

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND
ROOFTOPS**

AIR AMERICA, INC.

BOOK NINE

1968

BUDDHIST ERA 2511

YEAR OF THE MONKEY

HARRY R. CASTERLIN

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INTRODUCTION

Book Nine includes a continuing 1968 linear account of the Second Indochina War in Laos. The reader of the Author's previous books might rightly inquire, "Will it never end?" It will, but not yet.

The chapters in this book include a narrative of the Author's perspective while flying 204/205 Bell helicopters and combat experiences in a paramilitary role as a "contract" civilian pilot, covertly hired by the CIA to work for the quasi-government-owned company, Air America, Inc.

Although Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) trail watch activity, tailored to generate strike targets and interdict enemy lines of communication (LOC) on the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail system ¹ proceeded at an elevated pace, there was an abundance of other "normal" work for helicopter crews in all five Military Regions. These solo missions allowed the Author to become accustomed to the turbine engine Bell's numerous and significant differences as contrasted to the UH-34D "piston banger." This on-the-job-training, coupled with mountain flying techniques developed over years of difficult and hazardous flying in the country, was applied to the Bell. Although the Author initially experienced a challenging period when transitioning to the Bell, sufficient time elapsed whereby the thumb rule of "armchair comfortable" became a reality and I became a safe and proficient Bell pilot.

Early in the year, with the advent of the massive North Vietnamese military TET offensive in South Vietnam and increased manpower and aggressiveness throughout Laos, the complexion and intensity of the conflict soared to new heights not previously

¹ Known by the North Vietnamese as the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route.

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witnessed in Southeast Asia. Abrogating the Royal Lao Government's (RLG) slight balance of power gained through internal and external air superiority, the enemy spring dry season offensive was unlike any witnessed in past years, as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) exclusively initiated and controlled military action. Under this new enemy policy, the fighting portion of the communist Neo Lao Hak Sat political party, the indigenous Pathet Lao Army (PL), was mainly relegated to backseat support operations. Consequently, many strategic and important sites were overrun early in Military Region One (MR-1) and upper Military Region Two (MR-2), resulting in severe and unsustainable government army troop, equipment, and morale loss.

Much of the enemy push to clear, reclaim, and control important lines of communication (LOCs) could be attributed to United States air power's diminution of enemy capability to fully exploit in-country logistic routes, and the damage Rolling Thunder created to North Vietnam's infrastructure. Assisting this bombing program were electronic facilities strategically positioned on high ground in north and south Laos that allowed strikes to continue unabated despite adverse weather when visual targeting was not feasible. Commencing with a December offensive against Mounq Phalane's TACAN site, although posing increasingly difficult goals, these navigation sites became prime targets of the Vietnamese in 1968. In order to accomplish these aims, elite combat units and unique methods were employed.

Since the Southeast Asian war was becoming increasingly unpopular in the United States with the more vocal dissenters, another political motivation for enemy aggressiveness quite possibility included North Vietnamese leaders' anticipation of peace talks and ensuing negotiations should USG agree to cease bombing the North on unilateral terms. If actually implemented, the communist time-honored ploy of fighting and talking would

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allow the enemy to push government forces from occupied territory back to the de facto demarcation line posited during the 1961 ceasefire and 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos. This imaginary line included half or more of the country and most of the mountainous areas. If actually acknowledged, the imaginary demarcation line in Laos would permit communist control of territory close to the 200-mile Ho Chi Minh/Sihanouk Trail supply lines, allowing virtually unrestricted supply routes to all five military regions (MR) and the ability to function with reduced RLG resistance. Additionally, with this objective accomplished, under the pretext of Pathet Lao control and a façade of Lao neutrality, continued aggression against South Vietnam and an overriding quest to merge the north and south could be more easily achieved.

Beside the USAF radar facility perched on the summit of Phou Pha Thi (Site-85) in Houa Phan Province assisting USAF jet sorties from the Takhli, Thailand base with bombing targets in the North, the 1968 Vietnamese offensives in Sam Neua may have been a reaction to Military Region Tqo leader, General Vang Pao's guerrilla unit gains and successes within the province during the previous year.

Interdiction and harassment by Meo units along routes leading from upper Military Region Two to the Ban Ban Valley, and ultimately the Plain of Jars, were seriously hampering the timetable of North Vietnamese leaders' ultimate goal of reuniting all Vietnam under communist ideology. Intelligence gathered by crack tribal teams, trained to detect and direct air strikes on nighttime truck convoys and ammunition dumps were severely impacting enemy logistic movement. Moreover, measures achieved in Sam Neua created such logistical problems that large numbers of enemy troops were required to keep the routes open. As an example of damage perpetrated on the enemy, a considerable

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number of targets generated by ground teams resulted in enormous secondary explosions that American pilots reported unbelievable to witness, and hurtled debris high in the air, sometimes causing damage to their planes.

Book Nine, as in the previous volumes in the series, draws heavily on information contained in letters, logbook entries, photographs, and the Author's memory to produce narrative. Photos and maps were accumulated from the Author's collection and other documented sources. Most are credited. Since nothing is more important in recording history than accuracy and consistency in reporting valid and reliable facts, no attempt is consciously made to compress, modify, or otherwise skew reliable historical events. Much of the era is reported as the Author perceived. However, if the reader discovers errors in events, time frames, or other factors, they should be brought to the Author's attention for correction. Helping to supplement the storyline, particularly when the Author was absent from the field, Internet Email and interviews with principals in the Theater are liberally included. A majority of research was accomplished during previous years and filed. Unfortunately, many who contributed to this project and who participated in the Lao conflict are no longer available to confirm or deny this work. Because of finite telomeres in cells of the human body and advanced years, this condition is accelerating as the years pass.

To fill gaps and maintain a cohesive flow of narrative and consistency along the period's timeline, other writers' efforts are also liberally employed, as are attempts to footnote credits.

Lastly, the Author would like to salute and applaud all the men and women of Air America, Inc., Bird and Son, Continental Air Services, members of all military services, and other

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agencies who participated or contributed to containing communist expansion in Southeast Asia during the Cold War era--a prolonged period hopefully never to be repeated.

HRC

"I report to you that our country is challenged, at home and abroad.

The enemy continues to pour men and materiel across frontiers and into battle, despite his heavy losses..

But our goal is peace-and peace at the earliest moment."

Excerpts from President Lyndon B. Johnson's 17 January 1968 State of the Union address to the nation.

The New Year brought much pilot dissatisfaction with Air America management regarding the unpopular recent pay changes, entailing an estimated 3,000 dollars reduction a year for helicopter pilots, and more for the high flying fixed wing aviators. Most of us had worked for the Company a long time (more than five years in my case) and many times had been subjected to extreme danger. What really was disturbing to us, was that U.S. military personnel and USG employees continued to receive raises, perhaps at our expense. In light of the pay cut and the worsening outlook of the war, I was not as keen on flying combat missions as before. Still, I enjoyed the delightful flying over the beautiful and verdant mountainous country of Laos.

MILITARY REGION-2 ²

Following a day at home, I departed for Sam Tong in Bell 205 helicopter Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG) with Werth as my Flight Mechanic. Since most military activity was presently focused in

² Beginning in the north, for command and control, Laos was divided into five military regions.

upper Military Region Two,³ our work centered on the Pha Thi and Na Khang areas for the next two days. During the enemy push to clear government units from their logistic arteries of Routes 6 and 61, Meo forces had received a licking to the east at Phou Pha Louom (LS-220) and had been forced to move sixteen miles south to Houei Sang (LS-206), located twenty miles northeast of the enemy-controlled Ban Ban Valley. Preserving scarce assets in the face of overwhelming odds and successful enemy thrusts, General Vang Pao had ordered his men to retrench at Lima Site-36 to fight another day.

On the fourth we participated in this troop withdrawal and, following a long day in the field, recovered at Udorn after dark.

An Agency report specified:

*"The enemy has succeeded in driving most of the pro-government (Meo) from the area east of Route-6. This will affect the road watch coverage of this key enemy supply link into the area east of Na Khang and into Xieng Khouang Province. General Vang Pao will probably soon attempt to replace units..."*⁴

SPECIAL MISSIONS IN THE SOUTH

Saturday began a continuing round of Customer sponsored SGU team missions in the southern regions. "Scratch" Kanach, Pat McCarthy, and I relocated to Pakse in Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG). It was unusual for both "Scratch" and me to occupy the same cockpit for any purpose, except perhaps Company training requirements. During the two-hour and twenty-minute trip to Lima-11, Kanach logged flight time while I recorded the deadhead

³ Upper Military Region Two-This was called Houa Phan Province, but was better known as Sam Neua.

⁴ CAS Report, 01/08/68. CAS, a euphuism for "Controlled American Source" was used instead of the less acceptable CIA.

equivalent. Gone were the lucrative days when a pilot could accrue flight time or be paid as a Captain for simply occupying the same cockpit.

Consistent with a majority of Customer missions launched from PS-22 on the eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau, this troop infiltration ⁵ was scheduled twenty miles northeast in the hills to an unprepared spot. It was selected because of proximity to a complex of enemy supply lines and storage depots, nine miles west of Chavane and Route-96. After twenty minutes in the denied area we released our escort planes and returned to the Agency SGU ⁶ base camp. Pending negative results of the insertion that might necessitate an immediate emergency exfil, we worked locally. As there were no further requirements, we returned Pakse and spent the night in the Air America hostel.

Over the years, hordes of North Vietnamese engineers and laborers achieved truly remarkable results in developing and repairing hundreds of miles of the southeastern 200-mile infiltration corridor through harsh mountains, tangled jungles, and numerous streams bordering Laos, and North and South Vietnam. Despite the massive USG air campaign calculated to slow or eliminate movement on logistical routes into South Vietnam, North Vietnamese troops and Chinese and Soviet supplies still moved in sufficient numbers and amounts to adequately fuel the war in the south.

From our perspective in the Theater, the Agency participation in the Ho Chi Minh Trail interdiction program required smoothly oiled SGU teams to perform road watch missions. Along with various intelligence functions, including

⁵ Referred to as an infil for brevity.

⁶ SGU. Special Guerrilla Unit. Trained, equipped, and paid by the Agency, these troops were a cut above inept, poorly motivated Royal Lao Army soldiers. They were employed as road watch units on enemy supply routes and also conducted aggressive actions to disrupt traffic.

recon photography and visual reconnaissance, actual team delivery and retrieval by Air America helicopter, Volpar, and Continental Air Services (CASI) Porter and Twin-Beech pilots, and U.S. Air Force CH-3 helicopter Pony Express assets were tasked to deliver highly trained SGU teams responsible for observing enemy traffic, generating target information, and harassing the LOCs. The activity, calculated to provide eyes and ears on the ground, had been operational for many years and had now almost reached a saturation point for available combined civilian and military assets. Of late, our enemy territory penetrations had extended to our maximum operating range, but not so far as to overlap or interfere with U.S. Army Special Forces SOG cross-border operations from South Vietnam.

ZAP

The following morning Bell crews repositioned to Savannakhet for a three-aircraft mission. After shutdown, we entered the Customer's shack at the side of the airfield for the mission briefing. Waiting there for us was a Case Officer I had never previously seen or met. He was an older sort with short blond or graying hair and a good build. The friendly individual described the mission and then displayed large black and white high-level photographs of the infiltration site at coordinates XE055005. These were likely obtained by Air America pilots such as Frank Bonasinga, Berl King, or others flying the Customer-sponsored photo recon bird Volpar 42-Zulu.

Located ninety miles northeast of Lima-39, well beyond any government control or influence, the target landing zone showed a tight cluster of four fallow rice paddies close to heavily forested terrain in the Nam Phanang Valley below Phou Nalouang. According to information on our chart, the site was ten miles

east of active Route-911 and included several small, scattered hamlets. Active or not, no one seemed to know.

As soon as I looked at the photos, I became quite startled. *Whoa! Red light. Red light! Something is drastically wrong with the basics of this mission.* During all our previous infiltrations performed to date in which I had participated, we had **never** inserted SGU troops onto low ground so deep into enemy territory, especially where the landing zone was located in an obviously, albeit lightly populated area. Here-to-fore, mission deliveries or retrievals were always conducted to remote, forested hills, which provided us and the troops maximum cover and concealment. Such places offered all those involved numerous options, and an opportunity for the team to walk to their objective. Never one to maintain his own counsel when upset, I vigorously protested and stressed to the Customer and "Scratch" that by abandoning our previously successful methodology and established norm, we were asking for potential trouble--perhaps serious trouble. Unfortunately, the Customer was obdurate, maintaining that this was **his** planned mission: no deviations allowed.

Chief of Station (COS) in Vientiane Ted Shackley's pressure to escalate the Lao conflict in support of the primary war across the border had led to the necessity for additional Trail intelligence and road watch teams. This requirement demanded supplementary trainers, and several were hired from the ranks of current or former Special Forces personnel. Increasingly, we had been obliged to deal with "hard-charging" Customers of all types, who did not know or particularly care about us, nor were they familiar with our methods. They were generally impatient to complete their agendas without question. Some of these individuals had trouble coping with their current non-military status, and civilian pilots who were under no binding obligation

to execute proffered missions. With the influx of Case Officers,⁷ it was imperative for us to use good judgment, not to be intimidated by them, and to convince a newbie to allow us to approach a mission in a time honored, and thus far largely successful manner--our way. Fortunately, most realistic types listened to those of us with experience, readily admitting that they "could not argue with success." Those who did not usually did not remain long in our Theater.

As the war waxed to higher levels of conflict and fresh principals emerged, contention between a few younger pilots and Customers occasionally reached a boiling point. Fortunately, most unpleasantness was resolved without undue conflict.⁸

Senior pilot of the group, "Scratch" Kanach, automatically ascended to mission commander. Like Kanach, most of our senior pilots were highly respected, so therefore, no one ever objected to this policy (at least in the Bell program). Like most other competent leaders in our group, his philosophy was to assess a mission situation and then formulate a decision on how best to accomplish it with a minimum of risk to both men and machines. Billy P, who had joined the Bell program late, was tapped for the number two troop lift aircraft, and another crew was allocated SAR duty. The three PICs departed in a CASI Porter for an area recon. Although "Scratch" was correct in his thinking, I was not convinced that any amount of examination from the air would change my opinion of the proposed nonstandard mission and its potential hazards.

⁷ Case Officer will always be capitalized as a modicum of respect for the men working the field. By the same token, communist or communism will be written in lower caps as a measure of disdain for the Soviet ideology.

⁸ More regarding this sometimes-unpleasant facet of our operations and Customer interpersonal relationships will be explained and developed in later books.

Upon return, Kanach was candid. He admitted that the area looked somewhat questionable, but, ever an optimistic soul, he decided to continue with the mission. As with nasty SAR missions of the past, our general philosophy was to look at a situation, while retaining the option to abort a mission should something not look right, either en route or at the landing zone. Normally, this led to accomplished missions. Regardless of the decision to continue, I was still skeptical of its outcome. I protested that a gut feeling (that served me well over the years) cautioned me that the entire mission smacked of menacing factors--and my acquired sixth sense had rarely been wrong. However, except once at Luang Prabang, I had never backed out of a mission, and did not want to do so now. Moreover, any refusal to participate would certainly have resulted in scrubbing of the mission, possible disciplinary action from management, and perhaps even ejection from the Bell program.

We launched and linked up with our two escort cover aircraft. These consisted of A-1E propeller driven planes loaded with fuel and numerous and assorted wing stores.⁹

All proceeded well until our gaggle neared the landing zone. By then, I was so apprehensive and certain of impending trouble that, for the first time, I removed my .22 caliber Ruger Blackhawk handgun (fitted with powerful .22 magnum shells) from its holster and held it at the ready. The escort pilots had been apprised of our concerns. Therefore, just prior to our commencing a descent to landing, one Skyraider pilot conducted a low, high-speed pass along the valley's long axis over the straw-strewn rice paddies and tree lines adjoining them. His report was not encouraging. After dragging the area, he reported

⁹ We called this loaded for bear.

observing several hooches positioned under the trees, not noticed during previous recons. The mission was quickly developing into a "can of worms."

Understandably, the Air Force pilot's announcement elevated tension in our group. The SAR bird and Billy P remained "high and dry" to observe our progress. With all items in place, as I carefully scanned our area, particularly the tree line, "Scratch" commenced a slow descent toward the proposed landing zone. During the long final approach, I watched in fascination as a tall individual dressed in black clothing appeared in the rice paddy nearest the woods. Kneeling down, he pointed and aimed what looked like a long stick toward us. Next, the "stick" belched a large puff of black smoke and I felt our ship shudder. It was surreal, and the thought occurred to me that he must have fired a blunderbuss. Already primed for trouble, even though the shooter was out of range, I was ready to fire my peashooter, but was not in a proper position to draw a bead on him through my open window. The only alternative was to shoot through the Plexiglas chin bubble and I was ill prepared to do that.

I passed the word that we were under attack, but Billy P and the A-1 pilots had already witnessed the hostile act. Almost simultaneously, an A-1 driver commenced a run, delivering his deadly napalm canisters. Designed as terror weapons with material that adhered to everything, they were accurate and the contents liberally splashed the target area. As I looked, a cloud of greasy black smoke enveloped three of the four rice paddies. They burned copiously-except the one containing the perpetrator. I did not see him, and deduced that he was either a "crispy critter" or had incurred an enormous hotfoot.

With the mission totally compromised, we aborted further movement toward the now charred landing zone. Without comment, "Scratch," displaying his normal unflappable self, turned south

toward the cover of Phou Naloung's sheer cliffs. Because of our weight and at an attitude below the best climbing speed, the ascent was necessarily slow, and it seemed to be an eternity before we achieved sufficient altitude to vacate the hot area. Finally, able to breathe a little easier, I wisely kept silent. Furthermore, I took no great satisfaction in being vindicated regarding the danger awaiting us in that imprudently assigned landing zone. My natural response coalesced into considerable anger toward the uncompromising Customer who had placed us in harm's way.

I was equally disappointed with Flight Mechanic Pat McCarthy. Pat, who for whatever ethical or moral reasons, refused to carry a weapon of any kind, unlike most other American or Filipino Flight Mechanics. Having clear access to the area in question through the ship's open cargo doors, Pat had enjoyed an excellent vantage point to the rice paddy to suppress any ground fire and possibly allow mission success. Unfriendly types on the ground were not foolish, and any return fire from a helicopter, even largely inaccurate, normally produced sufficient flash-bang light and noise to discourage further hostile fire. Such means had been well proven and beneficial in the past. Consequently, there was an unwritten code among crews for a Flight Mechanic to carry a weapon to aid mission success and help preserve the ship and crew. By his reluctance to carry a weapon, and subsequent non-action, McCarthy revealed that he was totally useless in a critical life or death situation. Although a competent mechanic, a really nice individual, and well liked within our family, I harbored some ill feeling toward Pat and never felt comfortable flying with him again.

"Scratch" ceased ascending and turned toward home plate at an altitude I deemed far too low for the hostile area over

flight. However, since he was PIC and I was unaware of his situational assessment (battle damage), I was reluctant to challenge him. Still, depending on favorable weather conditions, most major road crossings in the past were normally conducted at 10,000 feet or above, and at a high speed to avoid large AAA fire; we were cruising well below that preferred level.

With our Skyraider escort pilots S-turning abeam our trail formation, we crossed Route-911 without incident. At that moment, I thought we just might get away with flying at the uncharacteristic altitude without a problem. However, I was still not convinced and became increasingly antsy, and was shifting uncomfortably in my seat. Finally, after mentally willing "Scratch" to climb, without success, I could not contain myself any longer and diplomatically questioned the altitude level. "Scratch," who rarely provided explanations for his reasoning, typically said nothing.

Low east-west oriented mountains loomed to our front. Beyond the ridges wooded and scrub covered flatlands stretched to the Mekong and a normal cruise altitude above small arms fire in that area was usually conducted without incident. We still had to overhead an additional major enemy artery largely considered inactive for a year or more; but, as we usually discovered after the fact, in Laos nothing is taken for granted.

While passing an almost invisible portion of Route-23, I looked left and aft. Suddenly, a volley of red tracers streaked upward and close to our left fuselage. Strangely, no one else on board or in the gaggle observed what looked to me like 12.7mm machinegun fire. Since our forward progress quickly took us past the road and final ridgeline, no action was taken. I had not heard hits or felt vibrations, so we continued to march toward Savannakhet. Still, the element of doubt was present as to

sustained battle damage, and I was very uncomfortable until we landed safely at Savannakhet and could inspect the machine.

My fears were unfounded. PFG had only incurred minor damage while on approach to the original mission landing zone. Supporting my blunderbuss theory, a fair-sized hole was evident in the fuselage aft of the left door. Likely incurred at maximum range, there was no critical damage. Apparently, the AAA fire I observed over the trail occurred just outside our rotor plane disk. That was fortunate, for a 12.7mm round was almost as large as one's thumb and capable of enormous damage to a fragile helicopter.

We certainly earned our "greenies" that day during the forty-one action packed minutes logged in the denied area. I was very fatigued from the stress of the mission and what ifs, and afraid of what I might say or do, so, while "Scratch" departed to debrief the Customer, I chose to avoid him. Instead, I left in the Jeep for the hostel for rest, sustenance, and much needed reflection. Fortunately, I never worked with that particular Customer again.

From the beginning of our Special Mission assignments in the South, because of too many intangibles and unknowns involved, I was not enamored with road watch missions. However, I recognized that they were an essential part of the war, and were integral to the Bell program's existence. Up to this point, I had largely resolved my previous distressing moments and thoughts of mortality through discipline, introspection, and a bit of suds. Now a seemingly unconcerned Customer had reawakened my deepest concerns regarding the special trust and confidence which the U.S. Marine Corps and mentor Tony Poe had instilled in me. Obviously, I could no longer take any mission for granted, and would have to reserve my opinions and tailor my options in

each individual case. I only hoped that others felt the same way. ¹⁰

We repositioned to Pakse on the eighth. After a pair of short missions, we were recalled to Lima-39. This was not unusual, particularly if a requirement for an emergency exfil suddenly surfaced.

The mission entailed retrieving eleven troops from XD049135, eighty-five miles east of Savannakhet. The men were located in the hills close to the lower Route-23 LOC between Moung Phine and the Se (river) Ban Chiang. Usually on such missions, the Customer established contact with the team radio operator from his CASI Porter, so, unless the men were on the run from an enemy unit, there was little problem with a safe pickup. That was the case in this instance and we logged one hour and seventeen minutes in the denied area.

With most missions accomplished for the time being, and the Bells required elsewhere or back at base for maintenance inspections, I deadheaded home on 39F. Scratch remained in the field. ¹¹

THE LOSS OF NAM BAC

"The collapse of the government's defense perimeter on 14 January culminated a ten-month campaign by the communists to reoccupy an area they lost in August 1966, after controlling it for nearly ten years. Government forces are being redeployed

¹⁰ Although not entirely positively identified, the Customer that day was likely Gene Norwinski, a particular buddy of Pat Landry, AB-1's man in charge of the southern area.

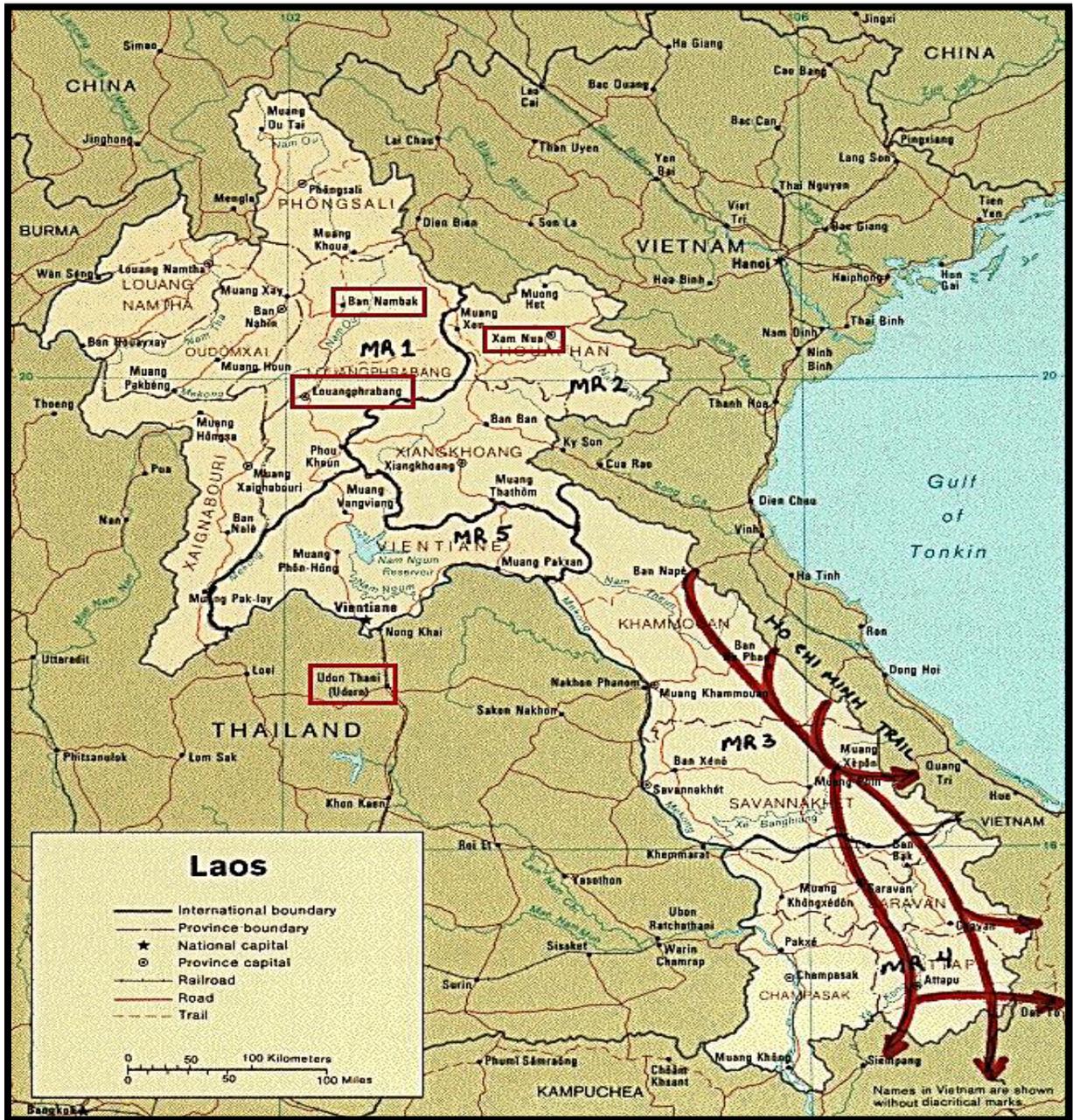
¹¹ Neither Wayne Knight nor I recall verbal or written mention of the worst road watch mission I had participated in to date. Perhaps once back home in one piece, I desired only a beer or two, and quality home time with the family. That is how I tended to cope with temporary adversity.

approximately twenty miles to the south to block further communist advances." ¹²

For even the naivest observer, after months of enemy movement and pressure on the area, the Nam Bac's collapse was anticipated. How could FAR, purportedly the world's worst army, hold or contest any site against a highly experienced and motivated North Vietnamese Army and world class military organization? The contrasts between the armies were great. Except for sufficient manpower, FAR's rank and file displayed none of the Vietnamese soldier's attributes. As a practicing Buddhist, the Lao soldier had little incentive to fight. Low pay, little or no competent leadership, and no sense of national pride or unity contributed to a reluctance to participate in combat. The few previous forays and probes calculated to clear enemy units from the eastern sector had largely resulted in failure and heavy losses--reputedly totaling 1,000 casualties over an eight-month period. Since mid-1967, perimeter defenses and firebases had been lost, or abandoned and never reestablished. Inside Nam Bac, local patrolling was generally limited to outhouse trips.

Despite serious T-28 losses during two lightning sapper attacks on Luang Prabang airfield in 1966, Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) T-28 inventory was restored to almost normal levels. With these assets, air strikes continued, tending to slow and moderate enemy movement toward Site-203. However, there was little coordination generated between ground and air forces, or from local forward observers to pinpoint targets. Therefore, a large amount of unnecessary bombing of the jungle occurred. In

¹² CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/15/68. Laos: The communists have succeeded in overrunning the important Laotian outpost at Nam Bac.



Upper center. The Nam Bac area in northern Military Region One, locale of the FAR January defeat, is outlined within the red box north of the royal capital at Luang Prabang. Also outlined to the right is Sam Neua in Military Region Two, where enemy activity continued at an elevated level while attempting to capture Phu Pha Thi. The heavy red lines in eastern Military Region Three and Military Region Four depict the locations of the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk Trail complexes. Further south in Thailand, Udon (Udon Thani), home to Air America's helicopter operation, is highlighted.

late December, Agency road watch teams selected likely targets for USAF assets along Route-19 and lesser arteries leading from warehouse depots in the Dien Bien Phu Valley. Despite an increased presence of enemy AAA as road work progressed, considerable damage was inflicted on convoys rolling southward toward Nam Bac. These efforts probably delayed the inevitable.¹³

With intelligence regarding the extent of enemy involvement, the Lao General Staff had largely given up thoughts of holding Nam Bac long term. However, the King, likely for his own preservation, insisted that the area be retained in government hands. Ambassador Sullivan was absent from his post at the time of this mandate, but given the right scenario, others comprising the U.S. Embassy Country Team were of like mind, without creating conditions like what occurred at Nam Tha in 1962, where hordes of panicked soldiers and civilians rushed south toward and across the Mekong River. All parties also desired to avoid a battlefield end-game like that incurred during the war in 1954, ending in a humiliating French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Furthermore, because the degree of difficulty and losses a massive evacuation would entail was realized, the organized evacuation of thousands of FAR troops was never seriously contemplated or attempted. Instead, reinforcements from other military regions continued arriving at the site with the hopes of stiffening and expanding the existing perimeter around Nam Bac. However, without adequate leadership the men refused to move. Additionally, a feint to the east to link up

¹³ While working well north of Nam Bac, the Author recalls observing an F-4 pilot conducting a dive-bombing run. Disconcertingly, the plane disappeared behind a hill and failed to immediately reappear. Thoughts of attempting a SAR in a very bad area caused some consternation, when the aircraft suddenly reappeared, soared to altitude, and departed the area.

with Vang Pao's units at Ban Na Tai (Site-50) and move on Moung Ngoi was largely unsuccessful, and the "die was cast."

Many Air America helicopter and fixed wing pilots participated in the last dismal days of Nam Bac. As the enemy noose tightened around the site, H-34 Captain Larry Taylor wrote to a boyhood friend:

"Up north I've been working around Nam Bac mostly, which the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh have been trying to take for six to eight months now without success..."

In addition to the large increase in workload, Taylor was concerned with the mechanical condition of UH-34Ds that he flew:

"...also a concurrent decline in the quality of maintenance of our aircraft. Quantity wise this maintenance setup has always been fantastic and quality wise it was at least as good as the military, but lately I've been finding things wrong with the aircraft that had been written up by previous pilots repeatedly. Kind of taxes your nerves to fly along wondering what's wrong with the bird you haven't discovered yet."

Commanding Hotel-15, Captain Mike Jarina departed Udorn for Luang Prabang on the eighth with Flight Mechanic Joe Siaotong. He worked in the region for six days. During his briefing regarding the deteriorating situation at Nam Bac, Mike asked the Customer, "If you have all these troops at the site, why can't you handle the situation?" Adding to the excitement during the period, he was mortared and incurred an engine chip light.

Mike recalled that pressure around Nam Bac began about mid-August 1967. There were several 105mm howitzers on hills around the area at fire bases. One day the enemy approached a firebase and chased the FAR off the hill.

He never saw many enemy troops.

One time, a Porter pilot was accelerating down the runway with mortar rounds splashing behind the plane. Mike thought the

enemy must have several mortar tubes strategically emplaced to effect such accuracy. For a period, helicopter pilots were prevented from landing at Site-203, so they landed at adjacent landing zones. A Requirements Office (RO) Lieutenant Colonel from Vientiane who was present during the attacks attempted to coordinate defensive operations and keep the situation under control. While talking to him, Mike logically indicated the solution to the problem was simple, *"Just send patrols out and take the mortars away from the enemy."*

In contrast to my en route 8,000-foot above sea level (ASL) cruise altitude, Mike generally flew from LP to Nam Bac at 4,000 feet above ground level (AGL) and never received en route ground fire (GF). The only time he spotted groundfire was during a mission conducted north of Nam Bac, where a UH-34D engine failure had occurred. He was flying upriver with "Shaky" Bengston in tow until hearing gunfire and seeing little "yellow bees." The ceiling was low and weather marginal while both ships climbed and reversed course toward Nam Bac. They arrived at a bridge east of Nam Bac, where the SAR ship flown by Larry Egan was holding at 3,000 feet AGL. They were about to descend under the weather but Larry radioed, *"I am getting shot at down here."* He was above small arms fire range, so the fire must have been from a 12.7mm gun. Not wanting to tangle with such a formidable weapon, they departed the area.

Mike's first day at Luang Prabang was relatively uneventful. He worked to the west out of Hong Sa (LS-62) supporting Sing Ka (LS-92), located ten miles to the northwest and south of the Mekong. Another trip took him to a high mountain sixty-eight miles north-northeast of Luang Prabang, where a few Meo troops had staged during Operation Link Up. It was only ten miles southeast of the joint FAR-Meo objective at Ban Na Tai (Site-50).

The following day Jarina and other helicopter pilots shuttled last minute Lao reinforcements flown into Luang Prabang by Air America fixed wing pilots from Seno to forward positions. Then he delivered elements of the Military Region Three Black Tiger Regiment to forward landing zones (LZ). Carrying paratroopers and supplies, Mike flew the men seventy miles north northeast of the royal capitol to Ban Houay Nam, five miles southeast of Site-50 to relieve pressure on the ongoing operation. He also supplied a perimeter position in the hills three miles north of Nam Bac.

On Wednesday, as Black Tiger soldiers continued to arrive at the airfield, Mike shuttled members of the battalion north to the same ridge as the previous day. Another trip returned him to the Sing La FAR position northwest of Hong Sa. A last mission was directed twenty miles northwest of Luang Prabang. ¹⁴

T-28s

Much was expected from RLA pilots during the final quest to save the day at Nam Bac. A message from the American Air Operation Center (AOC-Luang Prabang) related the true story:

"The feeling appears to be that airpower can work miracles in the battle of Nam Bac, and the T-28s are still not being properly targeted, due to lack of intelligence on part of FAR TAC North [Tactical Air Control] staff. The enemy is highly mobile and his movements are not known, but are estimated by TAC North. Targets being given are still area targets, and when pressed for definitive targets, the coordinates given are usually based on outdated intelligence. The daily operations order from TAC north arrives at the AOC at approximately 1000

¹⁴ Mike Jarina Interviews.

hours each day, and roughly translated from the French reads, 'All T-28s go Nam Bac, all day.' The T-28 [pilots] report into the Nam Bac command post and are given targets. Attempts to remedy the targeting problem have failed. The few times the O-1F has been utilized to check on suspected targets, the suspected targets proved valueless."

THE RAVEN PROGRAM

Because of jet planes' high speed, low endurance qualities, and the pilot's unfamiliarity with a target area, airborne forward air control (FAC) pilots were required in the Lao Theater to coordinate tactical air strikes, which constituted an essential part of any mission. Generally using light World War Two planes (O-1E-Birddogs), the FACs performed the task of identifying, describing, and marking targets with white phosphorus rockets, directing strikes (Bull One, do you see my smoke?), and reporting bomb damage (BDA).

The Lao program, known as Steve Canyon, began small in 1966. For volunteers to be considered, qualifications required four months combat duty with sixty days FAC experience in South Vietnam, one hundred hours as a fighter pilot, and a total of 750 hours flight time. In addition, at least six months had to remain on their overseas tour.

After thorough screening at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), men were assigned (or loaned) to AIRA Vientiane for assignments. As part of Project 404, to avoid political problems in the neutral country, wearing civilian clothes and having no military ID, the men were in-country "black."

Like the inception of U.S. air in Laos, the Raven program began with baby steps, initially flying with Air America pilots to gain familiarity in the area. By December 1966, an O-1E Bird

Dog Cessna aircraft was acquired to aid the RLAF effort out of Savannakhet.

By mid-1967, the first three Raven FAC pilots increased to six, and AIRA Vientiane requested excess O-1E planes for them to fly in lieu of FACing from the cockpit or rear seat of Air America planes. In addition to performing assigned FAC duties, the Ravens released air operations commanders (AOC) at various river sites of that responsibility, allowing them the freedom to plan and command. The Raven pilots also replaced the Combat Controllers.

During March 1968, with the war escalating, twelve controllers entered the program.

The total number of Ravens in Laos was never large. Although each military region had at least one, over time, a majority of Ravens were assigned to General Vang Pao at Long Tieng, where demand for their talents was the greatest. In the words of one former pilot who flew out of Long Tieng, since there was no job description provided:

"The purpose of the Raven program was to provide reliable and essential Forward Air Control (FAC) services for (primarily) U.S. Tac Air, provide advisory services of sorts to local commanders and CIA, and offer some vague sort of training and advice for the Royal Lao Air Force."

Like Air America pilots working in the trenches, the Air Force pilots learned the area well, and when the situation became tight, we relied on them for day-to-day briefings. Of course, helicopter pilots were also their lifeline should they be forced or shot down. The special group's boundless courage was never in question, but quite often considered foolish. As a result, many young men were killed, often toward the end of

their tours. ¹⁵

T-28 pilot and other aircraft losses at Luang Prabang were very high. However, despite thirteen lost or severely damaged during the first two weeks in January, replacements continued to arrive. On the eleventh, pilots flying the seven T-28s staged at Luang Prabang continued to perform their best while countering enemy advances into the low ground and hills surrounding Nam Bac. Some positive results were achieved, but a lack of proper targeting information continued to frustrate the pilots. Moreover, at the end of the battle only four operational aircraft were available to fly missions.

THE END

"Lack of communications with Nam Bac has precluded an accurate assessment of the situation, but it appears that the Laotian Armed Forces General Staff [in Vientiane], faced with growing communist military pressure, decided that it was not worthwhile to hold the position. The King, fearing the loss of Nam Bac would threaten the approaches to the royal capital at Luang Prabang, had pressured the military into overextending itself in order to defend the area. This had resulted in a general weakening of the government's defense posture throughout Laos, most significantly in the south.

The loss of Nam Bac is more a reflection of the lack of decisive leadership within the Royal Laotian Army than a

¹⁵ Don Moody, (raven.org/Adventures/Episode0000.htm; Wikipedia), Raven Forward Air Controllers, en.wikipedia.org/wjki/Raven_Raven_Forward_Air_Controllers. Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 261-262. Article in the October 1991 Issue of *Military Reprinted* from the *Air Commando Association Newsletter*, Clandestine Operations Over the Plain of Jars: Laos.

indication that the communists have embarked on a larger offensive role in Laos." ¹⁶

By Sunday, the enemy began minor diversionary attacks north of Luang Prabang.

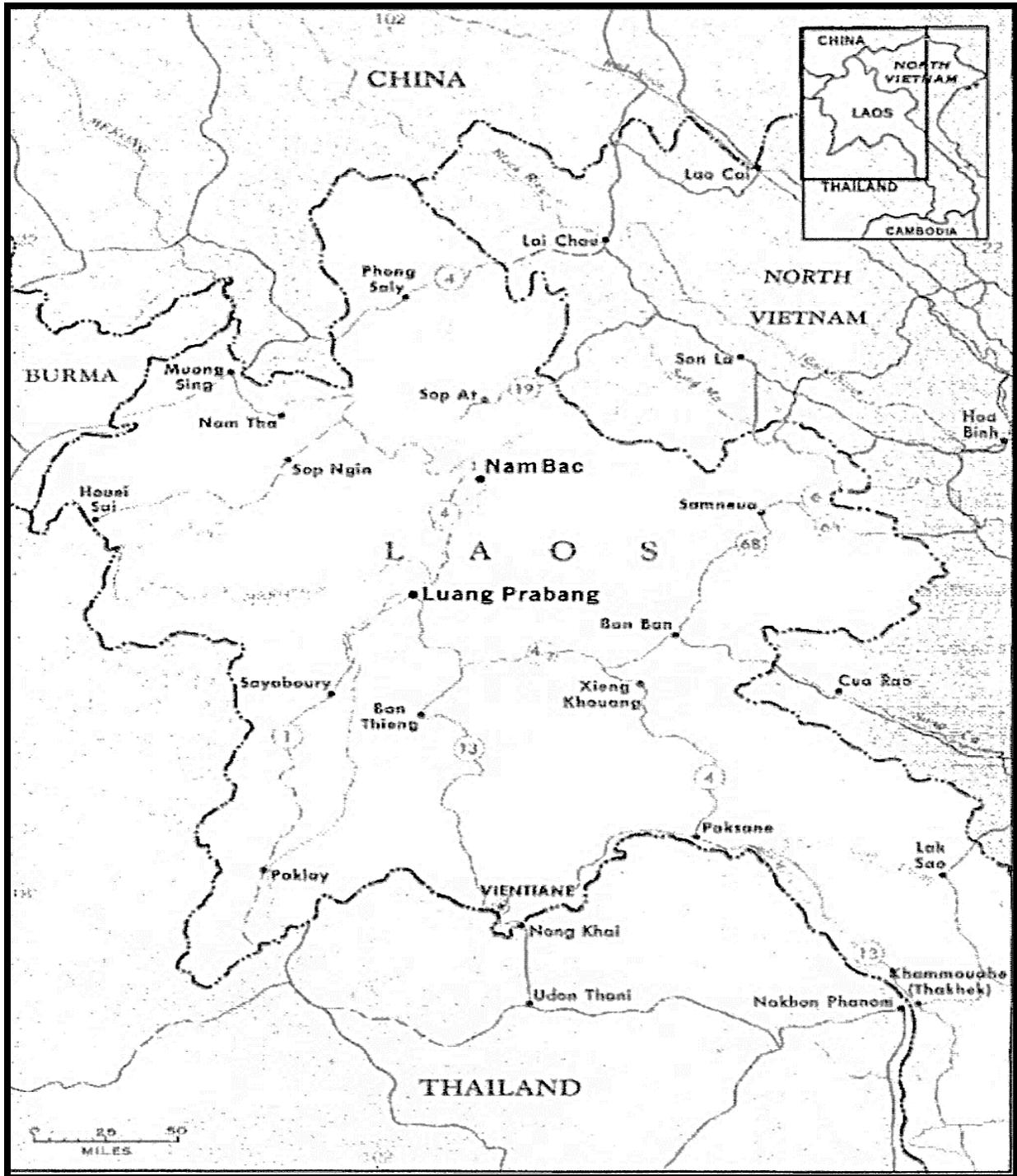
In response to the rapidly deteriorating situation near the Nam Bac Valley and accurate mortar fire impacting the strip, Commanding Officer of the operation, Colonel Bounchanh Savathphayphane, elected to relocate his central headquarters, two 105mm howitzers, and ammunition three miles northeast to a forward outpost at Ban Houei Ngat.

Captain Jarina continued shuttling between Luang Prabang, Ban Houay Nam, and the perimeter positions north of Nam Bac. At one such site he could not land and was forced to airdrop his load.

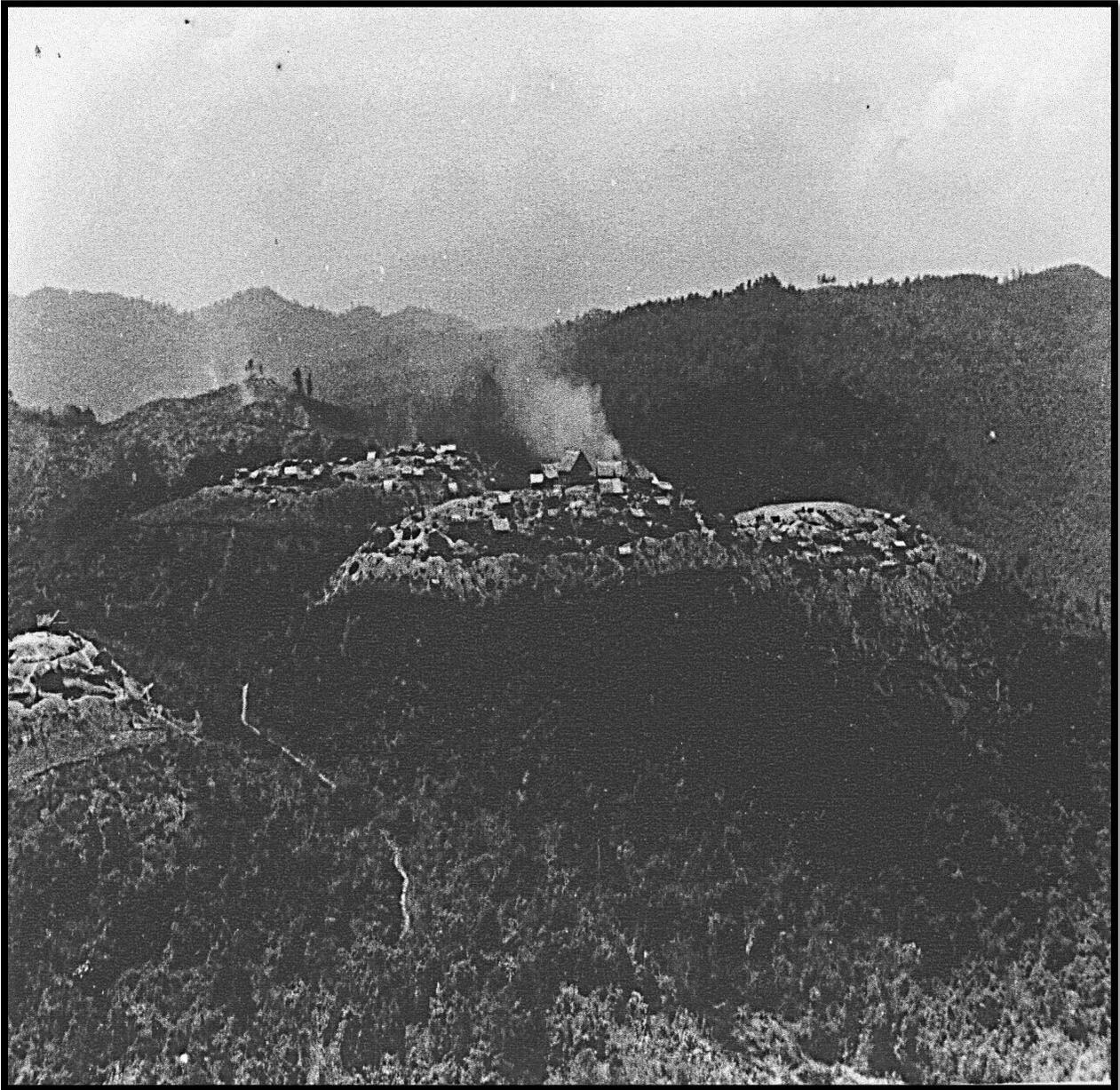
On Friday, during a day requiring recovery at dark, Mike again shuttled bullets, beans, and bandages to Ban Houay Nam. He also shuttled men and materiel twenty miles northwest of Luang Prabang to the Phu Keu range calculated to block and prevent an enemy envelopment of the royal capitol from the west.

Widely expected by all participants and spectators, the hammer fell on the 13th. With the airstrip at Nam Bac effectively shut down by mortar fire and the troops huddled in their trenches waiting for the inevitable to occur, enemy battalions converged on and attacked forward FAR positions from the north and west. Enduring sustained fire at Houei Ngat, Colonel Bounchanh, Colonel Khamphay, and his Thai liaison advisor abandoned headquarters and began evading south toward Luang Prabang. Within two days, an H-34 pilot retrieved them.

¹⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/15/68. Laos: The communists have succeeded in overrunning the important Laotian outpost at Nam Bac.



The FAR garrison at Nam Bac was lost on 14 January.
CIA Map, 01/15/68.



During the offensive, a "safer" headquarters site was selected at Ban Houei Ngat, not far from the Nam Bac base. In the photo, the FAR command post is subjected to enemy mortar fire. Although deemed more secure, the site was soon abandoned because of enemy pressure.

Thompson Collection.

Loss of communications with the Houei Ngat headquarters at 1330 hours provided the last straw for defenders. Soon afterward, rank and file troops began abandoning their foxholes and bunkers. Searches by three H-34 pilots, a U-17, two C-47s, and the AOC U-10 pilot failed to reveal any FAR troops in the valley. One H-34 Captain, Frank Stergar, had occasion to overfly Nam Bac after it was abandoned. He observed no evidence of high explosive damage anywhere, and no casualties were evacuated except FAR farther to the south who likely received bug out blisters. Frank, like many crewmembers, was very familiar with FAR "advances in the opposite direction," equated the situation to the usual "feint and then watch them run operations." Attesting to a lack of any visible attempt at defense, all the positions he evaluated from the air had their basic ammunition loads neatly stacked in respective revetments, with not a soul visible.

In response to the action occurring to the north, air operations at Luang Prabang had Jarina shuttle troops twenty-seven miles north northeast to the junction of Route-4 and the Nam Ou. After positioning these blocking forces, he left for Hong Sa and then Udorn.¹⁷

FAR's hasty withdrawal from Nam Bac and surrounding positions during 13 and 14 January resulted in the loss of numerous crew-served weapons and a massive amount of ammunition, much that could be recycled by the enemy and utilized against us at a time of their choosing. To deny the enemy war materiel, T-28 pilots were offered extra money to jettison ordnance in the area. American F-105 fighter bombers struck the complex toward the end of the month. Perhaps some weapons and ammunition were destroyed. However, not all, for later reports from agents

¹⁷ Frank Stergar Email.

revealed boats transporting heavy equipment upriver on the Nam Ou.

Sometime after 2300 hours on the 14th, an enemy unit briefly mortared the Luang Prabang airport. Damage was minimal to a pair of T-28s.

International Voluntary Service (IVS) worker Bob Grover produced some illuminating facts regarding the aftermath of the Nam Bac defeat. From an 18 January letter home:

"...The day before yesterday, the Bangkok paper had a good report of the attack on the Luang Prabang airport. It also reported the loss of Nam Bac...

We are limited to where we may travel outside the town. At present I'm filling in, in the radio room.

Tonight I'm keeping radio contact open with Vientiane until the day operator shows up in the morning. The telephone switchboard is located in the radio room. I will work it during the night, if it becomes necessary, to contact the American community. We have a surplus military field switchboard system which gives us contact with the widespread American community here in Luang Prabang. This gives them a good feeling to know that if they pick up the phone there is someone there. There are seven other IVSers here in town but they are reluctant to volunteer for the radio watch...

The choppers have been ferrying soldiers from the Nam Bac area the last few days, about four hundred a day. Soon we will be receiving several hundred refugees from the Nam Bac area, in fact, some have already arrived. This will give us a heavy load to take care of in a short time. We do have necessary supplies, but it will strain our available manpower. As usual we will handle the problem and it will come out all right in the end. I have word that we will receive about six thousand refugees as the result of operations in the north.

The town [Luang Prabang] is over-run with reporters. Time Magazine, Newsweek, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times are really hungry for any news of the fall of Nam Bac. One reporter did manage to get to Nam Bac a few days before it fell. Without question his trip was orchestrated by the U.S. Embassy, We, the IVSers, have been forbidden to talk with the reporters. The Embassy is the official outlet for anything that you see or hear via the news media. Of course, the Bangkok paper prints news that they have received from other sources and quite often it is not accurate.

The Prime Minister has been in town, but left about two in the afternoon.

General Ouan Sananikone and several colonels have been in evidence lately. The rumor around is that Luang Prabang is safer than Vientiane at present. There is a real possibility there will be a coup in Vientiane soon...

I don't feel that we are in any particular danger here. The Embassy is fully aware of events as they are happening. We have plans in place should evacuation become necessary and the means only a radio call away for the choppers to pick us up." ¹⁸

JARINA HELPS CLEAN UP THE NAM BAC REGION

On the fifteenth, Mike departed Udorn in Hotel-33 for Long Tieng via Wattay Airport, Vientiane. Old, cadaver-like Montano "Moon" Centeno was his Flight Mechanic. With enemy pressure mounting from Xieng Khouang Ville, Jarina was sent east over Padong Ridge from Alternate to the Ban Phang (LS239) area, located in the high Po River Valley eight miles east of Khang Kho (LS-204) and nine miles north of Pha Phai (LS-65). Remaining

¹⁸ Bob and Jane Glover Book, Laos.

in the area to shuttle troops to and from area sites, he logged a high number of landings and flight time.

Following a night at the Sam Tong hostel, Mike returned to Luang Prabang to participate in the aftermath of the Nam Bac mess and where attempts were underway to protect the town and salvage something from the situation. From there he went to Houei Thong (LS-196), sixty-six miles northeast of Luang Prabang. Picking up officers and a team, he flew fourteen miles northwest near the original site five miles southeast of Site-50, where late in the conflict, he and other pilots had initially shuttled the Military Region Three Tiger Battalion. With the latest information in hand regarding the ongoing conflict, he returned the people to Houei Thong.

His next stop was Ban Maya in the hills twelve miles south southwest of Nam Bac, overlooking the Nam Thuam Valley where the first phase of the operation commenced in 1966. After boarding stragglers and obtaining the latest intelligence regarding enemy movement, he delivered the vanquished to Luang Prabang. A mission followed to Ban Pha Thong, sixteen miles north of Site-203 and very close to Route-19. After conferring with hill tribe leaders regarding the state of movement along the artery, Mike returned to Ban May for another load of intrepid warriors.

Despite the pressure on Luang Prabang, Air America crews still RON at the royal capital in case they were needed to evacuate Americans from harm's way.

On Wednesday, Mike retrieved an intelligence gathering team from a hill nine miles north of Nam Bac and just west of Route-19. After returning to Luang Prabang, he returned to Houei Thong with troops to beef up the area and observe Route-622, a trail leading southwest toward Route-4 and north of Luang Prabang. He returned to Luang Prabang with refugees and troops fleeing the area.

Before RON, Mike shuttled troops locally to sites for the capitol's perimeter defense.

Following any government defeat, there were always numerous refugees to move to safer environs. Unfortunately, this was the continuing story of Laos, and an enormous challenge for USAID personnel and resources.

After weather cleared, the eighteenth became an active evacuation day for H-34 pilots working north of Luang Prabang. Mike returned to Houei Thong, where he worked the local area. Then, when the Customer called to begin the refugee shuttles, he relocated to the large helicopter pad designated Alpha. Well situated on high ground, Alpha was located eighteen miles north northwest of Site-196, southeast of Site-50 along the high thirty-five-mile-long ridgeline.

Several crews conducted evacuations from two points: Alpha and Kilo three miles north. The HLZs were separated to better facilitate refugee movement to Houei Thong without incurring delays. At 1340 hours, the crew of Hotel-55, Dan Carson and Bob Bedell, lifted from Kilo with twelve people plus personal gear. Even though quite heavy for the 4,200-foot elevation, Carson was able to launch, since the fuel state was low and he took advantage of the lift a westerly ten knot headwind provided. After takeoff, Dan conducted a climbing left turn to 4,700 feet, then instead of continuing his turn to clear the ridge and assume a formerly safe heading toward Site-196, he elected to overhead Alpha. About two kilometers beyond Alpha he passed over a pad previously deemed friendly. Five hundred feet overhead and 500 feet to the right of the pad, he began taking ground fire. He heard a loud explosion and felt the impact of an estimated fifty rounds hitting Hotel-55. During the fusillade, Carson began evasive efforts and called for help on Victor (VHF radio

frequency-119.1). Simultaneously, the engine coughed, power diminished, and most tail rotor control was lost.

Carson had his hands full attempting to maintain altitude, airspeed, and directional control. While turning back toward the last friendly landing zone at Alpha, Dan was surprised that manipulating the throttle enabled the engine to regain partial power. Bedell called over the intercom to inquire if his Captain was alright. He also reported copious smoke, which Carson had already observed. By the time he was in the vicinity of Alpha, he was no longer able to remain airborne and crashed on the mountainside.

Wisely using the buddy system during the evacuation, John Ford in Hotel-50 had been working closely with Carson. Not far behind Hotel-55, John landed and picked up the crew and some passengers while the enemy tossed five mortar rounds at them. Mike Jarina was able to retrieve the remaining passengers. Soon afterward the area was overrun by enemy units.

The largely uncontrolled crash resulted in Bedell breaking his left arm and Carson incurring a back strain. In addition, two passengers were injured.

A later accident report faulted the lack of current information regarding the area's fluid military situation. Without calling into account the emergency situation, Doug Dreyfus' people recommended *"That liaison between friendly elements, the Customer, and the Company be strengthened with a view of minimizing hazards of the operation."*

Accident reports did not always divulge a complete and accurate picture. Depending on the principal involved, they were often skewed to reflect what local management wanted disseminated to the head office in Taipei. Jarina's account to the Author sheds a new light on the incident:

"Carson was not supposed to be working in that area. He was just snooping. He had previously been working from a safe place [signal Kilo] and using a safe route [to Houei Thong]."

Dan was a nice guy, but took chances. A lot of incidents you could not avoid, but this one he could. He was completely overconfident in the safety of the area."

Mike never understood why Carson deviated to see what they were doing. *"It was simply a case of 'curiosity killed the cat."* Mike later asked Dan what he had been doing in the area. Carson responded, *"I wanted to see what you guys were doing."*

Frustrated, Mike replied, *"The same thing you were doing. You took an unnecessary risk. No wonder you were shot down."* Jarina later talked to experienced Case Officer Howard Freeman regarding the incident. "Howie," a former U.S. Army non-commissioned officer (NCO), was visibly upset over the loss of the H-34. He indicated that a contingent of troops had been designated to function as a rear guard to cover the villagers walking up the trail to the landing zone. Instead of fulfilling their primary task of guarding the trail, the soldiers went to the top and joined the refugees, while the enemy moved in behind them.

Jarina and Centeno worked for three more days at Luang Prabang positioning troops to block enemy movement toward the capitol and recovering refugees.

The day after Carson's shootdown, Mike went thirty-two miles north of Luang Prabang to a hill site overlooking the Nam Nga Valley and Route-4.

From there he shuttled troops southwest to the FAR observation and blocking site close to the junction of Route-4 and the Nam Ou. During the course of this activity, after twenty landings, an engine chip detector sensor illuminated, causing him to RTB Luang Prabang airport.



Flight Mechanic Pat McCarthy (left) sitting with Captain Dan Carson.

Knight Collection.

Finding only minor "fuzz" (a minimal amount of metal needle-shaped particles) in the detector element, Mike was back in the air on Saturday shuttling refugees from Houei Thong to Luang Prabang. Then, as management wanted only to maintain a helicopter crew or two overnight at Luang Prabang for evac purposes, to preclude UH-34D losses incurred by potential enemy attack, he was directed to Sam Tong for the night.

On the 21st, he returned to a point three miles south of Tong Too (LS-186) to retrieve stragglers from Nam Bac. After returning them to Luang Prabang, Mike continued back loading refugees from Site-196 to Luang Prabang. Toward afternoon, he returned to Udorn. ¹⁹

AFTERMATH

"Although it will be some time before the exact number of government casualties can be fixed, losses probably will be considerable. Over a week has passed since the Nam Bac defensive perimeter collapsed, but the government can account for less than half of the 3,500-man force deployed there. The government also lost large stocks of heavy weapons, ammunition, and other equipment.

Communist forces are harassing the troops withdrawing from Nam Bac area and have prevented the government from establishing a new defensive line south of the base. There is no indication, however, that the communists intend to follow up their success with a drive into government-held areas. Communist activity near

¹⁹ Mike Jarina Interviews.



January resulted in the loss of Nam Bac in Military Region One and enemy pressure on Site-85 in upper Military Region Two.

CIA Map, 01/25/68.

the royal capital of Luang Prabang appears to be an attempt to tie down a substantial number of government troops." ²⁰

Eliminated as a viable fighting force, reminiscent of the spring 1962 RLA defeat at Nam Tha, a majority of FAR defenders in the Nam Bac Valley were sent packing south. After encountering cleverly fashioned enemy ambushes, most troopers were either killed, captured or defected. By month's end, only about thirty percent of the original FAR contingent managed to escape, either walking to Luang Prabang or airlifted from rally points by helicopter crews.

Satisfied with achieving their dry season objective in Military Region One, after mopping up remaining entrenched troops, enemy units quickly wheeled east toward the disorganized GM-15 FAR unit, charged in December to clear and seize the Moung Ngoi area. Except for a few Meo and FAR advanced units who joined forces in the town, the bulk of the FAR unit never arrived at the assigned objective. Preferring to seek safety in a better area, they allowed substantial numbers of small enemy units to infiltrate through gaps toward Nam Bac's inner perimeter, where they reformed into larger fighting units. Linking with another regiment, the Vietnamese troops easily enveloped GM-15, causing the men to scatter into the jungle.

The Black Tiger battalion which Mike Jarina and other helicopter pilots had recently lifted to the area, failed to receive word of the defeat and had no other option than to fight to the death. Overwhelmed, the battalion was destroyed, with only a handful of men surviving to relate the outcome. A majority of Vang Pao's men also failed to reach the objective, thus escaping the enemy's "terrible swift sword."

²⁰ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/25/68. Laos: The Nam Bac defeat now appears to be one of the costliest setbacks the Laotian Government has suffered in several years.

By the eighteenth or soon afterward, the enemy push was largely completed. Nam Bac had fallen for the third time in recent history (April 1953 and April 1961), and the RLG and RLA had a terrible loss to bear.

As survivors fled south, plans were hastily cobbled together by FAR leaders to move FAN units to Luang Prabang from Moung Soui with the mission to move north and create a defensive line well south of Nam Bac. Meo guerrilla units would then replace departing FAN soldiers and take up the slack at Moung Soui. In the end, with demoralization prevalent and the will to fight falling to a low ebb, the plan was abandoned.

With so many Lao front-line units shattered and dispersed, in the future the RLA displayed a high degree of military impotence. They rarely entered the field, and ceased to be a viable fighting force for nearly three years. Except for Vang Pao's Meo forces, the non-battle shifted the balance of power back to the communists. Major approaches to Luang Prabang were now largely unimpeded, and Agency guerrilla units and ADC scattered throughout upper Military Region One came under enemy scrutiny. Currently, one could only speculate as to how, when, and where the victorious enemy would react next. Would they merely consolidate gains or move to acquire new territory? Unfortunately, we would not have long to wait for an answer.

Particularly galling, the defeat eliminated government territorial gains achieved since 1966 to join Military Region One and Military Region Two at the Nam Ou, and control and hold the upper Nam Bac area north of Luang Prabang. This likewise applied in a diminished ability to "show the flag" west in Military Region One toward Moung Sai and even into the Nam Tha region. Despite years of the American Military Assistance Program (MAP), calculated to mold the RLA into a viable and eventually formable army, the rout displayed the persistent and

predictable Lao bug-out syndrome and inability to rally and regroup forces against a long-dreaded foe. In addition, reinforcements pouring into Nam Bac during the last months from throughout the country, and subsequent disappearance of thousands of soldiers, virtually deprived the FAR of any reserve units.

Following the ignominious defeat, Souvanna Phouma ordered FAR reorganized. Groupment Mobiles, or GMs, were downsized into battalion sized units. Military leadership was tweaked to improve troop coordination, and commanding officers of the Military Regions reported directly to the Vientiane army headquarters.

Spilling over from the military to the political scene, if one believed rumor, there was a disconcerting effort within the FAR to stage a coup to seek the removal of Colonel Bounchanh and General Ouane. Like most other coup rumbles, this one came to naught.

THOMPSON'S FRUSTRATIONS

International Voluntary Service (IVS) representative MacAllen Thompson was still assigned to Moung Met (October 1967-April 1968), but also worked at Vientiane. Compared to the rest of Laos, Site-158 was quiet. He was working on a five-room school and expected to complete the project in about two months. After that, perhaps he would return to Xieng Lom if the situation warranted.

Mac was a little discouraged about accomplishing village self-help projects, especially as depicted by events occurring in the previous two years. During that time period, he had been expelled from work sites (like Nam Bac), used as a troubleshooter, and never enjoyed the satisfaction of a job completion.

After more than three months at his present location, village people, if any came to the job site to work on the school, mainly slept. Town fathers still wanted the school built, but the people were apathetic. Finally, after a serious talk with the Chao Mung, by February, the leader used army and police to usher people back to work. With the heavy work completed, Mac was satisfied that the school would be completed. However, he was not sure at what price and if there were going to be recriminations and accusations of forced labor against the RLG and U.S. Mac theorized the people might be happy when they observed their children going to a new school that was not falling down around them. At the same time, he was concerned about being remembered as the uncompromising American.

Nam Bac's collapse not only impacted military efforts, but also greatly affected the civil structure of the area. As depicted in a letter to his parents, Mac described what he observed:

*"As you've heard, my old stomping ground of Nam Bac got lost and all the army has pulled south to the Luang Prabang area. We lost 10 schools, four of them ones I worked on, and a dispensary, also mine. Maybe I shouldn't say lost as the buildings are still there but without medics or teachers. I flew over the area, about 9,000 feet, last week and could still see most of them. It looks like the PL and VM haven't occupied the villages or airfield but are staying in the surrounding jungle where they won't present a bombing target."*²¹

I still wonder what happened to the villagers who didn't evacuate with the army. It could be kind of rough on them.

²¹ Although generally disused in lieu of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), some people, including those in USG, still used the acronym VM for the First Indochina War term Viet Minh.

Luang Prabang also had its problems with two commando raids on the airfield just north of town. Didn't do much damage but it sure scared the hell out of everybody, both Lao and American. Especially since it came on the heels of the Nam Bac fall when the VM were sweeping south toward LP. The VM stopped though, about 30 miles north of LP. So, everybody there are calm, if a bit nervous again.

What's going to happen to Laos? I sure would like to know. The Lao government controls about 40% of the land area, so they say, but villages change hands quite often. I go up to the local army camp to sleep [at Moung Met]. It's up on a steep hill, dug in with a sharpened bamboo fence. The problem arises in the army outposts where there are only 10-20 men in a village. The Pathet Lao use 20-30 men and don't have much trouble over-running these posts. Last year, when there wasn't much activity, I used to visit places like that all the time. This year, no. As they say, 'the natives are restless' and I'm a coward. Also, I don't have that much faith in the Laos army. If there are a lot of them around, ok, you can mill around with them and not be seen, besides I can run faster." ²²

In August, Thompson signed a short-term contract with USAID replacing a man (Buechler) who left for home leave. Working under Jack Williamson, the Assistant Relief-Rehabilitation Administrator in Vientiane, Mac was in charge of the C-46 program and rice drops for the refugee program. While coordinating this task, he worked closely with FIC personnel.

²² Mac Thompson's reference to being a coward was mere hyperbole, remotely divorced from the truth, and only a matter of speaking for his parents. Mac was a former U.S Army engineer who had been through the mill with the International Voluntary service (IVS) while serving at forward sites of Hong Sa, Nam Bac, Xieng Lom, and Moung Met. Except for a FAR presence, he was alone at most remote places, and had to provide his own welfare.

Jack was an easy man to work for and had three embossed boxes on his desk related to his job-one read, in-put, another, out-put, and the third, Ka-put.

Thompson left in December to spend Christmas in Oregon with his family. ²³

THE GLOVER'S OBSERVATIONS

Eyes, ears, and boots on the ground during this period were valuable, providing much insight regarding the current situation. On 30 January, Bob Glover wrote home describing existing conditions at Luang Prabang and his thoughts:

"...I've stood radio watch most every night since the attack on Luang Prabang on the night of January 15...I'm beginning to get used to it. I've been able to take cat naps between the hourly checks with Vientiane. I do get a little sleep during the day unless something that might affect our security occurs.

Vientiane radio is supposed to be on 24 hours a day 7 days a week. The night we were attacked we could get no radio contact with Vientiane, and Skyline [The Air America radio facility located on the north ridgeline overlooking the Long Tieng Valley] is seldom on night duty. One night soon after the attack when I took over in the evening, Skyline came on the air and said that they would stay on the air all night, and would be ready if we needed them. This assurance sure gave me a lift which lasted several days. At the time it gave me a lump in the throat, which it still does when I ponder the past.

The telephone switchboard is also in the radio room. It would get me in contact with the rest of the American community

²³ MacAlan Thompson Letter to Parents, 02/04/68.
Mac Thompson Interview, 12/24/96.
Mac Thompson Emails, 02/23/97, 04/10/97, 05/13/97, 05/21/97.

should the occasion arise. I cannot return to Moung Nane [Bob's normal work area south of Luang Prabang] until the security improves. Moung Nane is very close to the trail that leads from North Vietnam across Laos to Nan in Thailand. You might say that I'm the man Friday around the office, nights too.

We are hoping for the best, but are preparing for the worst. We have designated pickup points. Assigned people to their pickup stations, and have our choppers, during the night hours, parked at strategic points. Several of us [former military types] are well aware of the seriousness of the situation, but we do have a few who have their heads in the sand.

Losing Nam Bac has made Luang Prabang more vulnerable. Our military advisers are deploying troops in a ring around the city, then another line farther out, which would buy us a better chance of an orderly evacuation, should it become necessary... Once in a while I think of the recruitment brochure of IVS that stated that 'Security has never been a problem where the volunteers are stationed...'

The same day, Bob Glover helicoptered to Moung Nane with Major Grace, the ARMA Embassy adviser, to retrieve his radio. At that time, he learned from the Chao Moung that a group of Pathet Lao had previously entered the village inquiring about Bob's presence. It seemed they knew all about Glover and wanted a piece of him.

Bob's wife Jane also wrote home describing the tension and her perspective regarding the current state of affairs at Luang Prabang:

"...we were able to be out on the front porch and watch the area near the airport being shelled to drive out the enemy.

Luang Prabang is organizing and will do their best to defend the city. Since we have not yet had a major attack here,

it is well to be prepared. They [FAR] had two practice shelling, one at 1 PM, and another at 8 PM. Someone forgot to pass the word along about the 8 o'clock one so of course I thought it was the real thing...Like this morning before daylight, in fact, before 5 AM, I was awakened by what sounded like small-arms fire about the building. I went downstairs and inquired, and found that Dwayne Hammer had purchased a punching bag for the [Lao] boys that work around USAID...There is a nine o'clock curfew that is very strict...

...Last night he [Bob] was on radio watch for 13 hours, and got about 3 hours sleep today...the other Americans feel better with him on all night. It was intended to make the radio watch a shift operation, but the other IVSers don't feel the same way. Bob says that as long as he has no real job now, he wants to do it."

From Commander-in-Chief Pacific's (CINCPAC) Headquarters in Hawaii an assessment of the Lao situation was forwarded to Washington:

"...We view the increase in tempo and intensity of enemy activity in north Laos as a kick-off of the dry season activities in that area. It is not believed to be a general offensive. The results of the enemy attack on Nam Bac will probably encourage further attempts at offensives in the area. The concern on enemy offenses in South Vietnam may explain some of the increase in activity in north Laos. Guidance and direction for such offensives originate in Hanoi and are intended for areas of active conflict.

Considering the communist forces presently available in north Laos, and the currently reflected performance of the FAR forces in this area, North Vietnam has the capability of reinforcing with one division, moving into the Pathet Lao area, and sufficiently controlling the situation to permit a communist

takeover of most of northern Laos. This probably is not their intention but the capability is there and the situation appears to present few obstacles should the North Vietnamese decide to move in force...

[In summary,] we see the current northern Laos picture as a successful enemy launching of his dry season offensive with limited objectives around the Nam Bac area. [The] situation is serious but it is not believed the enemy intends to attempt a complete takeover of this entire area."

Such a humiliating defeat and "loss of face" fostered a considerable amount of finger pointing and principal actors ran for the cover of denial. After the smoke settled following the "fog of war" and more facts regarding the FAR defeat were collated and analyzed, Chief of Station Ted Shackley submitted his after-action report to superiors in Washington. With his pulse on Lao activities, certainly deeply involved in the Nam Bac operation, Ted Shackley's spin to avoid any Agency taint in the sordid affair is interesting and worth noting:

"...FAR units involved in the Nam Bac salient broke under moderate but sustained enemy pressure and fled in disorder. The collapse of the FAR positions at Houei Ngat, Nam Bac, and Phou Kou started on 13 January and the rout was completed by 14 January [except to the east]. This defeat in a tactical sense, was due to FAR's inability to move out from its defensive perimeter and in so doing to eliminate those enemy gun positions which were putting continuous harassing mortar fire on the entire FAR perimeter and in so doing were denying FAR the use of the Nam Bac airfield. As FAR units would not eliminate the enemy's mortar positions by infantry assault operations or well-placed air strikes followed up by ground attacks, FAR was pushed into a tighter and tighter defensive perimeter. This squeezing down of FAR's salient subjected its troops to sustained mortar

fire harassment and sapped the troop's morale which had never been too high in the first instance. The net effect of this attrition by fire was a crumbling of the FAR salient under moderate pressure.

When the FAR units started retreating, it was a disorganized effort with the main guidelines being every man for himself. This resulted in men fleeing with little or no unit integrity. This in turn complicated any attempts to mount an organized rescue effort which was designed to regroup the fleeing FAR forces. As a result, by 29 January only about one third of the 3,278 men committed to the Nam Bac salient had been recovered and regrouped. Unless significant numbers of troops are recovered in the period prior to 14 February, FAR will have taken significant manpower losses at Nam Bac..."

Men continued to dribble into friendly territory through April. Subsequent intelligence revealed that captured FAR soldiers were incarcerated, indoctrinated, or distributed to areas where they could be utilized as common laborers to repair roads and haul enemy provisions. A few were later used as cannon fodder in attacks on government positions.

COS Ted Shackley's analysis of the defeat continued (Bold print is the Author's.):

"In retrospect it is clear that the single most important factor contributing to the fall of Nam Bac was that the **lack of leadership** essentially negated all of the plans that had been designed to save the Nam Bac situation. The second most important factor was the inability of General Ouan Rathikoun, Commander-in-Chief of the Lao Armed Forces, to recognize that Colonel **Bouchanh Savathphayphane was not up to the job**, the job was beyond Bouchanh's span of control and that he should be relieved. The third most important factor was FAR's **tactical weakness** in that units at Nam Bac **did not patrol** aggressively in

that perimeter. Nor would they attack the enemy in order to clear their perimeter and enhance its security. Lack of patrolling resulted in FAR not having accurate, daily updated intelligence. Because FAR did not have accurate intelligence, it was not using its T-28 air strikes to hit pinpointed targets, but was hitting area targets instead. This negated the value of the tactical air support which was given to FAR units at Nam Bac by RLAFF T-28's.

The real tragedy of Nam Bac is that it **should not have been lost**. With any real effort on its part, FAR should have been able to hold Nam Bac. This would have been particularly true if FAR had completed its operation to link up its forces on both sides of the Nam Ou River at Moung Ngoi. General Vang Pao, Commanding General of the Second Military Region of the FAR, succeeded in his move on Moung Ngoi whereas Bounchanh did not because he could never get his troops to move out of the Nam Bac perimeter." ²⁴

Finger pointing continued. Ambassador Sullivan, who also attempted to absolve himself and the U.S. Embassy of blame for the loss of Nam Bac, later stated in a gross understatement that Nam Bac was, "The largest military disaster in the history of Laos."

King Savang Vatthana was furious. Going a step further than the ambassador, he informed Souvanna Phouma and the General Staff that he considered the entire episode a travesty besmirching Lao honor. Furthermore, he believed the entire FAR General Staff at Vientiane should be cashiered. Of course, in the bizarre and problematical "Land of Oz," no punishment was

²⁴ Although largely an accurate account, Author Ken Conboy, author of *Shadow War*, might take issue with a portion of the last paragraph.

ever meted out to responsible principals. Instead, marking a characteristic Asian rationalization (or in vernacular of the streets, CYA) command generals in charge of the operation criticized and attempted to accord responsibility solely to the RLAf for failing to adequately resupply and properly provide air support for the operation. The only measure taken to ameliorate the situation was the mentioned FAR reorganization.²⁵

PHU PHA THI NAVIGATION SITE

Not far removed from the Nam Bac finale, in upper Military region Two additional pressure was expected at Site-85. A U.S. Air Force TSQ-81, a modified version of the MSQ-77, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) range-instrumentation radar had been

²⁵ Segment Sources:

Victor Anthony, Richard Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos 1954-1973* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1993) 237-239.

Ted Shackley, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA* (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2005) 172-174.

Former Air America Helicopter Captain Mike Jarina, Numerous Interviews Conducted at his House in Milton, Florida.

William Leary, Professor of History University of Georgia, January 1968 Notes, Letter Taylor to friend Seigel, Notes from John Ford's Logbook.

Hotel-55 Air America Accident Review.

Ken Conboy with Jim Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1995) 185- 187.

Former IVS Workers Jane and Bob Grover, *Laos: Land of a Million Elephants and the White Parasol* (An Autobiographical History of Laos during the Period from September 1966 to June 1968.) (Grassroots Graphics), 98-100, 102-105.

John Pratt, *CHECO: The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, 51, Obtained from the Dalley Book Service Christiansburg, Virginia. Agency Information Cable, 01/14/68.

Agency Intelligence Information Cable, 01/27/68.

CIA Cable, 01/30/68.

Telegram CINCPAC (Admiral Sharp) to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (General Wheeler).

Timothy Castle, *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 82, 85.

installed on the 5,500-foot Pha Thi mountain top next to a TACAN navigation unit. Functional from early November 1967, the radar, able to provide coverage of Hanoi and Haiphong 160 miles to the northeast, Dien Bien Phu to the northwest, and Sam Neua, to the east of the site was operated by twelve-man Air Force "sheep dipped" teams on a rotational basis in order to direct foul weather bombing in North Vietnam and selected parts of Laos. Although considered valuable, the system never lived up to the expected potential, especially for precision targeting around Hanoi. ²⁶ Consequently, targets were reprogrammed to include northwestern North Vietnam and northeastern Laos.

When enemy movement was detected from Sam Neua Town toward Pha Thi in mid-December, the new radar was employed to advantage, directing F4, F-105, A1E, and A-26 bomber pilots on targets to discourage enemy advance. Perhaps disrupting the enemy offensive timetable, these strikes seemed to have some effect on immediate or further large-scale progress, particularly during the first ten days of January. Also comforting to the Americans, including two Agency assigned Case Officers, Thai, and Meo units, was the fact that the sheer-sided site was deemed almost unapproachable. ²⁷ However, with the late December attack and successful capture of the TACAN site at Moung Phalane (Lima-61 in Military Region Three) and threatening overtures against a defensive unit on the heights of Phu Kate located a couple of miles southeast of Saravane (L-44) in

²⁶ There is some controversy as to the validity of this statement. However, historian and extraordinarily meticulous researcher Tim Castle claims this to be factual.

²⁷ The site was only known to have fallen once many years before, and this was accomplished under suspicious circumstances by Meo who were adept at mountain climbing.

Military Region Four, there was high level concern regarding the security at Pha Thi.

History records that even during the European medieval era, given proper forces, persistence, and ingenuity, no stone castle or cleverly erected fortress was ever immune from capture. Still, by 3 January the U.S. Embassy Country Team was confident that the approximately 200 men on top of the mountain, and 800 more scattered around the base, were adequate for security. These forces, and additional ears and eyes in the field that we periodically infiltrated toward LOCs and suspected enemy avenues of approach, were considered sufficient measures to provide an adequate defense ²⁸ and an early warning system should the "balloon go up," necessitating an evacuation of critical personnel.

The enemy was not asleep. Communist leaders were aware that Site-85 had been used for many years to launch road watch and harassing teams to the east. With the advent of the Bell Huey program, this intelligence and interdiction endeavor increased to some degree. General Vang Pao was well aware of Pha Thi's importance to his operations, and considered that if the site was eliminated from government control, then the entire province of Houa Phan would follow and the enemy would have unimpeded access to lower Military Region Two and the Plain of Jars.

In addition, the commanding heights had allowed Thai PARU to utilize the "rock" to conduct radio intercept activity from North Vietnam and Laos. The lower eastern portion, site of a Meo village with a short and much maligned strip, provided a RON and emergency landing/fueling site for both Air America and USAF helicopter crews. Less well known was the fact that the

²⁸ The Meo, primarily adept guerrilla fighters, were not particularly outstanding in a defensive stance.

mountaintop provided was one of most beautiful and the finest opium poppy growing areas in the region. ²⁹

Increased helicopter activity in 1967 associated with the construction and installation process most likely piqued the curiosity of local spies and Pathet Lao forward observers. Combined with this information, the decision to capture the site became a top priority goal for 1968's dry season offensive.

On the 10th, an enemy patrol was discovered probing defenses less than two miles north of the site.

For some time, Air Force technicians at the radar site had relayed reports of unidentified planes to Udorn. Overflights were rare, so reaction time was minimal and nothing could be done regarding the sightings. Then on the 11th, a Soviet MiG was noted in the area of the facility. Consensus surmised that another aerial reconnaissance was underway.

ANTONOV-AN-2 BIPLANES ATTACK PHA THI

Twelve January marked a first in Laos. With attention focused on the Nam Bac offensive, seemingly unexpected and considered unlikely by most Lao based principals, a two-plane air attack was conducted on the radar facility by crews of slow-moving Soviet built Antonov-2 (AN-2) "Colt" bi-wing airplanes.

In the forties, the metal and fabric-covered plane was initially designed, developed, and manufactured as a glider, and then as an agricultural aircraft by Oleg Konstanovich Antonov. In production by 1949, thousands of the single engine biplanes were eventually produced by communist and other nations for utility use, hauling internal cargo, or up to eight troops.

²⁹ The Author had remained overnight (RON) at Site-85 several times in the early days and during SAR forays into the Sam Neua Valley.



A portion of the Phu Pha Thi massif. The site was referred to as "The Rock" by those of us who worked on and around the sizeable mountain range. Sheer, often vertical cliffs provided a logical illusion that the fortress was impregnable from any attempt to attack the electronic navigation facilities on the summit.

Author Collection.

The modified NATO code-named Colt AN-2 planes had been previously employed in Laos as early as the spring of 1962. At that time, when Kong Le's neutralist army was supporting the Pathet Lao on the PDJ, Soviet AN-2 pilots were used to ferry bullets, beans, and bandages to turncoat FAN soldiers on short airfields.

The North Vietnamese Air Force possessed no equivalent single reciprocal engine bomber in its inventory to match T-28s employed by Lao and Thai pilots to conduct air strikes in low intensity situations. Therefore, during the mid-sixties, VPAF engineers and technicians elected to modify a small number of "Colts" with hard points to accommodate wing mounted rocket pods and a 500-pound bomb. In addition, a section was removed from the decking inside the cargo compartment to accommodate the random delivery of 120mm mortars through tubes.

A handful of missions were flown with the modified planes. There were mixed results against enemy boats in the Tonkin Gulf, but no attempt to bomb RLG positions in Laos had ever been attempted-until early January 1968.

After departing Duc Trang Airfield, and arriving undetected at the border, four "Colts" headed toward the Sam Neua Valley as a definitive navigation checkpoint. ³⁰ Continuing southwest in iffy weather, the green bi-wings were eventually spotted in formation just south of Hong Non (LS-86), one of the early Momentum sites used by the Lao government during the First and Second Indochina War. The site had been captured and abandoned in January 1965, but natives still lived in the area, tilling their hillside fields.

³⁰ Author Note: The formation of weird looking "Red Baron" planes must have flown at a very low level to penetrate Lao airspace undetected by any of our airborne assets.

The aircraft were observed flying a few miles further west, where two went into orbit. ³¹ Directed by a pre-positioned ground controller, two AN-2 crews headed toward Pha Thi eleven miles northwest. Ineffective rocket attacks commenced after 1300 hours. During a second pass, preloaded mortar shells were released through cabin belly tubes inflicting minimum damage on facilities, but some casualties. ³²

Two Bell helicopter crews and their ships were at Site-85 that day with an infiltration mission scheduled for 1500 hours. Phil Goddard, Norm Grammer, and Gary Gentz arrived at 1030 in a 204B and shut down at the HLZ on top of the mountain. With nothing required of them until mission time, Goddard secured the engine and applied the rotor brake. Gentz then attached the rotor blade tie-down to the tail stinger and serviced the aircraft with fuel. Then he followed Phil and Norm to the Customer's shack located between the strip and the TACAN van. They found that Dick Elder, Ted Moore, and Glen Wood had arrived earlier in a 205. Elder was already in the Customer shack with information regarding the infil to the northeast. Moore and Woods continued to fly drummed water from the water point at the base of the mountain, the junction of the Yut and Et Rivers to surrounding sites.

With nothing to do until launch time, Gary and Dick elected to conduct a walk about of the mountaintop. In the process, they

³¹ There is no mention that this information was relayed forward at the time. Therefore, one assumes it was a post event finding.

³² Depending on the source, following the attacks, four Meo were reportedly killed and two or three other soldiers wounded. Power lines were damaged, the TACAN building and the antenna shifted slightly after the impact of a bomb. As a consequence, the TACAN facility was inoperative for a few days. However, the TSQ radar facility was totally unscathed.



A view of Phu Pha Thi from the southeast showing the Meo village below the mountain top. The short airstrip below the village was sloped and often difficult to negotiate for STOL aircraft because of winds, downdrafts, and turbulence.

Author Collection.

climbed to the radar site, but it was surrounded by barbed wire and they were unable to proceed into the compound.

After returning to the Customer's quarters Gary was engaged reading a *Playboy Magazine* while waiting for a can of Campbell's soup to boil on the cook stove. Suddenly, he was stirred to action by machinegun fire and a loud explosion, with debris falling around the "hooch." Hearing an aircraft, he ran to the door and observed something burning fifty feet to the front. In addition, a strange-looking plane, something out of the World War One era, approached his position from the northeast. Between strikes he dashed to the helicopter and untied the rotor blades so Goddard could start the engine. Then, while another plane commenced a machinegun strafing pass at an estimated fifty feet above ground level (AGL) and eighty knots, Gentz dashed about fifty feet to the safety of a log pile where Elder and Grammer were hunkered down. During the attacks, Dick was busy firing his .25 caliber pistol at the low flying planes. The troops slated for the infil mission were also firing accurately at the interlopers. During the action, Dick attempted to call Moore over the Customer's hand-held radio to apprise him of the situation. ³³

Unlike a reciprocating engine that requires a warm-up period to obtain proper operating pressures and temperatures, a turbine engine can be spooled up quickly under normal conditions, and even faster during an emergency situation. Wanting to get the hell out of there, Phil had no idea what the engine exhaust temperature (EGT) reached during the accelerated start. From the cockpit's right seat, as a second "Colt" lined

³³ In contrast to other U.S. Air Force and authors' reporting, during the heat of battle Gentz claims to have observed three aircraft attacking Pha Thi.

up on him and loomed ever larger in the windscreen, Phil's blood pressure rose to astronomical levels. Bullets whistled overhead as Goddard engaged the rotors. All the projectiles missed as Grammer and Gentz hastily boarded, and Phil launched.

With the bi-wing planes "Winchester" (ordnance expended) or damaged, the "Colt" pilots flew low at maximum speed toward high mountain landmarks along the Lao-North Vietnamese border. The chase was on. Exceeding the Bell pilot's handbook-specified VNE (speed never to exceed), and with the Bell buffeting badly at the high altitude and airspeed, Phil eventually overtook an AN-2. Within range of a "Colt," in clipped English jargon he instructed Gary to shoot the bugger down. However, this proved impossible, for the Flight Mechanic's weapon was stored in the outside baggage compartment. Looking from the cabin door, Gentz observed another aircraft some distance behind at their six o'clock. Therefore, helpless to participate as an aggressor, Goddard began a high-speed dive and turned the Bell north to assume the role of a communications relay platform.

Ted Moore and Glen Woods were already airborne during the attack phase and soon achieved historical acclaim as the first helicopter crew to shoot down a fixed wing aircraft. While the AN-2 pilots continued to the northwest toward lower terrain, and desperately attempted to flee toward the border, over several minutes and taking advantage of the Colt's slow flying characteristics, Ted managed to position his ship over both planes at separate times. Glenn Wood, known for his expertise as a door gunner, fired two magazines of AK-47 rounds into each cockpit, which contained dual controls and side by side pilot seats.

One plane crashed and burned two miles west of the border, where a theoretical geographic line bulged around two mountain ranges into Laos; the other plane, evading at low level about

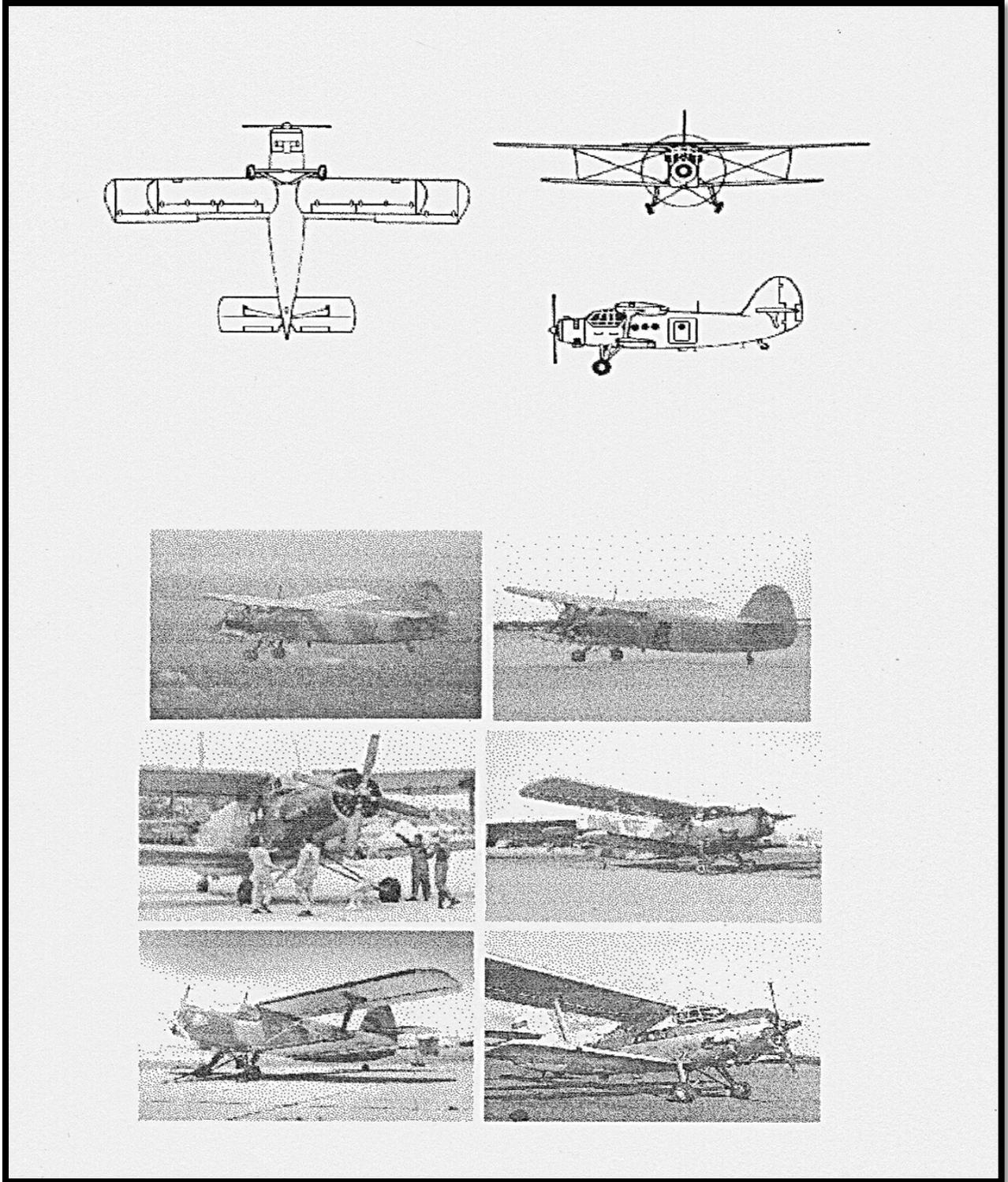
three miles further northwest, struck a tree while attempting to negotiate a ridge and crashed. One wing was torn off, the tail separated, leaving the fuselage mostly intact.

After the action Gentz had an opportunity to view both "Colts" and snapped aerial photographs. The following day they hoisted Americans, PARU, and an indigenous team to one crashed AN-2. Along with maps, documents, and other intelligence materials, three crewmember bodies were recovered and Goddard slung the deceased in a net to Site-36. The remains were bagged and later delivered to Long Tieng for viewing. ³⁴

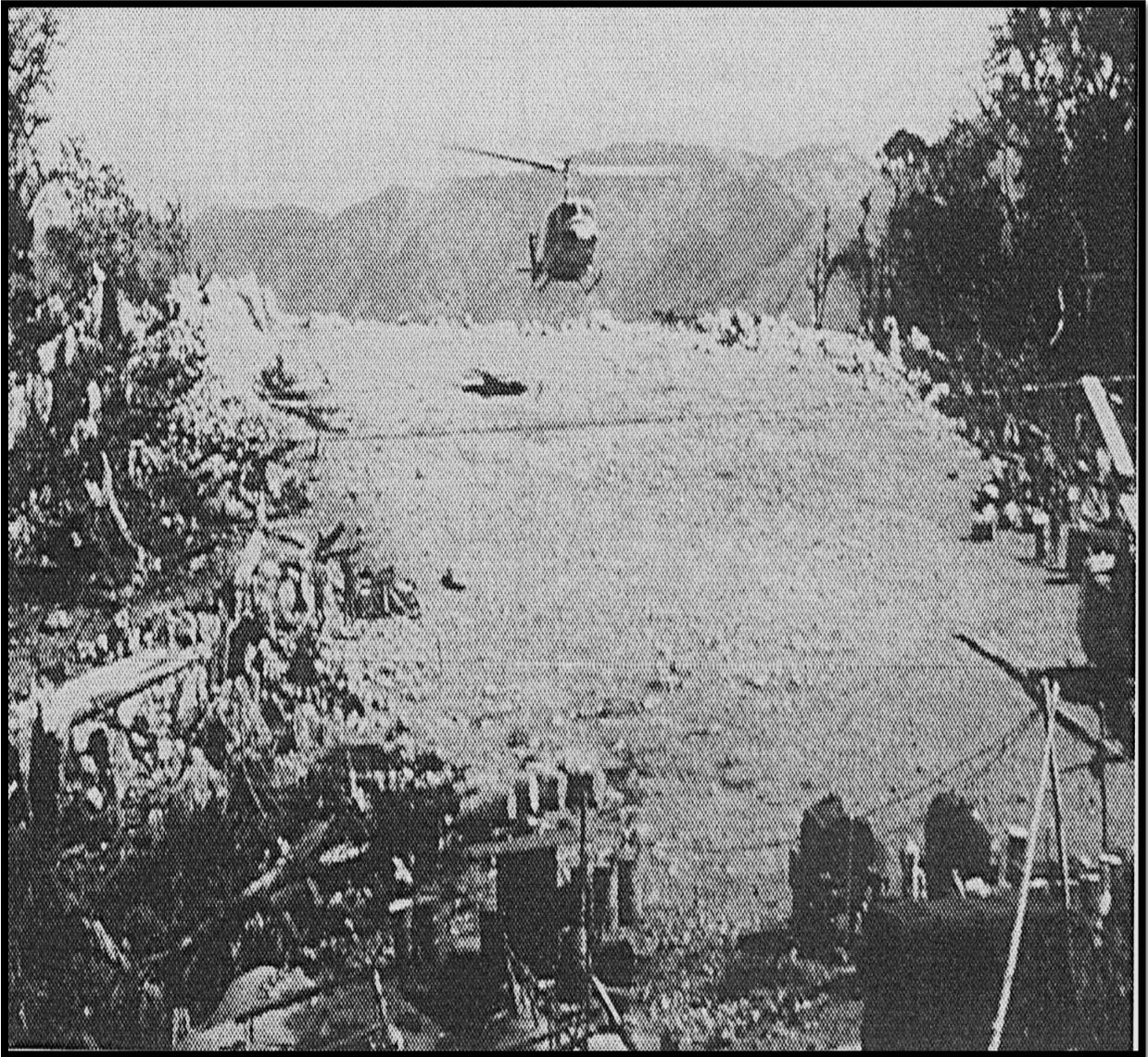
Air Force Captain Larry Pence, 7th Air Force Air Technical Intelligence Liaison Officer, was present when word of the AN-2 attack reached Saigon headquarters. Excited about prospects of obtaining intelligence from a NVAF aircraft, he immediately left for Udorn, where the Air Rescue and Recovery Service (AARS) squadron was located.

The following morning Larry launched with three Jolly Green crews intent on lifting an AN-2 to Wattay Airport, where world media outlets could view a North Vietnamese product involved in the invasion of a neutral country. After identifying a wreck, he and some Parachute Jumpers (PJs) were hoisted to a Colt. The PJs task was to shepherd Pence and rig a sling on the AN-2 so a CH-53 could lift it from the jungle. To his satisfaction, Pence found an undamaged Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) unit in the cockpit. It was the first ever found intact and could provide the means to target MiG aircraft.

³⁴ The Author originally heard that the AN-2 crewmembers were of considerably larger stature than an average Vietnamese, possibly considered ethnic Chinese. Since we employed Thai pilots to fly T-28s, such a possibility would not have set a precedent in the strange war. However, the three crewmembers were later identified as Vietnamese.



Views of the Soviet Antonov (AN-2) "Colt" type used in the 12 January 1968 attack on the radar facility at Phu Pha Thi, Laos.
Photo from the Military Analysis Network.



The sizeable landing zone on top of the Phu Pha Thi, Laos site. Another Bell is shut down at the lower right with fuel drums for the helicopters and generators scattered on both sides. Empty drums were used to transport crucial water from lower streams to the 5,500-foot pad.

Author Collection.

The attempt to extract the Colt failed; the CH-53's engine was not powerful enough to lift the bi-wing plane out of the high-altitude environment. Then a SAR in the North required the Jolly crews' immediate services. Consequently, except for radios, Pence and the PJs were temporarily stranded at the crash site with no survival gear or sustenance. A dozen Meo soldiers were present for security. Late that afternoon, the Jolly Greens returned to retrieve the men. ³⁵

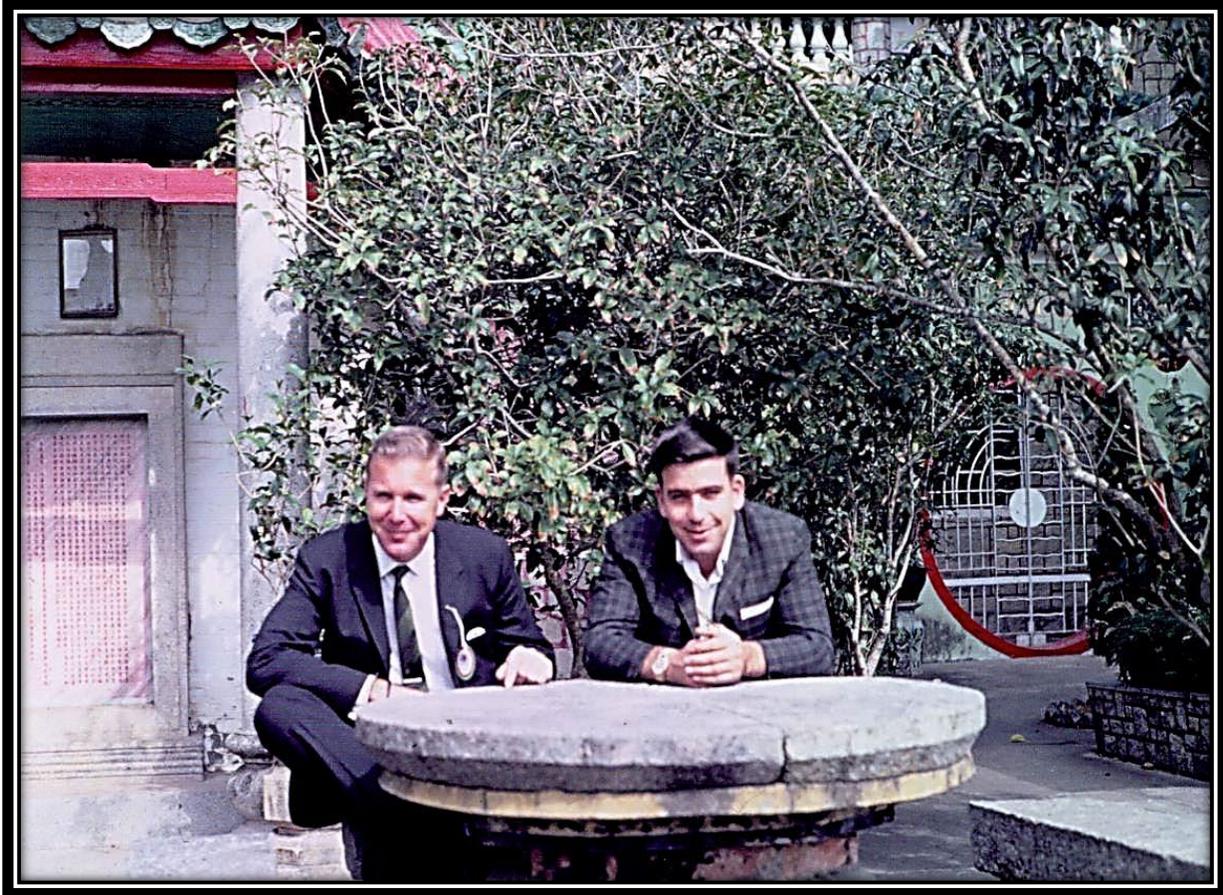
Within days, an Army Chinook crew lifted the somewhat intact wreckage of the AN-2 to Na Khang. It was eventually delivered to Vientiane and placed on display for three weeks where the Author had occasion to view it.

Fueled by alcohol intake, or a burning desire to appear important, some individuals invariably speak of classified subjects. This would especially be the case regarding such a momentous event as an unheard-of accomplishment of a Bell helicopter crew shooting down a plane, perhaps for the first time in recorded history. ³⁶

Instead of exhibiting euphoria over the success of the courageous action, the shoot down incident became something of an embarrassment for ranking personnel in the Vientiane Embassy. Staffers there did not wish to generate undue publicity that would expose a clandestine operation and U.S. presence in supposedly neutral Laos. Too much media coverage might cause the

³⁵ The Air America crew was not mentioned in the article. One has to assume Goddard and Gentz's work preceded the Jolly Green participation. Another theory was that the Air Force was working at the location of the second downed plane.

³⁶ There was no end to firsts during the Second Indochina War. The reader might recall the incident in which Navy Spad drivers from a carrier in the Tonkin Gulf downed a MiG during the egress of the Author and Phil Goddard after a SAR attempt in North Vietnam during June 1965.



Air America Flight Mechanic Glenn Wood (left) with helicopter Ground Supervisor Steve Nichols in Macau, an island and Portuguese settlement that hosted gambling sixty kilometers west of Hong Kong. Glenn, who loved to fly, made his bones by reputedly shooting down two North Vietnamese AN-2 "Colt" planes near Phu Pha Thi, Laos.

Nichols Collection.



Displayed by the runway at Long Tieng, Laos, one of three AN-2 crewmen shot down on 13 January 1968 by a Bell helicopter crew following an attack on Phu Pha Thi. The bodies were recovered by Phil Goddard and Gary Gentz on 14 January.

Nichols Collection.

Soviet bloc to react in a negative manner, by possibly withdrawing communist support for Souvanna Phouma's "neutral" government. Secondly, the spin that Air America crewmembers flying in the nation were unarmed civilians was now largely considered null and void.

Directly following the incident, Jim Glerum at AB-1 phoned CPH Wayne Knight informing him to fetch Moore and Wood back to Udorn ASAP and direct them to AB-1, leaving the helicopter upcountry if there was no replacement crew available. Wayne believed most AB-1 types were especially pleased with Moore's action, but wanted to instill the "fear of God" in him to deter any thoughts of going public with the story. ³⁷

Any uproar over the shutdown could not have been too sincere, at least at the CIA's Langley, Virginia, facility. The day after the attack, COS Ted Shackley received a cable from Bill Colby touched with a bit of levity saying, "*Congratulations to Snoopy and all you other guys out there who are fighting the Red Baron.*" ³⁸

Naturally, an event of such magnitude could not possibly be kept secret long, or swept under the rug. Therefore, within two days, to maintain confidentiality of the facility on top of Pha Thi, the RLG issued an erroneous statement to the press that for the first-time enemy bombers had attacked Laos. The village of Moung Yut, located a couple of miles southeast in a river valley of the same name, had been bombed. This was one of the two villages that Pop Buell and "Jiggs" Weldon visited in the early days to partake of the fabled hot springs. However, events of

³⁷ It was years before Ted Moore revealed his participation in the momentous event to other authors.

³⁸ This was in reference to the Charles Schulz popular Peanuts comic strip.

greater magnitude and import occurring at Nam Bac on the day afterward tended to somewhat diminish interest in the Pha Thi attack.

By late February the *Bangkok Post* also printed a lengthy rendition of the incident. Datelined *UPI* Vientiane 27 February 1968, some of the information, likely gleaned off the record from Lao officials, was close to being correct. However, most was considered speculation or secondhand rumor. Nevertheless, the article is quite an interesting read:

"One of the most fascinating-and puzzling-events in the entire history of the Indochina War was the so-called bombing raid by four ancient Soviet-made, North Vietnamese-flown biplanes last January 12 on a tiny village [Moung Yut] in Northwestern Laos.

There are hordes of rumors and theories circulating around this administrative capital city on the Mekong River 400 miles north of Bangkok about both the reasons for the raid and the targets they were aimed at..

The Hanoi government has maintained a steadfast silence on the issue from the start and North Vietnamese representatives here continue to maintain, even after the wreckage of one of the planes was displayed here for three weeks, that the entire incident was a fabrication.

This is the modern age and technology can make anything, one of them told an American recently.

The Americans, who provide the bulk of the Laotian government's outside support and carry on all sorts of clandestine paramilitary operations in this country, have also said nothing for publication on the subject.."

The article continued to describe the "raid" on That Ty, a mysterious airfield more than forty miles west of Sam Neua Town.

"...Never before had the communists bombed or openly used any kind of air power outside their own territory in the 22 years since the Indochina War began...

...the communists may not have been banking on the stiff opposition the aircraft met, and may have been planning to announce the raid later as a blow struck by the Pathet Lao rather than by the North Vietnamese [because of the need for covert operation to circumvent the Geneva Accords]...

...That in itself is an ideal location to provide support for helicopters picking up pilots downed in the Hanoi area 100 miles to the east, along the railways and roads running north to Red China, or near Dien Bien Phu, 100 miles northwest.

It would also be a good location for radar and radio monitoring stations listening in on North Vietnamese communications. Since it is in Laos it would in theory be immune to potential North Vietnamese air raids in a way that intelligence ships sailing off the NVN coastline might not be... All this, of course, may be no more than speculation-although it was not given as speculation but as a hard reason for the North Vietnamese attack.

Whether it is true or not, the fact of the matter is that there was obviously something of great enough importance at the base to warrant a bombing raid of considerable political risk to the communists."

With ground troops firing wildly while the "Colts" conducted several passes, troops on top of Pha Thi naturally claimed a downing. However, Flight Mechanic Wood personally claimed two kills to the Author. In the chaos that ensued during and after the attacks, there was no way of actually knowing which party was correct. Since two AN-2 planes were downed, it was really academic, and to a degree, all parties may have partially contributed. During a later broadcast, a Radio Hanoi



The damaged fuselage of one of the two AN-2 "Colt" aircraft shot down after the bombing attack on Phu Pha Thi on 12 January 1968. The plane was displayed at Wattay Airport, Vientiane for three weeks.

Author Collection.

announcer mentioned both Moore and Wood by name and indicated that they would soon receive their comeuppance. Within a little more than a year, this prediction became an actuality. Whether triggered by an ancient Asian curse or not, both crewmembers crashed in separate Bell accidents. Moore survived; Wood perished.

The unconventional air attack on Pha Thi resulted in a powerful wake-up call for the Western camp and attested to the degree of importance enemy leaders accorded to taking down the site. Although likely planned in lieu of a difficult ground attack that would certainly require a great deal more effort and many losses, North Vietnamese leaders opted for the pragmatic choice. Courageous to the point of being suicidal, the attack on Pha Thi had been costly in both men and materiel. Given a modicum of luck in ordnance delivery, the offensive could have proven successful. That it was not reinforced the adage relating to the final result because of unknown factors involved in war.

The TSQ-81 radar facility continued to operate during a period when it was deemed especially useful for the goals of the Rolling Thunder campaign. Several steps were undertaken to enhance security and improve defenses from potential air attacks. Against this end, additional weaponry was added, and two captured dual-purpose ground-air 12.7mm guns were delivered to the site. One was established at the TSQ location, the other placed on the lower HLZ. Other measures taken over following days to increase the defensive potential were the addition of an 85mm "Long Tom" artillery piece that could throw rounds far to the east. In February, a 105mm howitzer and other heavy weapons were brought to the lower portion of eastern Site-85. A U.S. Air Force Forward Air Guide (FAG) became part of the American contingent. His duties included observation of enemy positions and directing proximity air strikes. Using multi-functional

radios, he also relayed team spotting and current intelligence information to Udorn. It was also obvious that greater aerial surveillance of the area was essential to keep from losing Air Force or civilian aircraft to enemy fighters.

Despite the failure of the AN-2 air attack to take out the all-weather navigation facility, like all well-planned offenses, the enemy was undeterred from pursuing the overall mission: denying Pha Thi to their adversaries. Consequently, they reverted to a plan B operation. Although Meo guerrilla units continued attempts to maintain a twelve-kilometer perimeter to the east at Den Din and north at Houei Kha Moun (LS-111), and mounted increased patrolling, enemy units moved closer to their assigned goal.

On the 14th several hundred enemy mortar-equipped troops were reported fifteen kilometers north-northeast. Within three days units moved west to positions north of Site-111, causing panicked refugees and villagers to commence an exodus. On the 19th, equipped with artillery pieces, five battalions of mixed Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops marched out of Sam Neua Town. Intending to encircle Pha Thi from three directions, one battalion infiltrated north, another one south, with the bulk proceeding directly west toward the Den Din community.

By the 22nd, Den Din was lost to the east, as was Nhot Phat (LS-179), seventeen kilometers south of the radar facility. Despite the addition of daily A-1E sorties and A-26 support at night, the enemy dug in, waiting and preparing for the next phase of their operation.

Adding to the concerns of Vang Pao and his advisors for prospects in Military Region Two and at the central base at Na Khang, Moung Son (L-59), twenty-six miles north of Moung Heim (LS-48A), was attacked and fell. It appeared that Vang Pao's

flanks were gradually being squeezed and rolled up throughout the area. ³⁹

An Agency bulletin later reported:

"The communists are stepping up their annual dry season campaign against government guerrilla bases in northeastern Laos. The enemy has recently taken a number of outlying posts near Phou Pha Thi. Upwards of seven enemy battalions have moved into the area, and an attempt probably will be made to knock out the airstrip [with artillery] on which the base is totally dependent.

Loss of this base, which was unsuccessfully attacked on 12 January, would seriously disrupt government operations in northern Houa Phan Province. This would also deprive the U.S. of navigational aids for air operations over North Vietnam.

In addition, the communists captured the government position at Moungh Heim on 23 January, suggesting that an early thrust may be made against Na Khang [LS-36], the principal base for friendly operations in northern Xieng Khouang Province." ⁴⁰

³⁹ Segment Sources:

Tim Castle, 75-78, 258.

James Linder, *The Fall of Lima Site 85: The War in Laos* (CIA Studies in Intelligence, Downloaded from the Internet, 01/23/97).

Victor Anthony, 253-254, FN 10.

Military Analysis Network-FAS, Description, Specifications, and Photographs of the AN-2 aircraft, (<http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ac/row/an-2.htm>).

Ken Conboy 189-190.

Edward Vallentyne. *Project CHECO 7th Air Force, The Fall of Site 85*, Reprinted by the Dalley Book Service, 11-16.

Leary January 1968 Notes.

Gary Gentz Interview, 1/15/93.

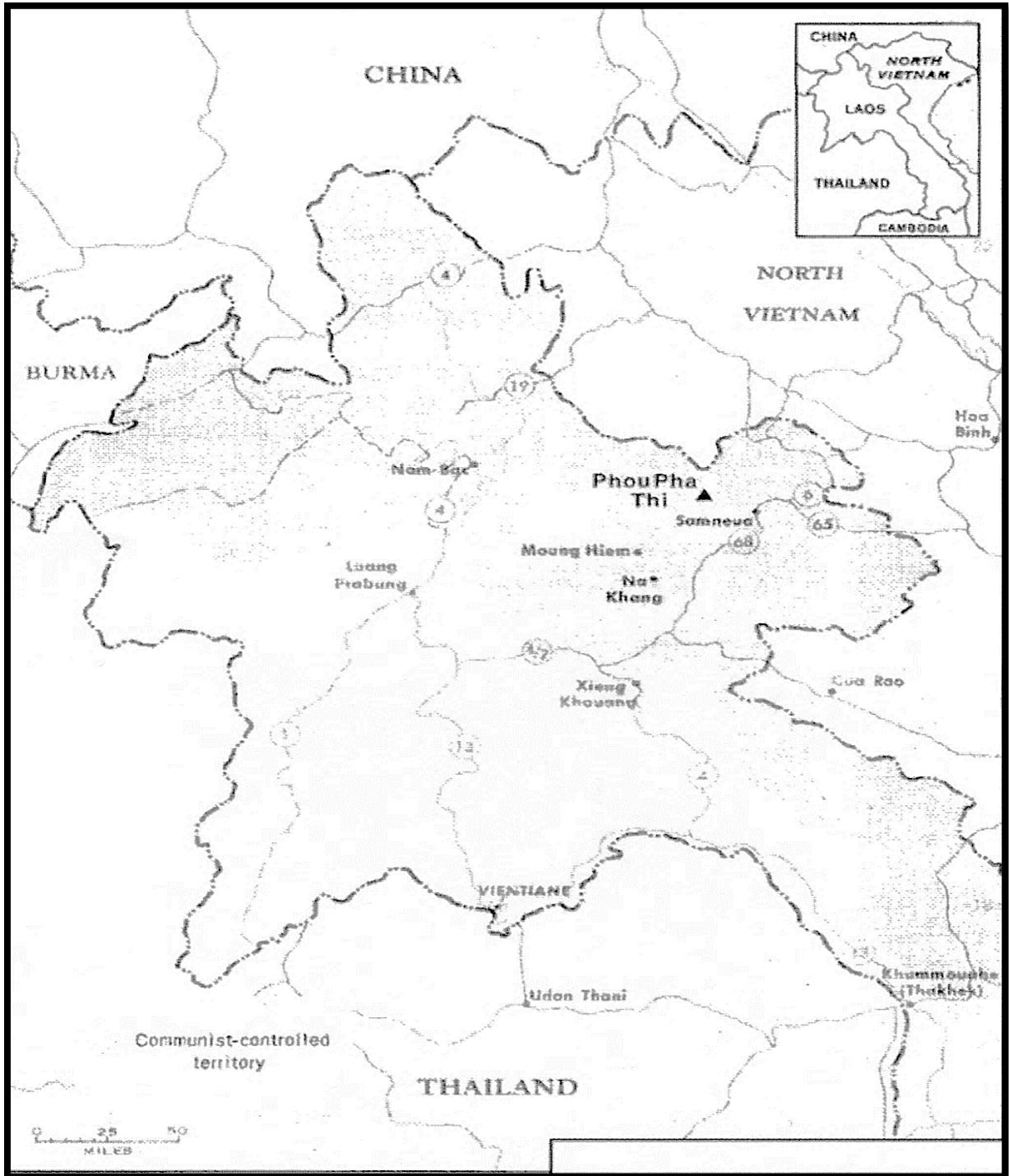
The *Bangkok Post*, *First Air Raid in Laos Aimed at Airfields*, 02/28/68, Article Provided the Author by Gary Gentz.

Wayne Knight Email, 09/01/00.

Ted Shackley, 185.

Lawrence Pence, *Freedom Bird*, Internet, 08/06/09.

⁴⁰ CIA Daily Bulletins, 01/25/68, 01/31/68.



January contested areas in upper Military Region Two.
CIA Map, 01/31/68.

DOWN SOUTH

Customer road watch missions in the south kept me largely out of the January "shot pattern" in Military Regions One and Two. However, these Trail missions were not without hazard, as the recent incident east of Savannakhet attested.

While Jarina was still enjoying fun at Luang Prabang, Ted Moore, Orvil Mock, and I headed southeast to Pakse in Papa Foxtrot Juliet (PFJ). Although curious regarding his Pha Thi incident, I did not unduly push him to divulge facts. Still smarting from admonitions not to reveal anything regarding the AN-2 incidents at Site-85, he did tender some information, indicating that higher ups debriefed him and many were not happy. He even believed that he might be fired for his aggressive act. This did not make sense to me, for although we were supposed to be unarmed civilians, I considered the shutdown an enormous accomplishment for a helicopter pilot, certainly a first in the annals of aviation history--one that might someday be revealed to the world. Ted did offer that he simply overtook the "Colts," as they could only fly at ninety knots or less.

After reaching Lima-11 we fueled and proceeded to Doug Swanson's well-fortified tribal base at Kong Mi (LS-7) south of Attopeu. Doug's missions were never far from the base camp and, unless deemed in an active area, did not always require escort aircraft. All other parameters and SOPs remained intact for the missions. This mission required an exfil of twelve SGU troops from a low hill area sixteen miles west of Kong Mi and six miles south of Route-110. Flying in a Porter, the Customer identified the men as his and received radio confirmation that they were ready for the extraction. We proceeded with three helicopters, two for pickup, and one relegated to a SAR role. After returning the men to Site-7, we relocated to PS-22.

The second mission of the day was a late afternoon infil of five troops twenty-eight miles northeast to the hills seven miles east of Route-96. It required a one hour and ten-minute recon by Bell PICs in CASI Porter Papa Foxtrot Delta (PFD).

Most likely a habit spilling over from the H-34, I felt much more comfortable sitting in the Bell's right seat. To me, it also denoted PIC status. However, in the skid configured Bell, unlike the H-34, there was no brake system, the engine could be started easily from either seat, and instrumentation was fairly equal. Therefore, because Ted had performed so well in taking out the Soviet AN-2s at Site-85 and was far more experienced than me in the Bell, I let him sit in the right seat.

We boarded the heavily laden troops on a pad adjacent to the Plateau's rim. At the time I thought we might be too heavy to hover. Apparently, Ted thought so, too, for when it was time for us to depart the landing zone, he jerked the collective up, snatched the aircraft off the ground, and dove off the rim toward the valley floor. Surprised and more than a little alarmed, I watched the RPM drop below ninety percent, but could take no action at the time. I was familiar with a jump-takeoff procedure, but after my experience at Na Khang with Robbie, thought them unnecessary, something possibly leading to disaster. Too much could happen in such a condition. From a conservative viewpoint, I still adhered to the time-honored hover check to assess power and weight. Apparently, Moore had performed this sort of takeoff previously, and in this case the end result was positive, but I was drained of energy. Considering Moore something of a cowboy, that was the last time I allowed him to sit in the right seat.

After linking up with our escorts, we launched. We logged twenty-seven minutes in denied areas for both incident-free missions and retired to the Pakse hostel.

Consistent with Customer asset sharing, we relocated to Savannakhet for a three aircraft exfil of ten SGU. Although in the right seat, I deadheaded while Ted logged flight time. Prior to our mission, the pilot of CASI Beech Baron N533C flew the three PICs on a one hour and twenty-three-minute area recon. The mission, almost a hundred miles east northeast of Lima-39, was almost at our maximum range and endurance. Most likely a cross-border operation, the team was at a location five miles from the border on the north side of the Phou Pho Mountain range. Like most of our team missions in Military Region Three, this one was successful without problems. However, depending on the length to the target and the time to think, stress levels were high--at least in my case.

After completing a mission at our extreme range and endurance, two hours and twenty-three minutes after departure, we landed at Savannakhet to RON.

Thursday morning, we returned to Pakse and PS-22 for work and additional missions. The recon was conducted in CASI Porter XW-PGD. Two infiltrations of fifteen men and equipment followed to coordinates YB222685, nineteen miles east of PS-22 and a few miles west of Route-96. Such a large contingent likely indicated a road mining or ambush operation.

We returned to Pakse late. With so much occurring in Military Region Four requiring many flight crews, the Company hostel was full. Therefore, we were obliged to stay overnight at the USAID guest house at the great expense of three dollars. This establishment was also crammed and extra canvas and wood cots were placed in hallways. I was assigned one rack directly across from H-34 driver John Fonburg. Early in the morning, even

before the cock crowed, I was awakened to strange, loud noises. When I became aware of the source, I discovered that it was none other than big John Fonburg belching and expelling flatus, sometimes randomly, other times in sequential harmony. I was reminded of early English writer Geoffrey Chaucer's droll humor in the *Canterbury Tales* describing sounds of the gastrointestinal tract that, "*made noises at both ends.*" Finally, with my patience exhausted, unable to stand the cacophony any longer, I screamed at John to wake up. After he grunted, mumbled, and smacked his lips, blessed peace followed.

On the nineteenth, with their road mission accomplished, we retrieved the fifteen men emplaced the previous day. After returning the team to the Customer at PS-22, we RTB Udorn.

PANHANDLE ACTIVITY

While enemy forces continued to capture and hold territory in Military Region One and Military Region Two, during the third week in January the battle for the remote Marine Corps highlands base at Khe Sanh, South Vietnam, ostensibly commenced. Over more than a two-month period, outposts and the main base, containing 6,000 Marine Corps and army of Vietnam (ARVN) troops, were impacted by enemy rocket, artillery, mortar, and small arms fire.

The combat patrol base at Khe Sanh had been developed and occupied as one of four large bases in the Northern area to supplement a wire and minefield barrier begun in the spring of 1967 across the narrow waist of South Vietnam. Calculated to tie down North Vietnamese units and control major infiltration along Route-9, the system had encountered concerted resistance. Khe Sanh was also conceived as a potential launch site for a proposed multi-divisional thrust into Laos to sever the trail system at the Tchepone Valley through point should approval of

such an ambitious plan be implemented. One of seven enemy logistic bases staged along the entire Trail system, Base Area 614, within the Tchepone area, was considered immensely important as the major base for the entire Trail network.⁴¹

Although mid-January intelligence revealed a major enemy buildup and encirclement around Khe Sanh, pros and cons of maintaining a remote major base so near the DMZ had resulted in top American leaders electing to remain in place for "political and strategic reasons." Ground and air artillery would provide necessary support and a sizeable battle would provide a perfect chance to fix and destroy the enemy.

On 22 January the largest U.S. air offensive commenced with massive strikes from multi-service tactical aircraft, including B-52s.

North Vietnamese activity prompted CINCPAC headquarters to speculate regarding enemy plans in the narrow waist of Laos, generically called the eastern Panhandle:

"In the Lao Panhandle area U.S.-ARVN ground operations over an extended period could restrict enemy resupply activities and movement of replacement personnel, destroy his supply caches, and deny him the base/sanctuaries he needs. If so, the enemy would be expected to divert infiltration activities further to the west and attempt to increase his use of sea infiltration to include the use of Cambodian ports and overland route [likely Route-110]. Could divert forces from other operational areas or provide additional forces from NVN. [The enemy] may act to intensify the threat in northern Laos causing FAR and other

⁴¹ Like logistic routes in Laos, U.S military intelligence personnel assigned numbers to major storage bases. Like Ho Chi Minh Trail vs. Truong Son, these designations were most certainly accorded different terms by the North Vietnamese.

friendly forces currently in the Panhandle to be diverted to assist in the north."

The assessment was prescient and timely, as evidenced by the loss of Ban Houei Sane on 23 January. Located close to the border and Route-9, isolated and remote Lima Site-189 was the only government base and listening post to survive in that area of enemy territory for more than seven years. ⁴²

Since the RLA had abandoned Tchepone many years before, civilian-piloted helicopters and planes had delivered men and supplies to Houei Sane. Resupply could be hazardous, as evidenced by the Air America C-46 cargo plane shot down with pilot loss and crew capture in September 1963. By 1966, increasing AAA area coverage rendered the site too dangerous for supply from the west. Consequently, filling the vacuum, military supply operations commenced from South Vietnam, and special ARVN personnel used the site to advantage for LOC observation.

On Tuesday night, seven enemy tanks were employed for the first time. These armored vehicles, plus three infantry battalions, sent Houei Sane's FAR Volunteer Battalion 33 (BV) troops and thousands of occupants, scurrying east along Route-9 toward Lang Vei, South Vietnam, where a U.S. Special Forces camp located between Khe Sanh and a mile and a half from the Lao border was operational by 31 December. Because of the presence of several enemy divisions moving to tighten the noose around Khe Sanh, the U.S. Special Forces camp at Lang Vei was considered one of the most exposed and seriously challenged

⁴² Despite defensive measures, in the Author's estimation, this tenure could only have been possible because of a favorable accommodation with local enemy commanders, similar to ones created at Attopeu and formerly at Moung Heim (which fell in 1966). The sites existed only at the whim of the enemy, and only when FAR troops were not aggressively probing enemy LOCs. Furthermore, beset with lengthy supply lines, the sites were expeditious to the enemy for trading purposes.

Special Forces observation posts in South Vietnam. Besieged by enemy armor, despite a heroic stand, during which seven enemy tanks were destroyed, the site eventually fell in early February. American survivors were evacuated by air. Indigenous Bru defenders, their dependents, and Lao from Houei Sane escaped to Khe Sanh.

Coupled with the massive TET offensive, the loss of Lang Vei was well publicized in the U.S., causing consternation in Congress and condemnation from media sources.

Following the victory at Houei Sane, enemy units either maneuvered east toward Khe Sanh or south to concentrate, and focus on pressuring the towns of Saravane, Lao Ngam, Thateng, and Attopeu in Military Region Four.

Despite concern in late January over the eventual outcome of the battle, a firm decision had been made in Washington and the field to retain Khe Sanh. There would be no turning back. A decisive defeat, like the French military suffered at Dien Bien Phu, could not and would not be tolerated. This fostered discussion about employing nuclear or chemical weapons if deemed necessary. Despite President Johnson's misgivings over the negative implications of losing Khe Sanh, he was reassured by advisors that:

"The United States had more and better equipped reconnaissance, all-weather, fighter, and other tactical aircraft, plus B-52 bombers [many recently relocated from the states to Guam and Okinawa bases]; there was reinforcing artillery from Marine positions east of the mountains; and there were vastly improved aerial techniques for resupply, medical evacuation, and for other needs."

Fighter-bomber strikes followed by B-52 Arc Light sorties continued 24/7 with impressive bombing results. Despite superior enemy numbers, defending U.S. Marines and ARVN troops held firm.

With the base supplied by innovative aerial techniques, massive firepower from base artillery, and tactical air strikes exacted a devastating toll on Giap's forces, estimated in the range of 10,000. Unless demoralized by the massive American bombing campaign, missing from the equation was the curious enemy reasoning for reluctance to commit infantry divisions, numbering in the tens of thousands, for a major frontal attack to overwhelm the base.

Hostilities continued at Khe Sanh until 8 April, at which time the land route to the base was opened, allowing a relief column to arrive. What was left of the original enemy hordes withdrew. ⁴³

UDORN

I chose to take my monthly scheduled time off (STO) in Udorn to relax with the family and attend to necessary items. In contrast to one-year tours U.S. military, one logical explanation that many of us were able to work for years in the Lao low intensity battlefield environment (at least in the early

⁴³ Segment Sources:

Telegram CINCPAC (Sharp) to Chairman JCS (Wheeler), Situation in Laos, 01/21/68.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 187-188.

Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985) 147, 157.

Philip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press 1991), 161, 172, 553.

Bernard Nalty, *The War Against Trucks Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-1972* (Washington, D.C: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2005) 12.

Victor Anthony, 265, 269; Wikipedia, Khe Sanh, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tet_Offensive).

Jacob Van Staaveren, *The Air Force in Southeast Asia: Toward a Bombing Halt 1968* (Washington: Office of Air force History, 1970) 8-13.

years) was the Company's liberal time off policy. ⁴⁴ Another reason for our longevity was the important diversion of family life, or for single men, activities revolving around the "creature comforts" at the Air America facility. Without these distractions, we would have become total "basket cases," unable to function, or remain long in Southeast Asia to perform the job.

During the early years of the Lao operation the Customer's plan was to discourage a pilot from remaining in Southeast Asia for more than his obligated three-year employment period. According to Vint Lawrence, Vang Pao's Case Officer at Long Tieng, Agency eggheads at headquarters posited that any more time in the Theater would enable a perceptive individual to acquire too much knowledge and information regarding the intelligence agency's somewhat convoluted methods, and piece together the "big picture." By the time the war in Nam commenced, this philosophy no longer applied to us contract aviators. By then many of us had gained considerable and valuable experience. We could navigate easily in most areas without maps, knew the names of villages, could negotiate high mountain sites with decent payloads, and had substantial rapport with the Customer and overlying goals. In short, in the main, we were performing commendable work, one that far exceeded original expectations. In addition, our SAR work was considered exceptional and essential in Laos.

Reports arrived from Malaysia revealed that negotiations continued in Kuala Lumpur attempting to salvage Concrete Masonry (a subsidiary of Asian American) and retain some control of the company. To satisfy the substantial debts incurred over the

⁴⁴ Former Marine aviator and Air America Vice President of Operations Bob Rousselot was spot on when he instituted this perk to our employment.

period of its existence, more money was solicited from the Udorn investors. However, after reading the letter I wrote following my frustrating visit to Kuala Lumpur, most investors believed an infusion of more money was too little-too late, and no enthusiasm for this request was generated on our end. Indeed, why send good money after bad? No one had tangible suggestions on what to do and few appeared to care; we were just too far away from the source to cull information and track the proceedings. In addition, we discovered that no records had been maintained regarding the influx of funds we forwarded to KL early the previous year. From the beginning, Manager Coble (perhaps canny like a fox) was never good at keeping records, but this revelation was inexcusable.

On a personal level, I discovered that there was a clause in the U.S. naturalization laws that, pending a successful test, allowed the spouse of the individual working overseas to be immediately naturalized. This was enormously beneficial, for it bypassed the five-year waiting period for those "green card" immigrants living in the States, allowing those who lived overseas to become Americans. I had heard it was quite easy to obtain naturalization in Hawaii, but had no information regarding the East Coast. Against this end, along with a trip to the States in April or May, we began planning to obtain Tuie's immigrant visa. I would also send for USG study material regarding American history and government. Of course, a modicum of English comprehension was required to read the material. I would be able to help with this phase of the requirement. In a letter penned on the 21st, I asked Dad if he was acquainted with anyone in the Newark, New Jersey or New York immigration system that might smooth the way for Tuie.

Air America recently sponsored a Cub Scout pack under the auspices of a Thai charter and major help from a U.S. Army unit.

My son was still too young for scouting, but since I was an Eagle Scout and had evidenced some interest in the project, on Saturday, I was asked to attend a picnic and meeting to discuss needs of the pack. Two Filipino men, one Manny Galleria, previously had Cub packs or Boy Scout troops in their country; they were already active as supervisors. However, Dan Carson, who was slated to be the pack leader, had just been shot down and injured, so could not attend. Therefore, the meeting was placed on hold in favor of a picnic. At the time, I was noncommittal about my participation, but agreed to help occasionally.

UPCOUNTRY

Because of the few Bells available for field work due to crashes, scheduled and unscheduled maintenance, and the heavy work load demand during a period of increased enemy aggression, H-34s continued to be utilized for road watch missions. Therefore, Special Mission requirements for two pilots in the cockpit often required helicopter pilots to travel to far distant points for only short periods. An example of this arose on the 23rd, when Mike Jarina deadheaded to PS-7 via Pakse on 39 Foxtrot. At Kong Mi, he joined Tony Byrne and Flight Mechanic Whiting in Hotel-44. After the mission, and before securing at Lima-11, they stopped at Attopeu and a site on the Bolovens Plateau ten miles south of Lao Ngam and twelve miles southwest of Paksong.

With the mission requirement complete, Mike found his way home the next day. ⁴⁵

Normally a thirty-one-day month would equate to seven days off the flight schedule, but requirements for a test on Papa

⁴⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

Foxtrot Juliet (PFJ) took me to the flight line on the 26th. During the day, Pat McCarthy and I struggled to produce an airworthy ship for Ted Moore to ferry upcountry.

Two days later Don Leach, Pat McCarthy, and I left in Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) to perform upcountry missions.

Following the unsuccessful AN-2 attack on Phu Pha Thi, a well-executed ground attack was expected on the mountain by defenders and planners. Despite the site being surrounded on three sides, quiet prevailed for the present, and the site was still functioning normally. It was believed that the Vietnamese infantry was waiting for artillery to be tactically positioned prior to any serious offensive.

During the period, a test was conducted by concerned radar technicians to divert strike aircraft on suspected enemy positions. Not coordinated with 7th Air Force, and violating SOPs, the test was not immediately fruitful, and caused consternation among those operating the TSQ-81 facility. However, lessons learned from the exercise did prove helpful when the mountain was seriously challenged.

As information and intelligence streamed into various agencies' offices and was distilled, high level bureaucrats and politicians flashed messages to each other regarding the current state of affairs at Phu Pha Thi:

"Most recent reports of enemy action around Site-85 indicate that an attempt to seize the site is imminent. Two key outposts defending the approaches to 85 have already been taken by the North Vietnamese and pressure is continuing to close in around the site.

Over a year ago when VP attempted to defend Site-36, his troops suffered a great number of casualties. At that point he decided never again to commit his units to the all-out defense of a position. That tactic is still being followed and, while

his units will continue to defend Site-85 as long as possible, he does not intend to accept heavy casualties in exchange for real estate.

As you know the TSQ-81...as well as a TACAN facility is located at Site-85. When the decision was made to install these facilities, it was understood that no last-ditch stand would be made to defend them. Although this equipment is costly, it is expendable--the men who service it are not and they will be removed prior to the fall of the site, if the situation becomes hopeless." ⁴⁶

With the enemy squeeze play on Pha Thi progressing, intelligence and aggressive patrolling action was critical to the site's survival--and in fact upper Military Region Two. Consistent with these requirements, after landing on the short pad on top of Pha Thi and obtaining a briefing, we performed an infiltration of a fifteen member Meo team from Site-85 to coordinates UH964756. Armed escort was no problem for missions, as A-1 pilots had long been assigned morning duty in support of the site.

Twenty miles northeast of the "Rock," the target site perched on high ground four miles west of Route-63, an important logistical conduit leading from North Vietnam into Sam Neua Town. Roughly located between formerly occupied government sites at Nong Khang (LS-52) and Phia Kham (LS-87), it included an area encompassing small villages and hill tribes. Naturally many trails proliferated with some feeding into Route-63

⁴⁶ CIA Vientiane Intelligence Information Cable, 01/30/68. Edward Vallentiny, 16-17. Country Director for Laos and Cambodia (Herz) to Assistant Secretary of State East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy), Enemy pressure on Site-85, 02/01/68, Source: Department of State, EA/Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia Files Lot 75 D 394.

After the mission, we repaired to Na Khang to address the second scheduled mission, an exfil.⁴⁷

There were equal concerns at Site-36 regarding enemy aggressiveness and threats in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Province. Located in a relatively open and less protected or secure area than Pha Thi, in the past, Na Khang had been attacked, abandoned, reoccupied, and was still considered important for various reasons. However, the base never attained the major proportions it once enjoyed. Still, when security allowed, it was used as a launch site for Jolly Green helicopters and their crews during requirements for SARs "across the fence." Earlier in the month, after northeastern and eastern sites near enemy LOCs had been compromised, General Vang Pao ordered the withdrawal of most fighting assets to Na Khang.

Our team was located on very high ground thirty miles northeast of Site-36, just to the east along Route-6, and a couple of miles north of Ban Hat Heng (Lima-31). After depositing the men at Na Khang for briefing, we returned to Sam Tong for the night.

On Monday and Tuesday, sans Leach, I returned to upper Military Region Two to work. There was a lot to do, and with the weather much improved, I moved water and supplies to the top of Pha Thi and shuttled troops around the area. Attesting to the heavy workload on both days, I logged more than ten hours carrying defensive materials such as mines and barbed wire to the mountaintop helipad. Some I shuttled from Na Khang; other loads were carried from the lower strip at the western base.

⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the Customer was generally tight-lipped regarding mission goals. With no "need to know," although able to deduce a reason, we rarely knew the exact object of such missions. Furthermore, without follow-up exfils, we were not aware of the success or failure of a mission.

The enemy was relatively quiet, but as ascertained by Meo teams, were located in force encircling most sectors of Pha Thi. Consequently, the defense and security of the TSQ-81 facility and its technicians was a constant object of concern. Case Officers responsible for the site, Terry Quill and John "Woody" Spence, another former Montana smoke jumper, conducted an area assessment of the immediate perimeter and reported:

"...the TSQ-81 and TACAN buildings were placed on the western edge of the mountain...a few yards from a nearly vertical 3,000-foot cliff. This...area, encompassing about one-quarter of an acre, was located on a relatively flat bluff some 200 feet in elevation above the CIA operations area and helipad. The mountain was heavily wooded and there was a single steep and rocky path that connected the helipad and operations area to the TSQ-81/TACAN site. From the helipad, there was a path down to the village of Pha Thi. To the north and south of the site, however, the ridge line was less abrupt. Although a difficult climb, the CIA officers considered that a determined force might attempt to use this route[s] to gain access to the mountaintop..."

Potential infiltration points were noted, particularly near the ladder on the east side leading to the Meo village. Concertina wire, claymore mines, quick fused grenades, and tubes of explosives were placed throughout the area. Additional troops were positioned to block any approach.

The added measures proved timely. Understandably, small enemy units managed to slip through the porous twelve-mile defensive perimeter around Site-85, and light enemy probes began to test the defenders' strength at Pha Thi. After we left, on the early evening of 30 January, defensive mines exploded on the southern avenue of approach to the lower "rock." This was followed by a short mortar attack on a southern outpost. A Meo patrol encountered only light resistance, after which the enemy

withdrew. No damage or injury was incurred. However, uncertain if the "balloon had gone up," Lamplighter flare planes and A-26 bombers were dispatched to investigate. There was no further action.

The same night, likely the same unit that probed Pha Thi, pressured MOUNG YUT, located southeast in the river valley below Site-85. The local ADC home guard temporarily withdrew and later moved back into the town. ⁴⁸

On one of these days in the north, I was working well east of Site-85 when a blanket call from an Air Force control ship boomed over Guard frequency stating there were bandits (enemy planes identified as "Colts") spotted near the border. Friendly aircraft were advised to clear the area. Having previously coined my forty-mile thumb rule, based on actual experience of errant Air Force sightings and coordinates from control planes aloft, I wondered if the bandits might be miles from their purported position. However, to be on the safe side, and since, to my knowledge, I was the only ship working in the area, I beat feet to the west. There were no further alerts and no air attacks.

ANOTHER BELL LOSS

Upon my return to the Site-20 hostel, I discovered that Ted Moore and Tod Yourglich had crashed in Papa Foxtrot Juliet, the same Bell I had recently tested at Udorn. Ted's accident marked the second of our young "safety pilots" to damage an aircraft. Thus far, none of us "Old Timers," who some in the Company predicted would be the first to have accidents, had not occurred-not yet.

⁴⁸ Edward Vallenty, *The Fall of Site 85*, 19.
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 89.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 190-191.

A common practice in Laos was for a fixed wing crew to deliver provisions to an airstrip when available. This was followed by a helicopter pilot, directed by a local air operation individual, distributing the bullets, beans, and bandages to outlying posts.

Moore had been shuttling supplies from the 4,700-foot Ban Moung Ngan strip, located fifty-two miles east of Long Tieng that Vang Pao's guerrillas had easily recovered in 1967. About 1500 hours, Ted was loaded for a short flight to 7,000-foot landing zone four miles northwest, where he had already conducted two trips without a problem. As was common at most elevated mountain landing zones, in the absence of definitive evidence, varying wind patterns often proved difficult, or impossible, to judge. Apparently in this case, conditions had changed from Ted's previous trips.

According to Moore's Aircraft Accident Review statement, Ted was able to determine a preliminary wind direction-south southeast-from a cooking fire's smoke. Turning on final three hundred yards from the pad, he commenced a normal approach, while subjectively judging ground speed and rate of closure. Close to the landing pad, he noted a wind shift, but elected to continue the approach. While still within translational lift mode (five to twelve knots), XW-PFJ began to settle, at which time he added power. Most certainly experiencing a settling with power condition only aggravated the situation. RPM decayed, the ship continued to descend and impacted the slope hard just short of the landing pad.

"...upon [ground] contact, the main rotor blades struck the side of the slope, the aircraft tipped to the right and the skids separated."

After attempting to secure the engine unsuccessfully, Ted exited the left side of the Bell, as Tod and one passenger had

previously accomplished. At the site's outpost, he discovered that Tod had incurred a rib and leg injury during the crash that required a splint.

After warning locals not to approach the helicopter, despite a danger of fire, Moore returned to PFJ to retrieve his survival vest containing flares and a radio. During the process, he again unsuccessfully attempted to shut down the engine.

Other aircraft were observed flying in the distance, but all attempts to reach anyone on VHF (121.5.0 Mhz) and UHF (243.0 Mhz) emergency guard frequencies with the survival radio failed; employing a signal mirror and flares likewise produced no results.

Ted conducted a second trip to the aircraft to obtain Tod's vest that contained another survival radio. Additional attempts to stop the engine came to naught.

Employing Tod's two pre-set radio frequencies failed to result in contact with any planes aloft. Therefore, Ted conducted a third visit to the broken machine. While rummaging through the cockpit, he forcefully twisted the throttle, finally achieving an engine shut down. At the same time, he employed the pedestal mounted VHF radio to contact a Company plane on 119.1 MHz. Within a relatively short period a helicopter arrived to ferry the crew to a point where they could be delivered to Udorn.⁴⁹

RECOVERY

CPH Wayne Knight had been absent from the office for almost two weeks and during Ted Moore's second January "moment of truth." Upon return, while flying 39F and Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot

⁴⁹ Air America Aircraft Accident Review, Bell 205, XW-PFJ, 04/12/68.

(PFF), he worked in the Thakhet-Savannakhet area providing Robbie Robertson a line check.

On the 31st, he ferried replacement helicopter, Hotel-54, from Udorn to Sam Tong with the dual purpose of journeying to Moung Ngan to retrieve radios and other items from PFJ prior to a recovery attempt.

I was working locally when Wayne arrived. At a selected time, he and a pair of mechanics joined Pat and me in Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) for a trip east to the Moung Ngan crash site. Situated at a high elevation, the ridge's long axis sloped upward to the northeast. At first glance the long ridge appeared to afford plenty of room to land. After a circling recon, unable to detect a definitive wind direction or velocity, I commenced a right-hand level approach to final.⁵⁰

Close to the landing site, with the rate of closure not decreasing appreciably, I realized that I too had been fooled and sucked into the same quartering or downwind trap as Moore experienced--a too rapid approach and one lacking an opportunity to go around. Concerned, I had visions of double crashed aircraft on the pad, just like what occurred in 1966 when Tom Pitkin and Marius Burke mated with J.J. McCauley's H-34 helicopter on a mountain in the Pak Beng area.

There had to be a viable solution. I scooted along the narrow, up-sloping ridgeline, and gradually reduced groundspeed by gently applying aft cyclic and raising the nose, while at the same time being careful not to over compensate and bang the tail stinger on the ground. Fortunately, there was a sufficient ground run available to stop and plunk the machine down before reaching the end of the ridge. Admittedly, there were more than

⁵⁰ We had no access to smoke grenades yet to assess wind direction and velocity. These would become available later.

a few anxious moments during that hairy approach to landing. Once on the ground, when I looked at Wayne and nervously smiled at him, he failed to say a word and appeared unruffled. It was anything but normal, but perhaps he was too concerned to respond.

After securing Papa Foxtrot India, we walked down to Papa Foxtrot Juliet, where the mechanics began stripping essential and non-essential equipment and attaching hardware and straps to enable a lift. Except for reported damage, the fuselage appeared mostly intact. When I peered into the passenger-cargo compartment, I noted the transmission had torn free from its front mounts. Pitched forward to the left, it lay partially askew across the rear bucket seats. I wondered where Tod had been sitting during the crash, and marveled at his amazing luck in surviving that horror.

Later in the day Wayne radioed for a lift. Not long afterward, a U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook arrived. The pilot conducted an out-of-ground-effect (OGE) hover alongside the ridge. Impressively he slid sideways over PFJ while an Air America crewman attached the Bell to the Chinook hook-sling mechanism. Then the pilot applied power and departed with no apparent trouble. I thought it was wonderful for a helicopter to produce such excess power at altitude. We had never enjoyed such luxury with our machines.

PFJ was returned to Udorn safely, where it was repaired and returned to service within several months. It seemed that just as one ship was restored to an airworthy condition, another went down. This did not bode well for a small program that only possessed six aircraft in its inventory. ⁵¹

⁵¹ I later went on home leave in April and did not fly Papa Foxtrot Juliet again until July.

After offloading Wayne, the passengers, and equipment at Sam Tong, I returned to local work before retiring for the night. ⁵²

I continued upcountry work until 2 February when I was relieved at Na Khang about noon. I was fortunate and deadheaded on Helio Courier Papa Bravo Zulu (PBZ) to Long Tieng and later to Udorn on Hotel-59.

TET 68

"...[It] failed to achieve its principal objectives.

It did not collapse the elected government of South Vietnam or shatter its army-as the communists had hoped.

It did not produce a 'general uprising' among the people of the cities as they had predicted.

The communists were unable to maintain control of any of the more than 30 cities that they attacked. And they took very heavy casualties.

But they did compel the South Vietnamese and their allies to move certain forces from the countryside into the cities.

They caused widespread disruption and suffering. Their attacks and the battles that followed made refugees of half a million human beings.

The communists may renew their attack any day..."

President Johnson's speech to the American people, 31 March 1968.

Events beginning in South Vietnam on the night of 30 January, and for the following two weeks in all but Hue, where vicious urban fighting continued for several additional weeks, did much to explain Transportation Group 559's trail system frenzy of traffic activity during the latter portion of 1967, and significant buildup of enemy forces in military regions of South Vietnam. Although, as early as 9 January, Saigon MACV

⁵² EW Knight Email, 08/30/00.

brass expected an offensive in some form, not necessarily, but most likely, at Khe Sanh Marine base, the Western camp lacked pertinent intelligence as to the exact time, place, and magnitude of any enemy thrust. The later loss of long standing Houei Sane and attacks on other border outposts portended something was in the wind. To forestall what was expected by Saigon headquarters, MACV's Commander, General Westmoreland, requested cancellation of the announced bilateral truce over the TET holiday. This was granted by Washington on 29 January. However, although warned, the South Vietnamese government chose to continue with the popular TET holiday, granting extended leave to nearly half its units.

Enemy feints and diversions away from major cities worked, however, inexplicably, Vietnamese headquarters initiated a day's delay commencing the expertly planned offensive. Consequently, the fabled ten percent, used in military parlance, already positioned in the field failed to "get the word" and the massive, coordinated attack planned to simultaneously assault countryside cities and towns on 30 January commenced a day early. Six cities were attacked with only a minor portion of the overall strike force. Even worse, for involved Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army units, premature attacks pinpointed intentions and triggered alerts to U.S. and Army of Vietnam (ARVN) forces that greater battles would follow.

As programmed, major enemy offensives began the following night on Saigon and other towns. Although the TET Vietnamese Lunar New Year absented up to half the Vietnamese government troops, American forces were alert and ready. Most ARVN units remaining on duty hanged tough and the South Vietnamese people failed to defect in the face of atrocities and heavy pressure to support the communist cause. Massive enemy assaults and fierce fighting were soon thwarted with huge losses incurred by Viet

Cong cadres, including top leaders. With the destruction of more than half its combat capability, the offensive became a tactical defeat for the North Vietnamese and the timetable to take over South Vietnam. Subsequently, the Viet Cong failed to operate as a viable insurgent counterforce in the country.

Aside from the loss of infrastructure, and destruction or damage to allied aircraft, a serious downside to the conflict prevailed in the Western camp. Seventh Air Force, in concert with the siege at Khe Sanh, virtually stripped all air assets from Laos and North Vietnam operations to quell the enemy offensive. At a time of increasing requirements, the shortfall of strike aircraft presented negative implications for government factions in Laos. It disrupted normal operations and created problems that would soon be magnified and revealed.

Another negative factor of TET 68 related to the disappointing failure of USG's three-year Rolling Thunder campaign to prevent sufficient movement of men and supplies along the Trails into South Vietnam to support the huge offensive. The ability to mount such an offensive also displayed the North's tenacity to pursue long term national goals.

In the final analysis, on the upside, historians later deemed the failed enemy offensive an overwhelming U.S. victory. The North Vietnamese lost important military and political initiative in South Vietnam--at least for the next four years. Although expecting conflict in some areas, apparently no one in Saigon foresaw the massive and concentrated enemy attack conducted throughout the entire country. Brilliantly conceived on the drawing board and the fabled enemy sandbox, utilizing more than 100,000 men and attacking 115 hard positions throughout South Vietnam, General Giap's forces initially gained tactical surprise. However, as often occurs during actual execution in the vagaries and "fog of war," they largely failed

in the physical endeavor and the Viet Cong were eliminated as a viable military challenge. Moreover, the battle produced a high degree of morale for the South Vietnamese army, and the Saigon government gained respect of the people who had refused to join the uprising.

Responding to the North's TET defeats, mainland Chinese leaders, dissatisfied over Giap's modification to their preferred policy of protracted guerrilla war in South Vietnam, were unimpressed. Consequently, previous excellent relations between the parties began to moderate, and problems with Meo's Cultural Revolution did nothing to alter or dispel this change.

In America, a minority vocal portion of the public, tiring of the protracted and increasingly unpopular war, did not view the end result of the offensive as an American victory, but rather as a defeat. Moreover, the liberal media had already conditioned Americans to excessive negative coverage of the war. Therefore, when disquieting photos and graphically displayed films of the TET offensive were aired nightly on prime-time TV by left-wing anchor personalities, many people, already weary of the long-drawn-out conflict, reacted accordingly; it marked a continuing downward spiral of American public support for the conflict. In the end, despite defeat on the battlefield, the communist winter-spring campaign was successful in that it helped terminate an American presidency.

One facet of the TET campaign related to prior enemy funneling of logistic support for the operation through Lao Panhandle LOCs. During a spring Department of Defense (DOD) after action assessment of USG policy in Laos, primarily regarding TET, military leaders alleged that in responding to enemy moves only after the fact, Johnson Administration officials, particularly McNamara, were not sufficiently aggressive in prosecuting the Lao war. It was time to reconsider

Lao policy, and a change was required. In response, Sullivan's Country Team countered that:

"...if the United States wanted to alter its basic commitment to fighting the North Vietnamese by covert and limited methods, it had better be prepared to support Laos with U.S. forces."

Of course, such action would most certainly destroy the country's neutral façade—at least in the eyes of the world. Backing Sullivan, State was quick to point out to DOD officials: "...what the North Vietnamese had not done in Laos: they had not set up a rival Pathet Lao government, not engaged in terrorism, not exposed publicly U.S. ground operations in the Panhandle, nor had they pushed to the Mekong."

Instead, tacit limitations existed between the two combatants that would be disturbed should either party substantially increase its operations in Laos.⁵³

Bob Hitchman, in Saigon with his family at the time of the TET fighting, later related some of the action to me. He and his young son Bobbie maintained an armed watch on top of their apartment building while fighting was occurring. The situation was such that civilians had to remain off the streets, as the

⁵³ Segment Sources:

Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 473-475, 485,478.

Edward Keefer Ed., *Foreign Relations Series Volume Summary 1964-1968, Volume 28, Laos*, (Washington: USG Printing Office, 1998) 10-11 (http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_28/FRUS_1964-68).

Stebbins and Adam Eds., *Documents on American Foreign Relations 1968-1969* (Council on Foreign Relations, Distributed by Simon and Schuster, 1972) 227.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 247.

Bernard Nalty, 13-14.

Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1986) 226.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 13-16.

The Author would like to believe the expanding Agency trail watch intelligence gathering program in which we helicopter pilots participated, in a small way contributed to the American military readiness for the TET offensive.

White Mice (Saigon police) scurried about the area shooting everything that moved. I thought to myself that the TET event was an awful thing for an impressionable lad to witness.

VANG PAO'S FLEDGLING AIR FORCE

Heralding an important change within the RLAF structure, the first two Meo pilots were graduated from Waterpump's T-28 training program in late January. Not satisfied with Lao air force support to his troops, for some time even before the October 1966 General Ma coup attempt, Vang Pao had pushed AB-1 and Bill Lair for his own exclusive tactical air force (TACAIR) and thus control of his own airborne artillery for close air support in Military Region Two. Previously, he could count only on the Thai and Lao T-28 pilots, who for various reasons, might or might not have implemented his orders with any precision.

There was early RLG and American reluctance to provide Vang Pao and the Meo forces air power. Like Colonel Bull Simons' training and formation of Kha tribal unit experiment on the Bolovens during early White Star days, it was feared by some that an attempt to form an autonomous region might result. In the case of providing Meo T-28s, Vientiane might be bombed. However, as Vang Pao's loyalty toward the government, tested again and again, was established and Agency control prevailed, this attitude waned.⁵⁴

Displaying true Asian nepotism, three fairly proficient English speakers with some education, former school teacher and

⁵⁴ Vang Pao loved to manipulate the controls of any aircraft, and took every opportunity to cajole the pilot he was flying with to allow him to fly. Over the years he amassed considerable "stick" time. Given different circumstances, in the Author's estimation, Vang Pao would have been the first Meo to enter a formal flight training system for his ethnic group.

Vang Pao's brother-in-law Lee Lieu, and Vang Tua, Vang Pao's nephew, were selected and dispatched to Nong Khai for indoctrination flights by Bob Hamblin and Jim Rhyne in the Agency-owned Cessna 180. Later, advanced training shifted to Khon Kaen, where, using the Cessna and a Piper PA-18 Cub, Thai pilots taught these men plus others chosen by Vang Pao. First classes of Meo pilots graduated during 1967. After gaining a modicum of technical English comprehension and 150 hours flight time, despite continuing Lao General Staff objections, the two top candidates, Lee Lieu and Vang Tua, were selected for T-28 combat training at the Udorn Air Commando Det-6 Waterpump facility.

Commissioned and assigned to the RLAF after graduation, both men were assigned to the Luang Prabang squadron. Even though considered good pilots, since they were derived from the "barbaric mountain race," lacking educational requirements of lowland Lao pilot candidates, and were actually NCOs in the Meo Army, Royal Lao T-28 pilots objected to flying with them. Beset with bias, before long Lieu and Tua refused to remain at Luang Prabang and rotated to Vientiane. This insubordination caused consternation in the RLAF hierarchy that was smoothed over by Agency personnel. Further concessions allowed the Meo to fly with seasoned Thai pilots.

Later, when an additional six Meo pilots entered the T-28 program, Lee Lieu was assigned his own squadron. Consequently, Vang Pao realized his long-term desire to have his own supporting air and the Meo pilots, paid and advised by him, were eventually dedicated to Long Tieng's operations on an autonomous basis.

As a school teacher, Lee Lieu was an exception to educational level education minimum required to train a combat pilot. However, many other Meo pilot candidates did not read

English well or at all. Consequently, they were quite difficult to teach on the ground and even more difficult to instruct in the air. They could not interpret cockpit instruments, a compass reading, or even comprehend the meaning of "a 360-degree turn." The Author recalls the flight training quip that even a monkey can be taught to fly. Through repetition, anyone can be trained to start an engine, take off, fly to a target and drop a bomb, then RTB and land. However, all important air and common sense dictate that much more is involved in operating a plane even in medium intensity conflicts.

Somehow, the Waterpump IPs managed to convey enough aviation knowledge over time to graduate the Meo pilots. It was estimated that twenty of the thirty-three Meo pilots eventually trained and released to the field died. Pushed to their outer limits, they foolishly braved weather and AAA threats. In order to ensure destruction of an enemy position, they jettisoned ordnance too low, often flying through bomb blasts and incurring damage. As the number of missions increased, the fatigue factor fostered errors in judgment, eventually diminishing proficiency, which resulted in fatalities.

However, overall the Meo pilots were competent and motivated warriors, dedicated to the cause, and as their colorful motto depicted-"*We fly until we die.*"⁵⁵

⁵⁵ John Pratt, *CHECO*, 56-57.
Ken Conboy, 170.
Victor Anthony, 259-260.
Don Moody, *The Great Adventures of Bob and Don: Short Stories from Laos 1961-1975*, 4-5, 10, ([http://aircommandos.org/Bob and Don/Episode0000.htm](http://aircommandos.org/Bob_and_Don/Episode0000.htm)).

I continued working from Sam Tong until the second. Thursday involved local trips from the site at the expense of daily project pay that was almost half the total time flown. This was all part of a game that Taipei management played with pilots, and certainly did not endear us to the Company. ¹ With the millions of USG dollars spent on two Indochina wars and the amount of money recently lost at Nam Bac in the form of supplies and equipment, when compared with the sum expended in the overall Theater, the pitiful amount denied us for our "blood, sweat, and tears" efforts appeared particularly egregious. The downsizing of wages smacked of targeting a minority group. Because we had no recourse, it was easily accomplished, and reminded me again of Senator Albert Gore's yearly attempts to deny even the paltry tax-free benefits to American overseas workers.

There was little or no sympathy for our plight. Rumor and innuendo being what it may, many people knew, or thought they were aware of, how much money we earned per month. Some were obviously envious, others realistic like IVS worker Bob Glover who, in a unique position to observe helicopter operations, indicated in a letter to stateside relatives that "*as some of the highest paid pilots in the world, we deserved every nickel we made.*" Air America Manager, CJ Abadie, however, was not as sympathetic in his assessment of our lot. He reputedly indicated that some of the "Old Timers" were "Fat Cats." They had earned too much money, were no longer hungry (highly motivated) and

¹ I never discovered where the order to cut our pay originated; certainly not Congress, the majority of whom were relatively ignorant of our activities. That left the White House or Langley as the culprits.

still willing to push the envelope in dealing with the Customer and job. When I heard this statement, I was reminded of families like that of Howard Estes, who departed Southeast Asia in 1965 with only a modest sum to show for his hundreds of hours of effort over hostile terrain.

The following morning, I was dispatched north, where hazards were perceived greater and project pay restrictions were not enacted. I worked only a little more than two fuel loads supporting area activities before being replaced by another pilot at Na Khang. Being relieved in the field, particularly at an outlying site, could present some difficulty and delay in obtaining a ride and returning home the same day. In this case, I was fortunate and deadheaded on Helio Courier XW-PBZ to Long Tieng, and from there to Udorn on Hotel-59, recalled for a maintenance inspection.

CONSIDERATIONS AT PHU PHA THI

Despite its defensible heights and rugged appearance as an impregnable and unassailable fortress, everyone associated with the project was aware that North Vietnam's superior fighting machine could achieve any goal they wished to pursue in Laos. This included moving to the Mekong River banks if the situation warranted. The only deterrents to the latter were complete destruction of the Geneva Accords on Laos, long logistical lines, and a threat of full U.S. military participation in the war.

All evidence pointed to a limited time remaining for Phu Pha Thi, its radar facility, and defenders. As enemy units continued efforts to surround Site-85, information gleaned from spies revealed a concerted attack was planned to commence during late February. Forewarned, Seventh Air Force leaders and the U.S. Embassy, charged with overall responsibility for the site

erroneously believed defenses would hold at least long enough until American technicians could be safely withdrawn. Furthermore, with the sheer northeastern and northwestern cliffs not deemed scalable, and the few avenues of approach on the southeastern side now mined and defended, there would be sufficient time for evacuation. Still, precautions were taken whereby the site was constantly in communications with friendly air, and the Air Force men were generally rotated daily to and from the site.

There was an overriding factor for maintaining an operational radar facility on top of Site-85. During current seasonal bad weather in North Vietnam, the TSQ-81 was considered effective directing semi-surgical strikes in that country. The unseasonal weather problem that negated visual strikes was not foreseen to end for a couple of months, so it was expeditious for Seventh Air Force to continue maintaining the site.

The massive enemy TET offensive in South Vietnam and the siege at Khe Sanh had stripped a majority air power from the Barrel Roll region of Laos until mid-February. Still, despite dedicated air strikes available in the vicinity of the "Rock," enemy forces continued arriving and forming into unit sized entities. Enabling the attacking forces mobility was the continuing extension of feeder road, Route-602 from Sam Neua toward the village of Den Din across the river from Site-85. The ambitious project obviously portended eventual movement of long-range artillery to points within range of Pha Thi's heights.

By the first, following mountain contour lines, road construction had progressed west to a location north of Ban Hong Non (LS-86). Progress was tracked by reconnaissance aircraft crews, and a few days later a large staging area was noted at Phou Chik Nou, only four miles east of Ban Den Din. Air strikes calculated to delay road construction or reduce enemy point

units were largely unsuccessful, and vehicular movement was observed on the eleventh.

As defensive measures proceeded at Site-85 in preparation for the impending battle, advanced portable rocket launcher devices, similar to the crude wooden ones built and employed by Tony Poe at Phu Khe (LS-19) were added to complement additional artillery pieces recently delivered to the mountaintop. A small contingent of Royal Thai Army Special Forces troops also arrived to join and supplement other Thai and PARU intercept specialists. Their tasks were to provide additional security and bolster existing defenses with machine guns, rocket launchers, and mortars in the vicinity of the radar, CIA, and HLZ sites.

Commanding Officer Captain Chamlong Sirimuang and his team were sent to Site-85 by Colonel Vitoon Yasawasi, also known by his code name DHEP {THEP}, honcho of the joint Agency-RTA unit Headquarters 333. ²

About the same time, Military Region Two Commander General Vang Pao recognized that his operation at Pha Thi was not achieving its targeted goals, so he reorganized the mixed command structure. Perhaps his motivation for this change centered on a lack of trust in Gia Tou (a FAR captain and somewhat autonomous individual in the region), or reliance on the captain's ability to pursue aggressive military action in retrieving fallen sites and holding the line against escalating

² Later known as the Joint Liaison Department, or JLD that was based at the Udorn facility in 1962. DHEP was the same individual who caused Bill Young to leave for the States in 1964. Chamlong achieved the rank of general. Aspiring to politics, later in 1995 he became the leader of the Democratic Party and Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand. Unusual for a Thai, he divulged that he had been a volunteer in the Lao war.

While visiting my wife's relatives in southern Thailand, we briefly met Chamlong at the airport, where he was busy pressing the flesh.

enemy pressure. Additionally, during the early years Gia Tou's loyalty had been somewhat clouded when the site temporarily fell under Pathet Lao control. At any rate, a proven, battle tested major, Yu Va Ly--we called him the Indian--was assigned tasks relating to perimeter defense and recapturing Phu Den Din and Lima Site-179.

Despite Vang Pao's effort to restructure his command of the diverse groups, no one was in overall charge of the FAR BV, ADC, SGU, and Thai units. Therefore, at this last-minute stage, with enemy forces relocating daily from Military Region One, and converging in force toward their goal, it was far too late in the Laos timeline, and the situation was far graver to cope with than anyone imagined. ³

FOCUS ON THAILAND

Since early 1967 communist activity in northeast Thailand had been minimal. With their movement proceeding at a low pace, the guerrilla insurgents only normally managed to scrounge food and commit minor intimidation against local villagers. Although some clashes occurred with Royal Thai Army's (RTA) security forces, villagers were no longer forced to attend communist indoctrination meetings. In addition, even by using terrorism in the region, communist efforts did not engender support from the local populace. Therefore, under pressure from Royal Thai Government (RTG) forces and success countering communist

³ Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 17, 20-21.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 188, 191.
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 88, 89.
Ted Shackley, *Spymaster*, 186.
Arthur Dommen, Interview with Former USAID Worker Ernie Kuhn, 03/25/95, 47-48.

insurgency in Isan, the Communist Party Thailand (CPT) shifted attention to other parts of the country.

Many non-Thai speaking people lived in northern hill areas and along the lengthy borders. Like ethnic Lao and Pho Thai in the northeast, until recent years, these tribal peoples were largely neglected or abused by lowlanders or greedy representatives of the Royal Thai government (RTG).

The diverse ethnic groups included Karen, Akha, Lisu, and Lahu, who enjoyed family ties with similar peoples in Burma. Yao and Meo clans, originally from Yunnan Province, China also lived in the northern region. Of all the hundreds of thousands of members of these hill tribes, because of issues over opium cultivation and slash and burn farming, the aggressive Meo provided the best fodder for communist ideology.

Since 1959, the CPT had been recruiting and preparing Meo for long term goals in north Thailand. Training for the future insurgents was conducted in either Laos or at Hoa Binh, North Vietnam.

With insurgency gradually moving north, CPT established bases in Nan and Chiang Rai Provinces. By November 1967 insurgents attacked lowland villages and remote Border Patrol Police (BPP) in those areas. Later, fighting commenced in the Loei, Phitsanulok, and Phetchabun areas.

Reacting in early December, 3,000 RTA troops and police mounted an offensive against the Meo in hills of Nan Province. Results were unsatisfactory for the RTG. An estimated two hundred trained, disciplined, and wily insurgents inflicted more than sixty casualties on government forces by late January. Factors contributing to the difficulty dealing with the Meo were a lack of cogent intelligence, the inability to provide sufficient logistical support in harsh, unfamiliar terrain, and like Meo warriors in Laos, the ability of the insurgents to

maneuver and evade contact except on advantageous ground of their choosing.

The large, poorly executed operation revealed RTG's awareness that insurgency had spread to other regions in the country. In addition, adverse treatment of tribals and denial that the insurgency was largely home grown, only exacerbated problems and tended to create new opportunities for communist inroads. ⁴

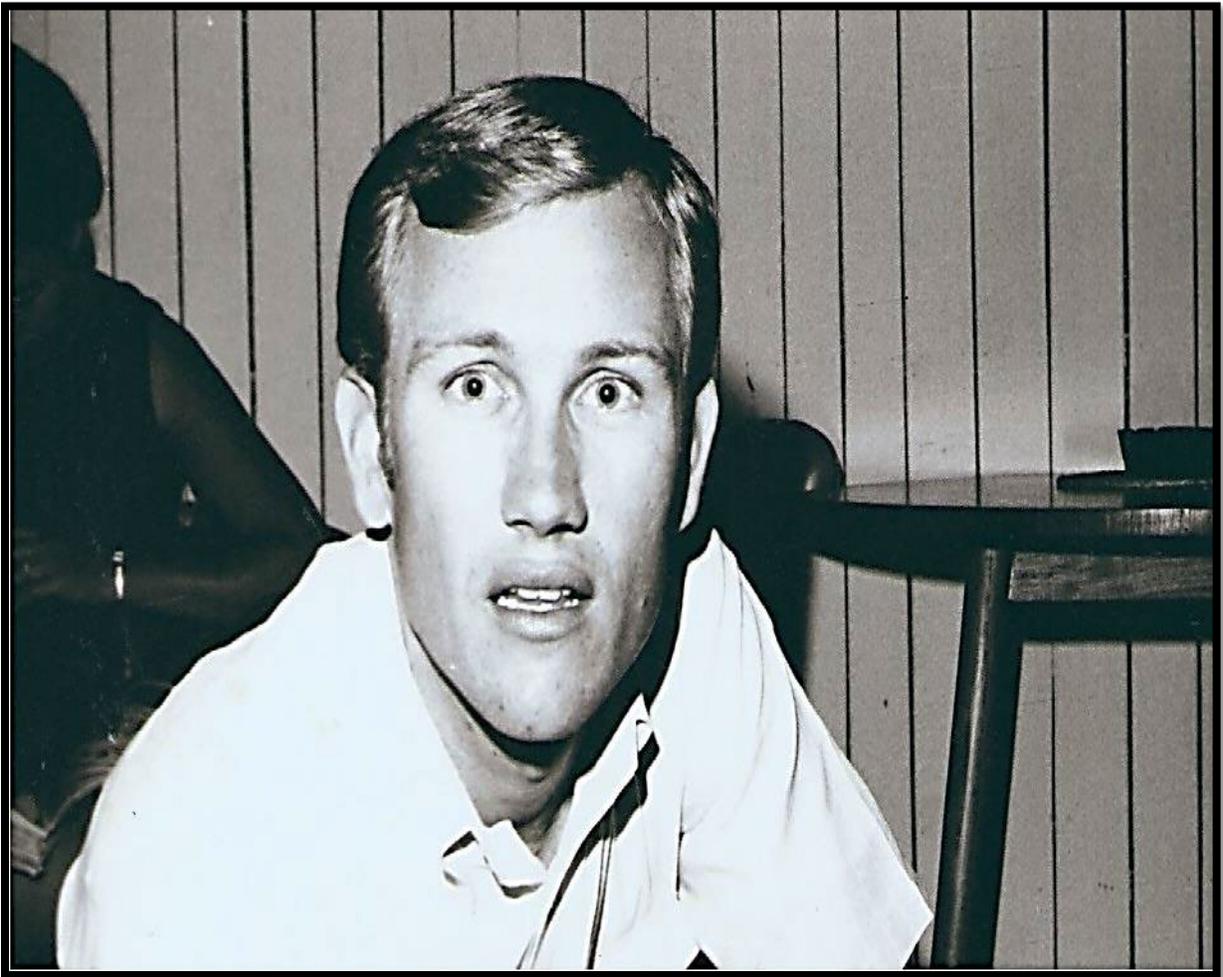
NEW BLOOD

Beset with a flood of new hires requiring evaluation and training, February proved busy for Chief Pilot Helicopters (CPH) Wayne Knight. Several more men arrived over succeeding months. Some included Tim Woosley (DOH (01/10/68) Phil Jennings, and Larry Henesy (01/09/68). Tim and Phil first trained with Wayne on 3 February. Another training session with Jennings occurred on 5 May.

Woosley, who the CPH considered a strong pilot, after his area familiarization, checked out a little earlier and had a line check with Wayne on 30 April. Their high time day took them to Luang Prabang, west into Sayaboury Province to Hong Sa (LS-62), then east to Phu Hua Moui (LS-67), Sayaboury (L-23), and on to Sam Tong for the night.

Harold Thompson (02/07/68) had his first flight on 8 February and continued training on 10 May. JE Overfield (01/10/68), although assigned many training flights in the H-34,

⁴ Kurdpol, Sayad, *Counterinsurgency*. Henderson et. al., *Area Handbook for Thailand 1971* (Washington D.C.: U.S Government Printing Office; 1970) 207. CIA Weekly Summary, Thailand pressing counterinsurgency campaign in the north, 9-10, 01/26/68 (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).



A surprised Phil Jennings captured on film.
Knight Collection

failed to achieve the standard proficiency grade, so the "powers to be" in Taipei reassigned him to Bob Hitchman's Bell operation in Saigon. Later, he returned to Udorn to fly in our Bell program. ⁵ ⁶

PERSONALS

While enjoying several days off the schedule, Tuie and I continued to work on the immigrant visa requirements for the trip home planned for April or May.

I also wrote home regarding Dad's last letter in reference to the fact that the genie was out of the bottle:

"Well Dick, it is no secret anymore. In Newsscope an article headed CIA in Air War on Laos Reds, from the Star Ledger Washington Bureau says pilots of the CIA supported Air America Company are now flying combat missions against Pathet Lao Communists in Laos. They are using old U.S. T-28 trainers fitted out with guns and bomb racks. How about that?"

Since the information was dated by about four years, and our people were no longer performing many if any missions indicated, I considered the reference to it quite funny. There was no mention to any other kind of combat missions like our road watch activity, but as I was constantly cautioned while still in the USMC-never confirm any military operations reported in the media, I answered:

"Don't believe everything you read, especially in the Star Ledger. Better yet don't talk about it as the wrong ears, which

⁵ Phil Jennings claimed he had a good run of luck in the stock market. He left Air America and became a lawyer. He was active with the inception of the Air America Association and still advised the organization pro bono on legal matters.

⁶ EW Knight Emails, 09/02/00, 09/04/00, 09/08/00.

are everywhere, might perk up. I understand that security checks are run on us every so often."

I was also confused regarding Doug Valentine's recent demise from colon cancer, and, as he had lent Sunray Land Corporation considerable money at a high interest rate, its effect on the company's status. I wrote Don in December, but had heard nothing, and considered my lack of information detrimental in any judgment regarding the current state of affairs. Therefore, I made reference to the situation in my letter home, and speculated that, in my case, the Chinese cycle of seven years of good luck was now in the phase of seven years bad luck.

Dad, in a later letter countered in his old school, traditional manner that:

"There is no such thing as seven years bad luck; most luck is of our own making. Sometimes we mistake errors in judgment for bad luck. As you say your lack of knowledge does present a problem that was not foreseen. If we all knew what the future held, life would be a cinch..."

In reference to my admonition not to talk about military subjects I was intrinsically involved with, he stated:

"You would be surprised at the so-called loose talk going on over here Dick. Every news media gives out info that I consider to give aid and info and comfort to the enemy. They even tell where and how many we have in a given sector, with printed maps locating same..."

JARINA AND GLOVER IN LUANG PRABANG

Mike conducted local night flying with Captain Boonchoo on the sixth in Hotel-48. One of the two so-called "Boon Boys," always friendly and courteous, Boonchoo was one of the most well-liked Thai helicopter pilots working for Air America. The Customer also favored Thai H-34 pilots, for they blended well

with the Lao, understood the language, and would perform almost any duty asked. Complying with contractual quota agreements with the Thai government, additional Thai crewmembers were hired and Juntiaraboul accompanied the pilots as a Flight Mechanic.

On Wednesday, Mike left Udorn in bailed aircraft Hotel-64, a recent addition to the H-34 inventory and courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps and the Lao Military Assistance Program (MAP). Along with Flight Mechanic Bob Peterson and new pilot Larry Henesy, the crew flew to the Vang Vieng (Lima-16) area and points west to work. They terminated at LP for the night. ⁷

Perhaps the best information regarding the Luang Prabang area situation continued from IVS worker Bob Glover. On February second, he wrote:

"...It is now more than two weeks since the much-publicized attack on the Royal Capital. It has been relatively quiet since, but with two minor incursions by the Pathet Lao. It has been reported that the enemy has been moving around trying to get into a more favorable position. This has been countered by the Lao army. Unfortunately, the Lao army is content to take up defensive positions around the city, and not aggressively pursue the enemy. I don't know of any offensive operations anywhere near. We don't know of any patrols outside the city limits. It is generally conceded that the attack on the city could have been prevented had the Lao army had patrols out and around the city. The present-day Lao army seems to be content to defend what they hold until it's taken from them, and then fall back when they can no longer hold it. The country seems to be getting smaller and smaller.

⁷ Mike Jarina Interviews.

...Contrary to the news report, there was no street fighting in Luang Prabang. The enemy did overrun a small outpost on a small hill overlooking the airport and set up a mortar barrage, but it was quite ineffective. Simultaneously, they launched an attack on a suspected artillery emplacement, but withdrew after losing two dead and one captured.

...The main target for the enemy seems to be the T-28's that are stationed here at Luang Prabang. The purpose for these aircraft is to bomb and strafe the enemy. The city of Luang Prabang is geographically similarly to that of Dien Bien Phu, i.e., in a valley surrounded by mountains. If and when the enemy decides to take Luang Prabang they will undoubtedly do it. There are at the present time 20,000 Chinese Army Engineers within striking distance of Luang Prabang [actually a considerable distance west in the Beng Valley], contrary to the agreement arrived at in Paris, France some time ago.

...We are prepared to evacuate if it should become necessary. We have people here that are in constant communication with the situation so that hopefully we will not be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Maynard Parker (reporter for the Los Angeles Times) was in Luang Prabang last month. He is quite apt to be overzealous in his reporting. What he writes is based on facts, but his manner of writing can, and often does lead to a wrong impression, at times what he writes is premature and occasionally deleterious to the American effort.

...The people in Mounng Nane are anxiously awaiting my return, the people there react as elsewhere in Laos. They passively accept the presence of the enemy and don't lift a hand when their rice is taken from them. On the other hand, they keep me well informed of enemy movement, and on occasion have hidden me, when necessary for my safety."

Five days later, with Jarina RONIing at Luang Prabang, Bob continued his dialogue:

"..We are expecting trouble this weekend. It has already started in Pak Song and Saravane [in MR-4]. Headquarters in Thailand has alerted us to be expecting trouble about the tenth.

I am in charge of one of the evacuation points here in Luang Prabang, and, with the bunch of birdbrains that we have here, I feel that I should stay close to the scene. John Perry, the area coordinator for Luang Prabang and Sayaboury provinces, is an old hand from WW-2. He parachuted behind the lines in occupied France several times, and worked his way back to England without getting caught. John is nearing seventy and has been with the State Department for many years. ⁸

There are 102 of us who will need to be evacuated if Luang Prabang falls.

On this past Tuesday we were all set to go to Moung Nane for the day when Colonel Chansom came over to headquarters and told us not to go. He had info from his detachment in Moung Nane that there were between 20 and 30 Pathet Lao in a nearby village. In the afternoon we had a report of a brief engagement, but no details. Later, the Pathet Lao were reported headed north 7km from Moung Nane. Later there was a fire fight on the west bank of the Mekong River. We lost four M-1 carbines. This took place 7km south of Luang Prabang.

There seems to be quite a high degree of escalation of hostilities this dry season all over Laos. Harassment is typical in the dry season but not to the extent that we are experiencing this year. Colonel Chansom will not allow me to remain overnight

⁸ This was the same John Perry who lost one son and had another seriously wounded aboard Captain Larry Wilderom's H-34 on a Sunday "milk run" north of Luang Prabang.

in Moung Nane because he has reports of a team of assassins in the area with orders to eliminate the Americans..."

Naturally, Bob was not excited over this prospect.⁹

Despite Glover's assessment of the local Luang Prabang situation, FAR, SGU, and ADC units were not entirely quiescent throughout the region. On the eighth, Jarina and crew worked all day moving or supporting Lao and Meo troops in the field. Attesting to the perilous situation accorded to the Luang Prabang area, it was significant that all flight time recorded in Hotel-64 was project pay during twenty-one sorties.

All work was conducted north. The first trip was to an established blocking site and quasi demarcation line twenty-seven miles north northeast of Luang Prabang near the junction of Route-4 and the Nam Ou. From there, Mike shuttled troops northwest to a river valley eighteen miles west of Nam Bac. After returning to the airport for fuel he was dispatched to Ban Pha Thong (Site-247), seventy-three miles north-northeast of Luang Prabang and eighteen miles north of Site-203. Part of the mission was to gather intelligence and to instill courage to friendly tribal units who were under pressure, but still holding their own. Consistent with this policy, he moved ten miles northeast to Ban "Y", back to Site-247, and then to Luang Prabang for the night.

The next day Mike was reassigned to work in Military Region Two, twenty-two miles east of Long Tieng at Ban Phang, a site with which he was well familiar. Lima Site-239 was located less than seven miles west of Route-4, a traditional enemy artery surging south from the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Ban Phang was also centered on the fringe of the Nam Pot Valley, almost

⁹ Bob Glover Book, *Laos, Letters Home*, 02/02, 07/68.

equidistant to and surrounded clockwise in a twenty-mile perimeter, the old sites of Padong (LS-05), Khang Kho (LS-205), Phu Khe (LS-19), Pha Pheung (LS-21), Tha Vieng (LS-13), and Pha Phai (LS-65). The enemy was busy pressuring Vang Pao's forces in the area, and not all the sites were still active or friendly. To counter enemy movement in the area, Jarina and Henesy conducted an astounding fifty-four landings at and around Ban Phang, shuttling ADC troops from Khang Kho and other sites.

Mike returned to Udorn in Hotel-64 on the tenth. ¹⁰

BELL MISSIONS IN MILITARY REGION-4

From current intelligence, Agency assessments of future conflict in southern Laos stated:

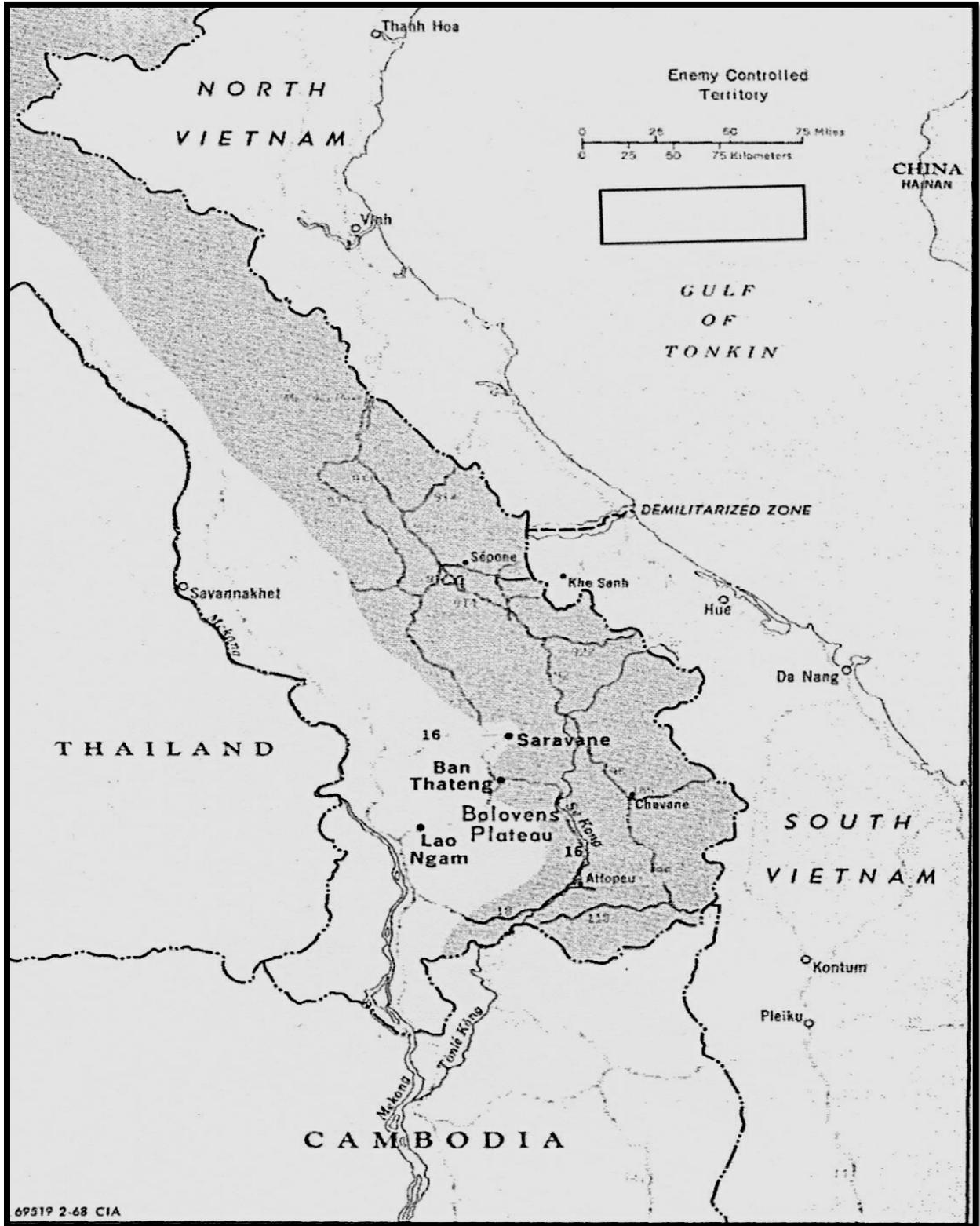
"The communists appear to be preparing for a new offensive in the northern portion of the Bolovens Plateau. North Vietnamese troops have reduced the government's defensive perimeter around the provincial capital of Saravane and have seized a number of villages astride Route-16, the key overland route into the lightly defended town. A [redacted] North Vietnamese deserter claims the communists intend to occupy Saravane before moving on to hit more important government base camps at Lao Ngam and Ban Thateng. Although Saravane does not play an important military role in the area, its loss would have a serious psychological impact on an already nervous leadership in Vientiane." ¹¹

A week later another intel report revealed:

"The communists are intensifying pressure against government positions in the Saravane area."

¹⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.

¹¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/07/68.



Bold print defines areas in Military Region Four subject to enemy pressure.

CIA Map, 02/07/68.

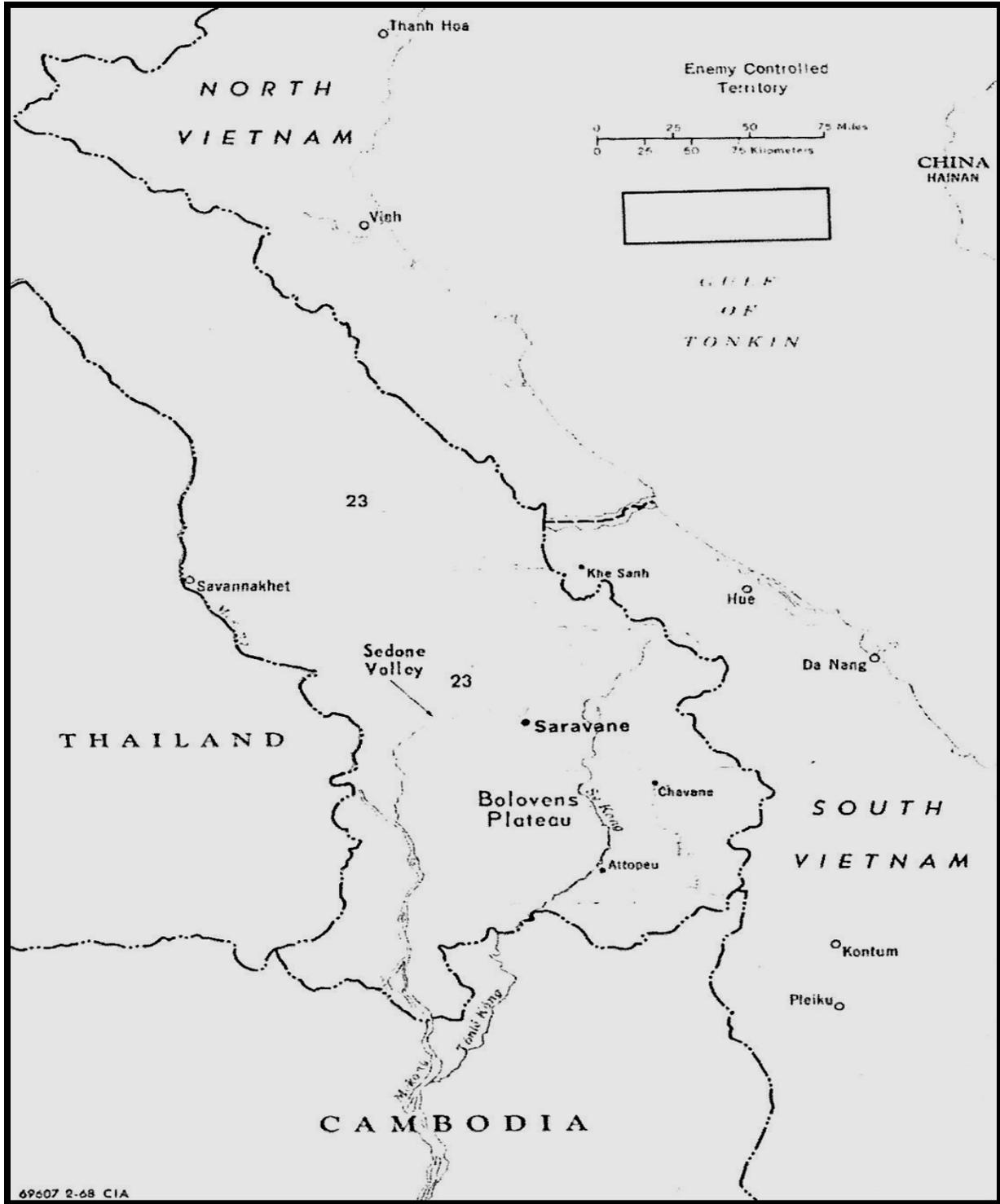
Government troops were driven from two positions west of town on 14 February. According to one unconfirmed report, Saravane itself has come under attack. There are now more than two government battalions committed to Saravane's defense. Their morale is low, however, and it is unlikely they can successfully resist a concerted thrust. The communists have refrained through the years from attacking Saravane despite its extremely exposed position. The current pressure, however, may be part of a wider effort to counter stepped-up government interdiction efforts by securing the western approaches to the infiltration corridor.

The communists may also want to open Route-23 as an alternate north-south route in the southern panhandle. The town could also serve as an anchor for reestablishing the enemy's position in the Sedone valley, a rich rice-producing area which came under full Lao government control only last year [the WAPI project].

Saravane's loss would signal the objective of the communist current dry season offensive goes beyond just regaining control over areas the once held... ¹²

On the twelfth I deadheaded to Pakse on photo recon Volpar 42Z. I joined Ellis Emery and Flight Mechanic Jay Meyers in Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot (PFF) for a flight to Kong Mi. There we connected with other crews to conduct six Route-110 afternoon missions for Customer Doug Swanson. The missions were likely backed up because of the heightened action in Military Region Two that caused a lack of assets here. As usual, the landing zones were located south of the road and missions consisted of mixed infiltrations and exfiltrations. They likely had a dual-purpose involving road watching and assessing Kong Mi's northern

¹² CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/15/68.



Military Region Four area where February hostilities occurred around Saravane. Case Officer Doug Swanson's road watch work took place out of Kong Mi south of Attopeu.

CIA Map, 02/15/68.

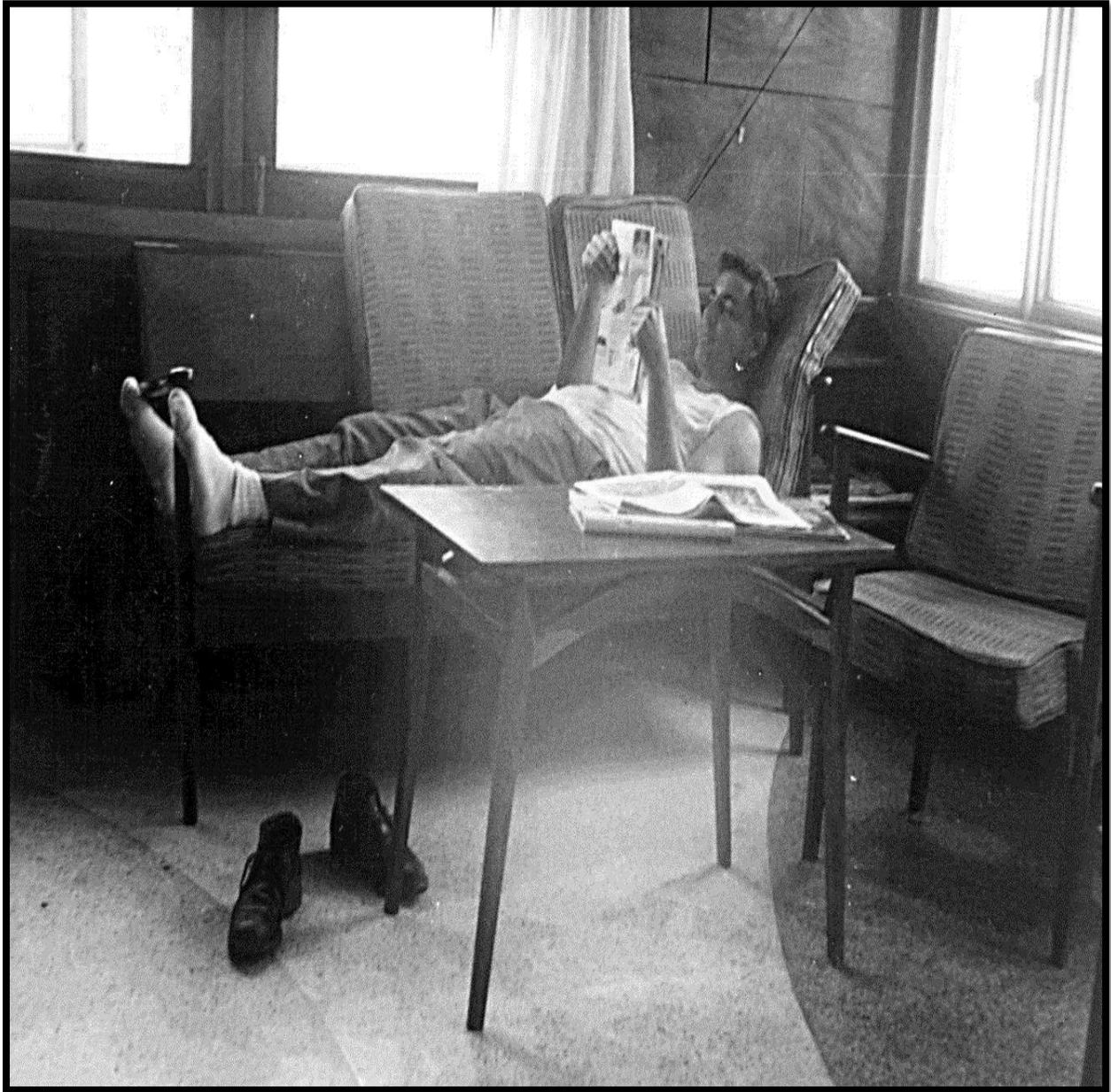
perimeter for any enemy movement toward the site. Depending on the location and team members, some tasks were combined and all were accomplished during a relatively short period.

Impressively, Swanson and his assistant had their "sierra" together. The first two assignments comprised a combined infil/exfil of a twelve-man SGU team eight miles northwest of Pakse Site-7 (XB949103); the third, also consisting of twelve men was an infil nine miles north-northeast (YB138185); The fourth and longest trip was twenty-one miles north-northeast (YB361205) to infil six men. Over time we had performed missions throughout the entire area and previously been to this landing zone. With only a few men involved, we were able to combine two exfil missions on the way back to Site Seven. Subsequently, six troops were lifted from YB3313, sixteen miles east-northeast and ten miles from YB064172, eight miles north.

To facilitate team survivability, Swanson liked to conduct his missions late in the day. Although waiting time at the Company hostel prior to launch was long and flight time low, the missions were successful and we were usually back at Pakse by dark.

Consistent with movement between the two southern Mekong River sites, on Tuesday I deadheaded to Savannakhet on Continental Air Services (CASI) Beech Baron 22 Charlie to satisfy the requirement for an emergency exfil. On the way north we reconned the target site. At Lima-39 I joined Nikki Fillipi and Flight Mechanic "Rusty" Irons as PIC of Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH). The mission entailed retrieving one individual from WD819591, about sixty miles north-northeast and a few miles west of Route-23. Following the exfil, Nikki departed for Udorn.

Until we were relieved, the next four days were of little value to anyone. Weather, a lack of, or inability to perform missions, or normal work precluded much flying and seemed a



Author relaxing at the Pakse hostel while waiting for the Customer's call to launch on an afternoon Special Mission.

Author Collection.



With the hostel manager's curious daughter looking on, Flight Mechanics John Simmons (left) and Terry Dunn (right) create a permanent Acey-Ducey board on a table to allay boredom at Pakse. Zippers on the side of trousers allowed crewmembers to carry items considered useful.

Author Collection.

distinct waste of assets when ships were sorely needed in Military Region Two. Sometimes it was difficult for me to understand AB-1's regional priorities in Laos, and the overriding influence the war "across the fence" had on our operations.

Until relieved, work during the seventeenth proved my highest time day when I flew five hours. Still, it was not particularly rewarding, for only an hour and twenty minutes was allowable project pay. I deadheaded home on CASI Porter XW-PDC.

On the same day I relocated to Savannakhet, Mike Jarina deadheaded on UH-34D Hotel-50 from Udorn to Pakse, where he assumed control of Hotel-53 with Flight Mechanic Tom Cournoyer. In the afternoon they launched east up the Plateau road to Houei Khong (L-56). From there they flew to a point fourteen miles southeast of Old Paksong (LS-180) in the vicinity of an artery leading from that town. After landing at PS-22, Mike returned to L-11 to RON.

Since the fall of Ban Houei Sane (LS-189) in Military Region Three, intent on expanding and protecting critical supply lines to South Vietnam, enemy units had moved closer and beyond lines-of communication (LOC) near Lima-44 and Route-23. There was also the annoyance of the USAF TACAN navigation equipment perched on top of Phu Kate with which to contend, and the issue of dealing with it, like the facility at Mounq Phalane had been in December.

U.S. officials were aware of a burgeoning enemy presence in upper Military Region Four, and during a meeting with his Soviet Union counterpart, State Department Secretary Dean Rusk indicated that his department possessed information that there were Vietnamese battalions around the town of Saravane and if the enemy launched an attack on the city, then the U.S. would become militarily involved.

On the 21st, representatives of the International Control Commission, without the Polish member "refusenik," visited Saravane to investigate and accomplish what they could to defuse the tension there. The trip may have influenced the Vietnamese to diminish offensive plans for a time. ¹³

Wednesday morning Mike was assigned a trip to Saravane to conduct local flights. After completion, he returned to Pakse. Another trip north of L-44 to the major listening post at Senammana (PS-19), located on the eastern fringe of the Toumlan Valley, likely helped provide intelligence that Rusk used in his meeting with the Soviet official. Mike then flew forty-four miles south-southwest to Phou Louang (PS-02) on the Plateau's east rim. He returned to PS-19, and then to PS-33 in the hills southeast of Thateng, where mounting enemy pressure threatened the crossroads town and small Site-210 garrison. After returning to PS-22, with fourteen landings logged, Jarina returned to Pakse and touched down well after dark.

During his last day in the field, after an early return trip to the PS-18 training base and back to Lima-11, Jarina launched for Ban Thateng (PS-28). This was followed by a flight north to Ban Nong Boua, located east of Saravane on Route-162. Stopping at Lima-44 to retrieve passengers, he returned to Pakse to refuel for a flight to Udorn via Lima-39.

Friday, after a local test flight Mike, trainee Harold Thompson, and Thai Flight Mechanic Toomgam ferried CIC-6 (BUNO 144644) to the Vientiane ICC representative in charge of air operations. ¹⁴

¹³ Memorandum of Conversation-Rusk/Dobrynin, Laos, 02/15/68.

¹⁴ Thompson for obvious reasons, later became known as umbrella Thompson.

Two days later, Jarina spent the day on the parking ramp with Hal Augustine and Punzalan testing Lao H-34s 4638, 5786, and Air America ships Hotel-58 and Hotel-49. Test functions were often assigned to conscientious and more talented individuals who had logged high monthly time relative to other pilots. ¹⁵

MILITARY REGION-2

On 20 February, scheduled to relieve the PIC of Papa Foxtrot India (PFI), I deadheaded upcountry to Long Tieng on Air America C-47 B-897. Since most Bell crews had already departed to work upper Military Region Two, I was obliged to wait for my ship's crew to return from the field to RON at Alternate. Because of increased activity throughout most of Military Region Two, requiring additional assets and crew changes, the hostel at Sam Tong was overflowing, relegating some of us to overnights at Site-20A. Additionally, although slightly early in Pha Thi's end-game saga, with an emergency Pha Thi evacuation contingency possible at any time, we were likely kept close to the Agency base camp and its radio capability with Site-85 and AB-1.

During the second week in February, U.S. Air Force Pacific Air Force (PACAF) meteorologists forwarded an adverse weather report for much of North Vietnam to Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) headquarters. The discouraging information included a ninety-day period through April. The information reinforced an important selling point to all interested parties to continue TSQ-81 operations at Site-85 in directing accurate radar-directed air strikes in and around Hanoi.

Concurrent with PACAF's report, a northwest monsoon formed in the Chinese Tibetan highlands. The cold front surged into

¹⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

upper Military Region Two, engulfing the region with high winds, extreme cold, and fog in river valleys resembling weather encountered in December, but far worse. Naturally, such conditions hampered not only military air strikes, but also fixed wing and helicopter operations.

Largely unimpeded, under the cover of low clouds and fog, hundreds of enemy conscripted laborers and a few bulldozer drivers struggled to push Route-602 construction work to completion. By Friday the sixteenth, team reports informed Meo commanders that the road from Sam Neua had progressed within a kilometer of Den Din. A few days later, additional battalions moved forward to assume positions around the area.

Unseasonable weather spilling into the Site-85 area likely temporarily slowed or dampened enemy desire to probe, recon, or move far inside the friendly defensive twelve-kilometer perimeter. However, this was not all inclusive, and did not apply to the southeast river valley village of Ban MOUNG YUT, where probes and hostile action seesawed back and forth on the fourteenth. ADC units were subsequently able to reclaim the position. Within six days, the village was again lost, with ADC troops soon attempting to reclaim the site.

In the area around MOUNG YUT, on the 18th, local ADC troops ambushed and slaughtered a small enemy patrol. Among the bodies was found important intelligence information delineating plans for coordinated battalion-sized attacks on Pha Thi shortly after the 22nd. A map also displayed many enemy locations.¹⁶

Before receiving this tangible information, additional recon and strikes were authorized by AIRA Vientiane along the

¹⁶ In the past, Sam Tong AID workers, carried by our H-34 pilots, often went to the Lao Theung village of MOUNG YUT to partake in its pristine hot springs that were rated second only to those at Houa MOUNG.

new road east of Din Den and around the "Rock." Vang Pao supplemented lower Site-85's defenses with another crew-served artillery tube, "four deuce" mortars, and several infantry units. In addition, small patrols ranged the surrounding area to develop targets.

Vietnamese perception of Vang Pao's ADC unit actions at the time is quite interesting:

"The enemy [our little guys] increased the activities of the civilian defense forces, sending out patrols to search around the footpaths they suspected we might use to infiltrate the area. They expanded the use of guises of hunting and fishing activities, and civilians striving to till fields in the forests, in order to discover our forces. They regularly fired their weapons at random, and at times they fired their automatic weapons furiously as if they had just discovered us. At night, they frequently fired artillery illumination rounds. They also launched commando teams into the surrounding areas to monitor and reconnoiter our activities...the enemy organized a network of informants in the hamlets and villages surrounding their troop positions. Whenever these informants spotted any sign of our activities, they would immediately report the fact and provide timely warnings." ¹⁷

¹⁷ Segment sources

Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 95.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 191.

Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 20-24.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 254.

PAVN Major Do Chi Ben, *Military Region Two, Several Battles During the War of Liberation 1945-1975*, Volume 3, Chapter 11, *Raid on the TACAN Site Atop Pha-Thi Mountain by a Military Region Sapper Team on 11 March 1968*, (Hanoi: People's Army of Vietnam Publishing House, 1998, 3, Commissioned by the Rand Corporation, Translated and Edited by Robert Destatte, 11 May 1997 and 7 April 1998.

Despite weather delays and circumnavigation, I managed to proceed north to the Site-85 area with Flight Mechanic Glen Woods. Glen, who enjoyed a position in the empty left seat to obtain stick time, casually and without emotion told me his version of the AN-2 shoot downs and how he had fired two full magazines of AK-47 rounds into each Colt cockpit. He did not brag, but simply believed that he had accomplished his job and downed both aircraft. Knowing his reputation with a weapon, I accepted his statement at face value. ¹⁸

We arrived in our work area late, but did all we could to move men and supplies and support the Meo-inspired defense of Pha Thi. After fueling late at Na Khang, we returned to Long Tieng, arriving just before dark to spend a second night at the fairly new hostel.

Senior pilot Captain Charlie Weitz joined me and took command of PFI on Thursday to conduct special intelligence-gathering operations in upper Military Region Two. I could barely recall flying with Charlie, perhaps only once or twice over the early years.

My initial flight with Weitz was conducted as a First Officer in early 1963 flying out of Bangkok for JUSMAG. The second occurred during a turning point in the war, in early June 1964, when U.S. Navy pilot Chuck Klusmann was the first military aviator shot down in Laos performing aerial reconnaissance of Route-7 on the northern Plain of Jars. The following day, I was deadheading with Charlie to fly with and relieve an H-34 pilot conducting a search for Klusmann north of the Plain of Jars. Cruising at altitude, we received ground fire while flying over

¹⁸ Although I believed a Flight Mechanic's place was at his primary station in the cabin section, I did not totally object to one accompanying me in the cockpit during slack periods like a ferry flight. This time, however, I did draw the line at Glen flying and would not allow him to manipulate the controls.

the elevated and supposedly friendly village of Nam Pit west of Sam Tong. Charlie could not see the fire from the right seat. I was so angry that the following morning I borrowed a BAR from Tony Poe at the Alternate, and had my Flight Mechanic "Chris" Crisologo shoot up the ville. There were a few repercussions, but the war had morphed inexorably into a new and exciting phase, and I survived the politically incorrect incident.

In order to assess potential supply caches along a complex of southeast LOCs, and enemy movement into the operational area around Pha Thi and Na Khang, the Customer combined an infil/exfil. He had us deliver an intelligence gathering team forty-two nautical miles southeast to rough terrain three miles north of Route-64 and eight miles south of Route-641 (VH2834), a secondary trail that paralleled and eventually joined Route-65, a principal logistic artery that plunged east into North Vietnam. Strategically selected for unrestricted movement and maximum observation of major supply routes, supported by friendly villagers, some converted to Christianity by Father Boucharde and other priests, Meo teams had been utilizing such intelligence gathering areas for years. To accomplish the second part of our mission, we moved five miles north (VH2542) and retrieved a team located three miles south of Route-641.

After depositing our charges, we continued the day's task conducting another exfiltration thirty-six miles southeast in an area on the Phou Phak Chanh massif. Located between Route-641 and the 6/68 junction, this position afforded team members access to mountain trails for flexibility and rapid movement to and from advantageous observation points.

Late in the day, we RTB Sam Tong near dark, where we could relax and unwind, as other aircraft assumed the potential Pha Thi evacuation duty. Actually, we were never out of the picture

for emergency missions, and double crewed helicopters would certainly be required when the balloon went up.

Although provided asset priority, Site-85 was not the only area in Military Region Two contested during early 1968 by enemy forces. Attesting to enemy aggressiveness throughout the region, government sites in and around Route-4 south of Xieng Khouang Ville were also threatened. For example, at noon on the twenty-first, Tha Thom (LS-22) and other government outposts were attacked, captured, or, more likely, once again abandoned.¹⁹ At Site-22, FAR troops subsequently withdrew a few miles south of the valley to blocking positions at Den Din, four miles south of the Ban Ngiou Ganai ridgeline, where they were ordered to stem further enemy progress down Route-4 toward Paksane. However, further attacks on the 26th forced defending Lao troops to withdraw farther south. Drawing a secondary defensive line between the last ridgeline near Borikhane (LS-129), leading to the flatlands and Paksane, General Kouprasith sent reinforcements to the area.

Helping to balance the situation somewhat, Thai B-Team T-28 pilots were introduced to the fighting. Newly released Meo T-28 pilots Lee Lieu and Vang Tua joined in the operations to aid FAR forces. Unfortunately, during the second sortie, Vang Tua, and two other Thai pilots, entered low clouds and crashed into a mountainside. Tua became the first Meo pilot statistic and initial casualty that would eventually claim the lives of a majority of Meo pilots..."Fly until you die."²⁰

¹⁹ The same problem applied farther east to positions in and around the fertile Moung Ngan Valley.

²⁰ Ken Conboy, 196.

TARN AND HOPE TAKE A HIT

While we worked out of Pha Thi, a nasty incident occurred east of Padong Ridge involving Hotel-52, crewed by John Tarn and his Flight Mechanic Jim Hope. Similar to Jarina's recent efforts, Tarn was assigned to work in the Ban Phang area. An offensive was underway to quell enemy dry season inroads west from Route-4, and Tarn was the first helicopter to land at a recently recaptured mountain ville cum runway. Shortly before 1400 hours, carrying several two hundred kilo bags of rice abandoned by an enemy unit at another site and one interpreter, John landed at a high pad (UG115275) twenty-five meters south of a friendly bunker. The landing zone was located four miles north of Site-239, across the Nam Pot Valley, four miles northeast of Khang Kho, and less than four miles east of Phou Houang (LS-140), a site that bordered the southern Plain of Jars.

After landing, the guide hopped out the cabin section to talk with the troop leader and Hope began throwing sacks out on the ground. Since the position was on the fringe of Indian Country, although fairly relaxed Tarn maintained takeoff RPM, as was the established norm in forward areas. Suddenly, there was a large explosion to the right. Hotel-52 had been hit by a RPG or a 57mm recoilless rifle round. *"Damn that was close, let's get the hell out of here!"* Tarn's initial reaction was to depart ASAP, and he simultaneously grabbed a handful of throttle and collective. Lifting to a hover, he discarded the option to depart when fire rapidly began enveloping the aircraft. After touching down, the damaged right landing gear collapsed and the ship began rolling to the right, violently shedding main rotor blades as they slapped the ground at high RPM.

The gyrating bird terminated its final flight about two feet off the ground on its side, propped up by stubs of the rotor blades. Intent on climbing out of the copilot's window,

Tarn unstrapped. However, the aircraft's horizontal attitude and gravity assumed precedence, and he dropped a short distance to the ground through the right window. Actually, this proved fortuitous, saving precious time when seconds were essential for survival. Once free of the cockpit, he was able to crawl beneath the main rotor components and scramble downhill to a position of relative safety behind a sizeable downed tree about twenty-five meters from the burning ship.

As minutes ticked by, he watched fascinated as Hotel-52 continued to burn fiercely while the engine still burped and chugged intermittently. Then 1,000 rounds of AK-47 rifle ammunition he had recently sold to Hope began to "cook off" in spectacular fashion. From his vantage point, Tarn observed two bodies burning next to the helicopter and speculated that Hope was likely one.

After the fire diminished, Tarn made his way up the hill toward the friendly position. He was met halfway by soldiers who were searching for survivors. A soldier offered him a cigarette. A non-smoker, he did not know how to refuse the gracious gesture. So as not to offend the young man, he took one, lighted it, and drew a puff. Then, when the boy was not looking, he threw it away. That marked his first and last smoke.

As an area search continued, one dead and one wounded man were discovered. Hope was missing and judged dead, consumed to ashes in the still burning wreckage that was now reduced to little more than a recognizable tail pylon and engine.

Actually, the explosion, in what seemed like slow motion, had blown Hope out the cabin door. With his hand partially destroyed and other parts of him on fire, he rolled in the dirt to smother the flames, and then crawled into a bomb crater as Hotel-52 began a slow roll to the right. Despite being in shock, he began moving downhill. Before long, he collapsed. While on

the ground, through facial burns and glazed eyes he saw a distorted shape. The man, whoever he was, fired a weapon, hitting him in the head and chest. When he regained consciousness, he struggled to climb the hill, but after a few steps, sank to the ground.

When the conflagration cooled somewhat, Tarn returned to the aircraft to look for Hope. At the same time a local yelled something in Meo. He had spotted Hope lying thirty meters downhill. He was on his back covered in blood. He was critically injured, but coherent and complaining of back pain. He wanted Tarn to turn him over, but John refused, thinking he might have incurred a stomach injury. After placing a tourniquet on Hope's wrist that looked to be half gone, a medic injected morphine. Then Tarn and the soldiers gently carried the large man to a bomb crater.

After establishing radio contact, a Porter pilot arrived and began circling. Tarn told Hope to hold on as a helicopter would soon be arriving to retrieve them. Hope was alert enough to answer that it was a Porter overhead and not an H-34.

Twenty minutes later Captain JJ McCauley landed in Hotel-40 and delivered the crew to Sam Tong, where Tarn discovered an injury--a two-inch shrapnel wound behind his left shoulder blade. A Caribou was waiting to evacuate Hope to the U.S. Army hospital in Korat, where doctors feverishly operated on him the entire night. After being somewhat stabilized, he was flown to the Clark Air Force Base hospital on Luzon, PI. Sinking into a deep coma for ten days, his survival was questionable for some time. Furthermore, he nearly expired after developing a serious pneumococcal infection. Although of the Protestant religion, Hope was provided Catholic last rites, but after eventually receiving a final medical release at Osaka, Japan, he was sent home, never to return to Air America.

Hope's grievous injuries were of such magnitude that he required a continuing series of operations. A lawyer eventually obtained a settlement of 55,000 dollars from Air America, but withheld 20,000 dollars as his fee. Additionally, representatives of the Internal Revenue Service waited at his door demanding 60,000 dollars in back taxes.

Following another unsettling incident during an aircraft recovery incident north of Luang Prabang, Tarn terminated his troubled Air America employment in August. According to Mike Jarina, CPH Wayne Knight believed that John had lost his nerve, but Wayne was not really certain what had actually influenced him. Still, Tarn claimed that his departure from Air America was related to the types of future missions planned, rather than any past incident or accident. During their face-to-face encounter, Tarn indicated to the Chief Pilot that he would definitely not participate in these future missions. ²¹ ²²

²¹ During a chance encounter in a men's room, the Author met Jim Hope for the first time at a CIA-sponsored SAR symposium conducted at the University of Texas, Richardson, Texas in April 2009. A large fellow, he complained of lingering health problems created by the incident on 22 February 1968. This was exacerbated by the fact that he had never served in the U.S. military, and therefore had no access to the Veterans Administration health system. Air America was no longer a viable company after 1976, and had stopped paying his medical bills after he was declared "fit." Hope is a bitter and disillusioned man today.

In all honesty, to my knowledge, all other Air America personnel injured in the line of duty were treated fairly. Although, what price does one place on pain and suffering, or loss of body parts?

²² Air America Accident Review Hotel-52, 04/04/68.
Air America Log, Volume 15, #3, 09/98.
Bill Leary February 1968 Notes Containing Telephone Conversations with both Tarn and Hope.
Joe F. Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, 4th edition, Sikorsky UH-34D, 2nd series, Hotel-52, 08/23/10.
EW Knight Emails, 09/04/00, circa 01/31/01.
Mike Jarina Interview.

Discovering amoebas in his system during a test at the Bangkok Christian Hospital, Tarn requested sick leave and regular leave to travel to CONUS to effect the cure, but was refused. Adamant regarding this subject, without informing Wayne, he departed for Taipei to request sick leave. After a time in the States and completing a college degree, like so many had previously done, in 1970 he called "Red" Dawson in Washington requesting rehire. Dawson said that he had to check with Udorn before doing anything. A few days later he phoned Tarn to reported that Udorn did not want him back, for unspecified reasons. It did not pay to "burn your bridges."

THE COUNTRYWIDE SITUATION

For various reasons enemy leaders were intent to conquer and hold previously controlled territory. Intelligence disseminated by Western individuals collecting and collating information posited that a carefully planned enemy offensive may have commenced in the Southern regions calculated to destroy FAR fighting capabilities and expand critical LOCs westward. Motives were slightly different in the northern region where LOCs, but also the main navigation site at Pha Thi, were targets.

PARTS OF MR-4 UNDER SIEGE

While thousands of enemy troops interdicted roads and controlled countryside, during the fourth week of February in southern Laos, Vietnamese gunners commenced simultaneous artillery attacks against FAR's outer defenses at Saravane, Attopeu, and Lao Ngam. The latter site was hit by 140mm rockets that were employed for the first time. The next day, action ceased at Lima-44. As government troops withdrew toward their main bases, to the north a number of FAR outposts in and around

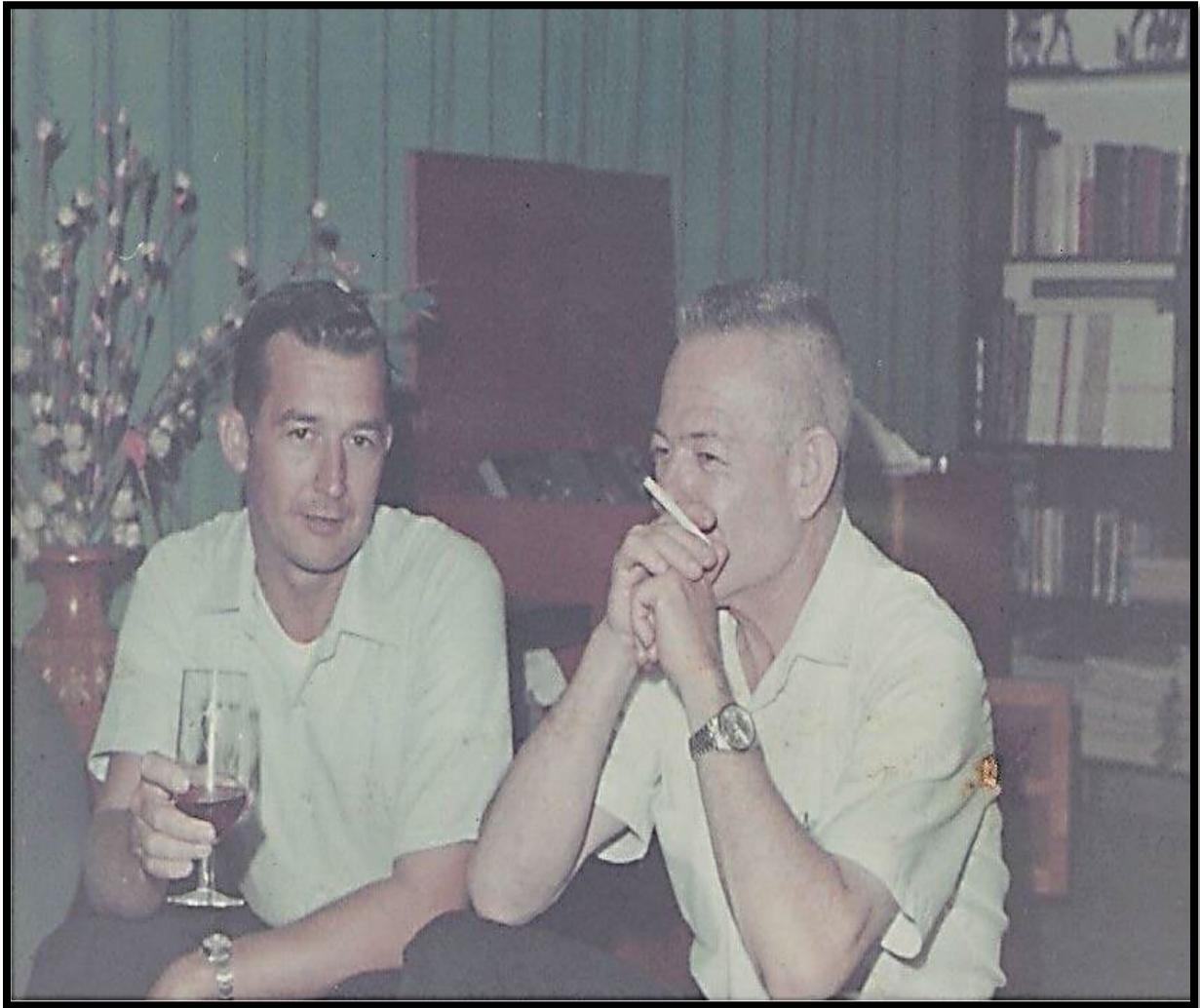
the Toumlan Valley flatlands through which Route-23 thrust, were lost or abandoned.

Action around the Attopeu area was considered the most critical of the problems in Military Region Four. Besieged by reputed portions of six enemy battalions, there was increasing concern that Lima-10 could not be held. Commander of MR-4, General Phasouk, visited the site to assess the situation. In his estimation, there was doubt that the garrison could be evacuated safely and efficiently. Such an operation would necessitate breaching enemy lines in order to assemble at a suitable HLZ for helicopter evacuation, which could be covered by friendly artillery fire from positions on the rim of the Bolovens Plateau. In addition, such an ambitious and highly dangerous movement by marginal warriors would certainly result in substantial government casualties.

It was believed in some quarters at the time that the coordinated enemy artillery attacks were calculated to encourage government units to abandon provincial capitals and avoid actual ground confrontations that might result in unwanted publicity regarding violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords.

The rapidly deteriorating situation and increasing aircrew hazards in MR-4 were perfectly evidenced on 26 February, when Captain John Ford and Flight Mechanic Tom Cournoyer were shot down crewing Hotel-54, while extracting wounded persons from a village outpost near Lao Ngam.

After loading three injured soldiers, Ford took off and commenced a tight climbing spiral over the ville. Rolling out on course at 2,000 feet above ground level (AGL), the H-34 was struck by projectiles from a large caliber weapon, likely a 12.7mm gun. First rounds penetrated the cockpit, blowing the altimeter gage out of the instrument console and onto the co-pilot's seat. While dense smoke enveloped the cockpit from



Air America UH-34D Captain John Ford enjoying a refreshing libation and conversation with an Allied officer.

Knight Collection.

another slug that severed a wire bundle causing an electrical fire, Ford radioed a blanket Mayday call. He simultaneously rolled the throttle off and lowered the collective lever to enter autorotation. Intending to land on the original landing zone, he noted numerous villagers still crowding the site. Therefore, confronted with limited options, he selected an alternate spot, an open space in close proximity to the village outpost. However, in his haste to land before encountering additional problems, he failed to consider the possibility that this cleared area provided friendly fields of fire and also contained a minefield.

After performing a successful autorotation and exiting Hotel-54, Ford heard people screaming at him, vigorously pointing to the ground, and warning him not to move. Without benefit of a map depicting buried mines, after a time, three individuals courageously picked their way through the minefield and arrived at the aircraft to direct the two men fifty yards to safety. During the process, Ford considered the short walk "the longest one of his life."

Other pilots heard the Mayday call from Hotel-54. Frank Bonasinga and his copilot, piloting photo reconnaissance aircraft VTB Volpar 42Z, while mapping a section of eastern Trails running south past Tchepone toward Saravane, proceeded at "high port" toward Lao Ngam. Such action was consistent with SAR SOPs, particularly when an Air America employee was involved. After talking to Ford on his survival radio, Frank offered to land on the road near the outpost. This offer was rejected as being too close to the enemy and far too dangerous. Therefore, concerned that the immediate area was too risky for a rescue attempt, Ford advised Frank to wait until they could relocate. They then confiscated a FAR Jeep and commenced a wild ride along a dirt road to another friendly position where Captain Alex

Nadalini, PIC of Hotel-32, waited to deliver them to the Lao Ngam strip (LS-310, also PS-11), where Frank Bonasinga patiently idled to ferry the crew to Pakse.

With the immediate area deemed unsecure, Hotel-45's recovery was delayed and in doubt. However, after the situation eased, retrieval was later effected. The H-34 was repaired at the maintenance facility in Udorn and returned to service.

At Lao Ngam, where General Phasouk's men twice resisted enemy thrusts, the outcome was initially clouded and the site eventually abandoned in early August. In time, the entire Se Done Valley to Pakse came under Pathet Lao control. This allowed enemy access to the area's rich rice bowl and ability to recruit young men from numerous area villages. Lao Ngam became the terminus for concealed roads that generally wound southeast along Route-23 from Moung Phine, until deviating and crossing the Done River south of Saravane.

The enemy threat to Saravane Town continued, which FAR commanders readily admitted could not be held long against any concerted Vietnamese attack. Because of its strategic location on Route-23 and entrance to the northern Plateau, the Thateng garrison was also threatened.

Attesting to the dangers at the time, on 25 February, Bell helicopter N2539F received minor small arms damage in a hover while the crew participated in a SAR mission at Lima-44. No one was injured and the crew recovered at Udorn.

Action in the south could not be ignored by Lao politicians. Souvanna Phouma was concerned that an aggressive enemy was intent on controlling the entire southern part of the country. Therefore, during late February, at the Prime Minister's request, two members of the largely ineffectual International Control Commission (ICC) visited Saravane. It marked their first investigation of an alleged Geneva Accord

violation in three years. As was often customary within the fractious organization, the Polish communist representative declined to accompany the Indian and Canadian commissioners on the trip.

During a cursory inspection, it was noted that the town's civilian population was reduced by two thirds, but RLG troops were well fortified and prepared for any eventuality. Despite the lack of a comprehensive inspection because of security issues, the ensuing report revealed sufficient evidence that Lima-44 was indeed under siege.

With the situation in the south still questionable, by the second week of April the ICC Indian Chairman and Canadian Commissioner once again visited Attapeu, Saravane, and Lao Ngam, without the recalcitrant Polish Commissioner. This time, Attapeu was mortared while they were there.

Information regarding southern Laos was blanketed through Americans working in Laos and Thailand. Bob Glover wrote in a letter home:

"...Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma has apparently opened the way for foreign troops to enter the country. The presence of North Vietnamese troops in Saravane Province brought this about. He is however, trying to work through the International Control Commission [ICC], which was set up by the Geneva Accords. The Prime Minister has worked hard to keep a viable and workable government in place in Laos, not an easy task when there are three different [contentious] factions to appease."

Jane Glover added to Bob's dialogue. On Saturday, 28 February 1969, she wrote:

"The Bangkok World says that the conditions in Laos are worsening. It also reported Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma will request the U.N. to send troops to combat the enemy. This

request is aimed at Russia as she is forewarning the Vietminh of the movement of Laotian Army, consequently, the Laotian army loses the element of surprise. Previous to this the Prime Minister has resisted the presence of foreign troops in Laos..."

Concurrent with Souvanna Phouma's complaints regarding enemy action around Saravane and Attopeu, Thai government leaders announced that any enemy advance to the Mekong would foster strong RTA support for Laos. This would not constitute a precedent, for using Laos to provide a buffer for Thai territory was well understood by realistic Thai leaders, and they responded in kind.

Years before, from the Thai side of the Mekong, army personnel had shelled Vietnamese forces threatening to envelop Thakhet Town. In addition, the military had responded during the 1962 Nam Tha crisis by dispatching tanks and infantry units to the northeastern border. Starting in 1960 to the present, Thai military and police, working with Agency advisors and RLA/RLAF, had covertly supported the war in many ways as trainers, advisors, radio operators, T-28 pilots, artillery technicians, and lately as a small fighting unit on top of Pha Thi. Some had lost their lives in the process. Not calling attention to the Thai presence, the policy of using Thai for complicated tasks in Laos was implemented on a small scale, until much later when the war escalated to a crucial point. But that is the gist of a narrative for a future book.

ACTION IN MILITARY REGION-3

In Military Region Three, on Route-9, Ban Moung Phalane (Lima-61) again slid down the tubes against minimal FAR resistance. Along with harassing operations against Route-13, the Se Ban Fai Bridge connecting Thakhet and Savannakhet was dropped on 6 February. Also, the large RLA training base at Seno

and the Mekong River town of Thakhet were seriously in question as to their longevity.

Indeed, for the previous two months, enemy units had obtained positions in nearby karsts around Lima-40 from which they could harass the town and airfield. In addition, local villagers were informed that the town would soon be liberated. Although road watchers reported increased road activity, there were no indications of an imminent attack on Thakhet.

CUSTOMER LADUE

As mentioned in previous books, from March 1967 to October 1970, Agency Case Officer Mike LaDue's road watch teams' responsibility and coverage involved monitoring the major choke point passes at Nape, Barthelemy, Mu Gia, Ban Karai, and along other enemy-controlled network arteries. Although a threat, there were no frontal attacks on Thakhet in 1968 or the entire time Mike lived in town.

However, enemy units did occupy the Mahaxay and Nhommarath districts to the northeast. For some time, units had occupied nearby eastern karsts and much of Route-13 north of Grove Jones. During the period, two British nurses attached to the Thakhet Colombo Plan Hospital project elected to drive north on Route-13 to Vientiane on time off. It proved a bad decision, for they were intercepted by an enemy unit and murdered.

In 1968, there was a compelling rumor that North Vietnamese and PL forces were going to move on Thakhet again. Some town residents who enjoyed the luxury of friends or relatives across the Mekong River at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, elected to move in with them for the duration of the scare. Bangkok newspapers

later published articles stating that Thakhet had been attacked, but this unsubstantiated information proved largely erroneous.²³

Following destruction of the Se Bang Fai Bridge, enemy units continued to pressure government positions along that portion of Route-13, the only viable north-south artery in the country. LaDue was at his home/operations center when area Commander Colonel Choumpholphakdy Rattanabanlang entered. Colonel Banlang explained that one of his officers, Major Vannivong, was being attacked at a FAR fort on the west side of the bridge, and that his troops were perilously low on ammunition and required immediate resupply. Having attended France's Ecole Speciale Militaire de Saint Cyr, Mike liked and considered Vannivong an excellent officer.

Because all Lao H-34s were "grounded for maintenance" at the time, in an embarrassed and disgusted voice, Banlang asked if Mike could possibly arrange to have Air America H-34 crews perform the job.

Two H-34s and crews were found: one for the resupply mission and the other to provide a SAR capability. Arriving overhead, no ground fire was noted. Therefore, while one pilot orbited and observed, Mike and his crew landed without incident inside the camp. The combat situation was ongoing and sounds of small arms fire could be heard. As Vannivong's troops hurriedly offloaded ammunition boxes, LaDue and the major dashed to a recently dug hole containing seven enemy dead.

Attesting to a recent and ongoing firefight, additional dead enemy hung on the perimeter barbed wire. Because of the tenuous situation and requirement to spend minimum time on the ground, Mike limited his area inspection to moments. Once he was

²³ There was, however a small probe conducted on 11 March.



An overhead photograph portraying the results of an enemy assault on the Route-13 Se Bang Fai Bridge in Military Region Three. The destruction occurred on 6 February 1968.

Photo taken by the Author during a Bell Special Mission.

onboard the H-34, the PIC launched. During the brief period on the ground, the enemy took the opportunity to converge on the outpost and direct fire toward the departing helicopter. One round struck a main landing gear tire; another drilled through the tail cone. No serious battle damage was incurred, and a recovery was conducted at Thakhet without further incident. ²⁴

LaDue's tour at Thakhet marked a highly stressful period in his life, which later led to serious medical problems. He considered the river town always a dangerous place for him to work and live. No security checkpoints existed, allowing civilian-attired Vietnamese and Pathet Lao to clandestinely enter town to purchase items and gather intelligence.

Mike also found that the cover story provided by his superiors before he arrived at Thakhet had been seriously compromised by predecessors, and it appeared that many individuals were aware of the reason he lived in the town and exactly what he was doing. Before long, LaDue discovered that he could not completely trust Colonel Banlang's Thakhet-based BV-32 and BV-34 garrisons to adequately provide his personal safety. Therefore, calculated as a better choice and to ensure peace of mind, Mike sought protection from reliable Meo warriors.

SAN SOAK IN MR-3

Mike LaDue was well acquainted with the Meo people and their steadfast loyalty toward favored individuals. Working with AID earlier, he had previous experience interfacing with Meo living in the northern portion of Xieng Khouang and most of Sam Neua Province. During this period, he monitored cargo drops,

²⁴ Colonel Rattanabanlang was later promoted to general officer rank. When the PL-NVA seized the country in 1975, the general was delivered to Vieng Sai for "re-education," and, like so many of his status, he ultimately starved to death.

village requirements, and "scoped-out" new or previously closed Lima Sites for potential. In the summer of 1965, while Vang Pao was using Na Khang as a launch site to recover Hua Moung, Mike and USAF Captain Jack Teague re-opened the site for refugee operations.

While working for Pop Buell, LaDue did not journey far to the east into Zone Steel toward Khammouane Province. There were occasional visits to, or an RON, at Moung Oum (LS-22) in the designated refugee relocation valley behind Phu Bia, one that also contained Moung Cha, and an area known as "VP's Farm" (Some pilots referred to the area as "The Golf Course). U.S. Embassy mandates restricted Military Region Two USAID employees from penetrating other provinces or military regions. General Vang Pao, however, had no similar constraints; he sent his men and personally journeyed to sites a hundred or more miles east to wherever Meo people were located. ²⁵ Naturally, fixed wing and helicopter pilots, charged to deliver bullets, beans, bandages, and passengers to remote sites anywhere in the country, were exempt from such nonsense.

Since the Meo lived in the hills or mountains, Mike had to journey far into the field to obtain his security team. Meo communities of Ban San Soak (LS-126), Moung Tiouen (LS-91), Pha Du (LS-263), and Pha Hom (LS-241) were all close to the border in extreme northwestern Khammouane. Located east of the provincial demarcation lines at the Nam Kading and Nam Mouan (rivers), both San Soak and Moung Tiouen were judged important and used as early warning sites, and the villagers were charged to alert interested parties by radio of enemy movements or invasions.

²⁵ The enemy certainly had no similar restrictions on operational areas.

Occasionally, to justify their existence and maintain or even increase rice and cargo allotments, greedy "friendly" commanders fabricated intelligence reports. This was the case at Site-91. Therefore, when obvious finagling was discovered, the site was determined unreliable. To set an example, it was declared off the Agency books for receiving further support. Consequently, Case Officer LaDue was dispatched to MOUNG TIUEN with orders to collect all the weapons issued to the Auto-Defense de Choc (ADC) personnel. Mike considered that he earned his pay fulfilling the dangerous assignment, for the soldiers were understandably reluctant to relinquish their prized fully automatic M-2 rifles.

During any serious enemy pressure in the area, Ban Done (LS-28) was considered the preferred fallback site. Because of its unique location and reputation for excellent intelligence gathering, enemy encroachments did occur from time to time at Site-126, forcing site relocation. This was the case for villagers at Old San Soak (LS-265) who, after complaining of enemy progress toward their site, were moved to a new position closer to Ban Done that was deemed more defensible. In an afternoon's work, three H-34 crews lifted all the villagers, their livestock, and goods to New San Soak.

The Author supported Ban Done at least once while working out of Paksane (L-35) in the early days. Located in the well-watered Nam Mouan Valley, the Site-28 village was east of the Mouan River in Military Region Three, with Chom Thong to the west in Military Region Two. Considered a peaceful and picturesque place containing a long grassy strip, the inhabitants were either Lao Theung, or some other lowland ethnic derivation. LaDue spent some time there fishing, hiking, generally resting and recharging his batteries.

From a Polaroid photograph he took in 1967, LaDue recalled San Soak as a small village in a gentle bowl containing about twelve various sized houses. Although positioned at the 3,000-foot level, this location differed from other Meo sites situated on or close to mountain tops. The selection likely had something to do with an abundant source of potable water. The short strip was flat and required a modicum of experience and caution for landings by fixed wing STOL pilots.

Mike generally employed gray Porters or Helio Couriers to carry him to outlying sites. These were flown by Thai CASI pilots who were originally employed by the now defunct Boun Oum Airways, a non-round eye entity employing only Asian pilots to create an atmosphere of plausible deniability.

Late one afternoon in 1968, after a RON at Ban Done, Mike had his Thai Porter pilot deliver him to San Soak as a confidence-builder for the people, and to obtain first-hand knowledge of the situation there. About dark, while preparing to leave, the battery failed to produce sufficient energy to start the engine. The village radio operator was able to contact Lima-39 on the ancient radio set with a request for a battery. However, since there was not sufficient time left to obtain a charged battery and deliver it to Site-126, Mike, his pilot, and interpreter were obliged to RON.

It proved a memorable night. Since the area was not considered secure, the three men resolved to rotate guard duty every two hours. In addition, they found sharp farm implements to breach the Porter's fuel cells, after which they planned to torch the plane should the enemy appear likely to attack the site. Finally, they chose an alternate site to withdraw. To mark their location for SAR aircraft, Mike carried emergency pencil flares in his bug-out kit.

Although perilously close to the border and with the Porter certainly a prime target, there was no problem with the enemy. The men stood watches and partook of food the villagers offered, part of which consisted of foul-tasting warm pig's blood.²⁶ Sleep was difficult to nonexistent on the raised communal split-bamboo structures that tortured Western backs.

At dawn the following day, another Porter pilot landed. The new battery was installed and all the principals launched for Thakhet, where a good breakfast and a decent bed awaited.

Most of Mike's personal security team for Thakhet Town had been drawn from Ban San Soak or nearby villages. He carefully selected and trained ten tough (ADC) volunteers from about eighty armed men and older boys. Strictly acting as his local security detail, the team did participate in road watch missions, were unrelentingly reliable, and were reimbursed using the same rate structure as road watch team members. Mike generally maintained a team of six Meo to guard the office and accompany him to the Chez Aubourg, the town's "finest" and only quasi-French restaurant and bar. Four men were generally always on leave. All were familiar with and armed with M-2 carbines and he was confident that they would have acquitted themselves well during any encounter that threatened him.

Primarily, Mike relied on his Meo security force, but he also maintained back-up contingency plans B, C, and D to "get out of Dodge" fast should the need arise. To implement this, he owned a small outboard motorboat that he stashed in the weeds along the bank upriver from Thakhet. Furthermore, during a worst-case scenario, if an airlift exfil request was not forthcoming and the motorboat did not prove functional, he

²⁶ I became violently ill after consuming congealed pig's blood at a Black Tai party across the runway at Sam Tong.

planned to swim out into the Mekong and allow the current to drift him downstream to safety.

Mike maintained a close watch on Westerners who entered and departed the town. He saw Joe Flipse once after Joe and his family located there. Joe, Suzy, and baby Mary had returned from extended home leave. When Flipse realized that AID Chief Mendenhall had failed to properly support the upcountry refugee program in Military Region One, Joe refused to return to his previous billet. Instead, in February 1968, he opted to temporarily work at Thakhet, playing the typical AID role as a Refugee Resettlement Advisor.²⁷

The only other American living in Thakhet at the time was a male AID representative, Val Petersen. There were numbers of French expatriates, mostly involved with the local school system. The headmaster of the lycée school was Mike's intelligence counterpart, but the man would never admit to this. There were a few English types operating the Colombo Plan Hospital and several itinerant Filipinos who generally remained drunk.

Most lucrative enterprises in and around Thakhet appeared to be owned by racially mixed French-Lao or French-Vietnamese families. Successful business practices required considerable "squeeze" (bribes) to Lao government officials and military leaders--and likely the Pathet Lao--to maintain their work forces. The end result was that, for such a small river town, these elite families lived very well.

Area businesses could be exemplified by the tin mining operation located at Ban Phon Tiou, thirty-eight nautical miles

²⁷ Joe Flipse went to Luang Prabang later during January 1969, when Bob Dakin left for home leave. Then, when Rickenbach departed, he shared AID duties between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai.

north of Lima-40 at coordinates VE6078. The operation was located in a large valley behind karsts east of Route-13 and Grove Jones. A White Star Special Forces team was located there early. I had either over flown the facility or landed in the area in past years.

Mike recalls the Phon Tiou worker force as a particularly rowdy bunch. Many were composed of French ex-patriots, former Colonial Paratroopers, or Foreign Legionaries. Some had fought at Dien Bien Phu. Disgusted with the outcome, or for other personal reasons they did not care if they ever returned to their native countries.

Paid on Friday night, they normally drove into town for two nights of drunken fun. The wild men usually ended up at Chez Aubourg to eat, drink, and carouse. After eating and imbibing a fair amount of beer or other adult beverages, they generally proposed that all present join them enjoying "the Whiskey Filter" cocktail. This nasty procedure involved a worker removing a filthy sock that had been worn for a week or more, wrapping it around the rim of one of Louis Aubourg's whiskey glasses, and pouring several shots of neat Scotch through the sock into a glass. The instigator then drank the disgusting concoction. Using his other dirty sock to create another "Filter," at the peril of a whipping, he would then dare all in the bar to follow his example.

Mike was usually present, along with French acquaintances from the provincial lycée secondary school. Rather than fight a daft individual who labored underground most of the time, and in the interest of international fellowship, all participated. It was a gruesome business. More than once, because Louie reacted negatively when his floor was besmirched, a member of the gathering had to dart out the door to empty his stomach.

Since his arrival in Thakhet, LaDue's productive community efforts and sociable personality, while interfacing with the local residents, largely contributed to the success of his actual job--as a clandestine area road watch coordinator. During his tenure, one incident approached a Shakespearian-like tragedy in a nation already immersed in sorrow.

During the course of his normal cover activities, Mike learned from French individuals that two of their countrymen had originally owned an equal portion of the Chez Aubourg Restaurant. At some time, the partnership of Marcel Druaux and Mister Aubourg encountered serious interpersonal problems that resulted in a split and a major feud. They ceased speaking to each other. Aubourg retained the restaurant and Druaux built the town's only concrete factory. Despite a rift in relations, both men had sons, Christian and Ettienne, who became best friends while attending the French high school. Mike often saw the two boys riding together on a moped, and conversed with them about their tennis lessons.

One afternoon, Etienne's sister arrived at his door in tears. Visibly upset, she requested that he take her across the river in his boat to Nakhon Phanom to obtain something. During the trip, she revealed that both young men had recently been accidentally killed by one of Druaux's concrete truck drivers. She had been detailed by her father to contact Mike and obtain a bottle of formaldehyde.

Upon return, LaDue escorted the girl home, where the physically shattered Ettienne lay on a mat. Later, when he visited the Aubourg residence to pay respects, he saw the body of an equally battered Christian. While there, Aubourg expressed a desire for Mike to provide a quasi-security detail for the funeral. Naturally he agreed.

When the ceremony concluded the two old men stood at opposite sides of the graves. Overcome with emotion they approached each other, embracing in tears. For Mike, it was a very moving moment and a day he long remembered. ²⁸

LUANG PRABANG AND MILITARY REGION-1

To the North in Military Region One, beside the defeat at Nam Bac (LS-203), formerly controlled tribal sites of Ban Pha Thong (LS-169, Ban "Y" (LS-187), and Yung Tuia (LS-217), north of Site-203 were abandoned or lost to enemy forces. This effectively shut down local former intelligence gathering by Agency trained guerrilla teams.

Luang Prabang could not hold if attacked in force, but such a plan was not feasible for the enemy, as a move against the royal capital would be a drastic departure from the established norm. Still, they wandered around the area creating havoc and intimidating the area populace.

Letters from Bob and Jane Glover continued to be the best eyewitness sources for period information, including local color and action in and around Luang Prabang.

Saturday, 12 February 1968.

"...The smoky atmosphere or the burning season is upon us and some days the wind is such that things are hazy. Very little burning yet this far south but the pilots are already complaining of flight conditions. There are two reasons for this, one is the visibility is not good and the other is the

²⁸ Mike LaDue Emails, 06/22/11, 06/24/11, 06/25/11, 07/01/11, 05/20/12, 05/26/12.

Joe Flipse Emails, 04/10/97, 06/06/97.

Joe Flipse Letter to his Daughter Mary, 06/07/97.

unfriendlies are shooting holes in the planes that come into Luang Prabang. The planes usually come in for a landing at 3500 feet. But now they circle at 10,000 then drop down in tight circles to the strip. We used to fly into Moung Nane in the chopper by following the valleys, but now we come in pretty well up and drop to the pad as quickly as is safe. The Pathet Lao are being prodded by the Viet Minh [people still used this archaic term] to be more aggressive, apparently my presence in Muong Nane is creating a problem to their aggressive desires.

My presence in Moung Nane is to the best interests of the USAID so now they are keeping a chopper handy just in case I need out. I feel safer now that they are really aware of my situation and are doing a bit more for my welfare..

Monday night the Pathet Lao blew up a bridge between Xieng Ngeun and Luang Prabang [located on Route-13]. This was the second time in the past few months. We are quite concerned about the triple span Bailey bridge linking the airstrip with the city of Luang Prabang. However, if the time came to evacuate, we would undoubtedly go by chopper which would come from the airbase in Thailand directly to the pickup points in the city.."

Next day:

"During radio check last evening I talked with John Perry. He is quite concerned with my safety here in Moung Nane. I hope that he doesn't pull me out for a little while, as there are many on-going projects that need my coordination to progress in the time we have to get them done.

The situation in Luang Prabang is rather tenuous at the present time. John has come to depend on me when the situation gets to the point of being iffy. He has no one on his staff with my experience to back him up in the kind of situation that would

exist should there be a serious attack on the city and the evacuation that would follow." ²⁹

Jane continued:

"...The King is out of town at present. Because of this, the feeling is, something big is brewing. Night before last [Thursday] the village opposite the royal grotto on the Mekong was attacked. The village officials were just finishing up a meeting when the Vietminh came in. With machine guns, they killed several, wounding others, including the Chao Moung, took four prisoners, plus two police radios. The reason for the attack came about because the villagers had received money in lieu of rice seed the previous Sunday. Bob and I had gone to this village with the refugee officer to distribute this money on the Sunday before the assassinations took place. Bob was present to observe the proceedings. He is often called to do this necessary office as he is available, willing, and trusted. This attack is typical of what goes on in Vietnam.

This past Saturday morning Bob and I went to the airport to see one of our volunteers leave on vacation. It was a long wait but his plane finally took off about 3:30. One of the planes was headed for Sayaboury but never made it. It went as far as Tha Deua [the location of the ferry south of Luang Prabang] where it left the Mekong to head for Sayaboury. It went into the water upside down. It appears there was no explosion and fire. No survivors, there were 37 aboard including the Italian Bishop of Luang Prabang, an English Army Attaché (Colonel Moore), and an American representative of an American tractor company. There were eight bodies recovered...They found that the plane disintegrated under the water. This information was reported by

²⁹ Both John and Bob possessed military experience.

a German who was on a river barge and took pictures of the plane going down and as it went under..."

UNREST IN MR-2

In upper Military Region Two, Phou Kouk (LS-59) located east of Houa Moung (LS-58) fell as did other sites east of Route-6 and around alternate feeder routes south of Sam Neua Town. Several defensive sites at Din Den and around Pha Thi were also under increasing pressure. Endangered were Sites-85 and 36.

Well east of Long Tieng in lower Military Region Two, the Moung Ngan Valley (LS-236) was lost and sites and outposts west of Route-4 were threatened. ³⁰

Potential threats to government sites were taken seriously in some quarters because of the known existence of large enemy bases on Lao territory, all-weather storage areas, and particularly the recent capability of the enemy to retain control of captured areas, possibly throughout the upcoming rainy season. Additionally, Nam Bac's defeat had devastated FAR reserves and the government's ability to counter the Vietnamese moves. Moreover, the Lao populace was losing confidence in both the military and government: the military because of the inability to win battles, dissent in the ranks and officer corps, and a pervading lack of leadership; the RLG because of

³⁰ Government sites continued to systematically fall and the report was written and disseminated before Tha Thom was abandoned in Military Region Five.

continuing political wrangles and coup rumors. ³¹

President Johnson was somewhat misinformed by composite State and CIA opinions stating that recent enemy activity in Laos was not considered an actual and all-encompassing offensive, but merely an attempt to recover territory lost in 1967 and reestablish a de facto territorial line which existed during the 1962 Geneva Accords agreement. More disturbingly, President Johnson was apprised that Pathet Lao forces, supported by the Vietnamese Army, possessed the capability to march anywhere in the country and achieve victory. ³²

UDORN REPAIRS

I returned to Udorn on the 24th. Attesting to the pay strictures we were subject to while flying to and from Sam Tong, I only logged five minutes project pay.

After an earlier training stint, Wayne was away from the office on vacation or business. During such absences, in addition to his many duties, Wayne's long-time accomplished and

³¹ Segment Sources:

CHECO, Project Corona Harvest, Abstract-Estimate of the Military Situation in Laos, 02/68.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968 Volume 28, Laos, Document 346, 03/21/68, Special National Intelligence Estimate, Communist Intentions in Laos.

Arthur Dommen.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America, Hotel-54.*

Bill Leary February 1968 Notes, Including Information from John Ford's Logbook and Leary Interview.

Frank Bonasinga Emails, 06/21-22/11.

Steve Stevens Email, 06/23/11.

Bob and Jane Glover, Letters 02/21,22,28/68, 109-111, 113-114.

Leeker, *Aircraft of Air America, Bell 204B N8539F.*

Robert Shaplen, *Time Out of Hand, 358-359.*

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos, 266.*

³² General Maxwell Taylor's impressions gleaned from a meeting at CIA Langley Headquarters, and relayed to the President, 02/24/68.

reliable Thai clerk Somsak continued as the CPH's primary pilot-aircraft scheduler. A college graduate from Assumption, the same Bangkok accounting college that my wife attended, Somsak was well liked and respected by most pilots for his diligent and flawless work. For a small stipend, he also performed extra duties recording flight times in individual logbooks.

During periods of management absence, we were relegated to test flying Bells released by the Maintenance Department. Except for being demanding, hot, and relatively unrewarding work, it was not necessarily a bad assignment. Like working with the UH-34D, it afforded me a first-hand opportunity to learn more about the "nuts and bolts" of the helicopter.

Before being released as airworthy for upcountry work, established test procedures for ships returned for hangar maintenance involved tracking the main rotor blades. At the Bell manufacturing factory, blades were supposedly perfectly matched as to shape, weight, balance, and other factors. However, they soon deteriorated as we worked dusty and debris-filled landing zones. This was especially prevalent during the dry season, which took a major toll on all helicopter moving parts. In the case of blades, leading edge abrasion resulted from upwelling and churning dirt and dust on unprepared helipads. Also, damage could be incurred from foreign object (FOD) dings, or holes incurred from battle damage. All these factors contributed to the previously matched blades becoming unbalanced.

Tracking Bell rotor blades presented me with somewhat of a frustrating problem. The two-bladed Bell rotor system possessed an inherent one-per vibration. Because individual pilots endured their own vibration threshold, a problem arose attempting to determine what average vibration could be tolerated while carrying a payload at altitude. Therefore, in contrast to the H-34, I found it very difficult to track Bell blades to what I

considered an acceptable vibration level. Exacerbating the situation, because of cost and a parts pipeline determined largely by U.S. military requirements and subsequent availability, we rarely had the luxury of extra replacement blades like we had in the H-34 program. Because of our mechanics' unfamiliarity with electronic tracking equipment and its renowned unreliability, we still preferred using the manual tracking flag. Consequently, this time-consuming system, requiring many starts and shutdowns, relied on an experienced individual who understood the process and could safely manipulate the steel flag. Extreme heat on the ramp during the day also influenced our temperaments and performance.

On the 24th, I labored all day and into the evening, logging an almost unheard of three hours and twenty-five minutes, while attempting to whip Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) into acceptable shape for upcountry work. At a time of increased action and challenges in the field, I was loath to release a ship that I did not consider close to perfect, and in the case of PFI, a better aircraft than the one I had ferried to Udorn. The reasons for this were personal and many. The upcountry job presented too many other variables and more life-threatening challenges to consider than doubting the reliability of an assigned ship. For this reason, I did not appreciate someone releasing a machine to me that did not meet my high standards. During many years of testing helicopters, ³³ knowing that we needed reliable aircraft in the field, I would not release one unless I considered it right. Over time, my conscientious attention to detail and unwillingness to compromise my principles eventually caused strife between me and individuals in the Maintenance Department.

³³ Now called functional check flights-FCF in the trade.

The next day, I was back on the line testing Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot (PFF) when it was towed out of the hangar. I went through the same drill as the previous day with PFI, but was able to produce an acceptable product in a little less time, although too late to take upcountry.

UPCOUNTRY IN MR-2

Mike Jarina deadheaded to Site-20 on Hotel-48. Arriving late, he assumed command of Hotel-53 with Rick DeCosta and logged minimum time performing AID work while shuttling out of the refugee site of Sop Hein (LS-75), twenty-seven miles south of Sam Tong. Mike worked well into dark before securing for the night. Monday, Terry Dunn and I crewed PFF to Sam Tong. Except for locating to a forward base, it was a wasted effort, as bad weather persisted throughout the day. Even Jarina, never loath to fly in any conditions, remained grounded.

The weather improved the following day in Military Region Two, enabling helicopter crews to fly maximum time. While I went north, Mike continued to work for 713 and USAID. Some of his trips were to Skyline Drive, the long ridgeline north of Long Tieng. Troops were being positioned and surveys conducted for a possible alternate location for a new USAF TSQ-81 facility and supplement for the existing TACAN should Pha Thi fall. During a twenty-five-landing day, other trips took him to Paksane, Phu Phai (LS-65), and to the refugee village at Ban Na Luang (LS-66), twenty miles south-southwest of Site-20. After an aircraft swap to Hotel-40, he continued refugee work ten miles north of Moung Soui at the old village of Phu Sang Nao (LS-80), and Phou So (LS-57), another Meo village and established checkpoint on the mountain of the same name. Called "going around the horn," we used this point for a long-established northwest route to

northern sites to skirt potential hazards from mobile AAA on roads crossing the northwestern Plain of Jars.

DEFENDING PHA THI

The enemy timetable to commence a full-scale attack on Pha Thi by the 23rd had been somewhat altered by the Meo ambush of a Vietnamese unit, the discovery of enemy troop dispositions, and a detailed map of the battle plan. With this tangible intelligence, employing radar equipment on top of Site-85 to advantage, Seventh Air Force mounted hundreds of sorties against enemy infrastructure, caches, and fixed positions. These strikes, plus a determined ground defense, proved an adequate equalizer and tended to slow and diminish the Vietnamese push, which failed to appreciably penetrate the seven-mile perimeter around the mountain. Therefore, by month's end, enemy units withdrew to regroup and reassess the situation.

As the battle for Pha Thi ground toward a final solution, an abundance of memorandum and message traffic was generated in both Vientiane and Washington agencies.

The Vientiane-based Agency office speculated that recent enemy penetration of the established twelve-kilometer perimeter and attacks on friendly positions in the Din Den salient posed an imminent threat to the Pha Thi facility. The enemy would attempt to consolidate gains during the next two weeks while preparing for the final assault. Depending on the success of air strikes and ability of ADC defenders to persevere, perhaps two additional weeks remained to the defenders--beyond 10 March?

The Agency-generated information confirmed the ambassador's pessimism as to Pha Thi's longevity. His realism was proportional to enemy perseverance in pressing the battle and the inability of Vang Pao to reinforce irregular forces because of Na Khang commitments and in lower Military Region Two.

As he had since 1965, William Sullivan continued to press his superiors to lobby Air Force commanders for additional air support to address northern targets. He had stressed the importance of interdicting enemy trails and logistical traffic as far north as possible before all elements disappeared into the jungle. Now, tactical air was deemed of the utmost importance in upper Military Region Two to support guerrilla units, ease the balance of power, and level the playing field.

He and his staff always believed that Seventh Air Force reluctantly provided assets for strikes in Laos only after enemy requirements were accomplished. For this reason, stressing employing propeller-driven aircraft, instead of less accurate jet planes, he continuously lobbied for the use of a bomber squadron from the 56th Air Commando Wing inventory at Nakhon Phanom, dedicated specifically to targets in Sam Neua. This unit would be employed to specifically strike embassy-generated targets. The ambassador believed control of such a unit would provide sufficient resources to meet daily sortie requirements. This element would include nine A-26 Nimrods, eight T-28s and eighteen A-1 Skyraiders; U-10s and C-123s for FAC and Lamplighter missions.³⁴

Like any subject of import, the civilian and military bureaucratic system always required more study and impressions from the highest levels regarding additional and dedicated air support for Laos. Consequently, Sullivan was informed that his request was bumped from CIA, to Joint Chiefs of Staff, to CINCPAC, and ultimately to the "lame duck" Secretary of Defense.

³⁴ As the conflict escalated during the Second Indochina War, high demand for strike aircraft existed, but because of perceived or actual priority and losses there were never sufficient air assets to satisfy all commanders.

Some civilian leaders in the Johnson Administration recognized deficiencies in the allocation of strike aircraft for Laos and were sympathetic to Sullivan's requests:

"Although USG has no formal commitment to defend Laos, we have keen political-military interest in preserving its independence as a buffer to protect the Mekong lowlands bordering Thailand. The current enemy dry-season offensive, hitting from north to south, is beginning to crumble the RLG's ability to defend itself, and NVA/Pl are pressing ever nearer to the heavily populated areas along the river. This has been a long-standing problem, but is more acute now."

In discussing the political importance of tactical air to Laos, the point was made:

"The counter-insurgency may be small to 7th Air Force, but on it depends the morale of tribal elements and also the entire FAR."

[Previous policy dictated that] we support RLG operations in the north to have a free hand in the Panhandle where our air operations were largely related to the war in South Vietnam. This is less true today. The RLG urgently needs our support also in the south..."

Ambassador Sullivan remained in constant contact with USAF leaders regarding evacuation of personnel at Pha Thi, and the destruction of sensitive equipment. He was confident both could be accomplished **when** the "balloon went up." Evacuation of all U.S. Air Force personnel and some defenders (to include Agency Case Officers) was planned, and assets were allocated to this end. Three USAF Sikorsky helicopters and two Air America Bells were designated as primary standby aircraft. These were to be launched when the ambassador deemed it a priority. Air America crews and Bells would RON at Long Tieng, and Jolly Greens at Thai bases. Four A-1E pilots would provide escort cover,

suppress ground fire, and FAC incoming jet traffic. Pickup would be accomplished at the HLZ.

For obvious reasons, it was assumed that any evacuation would be conducted during daylight hours. It was further recognized that evacuation attempts to lift personnel from the mountain would require sufficient lead time to mount the operation (particularly for the USAF). Always of primary importance, the bottom line for a successful extraction depended largely on existing weather conditions and a last or first light capability. For these reasons, to eliminate some of the negatives, new Air Force proposals were soon forwarded to interested parties for Air America crews and their ships to RON at Site-85. Despite the fact that Air America pilots had been quite successful implementing previous military SAR work, hazards were such that the proposed RON location was considered far too dangerous at the time. Therefore, the request was soon disregarded.

Another memorandum recapitulated the latest facts relating to Site-85 to the Secretary of State:

"[The] equipment, radar-navigation station at the [LS-85] site is very important for supporting U.S air operations in North Vietnam and northern Laos. Equipment installed at the site are: TSQ-81-a portable version of the MSQ-77-an extremely sophisticated radar-navigation device used by U.S. bombers for precision bombing of targets in North Vietnam north of Vinh at night and in inclement weather. It has an effective range of about 200 miles... Installed 1 November 1967, it is the only device of its kind in Laos. Two MSQ-77 units are installed in Thailand and two in South Vietnam.

[The] TACAN navigation aid emits beams [called radials in the trade] to help U.S. aircraft operating primarily in northern Laos. The [one at Pha Thi was] installed about a year ago. There

are three other TACAN sites in Laos, the nearest one to Phou Pha Thi being at Long Tieng, south of the Plain of Jars...

At any one time there are 15 Americans [soon increased to 19] at the site: 12 to service the TSQ-81, two to service the TACAN, and one presumably to oversee the operation. As at the other TACAN sites in Laos, these individuals are USAF personnel, formally converted to civilian status as Lockheed employees for the duration of their tour of duty in Laos. There are three teams at Udorn, each serving a five-day shift. Souvanna Phouma had authorized the [this largely depended on the situation and weather] stationing of U.S personnel at the TACAN sites but he has not been told about the TSQ-81 at [Site-85].

Site-85 situated [west] of Sam Neua Town, has also served for some time as a major base for guerrilla operations. At present about 700 Meo irregulars are based there to carry out forays into enemy territory as well as to man a defensive perimeter...this perimeter has been breached during the past week. The enemy is undoubtedly aware of the importance of the site as a radar-navigation installation and of the U.S presence there. [Since the 12 January bombing], the enemy has been completing elaborate preparations including the building of roads, to make a ground assault on the site. Ambassador Sullivan believes this will take place within two weeks. We believe that should artillery come within range of the 600-foot strip [lower southeast side of the mountain], it would become extremely difficult to extricate the small U.S unit as well as the 700 man

Lao force..." ³⁵

Upon arrival at Na Khang, I was briefed by the Customer on the "latest" information he had relating to the situation at Site-85. Then I was loaded with boxed ammunition for the garrison. The weather was good for a change, allowing me to work all day shuttling supplies and water drums from the lower strip to the "Rock's" summit. To my knowledge, thus far there had been no actual shelling of the heights. Air strikes were in progress to the east. Some road equipment along with laborers were destroyed or killed, but construction work on Route-602 continued west toward Pha Thi.

I returned to RON at Sam Tong just before dark.

On Wednesday, I was again assigned to the north. Close to mid-day, after flying a fuel load and a half, I was relieved at Na Khang. Fortunately, a stream of aircraft delivered supplies into Site-36 for helicopter distribution to outposts and Pha Thi. Therefore, after the arriving PIC stowed his gear and listened to my briefing about the machine and situation, I transferred my gear to Caribou N392 for a deadhead flight to Long Tieng. Later I caught another Caribou, N393, to T08. The

³⁵ Segment Sources:

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 254.

Edward Vallentyne *CHECO*, CAS Report (likely from Ted Shackley's office), 24, 26-27, 02/25/68.

Telegram from Vientiane to State. 02/20/68.

Ambassador William Sullivan to Chief of Staff USAF, 02/26/68.

Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 96-97.

Action Memorandum Assistant Secretary of State from East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy) to Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Bohlen), 02/23/68, Source: Department of State Central Files POL 27 Laos.

Keefer, FRUS, Forward.

Memorandum Herz to Bundy, Air Support for Counter-insurgency Missions in Laos, 02/27/68.

Memorandum from the Director of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State (Rusk), Significance of Phou Pha Thi (Site 85) in Northeastern Laos, 02/28/68.

month had not been particularly rewarding. Although spending half a month in the field, adverse weather, maintenance requirements, and road watch missions precluded me from even reaching the standard seventy hours.

The critical situation in upper Military Region Two dictated that Customer requirements in that region for Air America helicopters assumed priority over other sectors. Therefore, Jarina and Punz also supported Site-85 and adjoining Houei Kha Moun (LS-111), where Ernie Kuhn still maintained his forward AID post to enable contact with and support many thousands of friendly civilians.

Ernie had established Site-111 as his regional headquarters after Don Sjostrom was killed at Na Khang. His small Spartan quarters were fashioned of wood from expended rice pallets and flattened fuel drums. When at the site, communications with Sam Tong or further south were maintained through a Mark-4 single sideband radio powered by a small generator. In addition, he had a portable Stoner and hand-held HT-2 radio available.

Following a long day and impressive fifty landings in the field, Mike RTB Sam Tong via Site-36 and RON at Long Tieng.

Twenty-nine February 1969 provided a leap year, with one extra day for pilots to fly. Taking advantage of this perk, Mike continued his high time flying, performing fifty landings and takeoffs in the Site-85 area. By then, weather permitting, one could view new road construction to the east through the Customer's telescope. Stories were already being told and a legend generated regarding one courageous bulldozer driver who lived a charmed life avoiding air strikes. Remarkably, A1E drivers attempting to destroy the dozer with guns and rockets invariably failed. After several attempts, the driver pulled off into the woods, climbed onto and lay on the hood of his vehicle.



The Author's Bell being unloaded for "mountain moving" at the end of the Houei Kha Moun, Laos (LS-111) thousand-foot air strip. A fort complex is perched on commanding high ground. An early buffer for Phu Pha Thi, the 3,850-foot site was located five miles north of Site-85 and only eight miles south of North Vietnam. The site was abandoned after the attack and loss of Pha Thi in March 1968.

Author Collection.

Then he began waving, sarcastically mocking, and taunting the Skyraider pilots attempting to kill him. It was a great gallows humor story in a grim situation. Although not difficult to predict, no one actually seemed to know the man's ultimate fate.

One trip to the southeast with Captain Gia Tou involved retrieving a Meo patrol. Mike watched apprehensively as the commanding officer began climbing into the cabin with a web belt full of grenades. Knowing the danger of these mini-bombs if carelessly handled, and feeling uncomfortable, Mike was about to alert Punz when one grenade dropped and rolled out of sight beneath Hotel-40. With the throttle at idle and unable to immediately takeoff, Mike merely waited for the explosion-which never came. Like my nervous experience with the Coffee Man at Na Khang, I suppose we all had similar incidents occur, but the odds were catching up and this event was a prelude to a year-end disaster.

At the appropriate time, Mike headed for Udorn via Na Khang, Phu Cum (LS-50), and Sam Tong for fuel. Then he left for Wattay Airport with passengers. As usual, many people wanted a free ride to the big city for personal reasons. ³⁶

On 29 February, I posted a letter home that briefly described the current situation in Laos, but failed to provide details:

"...This is rough business over here and the enemy is playing for keeps, even though we aren't. Laos is being overrun and it is our own damn fault. I haven't seen such pessimism in years...

This is a funny year as we have had a great deal of rain [throughout the region] in a period normally of no rain and much smoke and haze...

³⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.

I put in for leave the 25 of April as Tuie wants to be home for Rick's birthday."

DEMISE OF THE CAT MANDARIN JET

After more than two decades of service in the Far East, as a result of a devastating crash and other considerations, Civil Air Transport (CAT) International's officials petitioned the Chinese Civil Aeronautics Administration to terminate international scheduled passenger service as of 29 May 1968. This decision effectively ended years of free employee travel we "Old Timers" had enjoyed to countries and airports throughout the entire CAT route system servicing the Far East. Destinations included Japan, Korea, Okinawa, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and the Philippines. Although somewhat early in the linear time frame of events unfolding in Southeast Asia, this may have been a precursor of the eventual demise of American influence and massive participation in Asian affairs.

Consistent with periodic equipment upgrades, in January, the Mandarin Jet, affectionally referred to by many employees as the "Golden Worm," a beautifully decorated and appointed Convair 880M in service since 1961, had been replaced by a Boeing 727-92C model jet. Registered B-1018 under the Chinese system (CCAR) and N5093 while operating with Southern Air Transport, the aircraft became the new flagship of the airline. Not new to the industry, although able to land at substantially shorter airstrips because of an innovative airfoil design and lack of wing-mounted engines, the plane initially had a reputation for a high sink rate with flaps lowered forty degrees in descent. Then, if a pilot got behind the power curve, particularly while conducting instrument approaches, a crash could result.

Captain Hugh Hicks, the Assistant Systems Chief Pilot, was qualified in the 727, but because of management duties and

Boyd's mandates restricting supervisor flying, had not flown many hours in the machine. Therefore, on 16 February, to obtain additional stick time, he was listed as part of the crew and piloted the 727 to Hong Kong with Captain Stu Dew acting as supervisor. All crew members were experienced CAT veterans in the Far East and both Americans were legends in the organization, having participated in combat missions supplying French forces during the First Indochina War.

PIC Stu Dew and First Officer FH Wong departed Kai Tak Airport (HKG), Hong Kong for Sung Shan Airport (TSA), Taiwan. The souls onboard (SOBs) including passengers and crew totaled 63. In addition to Chinese military officers, Hugh Hicks' wife, who had been visiting relatives in the British colony, was on the flight.

To gain further experience and maintain proficiency in Company equipment, Hicks sat in the left PIC seat, Wong in the right, and Dew in the jump seat to observe and advise Hicks.

Close to Taiwan, the weather deteriorated appreciably and the traffic controller's authorization to commence a night instrument landing system (ILS) approach to Runway 10 duly noted. Over the years, Hicks had performed hundreds of similar instrument approaches in DC-6 type aircraft.

During the approach, something went drastically wrong. Alerted that the plane was below published minimums, Hicks added power. However, it was applied too little too late. The aircraft contacted the ground near Linkou, broke in two and subsequently burst into flames.

One survivor, an uninjured Chinese passenger who opted to remain anonymous, stated:

"The plane split in two near the midsection where I was sitting. I jumped out and started running. When I got about 100

yards away I heard an explosion, turned around and saw the plane on fire. I took a taxi and came into town."

Both American pilots survived, but Dew's arm was severely injured. Hicks was cut, but he was relatively uninjured. Twenty-one passengers and one farmer on the ground were killed. Hick's wife was one victim.

The aftermath of the crash blossomed into what could be perceived as an Asian type face affair. Chinese CAA investigators hurriedly completed their work at the crash site and interrogations of some crew members by 23 February. Although motives were not entirely clear, a protracted and curious civil court case ensued. The pilots were arrested and the Taiwanese government ordered and arraigned them for trial. The case marked the first time in aviation history in which pilots involved in a crash with fatalities were prosecuted for perceived "wrongful" deaths. Captain Dew was charged with *"committing an offense by neglecting the degree of care required by his occupation which has resulted in the human death."*

Captain Hicks was accused of *"killing another [man] negligently."* If convicted two to five years prison sentences could be imposed on the men. ³⁷

Generating substantial publicity, the trial commenced on 25 March. Give and take proceeded between prosecution and defense lawyers. The VOR/ILS electronic equipment that provided all important navigation approach information was challenged as contributing to the crash, and suspect as to generating erroneous signals during the approach. Later depositions from

³⁷ Although sixty percent owned by Chinese citizens, and designated as the Taiwan government's primary carrier, CAT's American management was resented. Furthermore, China Airlines officials coveted CAT's Far East route structure and was steadily making inroads into the CAT passenger service structure and flying the same equipment.



CAT 727 B-1018 parked at the Chung Shan Airport Taipei, Taiwan. The plane crashed on 16 February 1968 while Hugh Hicks was conducting an ILS approach to the airport.

Vincent Ma Collection.

other airline pilots confirmed that the instrument approach equipment malfunctioned at times. However, this information failed to sway government authorities to allow a professional Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) man from the States to examine the navigation equipment for inaccuracy.

Previously noting an uncharacteristic precedent in trying airline pilots, the President of the International Federation of Airline Pilots Association (IFALPA) commented to media sources from headquarters in The Hague:

"If Chinese authorities should not meet IALPA's petition to suspend court proceeding and reopen investigation by civil aviation authorities and if the two pilots are convicted, airline pilots would obviously be afraid to fly into Taipei and very likely they will boycott the place."

Taking note of the ill-disguised implied threat, two days later, the three-man court judges ordered a recess. The trial was reconvened on 11 July.

Neither man was allowed to leave Taiwan. For much of the trial, Hicks was subjected to a court ordered house arrest. He was not allowed to bury his wife and she was kept for some time in a Taipei morgue.

Wayne Knight visited Hugh a number of times during business trips to Taipei. Hicks did not greatly enlarge on the reasons for the crash, but Wayne observed that the crestfallen man was clearly a defeated human being. Consequently, likely fearing a boycott of the island airports by pilots of IALPA, court judges declared Hicks and Dew "not guilty" on 21 January 1969. The judges further stated:

"...neither American pilot was responsible for any civil charges in connection with the accident." They maintained the accident occurred "because of abnormal illusions pilots develop while flying instruments."

Justice had been served, albeit a form of Asian justice, and face was preserved.

During a separate investigation of the 727 accident, department head Doug Dreyfus confidentially ruled that the incident was caused by pilot error. Of course, this was not divulged to the court or public and those of us in the field knew nothing of this finding.

After all details were sorted out, and the prosecutor failed to lodge an appeal with the court, Hicks returned to the USA in order to pay respects to his deceased wife. Knight remained in contact with him for several years.

During the trial a bizarre episode in a litany of peculiar events occurred. Air America's Vice President of Flight Operations (VPFO), Tom Boyd, while working for American Airlines had flown as copilot with Captain Ernest Gann, author of *The High and Mighty; Fate is the Hunter*, and approximately twenty-one other best-selling aviation books. During their flying careers, they became close personal friends and had maintained contact. When Gann learned of the CAT 727 accident and the lengthy trial involving the CAT employees, he decided to investigate the possibility of writing a book regarding it. Therefore, he journeyed to Taipei and stayed as Boyd's guest while researching the crash at Shu Linkou.

During this period, Boyd phoned Don Teeters, inquiring if he was interested in joining Gann and him for a round of golf. The opportunity of associating with a celebrity author appealed to Teeters and he accepted the invitation.

While the trial was still in progress, Company lawyers informed top management of developments using daily trial transcripts. Naturally, this information was critical and considered highly classified.

While changing clothes in the locker room, Teeters observed a copy of the courtroom accident brief in Gann's locker. Always stickler for rules and regulations, Teeters was furious and sequestered the brief. Boyd insisted that he trusted Gann implicitly, and that no harm would come from Gann perusing the recorded proceedings. Furthermore, he would never reveal anything from the transcripts until after the trial was complete. That explanation was not good enough for Teeters. Quite a fuss followed; Teeters was overwhelmed by the illegality of the act and remained inflexible, never returning the brief to either Boyd or Gann. It is quite likely that Teeters also reported the infraction to both President Hugh Grundy and CEO George Doole.

In 1973 Gann produced *A Band of Brothers*, a book loosely based on the CAT accident.³⁸

After six years as a manager with Air America, Tom Boyd terminate his employment in mid-1969. He was replaced by incoming VPFO Jim Walker, a former Pan American seaplane clipper pilot. Whether Boyd fell into disfavor with the Agency and Air America by inviting Gann to Taipei for the purpose of writing a book is really academic, for he was already on his way out of the Company management slot. Naturally, the Agency was extremely gun-shy when it came to publicity of any kind. But Boyd, being a former airline-type, without any Far East background, was also not supported or well regarded by peers or subordinates. Particularly galling to underlings, he was very difficult to work for, always nitpicking regarding paperwork. Boyd was overly concerned with administration instead of the operational end of the Company. He never emulated Bob Roussetot's accomplishments

³⁸ Compared to Gann's other books, both Tom Penniman and Wayne Knight considered it an inferior work.

by journeying to "remote" field stations in order to obtain the latest information and to press-the-flesh. At least one Udorn management person did not believe Boyd was truly aware of what his charges were doing in Laos.³⁹

³⁹ Segment Sources:

Air America Log, Volume 11, 1994.

Felix Smith, *China Pilot: Flying for Chiang and Chennault* (Washington: Brassey's, 1995) 293, 296.

Initial Report of the Accident Phoned to Smith and Enright 02/16/68.

EW Knight Emails, 09/04/00, 09/06/00 (2), 07/13/11, 07/14/11 (2).

Tom Penniman Email. Penniman was Boyd's Assistant.

News Release 03/12/68-Mayfield; *New York Times*, 01/21/69.

China Post Articles, 02/24, 03/01, 05/22, 05/27/68, 01/27/69.

Arnold Dibble Edited by Horace Sutton, *Saturday Review, Booked for Travel: The Nine Lives of CAT*, 05/11/68, 05/18/68.

Tom Boyd Letter to CJ Abadie, 07/10/69.

As delineated in an amalgamation of reports and assessments, compared to the previous year, the military situation in Laos appeared especially tenuous, even dismal, by the end of February. An abridged and paraphrased version of the situation indicated:

Communist forces achieved no major gains during a week of heavy fighting throughout the country. However, a significant threat to Royal Lao Government forces persisted in widely separated areas of Laos. In addition, the dry season offensive was deemed to remain intense, particularly in northern Laos. Detected by alert Meo road watch teams, the entrance of four additional Vietnamese battalions into upper Military Region Two pointed to enemy persistence in eliminating Phu Pha Thi as a navigational facility for strikes on North Vietnam and as a major guerrilla support base.

In the vicinity of the Tha Thom Valley, at the small town of Sala Den Din on Route-4 (not to be confused with Den Din village east of Phu Pha Thi) FAR blocking troops were dislodged farther south toward Paksane by a small number of enemy troops. The lack of overwhelming enemy numbers involved attested to their limited goals in Military Region Five.

In Military Region Three, enemy expansion and consolidation of the defense and control of the logistical corridor to South Vietnam in the Panhandle, known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was instrumental in committing a number of FAR units to a static defense. January's addition of three fresh Vietnamese battalions to the field portended future LOC expansion farther west toward Moung Phalane, Dong Hene, Seno, and Thakhet.

Military Region Four typified the most intense fighting, particularly around the Bolovens Plateau when, on 23 February,

attacks were simultaneously launched against FAN and FAR units located on the west foothills at Lao Ngam and at Attopeu to the southeast. During the heavy fighting at Lao Ngam, enemy forces incurred substantial losses, but this enabled other Pathet Lao units to easily seize the Se Done Valley rice harvest and spread propaganda in the villages against the RLG. Such activity had been underway since the previous year when the successful WAPI village help program supported by FAR, AID, and CIA and been abandoned in lieu of more emphasis on road watch and action teams in Military Region Four. Although nearly surrounded, no concerted attempt to take the FAR garrison at Lima-10 had been attempted, but enough enemy were present west and northeast that such an objective was certainly possible.

The attacks in Military Region Four stimulated a response from one of the two fighting generals in the FAR, General Phasouk, who appealed for reinforcements as-soon-as-possible (ASAP). With the country in turmoil and the recent loss of reserves at Nam Bac, no Lao commander was willing to strip his already scarce assets; hence no additional troops were forthcoming to aid in the south. Attempts to introduce Thai Army troops met with equal failure. Even if clandestine, it was too early for such obvious third country intervention into the "Land of Oz."

Pressure against Saravane was deemed likely to continue and accelerate because of the government site's proximity to northern portions of Route-23, its feeder LOCs, and the presence of the USAF TACAN navigation facility on top of Phu Kate.

Intelligence experts in the Western camp posited that the loss of Saravane and Attopeu would indicate that the current enemy offensive exceeded the goal of regaining control of

territory once in their possession. ¹

LUANG PRABANG

The military situation around Luang Prabang remained fairly static, but with enemy patrols sweeping the area, was largely unsafe for IVS/AID representatives working outlying stations. In spite of the danger, Bob Glover was allowed to return to Moung Nane on 27 February. As Bob observed in his book:

"...When I came back to Moung Nane last Tuesday morning the fog hung very low so we skimmed the Mekong at a couple hundred feet. Yesterday [1 March] the police reported that the Pathet Lao are firing on boats on this stretch of river. Guess we were lucky, perhaps the fog was too thick to see us. Anyway, I reported the PL action, so the info was passed along to the pilots. In the future we'll wait for the fog to lift. Today [2 March] I noticed that a passing chopper was above 4000 feet...

A little noisy this morning. About 0125 hours I awoke to the sound of gunfire so I just listened; there were six outgoing shots, probably mortar and one or two flares, no return fire so I went back to sleep...

[5 March]...The USAID chopper will be along later to deliver gasoline, food, supplies for the dam project, and a replacement driver...

Security in Luang Prabang Province is such that there is a strong possibility that work in progress now will never get done if we procrastinate. The Lao have a very apt proverb-when translated means-'things that should be done today should not be left for tomorrow'...

¹ Situation in Laos, 03/02/68.
Agency Intelligence Cable, 03/04/68.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 198.

Probably Mr. Perry will insist that I go out Tuesday, and with the shortage of choppers coupled with their work load, probably I wouldn't get back to Moung Nane until we return from our vacation-about the 30th of April...

We are gradually rebuilding some of the roads that the French built years ago. Many years ago, there was a road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang which was passable in the dry season [Route-13]. There was a taxi type of transportation that covered the trip back and forth between the two cities. Now the Embassy forms a convoy and makes the trip once a year. This year I was tagged to go as observer in a chopper to inspect the road and see if it was in good enough condition for the convoy to get through.

From Luang Prabang to Moung Ngeun, the road is good, and from Vientiane north as far as Moung Kassy it is also good. We regularly use this much of the road from each end, but in between it is not used much. For one thing the Pathet Lao frequent this stretch and it is apt to be unsafe. I suspect that we have the area pretty well under surveillance, before and during this outing of the Embassy desk jockeys.

We have recently lost a lot of stations in Xieng Khouang Province, but Pop Buell is still holding out at Sam Tong. He has been there for eight years plus, and is loved by all the mountain people for miles around. I wish we could get a glimmer of light on the outcome of all this, but all we can do is to keep picking away, and hopefully, keep what we have." ²

² Bob Glover Letters Home, 02/02/68, 03/05/68.

MR-2- FOCUS ON "THE ROCK"

During early March, with seasonal smoke and imbedded thunderstorms pervading the region, the weather was generally adverse in the immediate area around Site-85. Although limiting visual attacks, by using the navigation facility on top of Pha Thi, the bad weather did not preclude all air strikes. However, it did prevent Air Force FAC pilots from assessing enemy strength, movement, and locations. In addition, by dispersing into smaller units, Vietnamese troops were able to avoid most air strikes, overrun Meo defenses, and continue a steady advance toward "The Rock".

Although suggestions to transfer the navigational equipment and personnel to another location were posed between leaders in 7th Air Force Saigon to Pacific Air Force (PACAF), too much reliance on the presently installed systems continued to forestall any immediate action. Maintaining the facility at Pha Thi was considered paramount. It was estimated to be so for the next six months or more to direct precision strikes on infrastructure in and around Hanoi. This capability was especially important during current adverse weather impacting the region and the impending monsoon season. Furthermore, no site providing similar suitable characteristics for the unit had yet been discovered. Possible evacuation of personnel and destruction of equipment was mentioned, but not to be implemented until conditions warranted. Therefore, in typical CYA pass-the-buck fashion, the onus for decision making regarding Site-85 was directed from PAC to 7th Air Force, and, as always, to the leader of the pack, Ambassador Sullivan. Charged with running the war in "neutral" Laos, civilian USG State Department representative Sullivan had been making difficult decisions since his arrival in Laos. This involved juggling many different facets, working with Prime Minister

Souvanna Phouma, keeping the façade of Lao neutrality intact, and fending off excessive aggressive U.S. cross border military adventures. Currently pressure from the USAF hierarchy was intense to maintain the Pha Thi facility up and running, and only evacuate American personnel if absolutely necessary.

Based on perceived air strike effectiveness and road construction toward Site-85, after abundant calculations and prognostications, Agency officers in Chief of Base Ted Shackley's office estimated Pha Thi's remaining days as a viable navigation site to be severely limited. Consequently, they would not forward a longevity prediction past Sunday the 10th. This information was disseminated to diplomatic stations and MACV in Saigon, principals in Bangkok, Seventh Air Force in Udorn, CINCPAC in Honolulu, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, and the White House in Washington, D.C.

However, in the prevailing scheme of planning, Site-85's continued existence as an enemy target involved the participation of several Vietnamese battalions that might have been employed elsewhere in Military Region Two or in South Vietnam. On the other hand, such a large number of enemy forces concentrated in a relatively small area presented a choice opportunity to annihilate great quantities of troops.

In the meantime, additional Air Force personnel were introduced to the TSQ facility to enhance round-the-clock coverage of the defensive perimeter. Personnel were briefed on potential helicopter evacuation sites, mainly the HLZ below the site. In addition, becoming more cognizant of the danger, the men illegally obtained and distributed weapons, and prepared a

fallback position on a cliff side shelf below the southern rim.³

As the days and hours wound down toward the expected final battle, a demand for helicopters to assist in obtaining intelligence and supporting guerrilla activity in upper Military Region two escalated. Naturally the Customer preferred Bell equipment and crews, for this task was at the top of the implement list.

On 4 March, I deadheaded on Hotel-59 to Long Tieng, where I joined Ellis Emery in Bell helicopter Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot. After flying "around the horn" (avoiding the Plain of Jars via the western route north) to Na Khang, the Customer sent us fifty miles northeast to exfil intelligence gathering teams from the same two areas we had worked on 22 February (VH149468, VH0848). After navigating around shifting weather systems, the first mission was conducted in the Phou Pha Lang area near the junction of Routes-64 and 641. The second exfil was conducted on the return trip, a few miles west on Phou Phak Chanh. Denied area time amounted to one hour and twenty minutes.

After depositing our charges at Site-36, we returned to Udorn.⁴

On the sixth, I departed Udorn in XW-PFJ to work and RON at Sam Tong. Reliable "Rusty" Irons was my Flight Mechanic. We were directed north to Na Khang and then to Pha Thi with equipment deemed necessary for its defense. Except for A-1E pilots, who at times could fly and maneuver under overcasts, poor area weather

³ Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 27, 29, 31.
Tim Castle, 105.
Ken Conboy, 191.
Victor Anthony, 255.
Ted Shackley, *Spymaster*, 187.

⁴ Several years later I flew interesting night flights in this same area, while attempting to accomplish Special Missions for Agency folks at AB-1. These missions will be addressed in a later book.

prevented most air strikes. Under the low, dark ceiling the red slash of a new enemy road was clearly visible across the Yut Valley. It appeared to be complete almost as far east as possible. Overlooking the Yut River, we knew that heavy artillery would not be far behind. During breaks in the clouds, I watched A-1E pilots descend and, after obtaining target information from the forward observer on top of Pha Thi, attempt to blast workers and equipment on the road and in adjacent tree lines with guns and rockets.

Because of my late arrival upcountry, the work day was short. Therefore, I worked late, landing and securing at Site-20 at dark.

Because of pressing needs in upper Military Region Two, we arose early Thursday morning, consumed a hurried breakfast, grabbed a sack full of ham and cheese sandwiches, and launched across the ridgeline to Long Tieng for passengers, supplies, and any other item going north. A full day of flying support missions to Site-85 followed. The substantial contingent of men contributing to the site's defense required an abundant quantity of food, water, and ammunition, as well as paying close attention to the needs of "sick, lame, and lazy" individuals. These items could only be delivered or attended to by our versatile helicopters. Therefore, the Pha Thi Customer relayed requests south by single sideband radio, or through me by paper message, or by HT-2 radio. As support items arrived by large fixed wing to Na Khang, or by smaller STOL planes to the Houei Hok (LS-198) 900-foot dirt strip located at the base of the western cliffs of Pha Thi, I delivered them to the bustling and dusty pad on top. Rolls of barbed wire and personnel mines of all shapes and sizes were increasingly loaded as cargo.

Friendly air continued to provide what little help it could, but exploiting adverse weather conditions to their

advantage, the Vietnamese had moved additional troops forward and consolidated positions on the ridgeline running west of Houei Hao Mountain, a terrain feature pointing directly to their goal at Site-85. Under the cover of a low ceiling, during the day a company of enemy troops moved southwest along the ridge to an area less than three miles from the Meo village and strip on the southeast portion of "The Rock." There, in the semi-circular area we had previously occupied for years, they engaged one of our reconnaissance patrols. ⁵

Consistent with defense support activity of the previous day, I worked late before refueling at Na Khang for the boring return flight to Sam Tong.

In an overall attempt to provide maximum support for Site-85 and conserve considerable ferry time, it would have been far more efficient to have us helicopter crews RON at Na Khang. However, after our thatched hooch was burned to the ground during a previous offensive, there was no proper accommodation or guarantee of nighttime security for crews. Moreover, Jolly Green crews no longer RON there. Because of the close proximity of enemy to the east, like bees attracted to honey, there was a perceived danger from accomplished Vietnamese sappers infiltrating the site and attacking us and our equipment. Furthermore, there was resistance from the CPH office of Na Khang RONs for anything other than emergency situations like maintenance or weather. Therefore, security problems, limited RON facilities and a requirement for proper pilot rest and sustenance, were prime considerations not to remain there overnight. In addition, with the enemy at our doorstep at Site-

⁵ CIA Cable: Appraisal of Security at Site-85, 03/09/68.

85, we were already under considerable stress, and were subject to incurring frontline battle damage at any time.

Top American leaders of the Southeast Asia Coordinating Committee (SEACoord): CINCPAC Admiral Sharp from Hawaii, Ambassador Bunker, General Westmoreland from Vietnam, Ambassador Sullivan from Laos, Ambassador Unger from Thailand, their associated staff and aids met in Da Nang, South Vietnam. The agenda was Laos. Sullivan and Westmoreland were particularly anxious to discuss this subject and advance cogent ideas, many not new, relating to the current military situation and state of preparedness. Liberal enemy use of Laos had compounded the problem of countering activity in the northern provinces of South Vietnam. This incursion had become such a point of concern that, notwithstanding the Lao Geneva Accords of 1962, contingency planning for a possible limited ground operation in Laos should go forward.

An immediate increase in helicopter assets throughout the Theater was deemed necessary, with some resources allocated to provide increase support to Agency guerrilla activity in the Panhandle.

Ambassador Sullivan reiterated his desire for an increase of A-1E and A-26 assets, and for the 56th Command Air Wing at NKP permanently assigned to support specific operations in Laos.⁶

ANOTHER BELL ACCIDENT

On the afternoon of the same day I was sweating missions at Pha Thi, Captain Charlie Weitz PIC of 204B N8539 Foxtrot was involved in an incident in the vicinity of Ban Tha Si (LS-61), located at trail's end, sixteen miles southeast of Tha Thom.

⁶ Embassy Vietnam to State, 7 March Southeast Asia Coordinating Committee Recommendations, 03/19/68.

Accompanied by the crew of 205 XW-PFG, the emergency exfil mission involved evacuating fifteen hotly pursued troops to a more secure area. Because of possibly encountering hostilities in the landing zone, the Customer authorized double crews and an interpreter for the lead ship.

Upon arrival, as was often the case, seventeen excited troops were counted in the confined spot. All were extremely anxious to leave and almost overran the pick-up point. Therefore, intent on conducting only one lift, nine passengers scrambled on 39F and eight on PFG. Although humid and sweltering throughout most of the year, at this particular time of the year, the entire Tha Thom Valley was notorious for being ultra-hot. Consequently, when pre-takeoff power checks were conducted at a hover, both PICs noted a reduction in engine and rotor RPM caused by heat, high humidity, and the heavy payloads.

Not capable of launching, the Flight Mechanic hurriedly informed the onboard interpreter that it was imperative to immediately offload five passengers from 39F. Naturally, the soldiers were reluctant to relinquish their ticket out of a certain death or capture situation, and the safety of the helicopter, especially with sporadic gunfire occurring nearby. However, they complied when assured that the aircraft would return for a second trip. Finally, able to hover within acceptable parameters, Charlie began to maneuver the ship rapidly into the wind for takeoff. At the same time, the Flight Mechanic was busy returning fire at approaching enemy and was not able to clear the tail. Therefore, in the process of turning away from the enemy, the delicate tail rotor blades impacted a high stump. Spinning at very high RPM, the tail rotor blades disintegrated and the system was badly damaged, resulting in a severe high frequency vibration. Charlie immediately landed the

aircraft and secured. The crew was hastily evacuated by the PIC of PFG, and all recovered at Savannakhet.

Since 39F was abandoned in an unsecure area, recovery crews could not work their magic and the Bell was deemed not recoverable. Instead, following a short conference at the AB-1 office, it was decided to have air strikes destroy 39F. The helicopter became another operational loss. Within a week I learned that the incident would soon have far reaching implications for those of us in the Bell program. ⁷

The following morning, after the fog lifted in the Sam Tong bowl, I launched north. The day was largely uneventful, but demanding while supplying Pha Thi with the means to defend against the enemy onslaught everyone soon expected.

A CLOSE CALL

On Saturday the ninth, I again spent most of the day at Pha Thi helping to bolster the site's defenses. Howie Freeman, complementing Jerry Daniels (Hog) and Frank Odum (Bag), ⁸ at Na Khang replaced Terry Quill on top of "The Rock." Agency personnel were generally assigned to Pha Thi to coordinate evacuation of American, Thai, and Meo if necessary. I had known Howie for a couple of years during his tours at Luang Prabang and Long Tieng. Along with "Woody" Spence there were other new faces present directing emplacement of defensive items, but only Howard and "Woody" RON on the mountain. Using a single sideband high frequency radio in the Agency hooch, collocated with the

⁷ Air America Aircraft Accident Review, 204B N84539F, 05/16/68.
 Joe Leeker From the Air America XOXO of 03/07/68.
 Wayne Knight Emails, 09/06/00, 07/19/11.
 Mike LaDue Email, 07/18/11.
 Author Phone Call to Charlie Weitz.
 Charlie Weitz Email, 08/04/11.

⁸ Frank Odum also used the call sign "Scrotum Control."

helicopter pad, they maintained contact with principals to the south through AB-1 and Long Tieng. In turn, information was relayed to COS office Vientiane.

From observation and conversation, I sensed a modicum of tension and a heightened frenzy among the folks on top of the "Rock." I was informed that emphasis was now being shifted from last minute defense measures to fortify the rim's perimeter, to cliff side shelves located on the southwest portion of the mountain. Because of the northern face's steepness, this opposite side was deemed the only possible section the enemy might attempt to scale. There was general confidence that special demolition experts and a diverse mix of troops could deal with any and all enemy attempts to penetrate the perimeter, largely fortified with barbed wire, mines, trip-wire, and pyrotechnics; now I discovered that napalm would supplement the mix of defensive weapons. Knowing the controversy and distaste voiced over using napalm in Laos, such a decision must have been cleared at ambassadorial or higher levels. ⁹

In addition to barbed wire, I was told to expect fixed wing delivery of napalm canisters to Site-36. After these items arrived by STOL aircraft, I prepared to shuttle them to Pha Thi for disposition to a lower rock shelf. Because of the degree of difficulty involved in delivering even a light load to small, unprepared, and windy landing zones, I was a little skeptical when selected rocky promontories below the rim were briefly described to me. After placement, at a propitious time, rigged with a "Willy Peter" (white phosphorous) explosive charge, the fire bomb could be activated if necessary. Used against humans,

⁹ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 192.
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 107.
Ted Shackley, *Spymaster*, 188.

burning napalm produced a nasty effect. If positioned and rigged properly, the sticky liquid petroleum mixture was envisioned to liberally splash and flow into depressions and crevices in the rocky area, completely obliterating an infiltrating foe.

To anyone who ever felt the effects of being burned, the concept sounded good. As part of my U.S Marine Corps training, I had carefully shot the fiery mixture from a green colored flamethrower nozzle during a field exercise while attending the Quantico Officer Basic School. The result was impressive, and I was fully aware of its potential. I also recalled field instructor Colonel "Moo-Moo" Moore's Korean War story about surviving a direct napalm attack while serving in a tank. When one realized that heat from such an intense inferno consumed all available oxygen, it had to be a miracle that he was not killed. Denying likely access avenues of approach to the enemy was not new for innovative American ingenuity. Another instructor described employing tactically positioned shaped-charges, surrounded and packed tight by rocks and any other hard object at the top of mountain ravines in Korea, and the success of this in thwarting enemy advances. Still, I was not overly keen about carrying the volatile fuel gel in my ship.

I was not the only helicopter crew working in the north. That same morning Mike Jarina and others arrived from Udorn to work Na Khang and Pha Thi areas. Mike was flying Hotel-44 with Baccay, a large Filipino, as his Flight Mechanic. After flying a complete day and conducting thirty-seven landings, because of the large number of aircraft and crews at Sam Tong, Mike and Baccay were directed to overnight at Long Tieng. ¹⁰

¹⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.

During the afternoon, a Caribou, or C-123, arrived at Site-36 with a shipment of full napalm canisters from the massive Udorn Peppergrinder ammunition depot. Carried as anti-personnel stores by Skyraider pilots, packed without stability fins, the exposed silver canisters were contained in open slatted wooden crates. Unwieldy and quite heavy, assisted by our internal rescue hoist, several troops were able to lift and maneuver the bomb into my ship. However, because of the size, the long horizontal package could only be loaded in the Bell cargo compartment by opening both doors, and sliding the rectangular item lengthwise through the section. Since the ends protruded from both sides of the helicopter and created considerable drag, cruise flight to Pha Thi was necessarily slow. After delivering one unit to the HLZ, I returned to Na Khang to deliver another load.

Over a handheld HT-2 radio, the Customer told me to deposit my second load on a previously selected rock ledge. He and Meo personnel would be located on the shelf to direct me, offload, and position the canister. I identified the correct location without much problem and conducted an abbreviated recon. Low bushes and shrubs dotted the area and, as the rock shelf was not large, I did not have much choice as to good landing spots, but landing there appeared feasible. However, I knew that during the final phase of the approach, below effective transitional lift and once committed to landing, with the sheer, vertical cliff in the background, I would be unable to maneuver and there was little or no opportunity for a go-around. Additionally, I was aware from past experience that during the best conditions, adverse winds might constitute a major challenge. Even cognizant of last known winds on top, air currents below the mountaintop would be largely unknown, and certainly different. It was a definite unknown. Additionally, my machine might be subject to

downwind, quartering wind conditions or severe downdrafts. Despite a relatively light payload and acceptable power, any one of these factors could pose a significant problem.

Despite uncertain odds, I recognized the critical nature of my mission to site defense, and wanted to contribute. Therefore, after several slow passes to assess the power available for the altitude, prevailing winds, and to gain further information regarding viability of the landing spot, I alerted "Rusty" of my intentions to land, and commenced a flat, power-on approach that had served me so well over the years at similar landing pads.

The approach proceeded well enough until just prior to touchdown. Low, at reduced ground speed, while adding power, the ship began rotating uncontrollably to the right. I was losing directional control of Papa Foxtrot India (PFI). Application of maximum left anti-torque pedal failed to counteract the turn. I strained against the left pedal stops: nothing. With all other options expended, after a few nanoseconds of extreme anxiety, resigned to my fate, I centered the cyclic, lowered the collective, and settled on the rock shelf ninety degrees to my original flight path. Fortunately, the area where I initially chose to land was relatively flat and devoid of low foliage. I was in a level attitude and except for a less than gentle landing and frayed nerves, no damage was incurred.

Breathing a sigh of relief, while the little people offloaded the bulky crate, I was provided sufficient time to reflect on my good fortune of landing my machine without crashing with the combustible material. I did not know what thoughts were going through "Rusty's" mind, perhaps he was too busy with the load, but I was content with the knowledge that we had arrived. Had the ship not contacted the ground at the proper time and place, we might have bounced, and continued to

pirouette off the cliff, to eventually crash and burn after plunging hundreds of feet below. ¹¹

After departure, I decided that I had endured quite enough fun that day and headed for Na Khang to refuel and RTB. As I was offloading passengers at Long Tieng, I discovered that my relief pilot, Ken Wood, had arrived earlier and was waiting patiently for my return. After briefing and turning the ship over to him, I managed to catch a late flight on Hotel-45 to Udorn.

That night, all crews at Site-20A, including Jarina, Baccay, Ken Wood, and "Rusty" Irons, remained on alert for a possible evacuation of Site-85 personnel. Should an actual launch be ordered, everyone was praying for bright moonlight to help illuminate the mountain tops.

Although late night contact around the site was reported, no major attack was forthcoming. Friendly air was employed to discourage further penetrations.

The same day a final appraisal of security at Site-85 before "the balloon went up," was issued:

"...The enemy has methodically continued to prepare the battlefield for the attack on Site-85...As of 9 March the enemy has a total estimated force equivalent to seven battalions that could be brought to bear in a ground attack on Site-85...Pressure on the enemy by the ground force defending Site-85 has been heavy, but this pressure has in no way deterred the enemy from routing into motion its final preparations for its assault on Site-85. Patrols and ADC units have had an increased number of clashes in early March. The enemy is now in position and sufficient strength to launch his attack at any time. The enemy is delaying his launching his final assault until he has

¹¹ Years later at the CIA sponsored Site-85 SAR symposium at the University of Texas (UDT) Richardson Texas, when queried, Rusty Irons did not recall our hairy episode landing the napalm.

sufficient ammo stores on hand to provision and to keep up a steady pressure after his attacks. Thus, in view of current advances, Site-85 is now vulnerable to major artillery and mortar barrage, followed up by ground assault and possible air attack at any time.

The integrity of Site-85 is in grave jeopardy and it can now be no longer considered that friendly force dispositions are such to protect the site because they are outnumbered and outgunned. These forces have served the function of detecting the buildup, providing the intelligence. And mounting ground harassment operations which facilitated air operations designed to delay, for as long as possible, the final assault on Site-85. The regulars on top of Site-85 are ready to hold Site-85 as a terrain feature. They can hold Site-85 given tactical air support long after the TACAN and other navigation aids have been put out of commission..."

When Mike Jarina returned to upper Military Region Two on the tenth, fleeing local villagers were reporting large movements of enemy troops both south and west of the mountain. Units were also discovered laying field phone communications wire within a few kilometers of "The Rock." Weather continued improving and the 2,000-foot overcast enveloping most of the area allowed sporadic resumption of bomb and CBU air strikes. Although planned, no evacuation of the mountain was yet ordered.

While conducting thirty-two landings, Mike flew ten hours and forty minutes servicing sites in the area. At Na Khang, General Vang Pao was finalizing plans to commence troop movements west and southwest of Site-85, and to recapture or reinforce Meo villages. More than likely, after consultations with AID officials, and to generate some normalcy to the deteriorating situation, he and AID representatives were also concentrating on the preparation of temporary fallback sites to

accommodate fleeing refugees, many who were relatives or friends of his soldiers. Helping to implement this tactical and humanitarian move, Mike shuttled officers and people from Site-36 to Houei Hin Sa (LS-215), located thirty miles north of Na Khang and twenty-five miles west of Site-85; Houei Tong Ko (LS-184), thirty miles northwest of Site-36 and thirty miles southeast of Pha Thi; and Houei Thong (LS196), forty-two miles northwest of Site-36 and forty-five miles east southeast of LS-85.

USAID representative, Ernie Kuhn was somewhat pleased that Howard Freeman had been assigned to monitor Pha Thi. When Kuhn first arrived in Laos, he was assigned to work in Phong Saly and northern Luang Prabang Provinces. Although their job descriptions differed, the nature of the work and similar goals dictated that Howie and Ernie's paths often crossed in Military Region One and they cooperated and genuinely liked each other. Consequently, they continued this relationship during the Pha Thi operation, swapping information relating to the current situation. The day before their area intelligence census, Howie predicted another forty-eight hours before the enemy launched an attack on the mountain.

On Saturday morning, Ernie, who had been steadily working the region for the past week and Howie, visited many local area sites and airstrips either by helicopter or Helio Courier. Their purpose was to show the flag, gather current intelligence from civilian or military leaders, and judge the people's reaction to unfolding events. They discovered that the entire area within miles around Pha Thi was being probed. To a man, villagers were very nervous. While circling, some sites or landing zones recently under attack displayed no signal. On approach to another site, hostilities ensued, causing the PIC to abort the landing.

About 1500 hours, Howie, who had accompanied Ernie on only a portion of the trips, joined Ernie at Site-85 helipad on Pha Thi's east side for another trip.

Following additional visits, when the AID and Agency men returned to Site-85, Howie asked Ernie if he wanted to spend the night with him on Pha Thi. An ascent to the top was strenuous, accomplished by climbing bamboo ladders and a walk to the Agency hooch.

Ernie politely refused the offer because he had pre-arranged a meeting that night at Site-111 with civilian leaders who were anxious to learn what course of action to assume should Pha Thi come under attack.

Consequently, Howie returned to his command bunker on Pha Thi's heights, while the helicopter pilot returned Ernie to Houei Kha Moung (LS-111) for the evening.

Toward the end of the day, Jarina returned to RON at Long Tieng to stand alert along with Wood and Phil Goddard, who had recently arrived from Udorn. Other helicopter crews, who had been moving refugees, continued to RON at Sam Thong, where anticipation of a possible night evacuation of Pha Thi was also prevalent. ¹²

¹² Mike Jarina Interviews.
Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 30.
Intelligence Operations Cable, 03/09/68.
Ernest Kuhn Letter to Author, 06/27/96.
Ernest Kuhn Interview with Arthur Dommen, 03/25/95.

THE BLOODY END ¹³

The enemy attack on the mountain top from the east commenced just before 1800 hours on 10 March. Heavy volleys of howitzer, mortar, and rocket barrages continued impacting Pha Thi from the new road across the valley for more than an hour until slowing and then ceasing. Miraculously, no friendly casualties resulted, but the site's 105mm howitzers were damaged.

Five miles to the north, from their vantage point on the thatched porch at Houei Kha Moun, Ernie Kuhn and the village leaders witnessed the sound and light show of battle. From across the Nam Et (Het) Valley they observed muzzle flashes from friendly positions and heard the impact of exploding ordnance on top of Pha Thi and lower levels. From the description of hundreds of explosions, it could have been the duplicate of a Marine Corps school's nighttime "mad moment" demonstration I was subjected to in the Quantico boondocks.

Confusion reigned. First attempts to communicate with the site failed. Lao Thai could not raise his brother Gia Tou at

¹³ There has been an extraordinary amount of information recorded over the years, perhaps more than any other subject on Laos, in books, pamphlets, and the Internet, regarding the somewhat confusing demise of Phu Pha Thi as a forward government site, and the deaths of several Americans at the navigational facility. Tim Castle authored an entire book on the subject. U.S. Air Force historians issued a *CHECO* report. Ken Conboy devoted nine pages to the subject in *Shadow War*. Others have published short works and there is an abundant assortment of accounts that one can obtain from the Internet.

Rather than completely rehash the event, the Author will attempt to reconstruct not only friendly accounts, but also highlights of the exceptional feat Vietnamese special operating teams accomplished moving to and scaling the mountain without being detected. According to the account, they inconceivably managed to do this not once, but twice. This is no attempt to venerate their accomplishment, but merely to indicate the meticulous planning, preparation, dedication, devotion to duty, and challenging work involved in the effort, one that seemed to typify most Vietnamese battles.

Site-85. When Ernie began calling in the blind on his HT-2, a youthful Air Force forward air guide (FAG) assigned to the mountain gratefully answered, indicating he was by himself, unable to contact anyone. Using the sideband radio, Ernie reached Doctor Weldon in Vientiane and explained the current situation. Jiggs, in turn, began phoning the embassy, the CIA office, and ARMA and AIRA offices requesting air assistance. At the time, because no one from Pha Thi had called to verify the report, despite the fact that an eyewitness was reporting in real time, no one believed the site was actually under attack.

Eventually, message traffic from the two Case Officers in their command post bunker, and Air Force radio operators on Pha Thi apprised Long Tieng and the Vientiane Embassy of the unfolding situation. Interested parties were informed and the Udorn Air Force rescue center was alerted for a possible evacuation attempt. Flash messages were directed as far away as Washington and the President's office.

Flare ships, propeller and jet strike aircraft were ordered launched by Seventh Air Force, but except for the ineffectual efforts of one normally scheduled B-26 Nimrod pilot, failed to arrive at the scene for an hour and a half. With the arrival of air and initial area illumination, enemy firing ceased. Soon afterward, since navigation and radar equipment were undamaged, Air Force technicians returned from their bunkers to the MSQ-81 and TACAN trailers and commenced directing strike missions on suspected and previously plotted enemy targets.

About 2100 hours, the reverberation of grenades, automatic and machine gun fire was loudly rattling from Site-85's slopes across the valley to Site-111. Captain Gia Tou, with whom Lao Thai had by then established communications, confirmed that enemy units were rapidly closing on the Meo village and defense positions located on the southeast side above and in defilade

from the lower strip. Fighting for their very existence and forming the final defense line blocking the trail up the mountain, the Meo courageously foiled the initial probe and held the site. At that time Gia Tou indicated that he was unable to establish communications with anyone on the mountaintop.

During the lull at Pha Thi, Ernie and the village elders were concerned that Houei Kha Moun would be attacked next. Therefore, Lao Thai instructed ADC troops under his control to mount patrols, fan out, and search the immediate area. When no contact was reported, Ernie and the villagers retired at 2300 hours. However, as a safety measure, Kuhn slept in his clothes and left the radios on.

At upper echelons to the south, with only muddled and fragmentary information for basing a decision, total evacuation of American military personnel seemed out of the question and was considered only a last resort. Because of the enormous problems and hazards involved in any nighttime rescue attempt, such an operation was deemed too hazardous. Therefore, while carefully monitoring the unfolding situation, Ambassador Sullivan ordered a partial withdrawal of about half the Air Force technicians early the following morning. Two Super Jolly Green helicopter crews were programmed to launch from Udorn; the Air America Bells at Long Tieng and various H-34 crews at Sam

Tong would be employed as backup if required. ¹⁴ ¹⁵

THE RAID

As part of the overall military strategy in upper Military Region Two, Vietnamese leaders, based in the Northwest Military Region of Son La Province, planned to capture Phu Pha Thi and deny General Vang Pao and his (bandit) troops the base and support and intelligence benefits of villagers living in surrounding areas. Earlier emplacement of the TACAN station and presence of Americans as targets reinforced and served as a catalyst for this goal.

Against this end, an ambitious goal to raid the site was conceived and methodically planned by members of the North Vietnamese Army 305 Dac Cong Command. A raiding party of thirty-three mixed ethnic groups--Meo, Tai, Nung, Tay, and Vietnamese men--were selected for advanced sapper and mountain training. ¹⁶

¹⁴ A point in fact. From the beginning of military SAR work in Laos, during comparable hairy situations, Air America crews, often working at or close to the scene, invariably were first to arrive and assume primary SAR duties. In this case, since Air Force helicopters and crews were not pre-positioned at Long Tieng, the Author harbors deep misgivings as to the Seventh Air Force commander's true intent as to the nature of the proposed evacuation. In retrospect, it smacked of, but was never confirmed, what we always suspected pertaining to the USAF mind set: **let those overpaid Air America civilian bastards take the risks.**

¹⁵ Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 31-33.
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 111-112, 115-117, 119.
Ernest Kuhn Letter, 06/27/96.
Kuhn-Dommen Interview, 03/25/95, 49-51.

¹⁶ Author's Note: Diametrically opposed and in contrast to the racially biased lowland Lao philosophy, the North Vietnamese government wisely created a northwest tribal autonomous zone along the borders. Individuals representing all the various tribal groups and diverse cultures were then drawn from clans on both sides of the porous border and incorporated into the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Some derived from warrior stock, like Van Pao's guerrillas, tribals made excellent soldiers

Prior to June 1967, during nine months of exhaustive training, the special unit was schooled and practiced attacking mountains, ascending rock cliffs, operating clandestinely in forests, and enduring vigorous hardships.

At some time during the training phase, the original team was reinforced with an experienced nine-man heavily armed sapper squad.

The team was briefed on its mission and purpose early in December 1967: to destroy the TACAN equipment on top of Pha Thi.¹⁷

By the third week of December, a reconnaissance team was dispatched toward the Site-85 area to assess terrain, determine a concealed route of advance toward the target, confirm the location of the enemy command post, and survey the defensive system employed around the mountain. On the basis of the report, attacks went forward to bomb and strafe the TACAN facility.

Following the failed AN-2 attack to silence the navigation facility, on 22 January, a six-man team scaled the mountain. Separating into two sections, they conducted recons of the TACAN, communications, and HLZ sites. The second unit gathered information on the Thai living and work areas, the 12.7mm gun positions, the weather station, and the site's overall defense system.

After obtaining the most pertinent intelligence available at the time, accelerated planning went forward for the raid. The sapper team was divided into two assault elements with contingency plans to cope with unknown factors. In turn, for additional flexibility, each element was subdivided into small

¹⁷ It is interesting to note in the material that no mention of the radar bombing guidance facility was ever made by enemy sources.

cells with specific tasks to perform. The first assault element cells were tasked to attack the TACAN and communications sites, and the HLZ. The smaller second element was assigned to eliminate Meo units to the southwest and seize the high ground to support the operation.

If preparations were meticulously conducted like other Vietnamese battle plans, a blueprint of the target area was displayed in the proverbial sandbox, followed by painstakingly designed mock-ups and exhaustive field exercises.

During the final days of February, the highly trained group was thoroughly briefed and anxious to march. They proceeded south into Laos along Route-623 to the village of Moung Cau, twenty miles northwest of Pha Thi. Since Moung Son (L-59) and much of the lowland region had been recently liberated in January, movement was conducted without detection.

Soon afterward, the unit departed the forward base under cover of darkness. Although footpaths and trails led toward the objective, terrain was still harsh, with high mountains to cross and deep streams to ford. Closer to the mountain, lower areas presented the tough, sharp elephant grass with which to contend. Also, open slash and burn areas provided possible observation and discovery of the group by villagers and farmers. Therefore, stealthy movement was necessarily slow, but over a period of six days and nights, the men, highly trained to employ patience and perseverance, moved into the eastern assembly point.

Arriving a little more than a half mile from the mountain near formidable defensive positions at Ban Tham Nam and Houei Hok (LS-198), the team encountered a refugee area containing domestic animals, Meo troops, and later a minefield. These obstacles temporarily delayed them, but afforded an excellent opportunity to rest and send recon patrols forward to confirm that they were indeed headed in the right direction.

By 1000 hours on the morning of 10 March, the team had maneuvered past the Meo troops and was positioned only fifty meters from the mountain's western base.

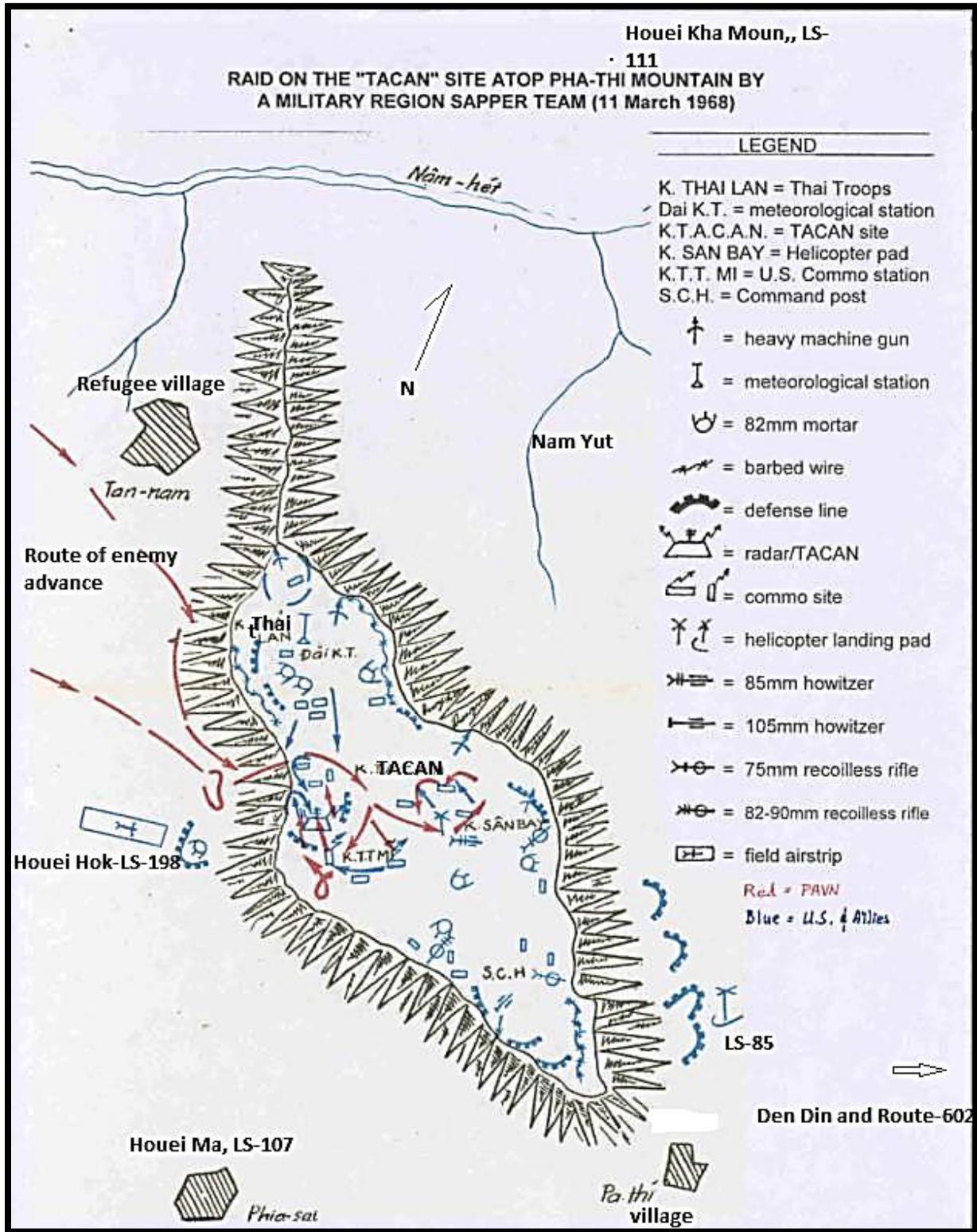
Eight hours later, under the cover of heavy artillery barrages from Route-602 and other locations, a team was dispatched to scale the mountain to identify and dismantle mines, grenades, other explosive devices, and to ascertain the correct route of infiltration up the cliffs. This was accomplished. Within two and a half hours the remainder of the raiders began the difficult climb.

At 2130 hours, with intermittent incoming mortar and artillery fire impacting the surrounding area, except for the second attack element which became disoriented in the darkness and was delayed, the hardy men of element one reached the summit. Employing cover and concealment in one of the numerous forests dotting the summit, they waited patiently, resting and listening for human sounds and waiting for the moment of opportunity.

At 0100, by moving slowly and stealthily, cells of assault unit one, maneuvering clockwise, edged closer to their assigned targets. Still lodged on the cliff, members of the second team were close to the mountain top's rim, but were unable to negotiate the last hundred feet.

By 0300 hours, cells of the primary TACAN assault team had encircled and were in close proximity to their objective. Additionally, the last USAF covering plane that included A-26s and F-4s, had departed the area.

Just before 0400 hours, a sapper unit charging forward to attack the communication site encountered a concealed guard post. The ensuing action triggered noise, and marked the beginning of the fight--the end of the Air Force navigation



Detailed Vietnamese military map-oriented northwest of Pha Thi defenses prior to 11 March.

facility, government control and influence in upper Military Region Two.

After the element of surprise was breached, using B-40 launchers, grenades, and automatic small arms fire to advantage, within a relatively short period, the raiders methodically killed and maimed personnel, or destroyed what they could in and around the primary target at the upper navigation facility. As during any heated battle where uncontrolled bullets and mortar rounds lack vision, who actually knew how many casualties were inflicted, and by whom, during that early morning fracas?

Fierce fighting continued until dawn, as friendly counterattacks were conducted to reclaim lost ground. Aircraft returned early and began indiscriminately strafing the area, but when friendlies were hit, strikes were called off by the airborne Customer.

Apparently, word of the battle at Pha Thi failed to filter down to Long Tieng, or was possibly withheld pending verification by the station COB, for at least one Bell crew departed early for Na Khang without knowledge of what was occurring at Site-85.

En route north, the eerie ping of a survival radio beeper could be heard over UHF guard frequency. Employing the UHF direction finder, Captain Ken Wood determined that the signal emanated from the vicinity of Site-85. Therefore, he continued in that direction and discovered through communications with the Customer and visual recon that the foggy mountaintop was a virtual beehive of activity, with Skyraider pilots attempting to aid friendly forces and destroy a captured 12.7mm weapon. Two Jolly Green rescue crews orbited somewhere in the distance pending successful suppression of enemy fire.

Trolling for survivors, between 0730 and 0800 hours, Wood and Irons spotted a few remaining Americans on a small ledge

below the navigation facility. As a Raven O-1 FAC directed A-1 strikes on top, Wood arrived at a steady hover, which in the early morning calm air was not excessively challenging.

Several USAF "technicians" were extracted by Irons using the slow reeling internal Breeze-Eastern rescue hoist and efficient three-pronged jungle penetrator.¹⁸ Following multiple cycles, with four Air Force personnel aboard, Wood moved away from the cliff. While hovering, despite being subjected to sporadic small arms fire, PFI and the crew remained unscathed. However, as soon as the ship unmasked and became exposed clearing the ledge, it was almost immediately hit. One man was wounded and later expired. Unsure about the battle damage inflicted, the thirty-minute flight to Na Khang was quite stressful, but proved uneventful.

Around 0800 hours, after a Skyraider pilot conducted a low pass over the HLZ and determined that portion "safe," the first HH-53 Jolly Green pilot arrived, was cleared in, and landed. Reputedly, the Thai contingent was the first fighting unit evacuated. Their departure to Site-111 was not sanctioned, and later unsubstantiated reports stated they had prematurely withdrawn from their defensive fighting positions, allowing enemy sappers free access to the mountain.

Ernie Kuhn was up and about early at Site-111. He was anxious to fly down to Na Khang to confer with Vang Pao as to the disposition of the civilians at his site and obtain more information regarding the situation at Pha Thi. Civilian flown planes did not arrive in his area until close to 0900 hours. Prior to their arrival, after the Thai were deposited on the

¹⁸ We received the removable hoists and jungle penetrators toward the end of 1967, soon after Wayne Knight and my interesting SAR of two "Wild Weasel" pilots with cargo straps and ropes at the southern base of Pha Thi. Hoist cycles were designed to be necessarily slow to prevent excessive overheating and seizure of the rescue device motor.

strip, curious as to their presence, Kuhn walked down the hill to converse with some of the men. He observed no injuries and all the troops appeared to have all their equipment intact. When the Caribou arrived to ferry them to Thailand, they marched into the plane in good order.

With a full-scale evacuation underway, panic ensued. Everyone wanted to get out. Howard Freeman, who had been wounded in the leg earlier while leading a Meo recon to the TSQ site looking for Americans, was the last man to board an outbound helicopter. Despite a serious lack of discipline, almost three dozen soldiers and wounded were transported to Site-36.

Next, Phil Goddard landed a Bell on the upper landing area, where he extracted an Agency Case Officer, Air Force technician, Thai and Meo officers.

Not long after Goddard departed for Site-36, a second Jolly pilot touched down, loaded dozens of tiny Meo guerrillas, and departed southeast.

Goddard returned to the site and began looking for an American reputed to still be alive in the vicinity of the navigation facility. A hoist recovery was conducted and the man became Phil's latest "pluckee."¹⁹

Sketchy information relating to action at Pha Thi slowly filtered into the Vientiane Embassy radio room, and late morning communications were relayed to Washington stating:

"As Dept has probably learned from military sources, enemy has effectively eliminated air navigation facilities at Site 85. Action began yesterday evening with artillery and mortar shelling. Decision to destroy facilities by self-destruction was

¹⁹ "Pluckee" was a humorous term Phil coined in the Club Rendezvous bar while talking to Curt Briggs following Nunez and my rescue of the Air Force Captain in June 1965. See the Na San-Son La episode recorded in Author's Book 6.

taken in the small hours of morning. Helicopter evacuation was arranged for first light this morning.

Evacuation plans have been seriously disrupted by enemy activity and several personnel have apparently been dispersed from pre-planned evacuation sites...Three are dead on the site, one died in the helicopter en route and three are at Udorn. [Because the men were suffering considerable shock, valid and reliable information regarding additional survivors was not forthcoming.]

In addition to these personnel, two CAS and one AIRA forward air controller have been withdrawn from their evacuation sites. Other local personnel (wounded, etc.) have also been evacuated.

Fighting and shelling continues, as well as helicopter and ground evacuation efforts. Because of confused situation at site and withdrawal our CAS personnel (one of whom was wounded) it will doubtless be some time before we have clear picture or further significant reports.

We will, of course, continue reports as information come in. At first glance, however, it appears we may have pushed our luck **one day too long** in attempting to keep this facility in operation.

Sullivan"

Somewhat late to the continuing evacuation process, a Detachment 1, 40th ARRS history narrative for 11 March 1968 stated:

"Crown-2 [the C-130 SAR control ship relieving Crown-1] had become airborne from Tuy Hoa, Republic of Vietnam (RVN) on scheduled launch time [0340Z or 1040 hours local Laos time. For purposes of this account local time will be used]. Flew standard route to Channel 89 [Udorn TACAN]. When within range of VHF radio transmission, Crown-2 was briefed by Crown-1 that Lima

Site-85 was overrun by enemy forces early that morning and that a major evacuation was underway, utilizing the Jolly Greens.

Crown-2 assumed control of the mission at 1215 hours. Sandy-3 was on scene commander...Crown-2 proceeded to Channel-79 [TACAN unit installed on Skyline Drive] to orbit for maximum radio reception.

On scene overhead at Lima Site-85 was Sandy three and four [call sign for A-1E SAR support A/C] and also Raven-41...Raven-41 advised he had at least 20 people on the side of the mountain at the 5,500-foot level. Jolly Green 15 and 37 were launched from LS-36 and proceeded to that point. After Raven-41 directed Jolly Green-15 to the scene, it was discovered that here was no place for the Jolly Green to land, so it was decided to lower the hoist [cable] to pick up as many people as possible...Jolly Green-15 managed to pick up 10 the first time and he returned to LS-36 to drop them off. Jolly Green-37 duplicated Jolly Green-15's effort and took his 10 to LS-107 where he discharged them and loaded up with wounded friendlies and brought them to LS-36. Both [pilots] report as they pick up people, more people keep coming out of the woods. Estimate runs as much as 40 now waiting to be removed.

At 1330 hours Jolly Green 70 and 72 arrive in the area and are directed to the scene by Raven-41 and Sandy-3. Jolly Green-72 dumps fuel and advises he will be able to handle only three to four people due to the altitude of hover. Jolly Green-72 picks up two and PJ [a skilled crewmember called a parachute jumper] reports there are at least 30 more people down there. So far no round eyes are reported. All have been Oriental. Jolly Green goes back in and tries for more. Jolly Green-72 has four aboard and [heads for] LS-36.

Jolly Green-15 is airborne from LS-36 [at] 1335 hours. [ETA] 15 minutes.

Jolly Green-70 is directed to another area by Raven-41. Jolly Green arrives on scene and picks up two people when he loses a rotor tachometer and has to return to LS-36. Jolly Green-70 is advised to drop off at LS-107 and pickup wounded on his way to LS-36.

Jolly Green-72 is advised to drop his people at LS-36 and return to the area for more pickups. At this time Jolly Green advises he will need gas and Crown decides to proceed north to refuel Jolly Green-72...Jolly Green-72 lands at LS-36...and after dropping off passengers takes off for LS-85. Crown hooks up with Jolly Green-72...

Crown advises Jolly Green-15, 37, and 72 in order to expedite lifting people to a safe area, Crown will conduct refueling operations in the area around LS-85. This way, the pickups can be made and passengers dropped off at LS-111 and LS-107 without having to go all the way to LS-36.

After refueling Jolly Green-72 Crown rendezvous with Jolly Green-15 and offloaded fuel.

At 1442 hours Jolly Green-37 RTB to LS-36 because of chip light on transmission box.

Jolly Green estimated LS-36 at 1500 hours.

Sandy three and four RTB and Raven-41 is replaced by Raven-44. Raven-41 advises he will land and refuel and return to the area.

At 1446 hours Jolly Green-15 had to cut his hoist [cable] due to people pulling on the hoist [cable] and almost stalling the aircraft. Nobody injured. Jolly Green-15 then decided to try and pick up [people] without the hoist by hovering very close to the ground and having them crawl in through the rear. this was successful.

1536 hours Jolly Green-67 arrives at LS-36.

...Jolly Green-72 lands at LS-107 and drops off more passengers. Reports that there are six soldiers (Thai) who need a ride to LS-36. Compress [the Air Rescue Coordinating Center at Udorn] is advised of this and it is approved.

1544 hours Jolly Green-15 and Raven-41 advised that there are no more people to be picked up. Compress is advised of and Compress advised the forces to make another check of the west crest on top of the slope. Raven-41 inspected the area and advised no more people to be seen.

1617 hours Jolly Greens and Sandys are clear to RTB. [Three] Jolly Greens are refueled again by Crown from LS-85 to south station.

Crown was RTB at 1754 hours to return to Channel-83.

Compress advised that 102 people were saved that day by rescue forces." ²⁰

While Meo forces departed the mountain and faded into the jungle, helicopter rescue and evacuation efforts continued. Flights continued until enemy ground fire and darkness was deemed too hazardous for further helicopter operations.

By late afternoon, only a handful of Air Force personnel had been rescued. Through debriefings and photo and visual reconnaissance of the mountain, the remainder were presumed dead or captured. Therefore, military leaders' attention turned to complete destruction of the sensitive equipment and code books contained in the steel navigation facilities.

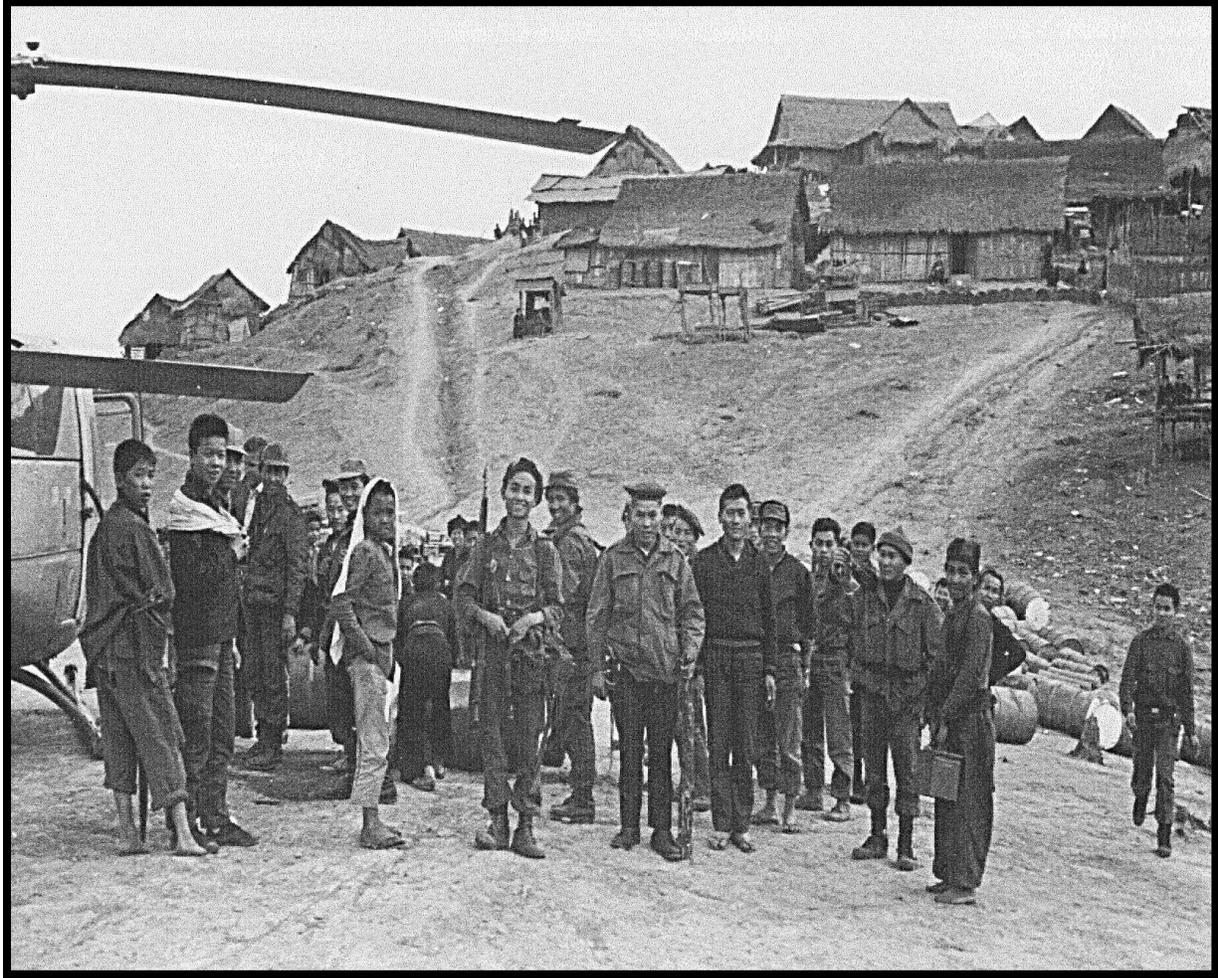
²⁰ Stanley J. Dubriske, Detachment One, 40th ARRS Rescue Crew Commander's account of the late morning emergency evacuation of personnel from LS-85 by Jolly Green 15 and 37. Detachment One, 37 ARRS also evacuated sixty-seven personnel. The account is added to the narrative to illustrate the complexities and assets involved in U.S. military rescues. This was in contrast to Air America's participation that required only a machine and a willing crew.

It was obvious that the enemy offensive was now in full swing and AID representative Ernie Kuhn, who had been closely monitoring the situation, was concerned about the disposition of his village civilians at Site-111. Therefore, in the morning, Ernie was transported south in a Porter from Houei Kha Mung to Na Khang, where he hoped to receive guidance how to proceed in his area. There he discovered Vang Pao livid after learning of Pha Thi's evacuation. Enmeshed in an embarrassing face situation, he firmly believed the site could still be held against any enemy onslaught. Consequently, the general was marshalling assets to have his troops delivered to Site-36 for the purpose of reinforcing Pha Thi. But when assured that neither the Agency nor the Air Force was interested in supporting further operations at Pha Thi, Vang Pao cancelled the troop movement. ²¹

Calming somewhat, by 1100 hours, an exasperated Vang Pao told Ernie that he wanted to begin removing all the civilians to safer areas. Armed with this mandate, Ernie returned to his people, while making blanket radio calls for all the helicopters available to converge on Houei Kha Moun. Within an hour, nine helicopters were en route. When they arrived, he arranged an airlift of civilian refugees sixteen miles southwest to Houei Hin Sa (LS-215) that continued into late afternoon.

Planning to coordinate and continue further movement early the next day, he elected to RON at Houei Kha Moun and resume evacuation operations. However, Lao Thai, the Meo District Officer and brother of Captain Gia Tou, strongly recommended that he not remain overnight at Site-111. Cited was the Don Sjostrom episode. All recalled the excellent work Don had

²¹ Over the years I observed that when angered, Vang Pao's face became beet red against his smooth, unblemished olive skin.



"Our little guys." Houei Kha Ma defenders of all ages posing for the Author. Wearing a side arm, military coat and distinctive beret, Meo District Officer Lao Thai, brother of Captain Gia Tou, stands in the center of the group.

Author Collection.

performed in the area, and that after he was killed during the January 1967 attack on Na Khang, the AID program had suffered. To spare everyone a repeat of the Sjostrom incident if Site-111 was attacked, it was better if Ernie RON at Site-215. Then, if the site was attacked, he would be in a far better position to help.

Kuhn, appreciative and fully understanding of Gia Tou's logic, spent the night at Site-215.

The enemy attack enveloped the entire area. During the evening Phou Tia (LS-185), four miles north, was shelled, then attacked, and lost. Those at Hin Sa were well aware that their site would be next.

Before the attack on Pha Thi commenced, refugees were already on the move in the region, scurrying to safer areas to the west and pouring into Sam Tong. Therefore, numerous H-34 crews were tasked to either retrieve or reposition them to established or newly developing sites.

On 11 March Mike Jarina was assigned to work out of Sam Tong on AID refugee relief missions. After clearing Skyline Ridge, and landing at Site-20, he began a long seventeen landing day and some night time shuttling people to Than Heup. Site-238 was located twenty-one miles north of Site-20 on the south side of the Nam Ngum between the old sites of San Luang (LS-41) and Houei Ki Nin (LS-38).

Next, he flew to UH1477, twenty-one miles north-northeast of Phu Cum (LS-50) to retrieve people dislocated by recent enemy pressures clearing the Moung Son area. These troops and refugees were moved to the lowland site of Ban Phang (LS-239), close to the landing zone where John Tarn and Hope received severe battle damage in February, and where danger and enemy pressure still persisted. Because of the activity, Site-239 was abandoned on

the twelfth and the following day Khang Kho came under fire to the west.

Mike was dispatched twenty-six miles south to Ban Pou That in the hills some ten miles southeast of the Moung Cha (LS-113) Valley, an area which supported a large refugee presence. At Phu That, located on the border of Xieng Khouang and Borikhane Provinces, Hotel-44 was hit and received minor damage from either recoilless rifle or mortar fire. Undeterred by the excitement, Mike finished the day shuttling people to foothills at TF6272 west of the Nam Ngum and Phou Sot.

Since crews were rotated or returned ships to Udorn, he was able to spend a night in the Sam Tong hostel.

RESETTLING

As soon as favorable weather allowed on the twelfth, Ernie returned to Houei Kha Moun late in the morning, where the runway was jammed with people, and the continuation of the previous day's evacuation was already underway. Numerous helicopters and Porters assigned to the refugee movement circled, waiting to land and assist in the airlift. Pointing to north and west ridgelines, Lao Thai indicated enemy forces were moving toward the site. The window of opportunity was narrowing and it was incumbent that as many people be evacuated as fast as possible.

After coordinating civilian loading and delegating further responsibility to local officers, Kuhn walked up the hilly earthworks to his house, which contained the generator and single side band radio. While attempting to contact Sam Tong with the latest information regarding the evacuation's progress, after being ambushed below the southeast end of the runway, several wounded Meo soldiers were carried to the dispensary for patching and evacuation to Na Khang or the Sam Tong hospital. To preclude disaster, Kuhn radioed in the blind over his hand-held

HT-2 radio for all aircraft to abort further landings and immediately return to Site-36 until further notice, and for anyone still on the ground to depart immediately. While circling, one of the pilots spotted four men and two 60mm mortar tubes 400 meters from the strip. Captain Lloyd Watkins, circling high overhead in his Porter, believed he could be of some help and refused to leave.

With enemy activity so close to the site, a decision was made to have the remaining thousands of villagers form up and walk west to safety. While this process was underway, recoilless rifle fire could be heard to the southeast from the direction of the village. Then a mortar round hit the village. At that time Ernie activated a thermite grenade and placed it on top of the radios.

Lloyd Watkins had observed the mortar splash and called to say he was going to land. Ernie advised him not to, but, disregarding personal safety, Lloyd began a vertical dive toward the strip. During the approach another mortar round impacted the village. Lloyd landed and picked up Ernie, Lao Thai, members of a PARU team, and other civilian and military leaders.

After departing, they circled for an hour observing the enemy at their deadly work. Accurate mortar fire began splashing on the defenses. The third round was a direct hit on Ernie's house. With discernible targets in sight--mortar tubes and crews off the runway and a couple of platoons of enemy emerging from the woods--Watkins attempted in vain to obtain air support, but nothing was available. After some time, he did manage to contact two Sandy pilots, but they were engaged in primary CAP duty for potential SARs and were unable to divert for a strike.

Disinterest in the area was evident. Inexplicitly, less than twenty-four hours after Pha Thi had been abandoned, not one USAF plane was observed in the vicinity. ²²

Along with numerous other aircraft, until enemy action precluded further landings at the Site-111 strip, Mike Jarina participated in Kuhn and Lao Thai's Houei Kha Moun evacuation, shuttling southwest to the 600-foot sod strip at Houei Hin Sa (LS-215). He flew similar refugee relief missions for the next four days. Other fixed wing crews shuttled people to other fallback strips or to Na Khang, where larger planes transferred them south to Sam Tong for rest and resettlement in the many refugee villages that had developed over the years on the complex's southern, eastern, and western flanks.

When Site-111 was shut down as unsafe for landings, eight to nine thousand people streamed off the mountain, walking west toward alternate sites where evacuations continued. Overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of individuals, the enemy did not pursue the refugees, but allowed the exodus.

Mike made forty-one landings on Tuesday and did not recover at Site-20 until well after dark.

That same day Ambassador Sullivan informed his bosses in Washington:

...“there would be a search and rescue operation for personnel still unaccounted for, the remaining structures at Site-85 would be destroyed by napalm bombs [an unusual weapon for Laos] dropped from U.S. aircraft, no publicity would be given to the battle...”

²² Later that afternoon a few strike aircraft did manage to attack Pha Thi's summit, but failed to destroy the radar vans and critical equipment.

With a large number of enemy combat troops impinging on Vang Pao's forces, and employing heavy weaponry that could not be duplicated, a decision was made at highest levels to evacuate government troops, their dependents, and other refugees to safer areas. They then would wait for the onset of the rainy season to mount fresh offensives against the generally road bound enemy.

Major evacuations had occurred in past years, but nothing approaching this scope. Consequently, a large number of aircraft were dedicated to effect the movement and the push was on, "balls to the wall" in the vernacular of the time, to move villagers away from the enemy advance. Moving refugees to safer areas was nothing new for RLG or dedicated USAID personnel. Over the years thousands of tribals had been resettled and provided food, rice, vegetable seeds, bolts of cloth, tools, educational and medical services, and other items until they were able to sustain themselves.

During these challenging times, Air America Company rules and regulations as to flight and duty time were ignored, and pilots were allowed carte blanche to fly as many hours as they were able to accomplish the job. Therefore, with weather patterns improving throughout the region, rising early the following morning, Mike and other crews proceeded north to continue evacuations. Attesting to the amount of work accomplished, Mike flew almost eleven and a half hours on the thirteenth and nearly eleven hours on Thursday.

Led by Ernie Kuhn, AID and Agency personnel, with indigenous interpreters onboard, circled in Porters to pinpoint refugee clusters. As in many similar situations soldiers

accompanied the people and contact was made with them by either visual means or HT-2 radio contact. ²³

Since enemy units were actively concentrating on consolidating gains at and around the primary objective at Pha Thi, there was no recorded instance of a helicopter sustaining battle damage during the early refugee operation.

Located close to Houei Kha Moun and still deemed relatively safe, Houei Hin Sa was the first site chosen as a temporary refugee depository position. As Site-215 rapidly filled to overflowing, Houei Tong Kho (LS-184), eighteen miles farther southwest, became the new relocation spot. It afforded an upslope strip 400 feet longer than the one at Site-215.

Aware that the enemy was on the move in his direction, after some deliberation and airborne reconnaissance, with Site-184 becoming saturated, Kuhn selected yet another refugee base on a spur of Phu Loi (UH1343). Eight miles further southwest, at 7,425 feet, Phu Loi offered one the loftiest mountain sites in northern Laos. It quickly became known as Point Alpha after a drop signal used to identify the drop zone for cargo resupply planes. Mike participated in refugee delivery during the site's infancy. Initially, refugees were airlifted there to establish the site, but most walked up a solitary trail to Point Alpha.

Before long, Ernie had cargo drop parachutes fashioned into tents, and remained overnight at Phu Loi along with Captain Gia Tou and his brother Lao Thai.

Relocations continued. The H-34 pilots worked into and off unprepared landing pads, some considered extremely hazardous. During one trip to a narrow trail, Jarina conducted one of the heaviest takeoffs of his career. Despite Kuhn's admonition to

²³ Desperate people on the ground desiring to be rescued will always make their presence known.



A few of the thousands of refugees streaming westward over hill trails and footpaths of Houa Phan Province after the March 1968 fall of Phu Pha Thi, Houei Kha Moun, and other sites. Many people were retrieved by Air America helicopters and moved to safety at sites south and west.

Jarina Collection.

Meo officers to maintain order during loading, frightened refugees invariably crowded onboard Hotel-44. Although Baccay was a large man in relation to the diminutive Meo, even in less anxious conditions the Meo did not respect Filipino Flight Mechanics like their American counterparts. Now, with the enemy pursuing them there was total chaos. Finally, unable to control the people, the perplexed Flight Mechanic allowed as many individuals on the ship as the cabin section would hold. Then when no more could pile onboard, he radioed to his Captain in the cockpit, "Let's go!"

Anxious to depart the questionable area, Mike commenced a downhill rolling takeoff with 2700 RPM. However, the aircraft was so grossly overloaded that while adding power RPM deteriorated, and Mike had to rapidly "nurse" the turns back to 2500 RPM. ²⁴ Once airborne and in cruise, H-44 barely remained airborne. Moreover, he kept losing turns and some altitude en route to the landing zone. Fortunately, strong upslope winds supplied adequate lift and aided in the landing. Looking out the right window, Mike could not believe the number of souls disembarking his helicopter-twenty-five.

Puzzled, Mike asked Baccay what he had done. His Flight Mechanic related that in their frenzy to leave the area, the local people were punching and shoving him, so, in the interest of preserving his body, he stepped back against the fuselage and just let them surge into the cabin section.

Quite angry, Jarina exclaimed loudly, *"I would say that I will kill you if you ever do that again, but if you do it again, then you are certainly going to kill both of us!"*

²⁴ Lowering or pumping the collective to obtain higher RPM was called milking in the trade.

On another occasion Mike was very heavy, but again prevailing winds provided sufficient lift, enabling him to "ride" the wind current to the hill's crest.

Thousands of diverse ethnics were on the move. Therefore, as conditions allowed, distribution of people to various sites continued for days between Houei Hin Sa, Houei Tong Kho, and Phou Loi. There were so many people that Mike shuttled some to a new LZ situated near Point Alpha. Others walked. Troops were assigned to accompany and guard the exodus. Although seemingly well organized, in some cases soldiers were noted well ahead of the refugees. Jarina continued flying back up the trail, landing and picking up human loads. He fully expected problems, but surprisingly none occurred. After one landing, a soldier and his buddies approached the aircraft looking for a ride. However, Mike shook his head indicating he did not want soldiers, only refugees. Apparently, the soldiers understood. They backed away allowing refugees to board. Nobody ran and Mike thought the men performed well by taking care of their people.

Arriving late, because an overflow crowd had already inundated Sam Tong hostel, Wednesday evening Mike again RON at Long Tieng.

During the early morning of the fourteenth, a ground accident on the sloped parking ramp occurred, reducing the helicopter refugee evacuation fleet by two.

The asphalt parking, loading, and unloading ramp at Long Tieng between karsts was large. As customary in the evening after work, H-34 pilots normally parked down slope to allow the introduction of maximum fuel to forward, center, and aft tanks. Learned from experience, if a late model H-34 was parked uphill and fuel tanks were not completely filled, during the night fuel would gravity flow rearward. Then a possibility existed that with little or insufficient fuel available in the forward tank,

the fuel pump would cavitate, rendering an engine start impossible. Similarly, with three filler orifices located on the right side of the H-34, if a helicopter was parked cross slope on the ramp's west side, the substantial tilt prevented a full fuel state. Parking on the paved ramp's east side did not present such a problem, but was quite far from air operations and the refueling facility. For these reasons, pilots preferred downhill parking.

The Captain of Hotel-50 parked, set the parking brakes, and secured for the night. Hotel-57's PIC did the same behind and slightly upslope from Hotel-50. As a redundant precaution against rolling, wood was obtained to chock the large main gear tires.

On the fourteenth, looking forward to another full day of work in the north, pilots and Flight Mechanics arrived on the ramp at 0515 hours. Suddenly a screech of metal on metal echoed off the karsts in the silent dawn morning, as Hotel-57 began rolling toward and into Hotel-50, causing substantial damage to its pylon and tail rotor components. Hotel-57 received damage to two main rotor blades, The blades were changed upcountry and the helicopter soon returned to service. Hotel-50 required more extensive maintenance.

A search of the local area failed to find the wooden chocks installed the previous night. As a result, cross slope parking was initiated.

Such an incident happened to me one evening. Before the advent of manufactured chocks, we employed rocks, stones, or whatever was available to chock the wheels against a common scenario of the brakes bleeding off overnight. By morning all chock implements had mysteriously disappeared. Consequently, the helicopter rolled down slope into empty drums slightly damaging the exhaust stacks.

Later investigations revealed that young Meo lads, assigned to guard the ramp and our ships, were the culprits. Human nature being what it is, the youngsters often entered the cabin sections to avoid the harsh elements or to sleep. Before the Air America hostel was built at the top of the parking ramp, it was a burden to haul all our heavy RON gear up the hill, so we often left our upcountry bags and emergency rations in the aircraft. Soon the curious fellows began looking for candy, chewing gum, food, and anything else of interest. They were careful not to liberate anything of real value to crews. Sometimes wood chocking material was missing in the morning, having been used to stoke warming fires. I was never able to determine why the kids removed the rocks.

In Vang Pao's opinion his youngsters were sacrosanct, and he was deaf to all entreaties to help solve our problem. Therefore, after completing post flight inspections and greasing, to prevent entry to the cabin entry and internal thievery, the Flight Mechanic strapped the cargo door shut and egressed the helicopter through the cockpit. This helped somewhat, but the problem was never fully resolved.

Unlike Tuesday's miserable conditions, better weather prevailed on Wednesday, allowing indigenous T-28 pilots to deliver napalm, and American pilots to bomb the Pha Thi facility. Reported BDA indicated some fires and destruction of property. One A-1 FAC pilot was lost to enemy fire. Despite the presence of numerous helicopters flying throughout the area, without any sign of a parachute, a beeper, or pilot, no SAR attempt was mounted.

REFLECTIONS

On the morning of the thirteenth in Vientiane, Ambassador Sullivan briefed Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma on the latest

developments regarding the loss of Phu Pha Thi and its implications to the Lao government. Since the navigation facilities and equipment had not been destroyed, even though nothing had been broadcast over communist radios, there was consternation about the Hanoi government going public with information regarding American military meddling in the neutral country.

During the day, as more information was revealed regarding the Pha Thi adventure, Sullivan twixed his headquarters in Washington: ²⁵

"Evacuation operations at Site-85 have been completed and [the] site is currently in enemy hands. Personnel from mountain-top positions have been extracted by helicopter with [the] exception [of a] relatively small group SGU local troops who have descended to base camp positions [LS-198 on the southwest side], joined other units there and are withdrawing overland to previously agreed safe havens. Since we may assume that these safe havens will also come under enemy pressure soon, there may be required a second phase of withdrawals for these latter personnel..."

Contrary to [previous] figures cited, there was [a] total of 16 of these [American] personnel at [the] communications site, rather than 18 as we had earlier understood. Of these 16, five were extracted alive but one was killed in [the] helicopter when he was hit by ground fire. Eight others are known dead. Three are unaccounted for, although one of these...may be presumed dead.

²⁵ Since the message was transmitted without using many articles for brevity, the Author has added a few to create a more readable flow.

Confusion surrounding extraction these personnel stems from two factors not fully explained. First was [the] fact that these personnel, instead of assembling at pre-arranged evacuation site, decided to climb down over [the] face of sheer cliffs to a narrow ledge, using some sort of cargo harness system which they devised for this purpose. It is not known why or when they decided to take this action. But it is presumed that they must have thought, contrary to fact, that [the] trail to [the] evacuation site was blocked [by enemy units].

Second was fact that [a] small enemy 'suicide squad,' which seems to have made [an] improbable ascent up those sheer cliffs, surprised and caught these personnel on their narrow ledge, gunning and grenading them while they were trapped in this inescapable position. It was here that these men suffered such heavy casualties and where most of them are reported to have died. Three bodies were subsequently seen on this ledge, but [the] remainder are assumed to have fallen off [a] sheer 2000-foot drop.

We and Air Force personnel at Udorn will attempt reconstruct [the] story further from survivors when [the] latter have recovered from sedation and shock. [The] conclusion, however, seems quite definitive that none of missing personnel are likely to be alive.

For this reason, USAF late yesterday afternoon flew several missions against remains of navigation and communications equipment on [the] mountain top, as well as [an] abandoned artillery position, in order to destroy material left behind, Photo missions are being run today to determine whether further strikes are necessary.

Several follow-up actions remain to be accomplished, and will be subject of [a] meeting this afternoon between Ambassador and DEPCOM 7/13 Air Force. We must discuss with RLG and

determine what, if anything needs to be said about this action. It remains to be seen whether Hanoi or Pathet Lao radios will announce their victory." ²⁶

"We must decide how to handle next of kin notification, casualty announcements, etc; We must expedite action for [a] replacement site, at least for [the] TACAN [equipment]; We should discuss [the] possibility that Site 36 will be next on enemy list and what contingencies we should consider there. Sullivan" ^{27 28}

Because of extensive enemy preparations for the assault on upper Military Region Two, Vang Pao was likely rethinking that his strategy and future prospects for the region. He firmly believed salvation and any hope of reclaiming sites lay in massively targeting previously off-limit areas with air power. Such action would stabilize further inroads and help turn the situation around.

From the very beginning of his tenure in MR-2 with Agency advisors, Vang Pao's opinions and military expertise were well regarded among Americans and some realistic RLG leaders, for without his formidable guerrilla army the path would be open to

²⁶ On the seventeenth, Pathet Lao radio related an inflated version of Site-85's capture and the American deaths. No mention of a navigation system was made. In line with past communist allegations regarding action in Laos, State refused to comment and media personnel soon lost interest.

²⁷ Since Na Khang was still employed as a forward launch site for Jolly Green rescue helicopters in North Vietnam when possible, there was concern that an estimated seven Vietnamese battalions would attack the site. Although defenses there were formidable, they were not as strong as in the past, and the garrison could probably not long withstand overwhelming odds.

²⁸ Duane Keele Email, 09/12/05, From a Washington news article. During March 2003, four decades after the loss of Pha Thi, with the help of two Dac Cong raiders, remains of USAF Technical Sergeant Patrick L. Shannon were found on the ledge below the electronic site and later identified.

the river towns. Therefore, the Prime Minister met with Sullivan, AIRA, Shackley, and the photo-interpreter to plan an expanded bombing campaign in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces. Suitable targeting information and requests were forwarded to Seventh Air Force and it was believed strikes would commence the following week, providing weather allowed.

After being pressured by many Meo clan leaders regarding their future status in Military Region Two, Vang Pao mentioned relocating some Meo refugees to Sayaboury border areas. These were locations Bill Lair had promised him in 1961 to use as a fallback area and sanctuary should the military situation in MR-2 sour. It appeared that time was fast approaching.

Summing up his thoughts on Laos, Ambassador Sullivan informed State:

"As we enter the last few weeks of [the] dry season without [a] visible reduction [in] North Vietnamese presence or activities, [the] Lao are bracing for another series of enemy attacks. This time there is somewhat less sense of panic than in February. Also, in an underlying worry and fatalism [the] chief [problem] is [the] apparent inability of South Vietnam to reassert initiative, especially on countryside and [indication] of diminishing support for war in U.S."

Following the fall of Pha Thi and loss of American lives at the TSQ-81 facility, normal finger pointing, rationalization, and CYA (cover your backside vernacular) verbiage proceeded between upper echelon civilian and military types, who apparently wanted the whole situation to fade away, which it eventually did because of developments across the border. After all, battles and men were continually lost and expected in war zones, particularly in the political and military meat grinder called South Vietnam, where pragmatism and attrition seemed a key answer to all ills.

Poignant shouda-wouda-couda questions and answers abounded among all parties: If the radar and navigation facility at Site-85 was so crucial to the Rolling Thunder strategic bombing program in North Vietnam where was sufficient air support to ensure its survival? Where was cogent intelligence as to previous enemy intentions? How did such a small Dac Cong sapper unit manage to scale sheer cliffs to the top of a supposedly well-fortified and defended mountain without detection? Were any Americans left alive following the Air America and USAF evacuation? Why was the site not evacuated earlier when all evidence pointed to the exact day of its impending demise?

Naturally, three months of poor weather and the increased action of the enemy TET and Khe Sanh offensives occurring in South Vietnam were prime factors proffered for much of the failure to provide more air support. ²⁹ However, most answers were noticeably lacking and some questions never properly addressed. It is especially interesting that apparently no high ranking official or officer lost a position over the episode, and the contentious subject soon faded from the limelight.

Probably overriding factors in the long conflict, the combination of overwhelming defeats at Nam Bac and Phou Pha Thi resulted in the worst RLG territorial reversals since the bad old days of 1961 and 1962 when the country was up for grabs.

*"Time is the condition to be won to defeat the enemy...**Time ranks first...**"*

The Writings of Ho Chi Minh

The U.S. supported war, calculated to maintain the independence of South Vietnam as a democratic state, was rapidly

²⁹ Actually, there was some air support, but battles or wars are not won by air power alone, and in this case, air was just not particularly efficient in rooting out a widely dispersed enemy.

sliding downhill. Limited war on the ground did not seem to be working and tactical air estimates reported less than fifty percent success rates. Furthermore, the issue of the enemy's ability to implement the massive TET offensive revealed a failure of American air strikes in the North and the ability to quell or effectively interdict the LOC system in Laos to prevent North Vietnam from pursuing their professed goal: to reunite the North and South into one communist nation. It was obvious that the gradual escalation of Rolling Thunder, an operation intended to display USG determination in prosecuting the war, and to convince North Vietnamese leaders to negotiate a bilateral peace agreement, had failed miserably. Apparently, Asian history had not provided a compelling lesson for the supposedly "wise" individuals staffing, advising, or associated with the LBJ Administration, many of them holdovers from the Kennedy Administration. Therefore, apparently no one was aware of, cared, or heeded students of Asian history, who expounded on Asian patience and proclivity to establish and engage in a national objective for no matter how long it took, or the cost in infrastructure and lives. Indeed, General Giap, a communist ideologue trained and indoctrinated in China, as was Ho Chi Minh, was reputedly willing to accept a hundred to one loss ratio to achieve a goal.

It was obvious that a new strategy or at least some tangible approach to the war had to be devised and implemented in Washington. Therefore, when Clark Clifford, initially a "hawk" and then almost overnight switching to a "dovish" philosophy, replaced Robert McNamara in March as Defense Secretary, both military and civilian leaders agreed that:

"A new and integrated strategy must be devised. [Such a plan had to include] ground operations in South Vietnam, the air attack against the North, and negotiations with the North

Vietnamese...it had to be based on an attainable, articulated objective..."

In all fairness to top military leaders of the time, an integrated strategy to win the war had long been in place. This, of course, required a drastic modification from defensive to offensive policies, something previously unacceptable to both Secretary McNamara and the President throughout 1966 and 1967.

General MacArthur, author of the successful Inchon invasion in Korea, undoubtedly would have been proud of the ambitious military plans for ending the North Vietnamese nonsense in Indochina--at least on paper. They included: Marine amphibious and U.S. Army airborne landings north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ); a multi divisional thrust into Laos to sever the enemy logistic trail system; destroying off limits enemy base camps in the DMZ, Laos, and Cambodia; and bombing Hanoi and Haiphong infrastructure.

On the plus side, any one of the moves would have greatly affected the war effort and pushed it toward a final solution. The moves would have drastically changed the complexion of the war, particularly in Laos, which was already a façade and never really considered a neutral nation as envisioned in the unrealistic Geneva Accords of 1962. A negative aspect was what reaction to expect from the Soviet Bloc. No intelligent soul wanted to foment World War Three. However, China was an intangible. In Korea, Chinese leadership had displayed a willingness to invade a country to protect its interests in Laos. Would this again be the case should USG change strategy and escalate the war?

Since America was initially structured as a democracy, the Founding Fathers provided in the constitution that civilian leadership would control wars. Therefore, with military

leadership subordinate to civilian, plans for ending the war gathered dust on the shelf.

A SHOCKING TURN OF EVENTS

"Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia..

Our objective in South Vietnam has never been the annihilation of the enemy. It has been to bring about a recognition in Hanoi that its objective-taking over the south by force-could not be achieved..

Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President"

President Johnson's 31 March 1969 Speech to the American People.

Not long after the loss of Phu Pha Thi in upper Military Region Two, additional unexpected events were forthcoming. On 31 March, during a comprehensive prime time radio and television address, LBJ announced to the American public that he had ordered an immediate and unilateral cessation of all U.S. aerial and naval bombardment north of the 20th parallel.

Since Rolling Thunder had commenced, temporary bombing halts had been periodically implemented. Seeking to stimulate negotiations and peace talks leading to the war's end, the several short-term bombing halts had failed to provide fruitful results. The latest offer to cease bombing the North in exchange for peace talks was issued in August. However, except for a statement on 29 December 1967 by the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister alluding to interest in negotiations, as usual, North Vietnamese leaders were obdurate, refusing to acknowledge our gestures for hard negotiations and ultimate peace. In fact, previous halts were generally detrimental to USG overall policy, and accomplished little positive for our side. In fact,

unimpeded by air strikes, enemy road repair and construction continued, and Vietnamese logistical transport to South Vietnam increased proportionally. The latest bombing halt indicated a U.S. attempt at military de-escalation and a political settlement to the war.

Johnson's mandate effectively curtailed bombing in the upper two thirds of North Vietnam. Alarmingly, at first it also appeared to include Na Khang, Laos, and still functioning government sites in upper Military Region Two at a critical time when air strikes were sorely required to salvage what was left in the area. While searching for answers, some individuals incorrectly equated Pha Thi's recent loss to the President's decision. The order came at a very critical time, and one can imagine the reaction among us participants hunkering in the trenches, and the leaders of both the Royal Lao and Royal Thai governments, who depended on USG support for survival from the communist incursion.

In addition to the bombing halt, triggering a double-barreled blast to a shocked nation and leaving a temporary vacuum in Democratic Party hierarchy, President Johnson announced that he would not *"seek or would not accept nomination"* for reelection as President. He would use his final months in office seeking negotiations with North Vietnamese leaders in order to obtain an honorable peace in the Southeast Asian Theater. Such action was unprecedented for a sitting president during any war, announced or unannounced. Who knows the prime catalyst that caused him to make this decision, and if it would constitute a final straw in the demise of America's participation in Southeast Asia?

Actually, although not totally transparent, there were likely several motives involved in his determination to retire from politics: Having suffered an earlier heart attack in the

fifties, Johnson was visibly fatigued and understandably concerned about his health. He was also under considerable pressure from the American people (sans the older "silent majority" coined during the Nixon Administration's tenure) to terminate the long and increasingly unpopular war. Indeed, according to a Harris poll at the time, support for the war had declined from a level of seventy-four to only fifty-four percent. Despite an overwhelming U.S. military victory during TET destroying the Viet Cong infrastructure, the enemy offensive was cited by some pundits as displaying a major defeat for U.S. policies and objectives in South Vietnam. Consequently, many in Congress would no longer support the President. Undercutting Johnson further, even those "doves" in top administrative slots, including close advisors and department heads, like Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, were skewed toward commencing negotiations with North Vietnamese leaders that would finally end a very expensive and unwinnable war. Finally, like the "guns and butter" policy that included prosecuting a war and providing bennies for the "underclass," Johnson's Great Society experiment, which included civil rights and substantial entitlements for lower class citizens, had proved an immensely costly and a largely failed policy. Instead, a combination of the graphic war and issues generated by LBJ's Great Society divided the country from the bottom to the very top of society, and in the same vein of Harry Truman's "*The buck stops here*" pronouncement, the President received the pressure and brunt of dissatisfaction from all sides.

NEW EQUIPMENT

Timing is the key to success during the course of events, especially during wartime. Before the President's decision to cease Rolling Thunder below the 20th--then the 19th--parallels

became reality, new and improved strike aircraft entered both U.S. Navy and USAF inventories. But they arrived too late to influence a near term outcome.

The Ling Temco Vought fighter-bomber A-7 Corsair 2 was deployed aboard the *USS Ranger* in December and introduced to combat. Shortly afterward, the all-weather sophisticated plane proved beneficial in U.S. bombing policy.

During March, six General Dynamics swing wing all-weather F-111A's were delivered to Takhli, Thailand, for evaluation in actual combat situations. The advanced planes were equipped with terrain-following radar (TFR) and electronic equipment to permit IFR bombing missions at a high-speed low-level configuration. For a time in 1967 Air America On Mark pilots had led the way in assessing technology with night testing of the TFR over the Panhandle trail system. Although some results were good, introduction of the F-111 to Southeast Asia proved premature. After two planes on strike missions over North Vietnam disappeared by the end of March and one in April, the remaining planes were grounded and withdrawn for technical problem investigation. (We heard that the first five planes disappeared.) Although some continued to fly, it was not until 1972 that the improved F-111 returned to the field in strength to provide much needed support.

Improved electronic navigation devices also evolved. By March, a long-range navigation system (LORAN) installed at ground stations (Sattahip and Udorn, Thailand, and Con Son, South Vietnam) and operated by U.S. Coast Guard personnel was in use for projected bombing over North Vietnam. Not designed for pin-point bombing missions as were the efficient TSQ-77 electronics, LORAN navigation was touted as being so accurate

that it could be employed for high altitude bombing.³⁰ However, striking precise coordinates was not possible and extreme ranges for time-difference pulses negated striking many northern targets.

With the bombing halt still in effect, by July no TSQ-81 facility had been installed, and by then the equipment was deemed unnecessary. Instead, attention focused on installation of TACAN navigation sites at either Na Khang or at a suitable location in Thailand.

On the fifteenth Jarina et. al. continued the massive refugee evacuation between Houei Tong Kho, Point Alpha, and Houei Hin Sa.³¹ During the day, Captain Lloyd Higgins joined Mike at Site-

³⁰ In later years, while working in the Agency's Special Project program, I experienced an unexpected inefficiency in long range fringe signals and considerable effect of ground electronic interference on the LORAN-C system while navigating to sites at night.

³¹ Sequential Chapter Comments and Sources:
 Depending on the source, accounts of the Pha Thi loss vary somewhat. Although not present during the actual fracas, but a frequent Site-85 participant over the years, the Author has attempted to briefly relate the most likely scenario from a pilot's perspective.
 Do Chi Ben-Destatte, *Raid...4-10*.
 Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 121, 128-130, 138, 140, 148-149.
 Edward Vallentyne, *CHECO*, 33, 36, 38, 40-41, 48.
 Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 193-196.
 Ken Conboy, *Vietnam and Laos: A Recent History of Military Cooperation*, Indochina Report, Information and Resource Center, #19, April-June 1989.
 Ernie Kuhn-Dommen 03/25/95 Interview, 51-54.
 Ernie Kuhn Letter of 06/27/96.
 Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 03/11/68, 0512Z. To convert GMT Zulu to Laos local time one must add seven hours-i.e. 0512+7=1312 local.
 Telegram Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 03/12/68.
 Telegram #5103 from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 03/13/68, 05558Z.
 Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 03/14/68, 0841Z.
 Telegram Sullivan to State, 03/16/68.
 Telegram Sullivan to State, 03/27/68.
 Phillip Davidson, 515.
 Mike Jarina Interviews.

215 for a multi-helicopter mission near the southwest base of Pha Thi and the former strongpoint at Ban Tham Nam (UH6362). Assisted by A-1E cover, the mission likely involved a retrieval of SGU officers and their men, and perhaps a cursory search for the downed A-1E pilot. After returning to Hin Sa, Mike flew to Na Khang and then on to Long Tieng for RON.

The next day, with Phil Jennings onboard, Jarina recovered at T08.

TIME OFF

After I returned to Udorn on the ninth we motored to Bangkok. During the scheduled time off (STO) we had several items to address in the big city--mainly, to apply for Tuie's immigrant visa at the U.S. consul office on Wireless Road. This entailed filling out numerous questionnaires and other mundane details. Perhaps the State Department had finally gotten its sierra together, for the consular unit seemed a kinder, gentler environment with more efficient personnel. Since Tuie already possessed a Thai passport, and we had previously been to the States, there was none of the bureaucratic hassle encountered in 1966. The visa was promised in July.

While at the embassy, I also had three books tailored for citizenship applicants sent to my parents Plainfield, New

Victor Anthony, *The War In Northern Laos*, 255-256.

John Bowman, General Editor, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York: Bison Books, 1985) 198, 200, 410, 414.

Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 529, 535-536, 538-539.

Stebbins and Adam eds., *Documents on American Foreign Relations 1968-1969* (Council on Foreign Relations: Simon and Schuster, 1972) *American Policy in Asia: The Vietnam Conflict: Steps Toward Peace Talks*, 227, 232-233, 236.

John Smith, *Rolling Thunder: The Strategic Bombing Campaign North Vietnam 1965-1968* (Saint Paul: Phalanx Publishing, 1995) 147-148, 158, 160, 162.

EW Knight Email, 08/10/00.

Jersey, address. Upon arrival, using the government material, our task would be to rapidly instruct Tuie regarding U.S. history and government structure in preparation for a citizenship test in Newark.

With groundwork completed for the trip, I retrieved a Pan American route structure pamphlet and planned a flight home on or around 25 April. Then I filed necessary paperwork for the trip in the Air America office.

Taking time off from our hectic schedule, I walked down Pat Pong Road to the Bangkok Christian Hospital for a periodic amoeba test. A couple of days after enduring the nasty, bowel unsettling enema, our Doctor Wells indicated that, yes, I had the intestinal parasites again. Although not a death sentence, the revelation was disconcerting. I left armed with numerous and various medicines calculated to eradicate the host's organisms.

BACK ON THE LINE

"We are still losing everything over in Laos. The enemy seems determined to consolidate and hold all recovered land. We lack the troops and guts to do anything at this time. The poor Meo ranks are getting thinner all the time. Even their leaders have succumbed to politics."

Author Letter to Parents, 03/16/68

Upon return to Udorn, I learned of Site-85's loss. Disregarding my hairy adventure with the napalm, it was disappointing, and seemed a major waste after all the effort and materiel that was expended to defend and hold the site.

On the sixteenth, I learned that I was scheduled to relieve the PIC of Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG) the next day at Pakse.

Among higher ups there was obvious concern regarding the Bell program. Through word of mouth or a dreaded all-pilots-

meeting (APM), I discovered that a crash of a Bell 205 while at the controls would cost me my job. After several accidents, the recent loss of 39F was likely the last straw (39F was the only Bell 204 in our inventory). Although I never learned where this dictum arose, in the past not all Udorn management had been our champions, particularly Abadie and Jack Forney, who at various times displayed their own agendas. It seemed inconceivable that, without pressure from Taipei, and in turn Washington, local Udorn management would issue such a decree, given the daily increasing risk factors associated with our jobs. We had begun the Bell program with relatively innocuous supply work, morphing into Agency-sponsored trail watch missions and combat assaults, which sorely taxed our machines and pilot ability to the maximum.

During past years, discounting obvious pilot error, even when we possessed only a few machines, operational accidents in the UH-34D were expected and considered part of the job description. If not flagrant, the PIC was generally not held accountable. However, depending on favoritism, in some cases the truth was shaded a bit and the individual emerged from a situation without penalty. Still, the unwritten policy appeared a fair system overall for a progressively difficult job. It also fostered confidence in our leaders, most of whom had previously flown or were still flying the line and fully appreciated the value of not having the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads.

I left the Company facility thoroughly disillusioned and conflicted as to continuing to work for Air America. The new policy smacked of the bad old days when we never knew if we would have a job the next day. As if there were not enough pressures and stresses with which to contend, it seemed exceedingly cruel. Furthermore, instead of receiving kudos for

our good work, we were seemingly inundated with sierra by individuals only concerned about the program--those who only read XOXO reports and were concerned about their tiny sphere encompassing their own six o'clock. Little did they know regarding the initial pressure and efforts to sell the program to the Customer, and they cared for little else than performance. From engines to the operating procedures, the Bell helicopter was a radically different animal from the H-34. Yes, within limits, the more fragile machine had power, but possessed none of the endearing characteristics in the mountains and forgiving tendencies that would enable the UH-34D pilot to survive and perform high altitude work far and above anything ever conceived on an engineer's drafting board or in USMC aviation.

With the recent pay cut and other actual or envisioned grievances, the Company was digging an ever-deeper hole, and was adding more coffin nails to the special trust and confidence we considered just. Consequently, the day of reckoning was looming on the horizon.

DOWN SOUTH

Since the beginning of the year, enemy forces had been on the move in Military Region Four. They were active in the Bolovens area, busy eliminating FAR positions around Saravane, and reestablishing firm control of several villages along Route-16 in the Sedone Valley region. Lao Ngam, the focal point of the WAPI village defense program, had also been attacked the previous month. Consequently, as John Ford could attest, area work in a region previously referred to as the "Country Club" by early Old Timers when I hired on, was no longer an easy place to work, and was becoming increasingly dangerous for helicopter

crews. Indeed, this fact was recently reinforced by another incident.

On Sunday, after the Company Transportation Department driver delivered me and my equipment to the opposite side of the parking ramp in the blue Volkswagen bus, we called the "B-Bus," I left the base in CASI C-47 XW-PAP for Pakse. From there, I continued deadheading to Ban La Tee (PS-22 or LS-190) located near the eastern rim of the Bolovens, to assume command of PFG with Flight Mechanic Kania. My mission was specific. I was to deliver a UH-34D rotor blade to Kong Mi to replace Hotel-49's battle-damaged blade.

During the morning of the sixteenth, with a five-member team onboard from PS-7, Tony Byrne, Alex Nadalini, and their Flight Mechanic were exposed to and hit by large caliber anti-aircraft fire southeast of Attopeu. Severe main rotor blade vibrations immediately indicated obvious battle damage. Not enthused about landing in enemy territory, with little other option available, the crew managed a nervous return to PS-7. After kissing and caressing Mother earth and changing their soiled skivvies, the crew discovered three honeycomb pockets missing from the end of one blade. The helicopter was secured and the crew lifted to L-11. Byrne became one of our new magnet asses. In the future, as the military situation worsened, Tony's luck spiraled precipitously downward. He would be hit, shot down, and experience horrendous emergencies in the Pakse area. ³²

I relocated to the PS-38 strip on the southeastern Plateau. The experiment, using Chinese Nung for aggressive trail action against Route-96 had failed to achieve the expectations Agency

³² Air America XOXO 03/16/68, 1300.

planners envisioned. Therefore, the men were repatriated to South Vietnam. FAR units now occupied the site.

A C-123 pilot delivered the black rotor blade and a couple of mechanics to PS-38. Naturally, the more than sixteen-foot blade length precluded either conventional or longitudinal loading in the Bell cargo compartment. In the past, using the H-34's electronics and cabin compartment, I had delivered H-34 blades internally, and I was not sure why such an aircraft was not employed in this case.

Without the means to accommodate the bulky item normally, a sling load was out of the question. Therefore, we collectively elected to carefully strap the blade crosswise on the cabin deck, spaced equidistantly through both open cabin doors. Carrying the blade in this manner marked a first for me. I was aware that using this unconventional method, with the blade protruding from both sides of PFG, would cause considerable drag during forward flight, but until actually airborne, I could not predict what other flight anomaly might occur.

We launched south toward Khong Mi. As predicted, drag prevented high speed flight, but the blade, acting as another airfoil, adversely distorted the aerodynamic characteristics of my ship. The unaccustomed lift caused an uncomfortable porpoise effect. However, the new "wing" was not enough to cause control loss of the aircraft, and by decreasing speed even more, I was able to complete the flight.

I waited until the mechanics rotated blades and loaded the damaged one in the H-34. Then we all headed northwest to arrive at the Pakse airport just before dark for a decent meal and a night at the hostel.

On Monday Charlie Weitz deadheaded to Lima-11 with Mike Jarina in Hotel-32 to join me for a short exfiltration of nine men at a landing zone not far from Khong Mi. The pickup site

(YB0619) was located close to Route-110, six miles north of PS-7. I had worked this site before. Because of delays waiting for assets and escort cover, like the previous day, I logged less than three hours flight time.

In contrast to my reduced flight activity, Mike and Rick DeCosta worked the entire day making eleven landings at Attopeu, Kong Mi, PS-22 (LS-190), and the TACAN site on the soaring heights of Phu Kate.

I got a break on the nineteenth and worked most of the day supporting area activity.

Jarina performed work in increasingly hostile areas in and around Saravane. Since February, much of the Toumlan Valley north of Site-44 had been abandoned or otherwise conceded to Vietnamese forces intent on forcing RLG troops away from their critical supply lines to South Vietnam. Since Senammana-PS19, tucked away in the eastern portion of the Toumlan Valley, remained a viable SGU listening post and road watch launch site, Mike shuttled men and supplies there from both Saravane and Pakse. As enemy pressure was increasing around the TACAN site at Phu Kate, he also shuttled into and out of the mountain rim. Attesting to the work accomplished, he logged thirty-seven landings before securing at Lima-11.

Incidents continued to plague our ships and men in other parts of the country. On the previous day in northwestern Military Region One, Bob Davis and Harold Thompson, flying in Hotel-54, were hit by ground fire in the vicinity of Nam Yu. They recovered without further incident. ³³

³³ Mike Jarina Interviews.



Captain Mike Jarina standing in front of the spacious Air America hostel located toward the east end of Pakse, Laos.

Author Collection.

POINT ALPHA IN MR-2

On Tuesday at 0300 hours, Ernie Kuhn, Gia Tou, and his brother were awakened at the Point Alpha refugee site in upper Military Region Two by a stir of excited men carrying wounded. They had been attacked while leading a group of refugees to the site. The Captain ordered patrols to fan out and comb the area, and the men returned to their beds. About 0400 hours several men arrived carrying two more wounded. They had made contact with the enemy and suffered casualties within two hours walk from the camp. After encountering two separate attacks within a relatively short period, Gia Tou wanted an aircraft to recon the immediate area and attempt to establish radio or visual contact with his men shepherding the groups of people that had been attacked. Consequently, Ernie used his single-side-band radio to contact Sam Tong for helicopter support at dawn.

Crews were awakened and alerted at Sam Tong for emergency medical evacuation and a recon mission at Point Alpha. As Company SOP and basic common sense dictated, when danger was imminent, Captains Frank Stergar and John Tarn doubled up in the cockpit of Hotel-15 with old Punzalan as Flight Mechanic.

The crew launched prior to false dawn, arriving in the northern area just before eastern sunrise. Despite foul weather, including low clouds on the mountain peak, Stergar managed to sneak under the overcast and land.

Ernie briefed the pilots about everything he knew regarding the situation. Enemy units were moving into the area along with friendly civilians and troops, but he was not aware of the disposition or number of either friend or foe. Then he, Gia Tou, and his brother, equipped with two HT-2 radios, boarded the H-34.

Despite the low regional cloud coverage, Stergar circled and trolled underneath the ceiling. He flew low recons above

ridges and along trails and footpaths while the captain and other eyes in the helicopter attempted to spot or raise someone on the ground. Then, believing he had established radio contact, the Gia Tou moved away from Ernie's seat, close to the cabin door to achieve better reception. About this time Frank flew over a small valley containing a few houses. Suddenly, small arms fire erupted from starboard ridgelines. Two rounds impacted the cockpit, liberally splattering Stergar with glass fragments. With Punzalan sitting on his tool box, in shock and unable to help or talk, John Tarn assumed control of Hotel-15 and conducted a hard-right hand turn away from the enemy fire. ³⁴

While kneeling near the cabin doorway, Gia Tou was exposed to accurate enemy fire. A round struck him in the cheek and exited below his ear. As he fell backward, Lao Thai caught him. In addition to chaos in the cockpit and cabin section, rounds hit the tail pylon and a fuel tank. Heavy gasoline fumes enveloped the cabin. There was concern among passengers that penetration of one hot tracer round would reduce all occupants to crispy critters.

Despite substantial battle damage and chaos inside the helicopter, a return to Point Alpha was effected. With bloody air bubbles and sputum dribbling from his mouth, Gia Tou appeared still alive. Upon landing, Kuhn leaped from the helicopter and dashed into his tent to radio Sam Tong regarding recent developments and to alert Long Tieng that the captain had most likely been mortally wounded. He was still in the process of talking when Gia Tou expired, yet another high ranking and respected leader to die from hostilities in Military Region Two.

³⁴ Over the years, some pilots had issues regarding Stergar's actions under fire or during emergency conditions. However, his performance in the Na San Valley, North Vietnam with the Author in 1965 was both comforting and exemplary.

While Ernie was busy, pending a secure period and a more detained maintenance inspection to determine if the ship was sufficiently airworthy to move to another location, Hotel-15's crew was ferried to Site-36 in Hotel-39.

News of the incident and the Meo leader's death spread rapidly throughout the camp. Usually guns were fired in the air announcing a Meo death and to send the soul off to his final peace. However, some exuberant individual carelessly fired an M-79 grenade launcher and the round exploded close to the parked helicopters. Believing Point Alpha was under attack, all the crews, including Kuhn, departed for the safety of Na Khang.

Later that day a courageous H-34 pilot, accompanied by a Case Officer, returned to Alpha and discovered the true nature of the explosion.

It was obvious that the Phou Loi refugee center would not be viable much longer. Therefore, following discussions and due deliberation in Vientiane, AID, Embassy, and Agency officials elected to order an immediate evacuation, removing thousands of refugees from Point Alpha and surrounding areas to safer locations. Despite enemy presence, in addition to denying men for corvee labor and supplying food, more reasons solidified the Country Team's decision for the evacuation. Alpha was not a choice location for large numbers of refugees to settle. Covered by only grass, area ridges were largely bare, minimum forest existed for shade or fashioning structures, and no practical area was available to grow rice or other sustenance crops. Moreover, only one small stream existed. Therefore, with Kuhn acting as on-site coordinator, a massive lift of about 8,000 refugees commenced on 20 March. H-34 crews subsequently ferried refugees to Houei Tong Kho, Mounng Heim, or Na Khang, where they either remained or were delivered to Sam Tong by Caribou or C-123 crews. After they received necessary aid and were tabulated,

further relocation was made to southern areas (what eventually became LS-272).³⁵

While work began on Wednesday to clear upper Military Region Two of refugees, I worked a couple of flights out of Pakse and then was informed by the radio operator that T08 wanted me to RTB with the ship.

Jarina remained until the 22nd working beleaguered areas around Saravane. Trips included movement of troops and supplies to and from Phu Kate. During the thirty-one-landing day, Mike also worked several PS sites (PS-38, PS-26, PS-23, PS-22) on the Plateau's rim.

The following day he returned to rim work supporting previous day outposts. Before being relieved, he journeyed to a site on the southern rim that would later be numbered LS-423. He deadheaded to Udorn via Wattay Airport on CASI Porter XW-PFC and Air America C-123 613.

BACKDOOR TREACHERY

As a surprise to everyone in both helicopter programs, South Vietnam-based Bell helicopter Chief Pilot Bob Hitchman suddenly appeared in Udorn and remained for considerably more than a week. With both Wayne Knight and Ben Moore away on leave, we were perplexed and highly suspicious regarding Bob's sudden and unannounced presence, and wondered as to his agenda. No one doubted Hitchman's upper mobility ambitions, and overtly, it appeared his visit was a stealth approach calculated to replace

³⁵ Ernie Kuhn Letter to Author 06/27/96.
Ernie Kuhn Interview with Arthur Dommen, 03/25/95.
Frank Stergar Email.
Bill Leary 03/19/68 Notes from a Phone Interview with John Tarn 04/13/91.
John Tarn Email, 11/07/11.

Wayne or Ab (although Ab usually supported Bob in most matters). Some suspected that Bob was attempting to manufacture a position or a new Standardization and Safety slot over both Udorn and Saigon.

In 1965, when other senior H-34 pilots refused the Saigon CPH slot for the new Bell program, Bob obtained the job by default. An upgrade to a management position was something he had always coveted. Even in the early days, while haunting the CPH office, he had cultivated CJ Abadie and other bosses, attempting to ingratiate and promote himself with them. His methodology was so transparent to us line poguees that it was both laughable and disgusting. ³⁶ Furthermore, one had to watch one's back when Bob was around, for Hitchman was the type of individual who would attempt anything to advance over a fellow pilot.

Devastated after Jim Coble left Udorn to start the Kuala Lumpur concrete block business, and Wayne Knight was eventually selected Udorn CPH, Bob had left in a huff and joined Bird & Son for a short period. In 1965, when throttle twisters were in short supply and flight time had substantially increased, we were not happy when Hitchman was rehired for our program.

Bob's transfer to Saigon may have been partially calculated, serving a purpose by ridding our UH-34D program of an individual many loathed or simply did not trust. In an environment where one could be forced or shot down at any time in Laos, we had to rely on all our peers to rescue us. Because of certain past events, such a scenario posed a conundrum in Bob's case.

Prior to assuming his exalted CPH position in Saigon, Bob had a leg up on us backwater peons in Udorn. He had benefited by

³⁶ The term was called a descriptive "brown nosing" in those days.

attending extensive ground and flight training at the Bell Helicopter factory in Hurst, Texas.

Serving as upper management's additional tool in supplementing and reinforcing the threat to terminate the next Bell pilot who crashed a machine, Hitchman arrived in Udorn. Bob, a likeable, silver-tongued devil, maintained high level contacts, and always managed to curry favor with just the "right" management types. He convinced Taipei principals that there was no such negative accident record in his Saigon program, one that was generally staffed with experienced and seasoned Bell pilots. Always an extreme egotist with abundant ambition, he enthusiastically indicated, "*I'll journey to Udorn and get those inept guys straightened out.*" Consequently, with Taipei management primed to obtain answers and solutions, Bob was authorized to conduct a Company sponsored fact finding mission regarding our supposedly clouded Udorn Bell program, while attempting to assess performance and retrain as many of us as possible. ³⁷

Our program admittedly experienced growing pains, and some of what Hitchman indicated may have been true, but work in South Vietnam contrasted drastically from ours required in Laos. In South Vietnam, pilots flew a majority of missions from pristine sea level airstrip-to-airstrip, which involved very little, if

³⁷ The actual problem with early weight related accidents stemmed from a non-flat rated -1100 turbine engine that placed us below sea level performance even before we left Udorn for upcountry work. This became evident after the retrofit to the dash 1300 engines in the B-205. With torque limited performance to four or five thousand feet, there were no more weight related accidents. There might have been a tendency for some pilots to over-torque, something the CPH made an issue of when discovered. Since over torquing, like over boosting or over speeding in the H-34 R-1820 engine was cumulative on the transmission, Wayne believed that pilots who habitually did this showed little consideration for the relieving pilot. He considered aircraft abuse one of the worst sins a pilot could commit.

any, hazardous mountain flying. Unlike our specialized program, there was virtually no Customer-sponsored combat flying into enemy territory, road watch infil/exfils, or search and destroy missions. When a few Saigon-based Bell pilots were loaned to us in the fall of 1969 to effect double crewed missions during Vang Pao's temporarily successful Plain of Jars operation, the men were amazed at the challenges our job entailed. Some loved the work and eventually transferred to Udorn, but others, preferring the calmer flying conditions in South Vietnam, did not.

There was also the issue of a large number of Bell replacement parts recently ordered by Udorn compared to orders by Saigon's maintenance department. Largely because of the less demanding work, Saigon did not require many parts. Therefore, something was deemed seriously wrong with our program. Because of the high number of hours flown under hazardous conditions, pad debris, battle damage, and other engine and blade degrading factors, Taipei management was not sufficiently astute to realize that our program required more spares than Saigon. Since these came from civilian manufactures and not military inventories like H-34 components, Bell parts were quite expensive. Tasked with paying the bill, upper management demanded answers, and were confident that Bob could investigate and also resolve this matter.

Despite huge disparities in the two Bell programs, some of these issues were understandable. A majority of Saigon Bell pilots and mechanics had been hired directly from the U.S. Army. Still associated with individuals in the Army supply system, they were able to procure parts, like fuel control units (FCU), engines, and the sort, from the Army repair ship anchored offshore, for nothing except favors.

Curiously, Wayne Knight was away on five weeks leave when Hitchman arrived in Udorn. He had no previous inkling of Bob's

visit, and presented the Author with a different version of the maintenance problem. He maintained that Hitchman was only a CPH at Saigon, who held no sway over the Udorn Maintenance Department or base management. Items attributed to Bob would have been within the sphere of other individuals. He would not have been given personal credit for having anything to do with maintenance costs.

Furthermore, Saigon maintenance could not just exchange components between U.S. military and USA "N" registered aircraft. Such a practice was strictly forbidden. One would find it difficult to discover anyone who would publicly state that Air America installed non-FAA certified dynamic of power train components in FAA registered aircraft. Such an instance probably never occurred, except possibly for a rushed field recovery. Entirely different quality control standards existed between military and civilian models. If an "N" registered aircraft was discovered to have crashed with a non-FAA certified drive train or dynamic component, there would have been quite a stir. One can imagine the consequences, like in March 1965 when Charlie Jones died, if bogus components were found on the helicopter.

Qualifying his input, Wayne acknowledged that there might have been some midnight acquisitions in Udorn, but not of a power train or dynamic component variety. Any maintenance manager would have lost his license and job if discovered. Some cross tubes and skids and perhaps an FCU may have been secured for a quick field recovery, but any non-FAA component was removed ASAP. He recalled Jim Schultze talking about obtaining an engine from an overstocked Army unit at the time of an inspector general inspection in Saigon. The engine was never installed on an Air America ship.

Many stories emanated from mechanics who joined us from Saigon. Wayne knew of a case where an Army unit could not

justify the presence of an extra Bell 47 series helicopter. With an inspector general inspection imminent, the Bell was transferred to an Australian aviation unit for the duration of the war. Jim Schultze once related a story of two Huey -13 engines being dumped down a well; he also told me about an excess UH-1H "deep sixed" in the Saigon River.

On the 21st, in combination with a test flight, I was scheduled for a short observation cum training session in Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) with Hitchman. His interaction with us was supposedly voluntary on our part, but was strongly recommended and smacked of a mandatory military order. Still there was a lot of grumbling by our pilots. Despite his questionable reputation, Bob was friendly to me, not at all like someone pursuing a detrimental agenda. I did not mind flying with him. After all, when a new hire, I had flown with him and learned a great deal about working for the Customer (Pop Buell) and in a Lao mountain environment. On a more personal level, he discussed the TET episode, and he and his son's participation.

Discounting all hyperbole, Bob's knowledge of the machine compared to mine was exceptional. During the course of the flight, I felt like a neophyte when he showed me how to start the engine using the manual fuel control feature, if necessary, to prevent an over temperature condition. ³⁸

Neither Robertson nor Webb had imparted that knowledge to me, nor was the procedure discussed in the pilot's handbook. Also, in contrast to the Army method for hover power checks stressing gas producer or N1 settings (called a HIT check), the factory-trained pilot maintained that torque reading should be

³⁸ The Lycoming-11 engine model had a tendency to start hot, particularly if not allowed sufficient time to cool after shutdown.

employed as a primary power indication. This gage would be the first indication of a power loss and engine failure.

The flight went well and I was satisfied with Bob's patience and assistance that day. I earnestly believed that his visit, whatever the intention, might prove constructive. Furthermore, I was of the opinion that had Bob been available to instruct me from the inception of our program, I would have performed much better during my spotty catch as catch can, and troubled transition in the Bell.³⁹

The following day, I returned to the steaming flight line testing PFI and PFG. With only a slight problem to resolve from the previous day, I released India for upcountry work within thirty minutes. PFG required substantially more work. Tracking blades was not easy. Battle and foreign object damage (FOD) and normal degradation of leading edges by abrasive dirt and sand from upwelling rotor wash took a toll. Unless severely damaged, a rotor blade was normally too expensive to replace. Ones replaced were not matched at the factory by weight, and seemingly had to be manually tracked for long periods. This laborious process usually required many starts and shutdowns, while maintenance personnel marked the blades with grease pencil, re-taped the tracking flag, and adjusted pitch change links. This was followed by short flights to ascertain the vibration level. Except for tracking, I enjoyed testing the Bell. It allowed me additional time in the machine without the added stress of combat, enabled me to pick brains of experienced maintenance personnel, and to learn a great deal more about the machine and its working parts.

³⁹ Marius Burke Interview.
EW Knight Emails, 09/02/00, 09/06/00 (2), 11/22/00, 11/24/00,
01/08/01.
Mike Jarina Interview.

Local test flying was not without occasional risks. But that was what the maintenance function was all about: discovering and repairing problems before releasing a machine for demanding upcountry work. One time I air taxied a Bell from the ramp to the grassy infield between the runway and the taxiway in preparation to launch and fly a pattern within the confines of the airfield. While moving forward into flight, and just prior to transition to a climb attitude, the transmission oil gage needle dropped to zero. Following an immediate landing and engine shutdown, an inspection revealed a missing transmission filler cap. The cover, if ever installed in the hangar, had likely been improperly secured and was lost during the taxi. This enabled most of the oil to siphon from the orifice. It was a good object lesson for all parties-pay closer attention to quality control and preflight checks.

UPCOUNTRY

Charlie Weitz, John Melvin, and I departed Udorn early on Sunday 24 March in Papa Foxtrot Hotel for a Special Mission and to participate in the massive refugee evacuation in upper Military Region Two.

After recovering three individuals from UH4960, three miles northeast of Houei Hin Sa, and eleven miles west of Pha Thi, we joined other crews moving people south from Point Alpha and other sites to Mounq Heim and Na Khang, where they could be relocated to Sam Tong. Some individuals had already been moved two, perhaps three or more times. The activity continued all day and we recovered late at Long Tieng.

Ken Wood joined my crew on Monday. During another long day, the last of the refugee evacuation phase, we moved an enormous number of people and their goods out of harm's way.

From my very early days in Laos, I had participated in many evacuations, but the latest one constituted the largest to date. It required an "all hands" effort: all available Air America crews, aircraft, AID workers, and an enormous amount of supplies from refugee relief stocks.

One AID worker related issues regarding evacuations:

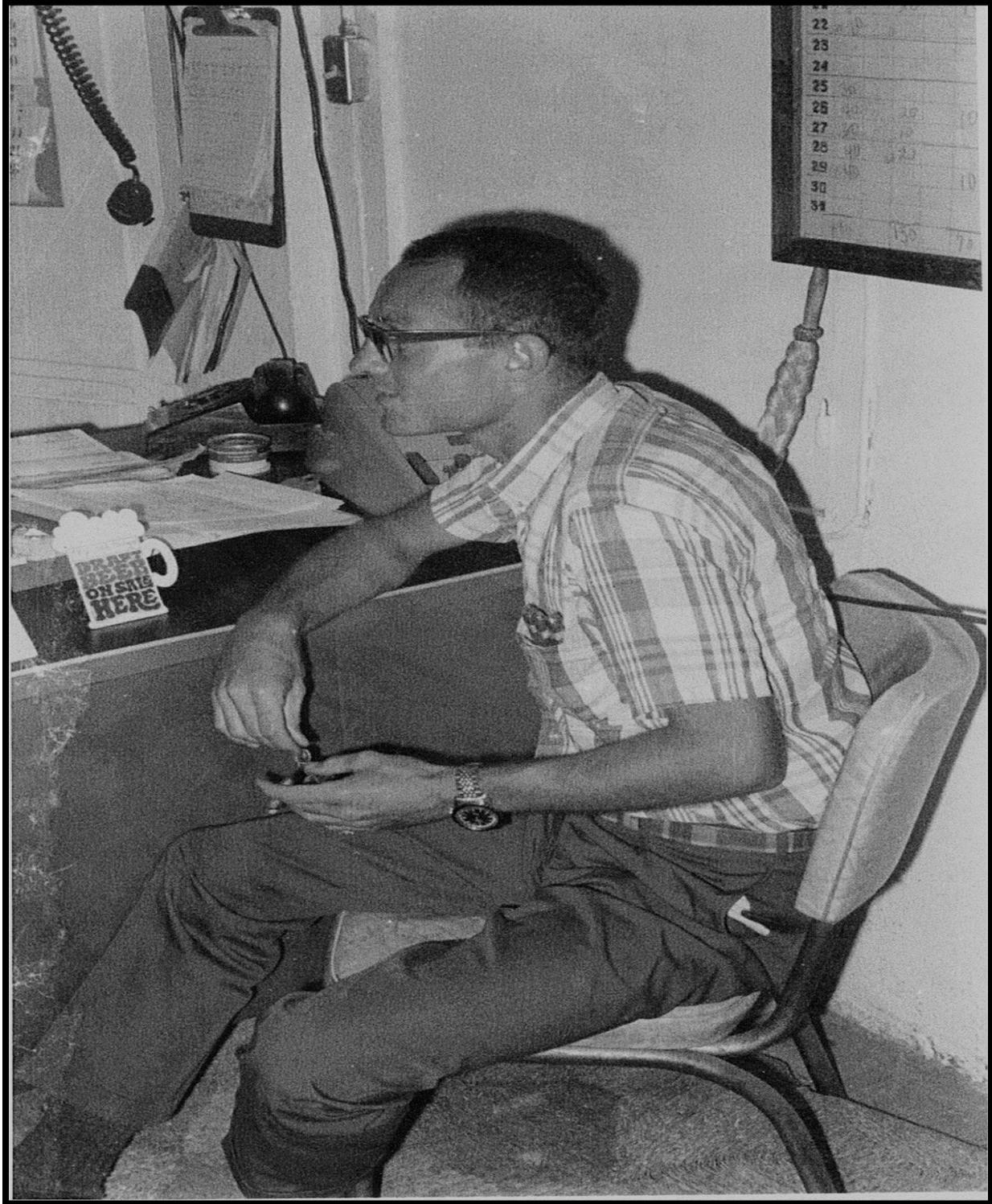
"Many times [during evacuations] we were using two or three different safety locations. Once the evacuation was complete, we would send Nai Kongs out to sort out where the family unit was located. Because of the chaos fostered by the movement, it was not unusual for grandma to be in one place, momma and the kids in another. We would [eventually] get things sorted out and the family back together.

None of the separated family members ever went hungry. Another family would take them in and feed them until we could get the situation resolved. One lady had breast fed an infant that had been left on a helicopter during the confusion. She had one of her own but was nursing them both. It took over a week to get the lady to admit that she had found the child in the aircraft, and more importantly, agreed to let us take it back to its mother, who was at another site.

Many times, we were never able to [fly] everyone out and they had to walk. He always had a hard time facing them when they finally arrived on foot. He always felt that maybe we could have done more and avoided having to have them go through that ordeal. But not one of them ever complained or was hostile toward him." ⁴⁰

Ernie Kuhn was completely exhausted when the evacuation and much of resettling operation was complete. He wanted to move to

⁴⁰ Blaine Jensen Letter.



Ernest Kuhn USAID Coordinator at Houei Kha Moun (LS-111) when Phu Pha Thi fell.

Thompson Collection.

sites where "his refugees" were to be located. However, Doctor Weldon had a different idea. Two weeks rest for him, if not in the hospital, then in some quiet place where he could unwind. As a compromise, the disused beach at Ban Saen, Thailand, was selected.

Later, Aid Chief Charlie Mann conducted a large meeting at the USAID facility. However trivial, anyone who had anything remotely associated with the evacuation received an award and a small bonus. Curiously, as the on-site coordinator, Ernie's name was never mentioned. Feeling empty and left out of recognition, when the meeting concluded he was extremely upset and bitter, for he had "busted a gut," obtaining little sleep over a couple of weeks.

Unknown to Ernie, at the time of the meeting, Mann did not possess authorization to present him with anything because AID Washington could not agree on awarding him the proposed highest civilian AID medal. Therefore, no mention of his substantial role in the operation was forthcoming at the time.

It required almost a year of wrangling between the Vientiane mission and Washington agency before the two agreed to award Ernie the second highest AID medal and a 2,000-dollar bonus. Even this was peculiar. He was on home leave during the summer of 1969 when he received a bonus check in the mail for 1,800 dollars. The balance of 200 dollars had been withheld for personal income tax. After he returned to Laos, without ceremony or fanfare, an AID secretary removed the medal and certificate from a filing cabinet and handed it to him. ⁴¹

Apparently, anyone, however brief, who participated in the evacuation, received some sort of acknowledgement from the

⁴¹ Ernie Kuhn Letter to Author, 06/27/96.

Vientiane Embassy. After returning from home leave, along with a form letter of appreciation dated 20 April 1968 from Jerry McEntee, AMF/RW-UDN, I was forwarded a standard form letter from Ambassador William Sullivan. I had received many commendations over the years for SAR work, but never before anything from the State Department.

Captain McEntee's cover memorandum stated:

"It is with deep satisfaction and pleasure that I forward the enclosed letter from the U.S. Ambassador to Laos. It is written testimony to your resolve to undertake and accomplish a difficult and hazardous task reflects credit on you as an individual and at the same time "Air America" which you represent.

I extend my congratulations with that of the Ambassador's for your excellent performance."

Written on U.S. Embassy letterhead, the Ambassador's 8 April stock letter read:

"...Dear Captain Casterlin:

The emergency rescue operation of March 20-25 in Northeastern Laos, which brought over eight thousand people to safety, was accomplished under the most hazardous and trying conditions. The magnificent success of the airlift was due to the courage, skill and resolve of everyone who participated. A great measure of these qualities was furnished by you and your fellow helicopter flight personnel, who flew tirelessly in the worst conditions of weather and security to find and move the refugees. Without you, saving them would have been impossible.

Please accept my warm thanks and commendation for your splendid and essential contribution..."

I was not privy to the number of letters distributed to H-34 and Bell helicopter, or fixed wing crewmembers, but they must have totaled dozens. (Mike Jarina received one.) Like the SAR

commendations, the letter was well received, but I considered a little embellished and quite tardy after five years of similar type operations. Still, such an operation was really normal work and the ambassador was not obliged to acknowledge our effort.

PUBLICITY

After visiting Luang Prabang during the March evacuation period in upper Military Region Two, Author Robert Shaplen from the prestigious *New Yorker Magazine*, Keyes Beech of the *Chicago Tribune Newspaper*, and Arnaud de Borchgrave from *Newsweek Magazine*, in a rare move, were authorized by the U.S. Embassy to journey to Sam Tong and interview Pop Buell for their organizations. Normally these uncommon visits were connected with major enemy advances that produced a flood of refugees and were believed by State to warrant world-wide publicity. Since most adhered to a liberal persuasion, reporters were normally not welcome upcountry, and not much had ever officially been recorded regarding Pop or AID's work at Sam Tong. Don Schanche had previously written a positive article about Pop in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and in the spring of 1964, while I was present, CBS and NBC crews had filmed Pop and Sam Tong during a major refugee evacuation. The made-for-TV documentary was actually aired in America.

Ernie Kuhn recalled the morning the men arrived at Site-20 in a Caribou. Unfortunately, no one from AID Vientiane or the embassy had informed Pop of the media visit, and he was working under the premise that reporters were forbidden upcountry. Moreover, he was likely having a bad day, for after some Pop-sweetened invective, Buell sent them back to Vientiane.

Determined to obtain their stories, within two hours the men returned to Sam Tong and were again promptly ejected from the site. When this occurred a third time, the disgruntled

newsmen went to the embassy to complain about their treatment. Consequently, Pop was instructed to properly deal with the men, take them anywhere, and ensure that they obtained their stories.

Requiring support and assistance, the disgruntled Buell instructed Kuhn, who was in the north working with refugees, to RTB that evening. When Ernie arrived, dirty from the day's work and carrying his AK-47 and pistol, the angry trio ignored him. They were only interested in retaliating for Buell's rude and hostile behavior.

Foregoing the "live like the natives" philosophy of earlier years, Pop now lived in a decent well-appointed rock house that was built for him the previous year while he was on leave. Citing a need to accomplish something, Buell asked Ernie to drive the reporters to the house in his Jeep. On the way, the stateside contingent was still not interested in him and became very belligerent. Ernie was definitively not impressed with them.

A fifth of scotch was cracked at the house to help clear the air. First Jiggs arrived, and receiving the brunt of the men's displeasure, became defensive. When Pop arrived, the fun began. Merely a bystander, Ernie recalled several hours of opinionated versions on various subjects and much name calling. On one topic, Pop, an ogre when drinking, was adamant about the stupidity of Averell Harriman for "giving Laos away to the communists." Taking exception to Pop's diatribe, one of the men indicated that he had been an aid to the great man.

Never forewarned of the visit, Ernie was not intimidated by the men's credentials, their arrogance, or their mission. However, as instructed by embassy personnel, when they wanted to talk to Vang Pao he cooperated by driving them to Long Tieng. On the way, they were stopped at several checkpoints, where guards had no idea what action to take. Finally arriving at Vang Pao's

rock house, perhaps forewarned, they discovered that he was not home.

Shaplen later recorded **his** reflections of the trip in his book *Time Out of Hand*, Chapter Seven The Ugly Duckling regarding Laos. The segment somewhat portrayed the situation, color, and flavor of the time. Within reasonable limits of human passion, the depictions were fairly accurate, but also reflected observations of one relatively naive and highly flustered individual, and perhaps contained biased or manufactured opinions of those he purportedly interviewed:

"...The atmosphere at Sam Tong was tense with NVA [forces] only a day's march away. Caribou transports were shuttling in and out with refugees being ferried from airstrips in the north. Mostly Meo, but including some Lao and some Thai Dam, or Black Thai, they were clustered in their various native dress alongside the runway, and among them were a dozen Buddhist monks who wore machetes under their saffron robes..." ⁴²

"...Now it was packed with victims of the current offensive, mostly young men with bullet wounds in their faces, chests or with shattered limbs. 'We picked them up wherever we could and then flew them down here...The whole region up north is falling to the Communists. This year they are fighting harder than they ever did before, and they have brought in the first team. The situation is now hopelessly mixed up with the Vietnam War, and these poor people are taking a beating because of that. Once we assumed an obligation to help them, we should not have abused them because of Vietnam. We should have defended and helped them in their own right...'"

⁴² USAID Health Chief, Doctor "Jiggs" Weldon, escorted Robert Shaplen through the expansive Sam Tong hospital that had handled more than 12,000 casualties in 1967.

Edgar Buell, who Author Shaplen claimed he had met in 1963, when "Pop" was already somewhat of a legend as a result of his passionate dedication to the Meo cause, had hardly slept in days due to the refugee crisis and was in a highly emotionally state. The stress and strain of the current situation certainly did not help the fifty-five-year-olds' overall health and heart problems.

Critical of USG's support for the Meo, he complained about their inferior World War Two weapons in contrast to the enemy's more modern communist-manufactured AK-47 assault rifles:

"VP had lost at least a thousand men since January 1, killed alone, and I don't know how many more wounded. He's lost all but one of his commanders." [The bitter man continued], "Was it their war at Pathi? We asked them to go in and defend our lousy installation because of the Vietnam War. Why didn't we defend it? We destroyed their homeland in order to keep that installation secure, and it was lost anyway. What's more important, I've just lost twenty-five thousand people to the Communists, and they're all my friends..."

Vang Pao was described in Ambassador William Sullivan's book *Obbligato* as a:

"...wiry little man with a broad intelligent face, and a restless air of constant activity. He had a matchless knowledge of the hills, ridges and valleys of northeast Laos. He recruited his troops in the various villages lying in the path of the North Vietnamese menace and commanded their loyalty by example

*of his personal courage..."*⁴³ ⁴⁴

In addition to action in upper Military Region Two, Long Tieng's flanks were under pressure, particularly the eastern region. On Route-4 north of Paksane, the enemy had already captured Tha Thom and Sala Sen Din, and was causing problems in the Khang Kho-Ban Phang (LS-239) areas.

*"At the time, Vang Pao's men were 15 kilometers away [in the Khang Kho, LS-204, region] fighting off an NVA battalion. Vang Pao was in his late 30s with five wives and 20 children. VP indicated [an estimated] 46,000 NVA and four Chinese battalions were in Laos."*⁴⁵

"We are losing 10-20 men KIA per day and are outgunned by heavy mortars and artillery as well as AK 47s. We've respected the Geneva Accord on armaments, though they haven't, but we didn't expect a conventional war of this kind. We need modern weapons and more than the few T-28 bombers we've got. We must mobilize all the hill men in this part of the country. The Communists are building up a political as well as a military offensive. They are determined to throw us out of Sam Neua and

⁴³ This assessment was only partly accurate, but somewhat skewed. Unstated was the fact that uncooperative village populations were sometimes harshly intimidated to participate in the war by withholding rice drops or by direct military force.

⁴⁴ Robert Shaplen, *Time Out of Hand: Revolution and Reaction in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1969) 351-352, 354. William Sullivan, *Ambassador Sullivan's Impression of Vang Pao* in his book *Obbligato 1939-1979: Notes on a Foreign Service Career* (New York, Norton & Company) 213-214. Bill Leary March 1968 Notes. Ernie Kuhn Interview with Arthur Dommen, 58-59, 03/25/95.

⁴⁵ Although a Chinese mission existed at Khang Khay on the northern Plain of Jars, the province of Phong Saly all but officially annexed, and major road building underway for years, such a number was never substantiated by the Western camp or admitted until the PDJ operation in 1969.

the other Northern provinces, and after that the cities...It's finished up here unless we get help quickly...'"

OPERATIONS

I worked locally out of Long Tieng on Tuesday morning until ordered to proceed to Savannakhet. Such a shift to a different military region was rare and signified one thing to me: Special Missions.

Mike Jarina deadheaded north on CASI C-47 Papa Delta Echo (PDE) and Hotel-30. After arriving at Sam Tong, he assumed command of Hotel-57 with old time and reliable Flight Mechanic Rick DeCosta. Mike joined the gaggle of helicopters and STOL aircraft moving upper Military Region Two refugees and supplies to established or newly formed outlying sites according to clans or ethnic derivation, to preclude centuries long real or imagined grievances. Meo generally went south of Site-20 to an area overlooking a well-watered valley near Ban Pacpeup, twelve miles southeast of the Ban Na Moh (LS-207) area. ⁴⁶ When that site filled up, refugee backhauling continued to a position five miles north on Phu He. Other people were deposited at Ban Na Luang (LS-66), seven miles northwest of Nam Mo.

Some lowlanders, likely the generic Lao Theung people, were distributed north to New Xieng Dat (LS-117), southwest of Moung Soui. Always concerned about Sam Tong and Long Tieng security, additional people went to the Lima Site-72 area to settle five miles northeast of Site-20.

Jarina completed the day working the Ban Phang Valley to the east of Padong Ridge, where the enemy was active.

⁴⁶ Readers might recall from an earlier book that Old Timers called Site-207 "Pearson's Pad."

After arriving at Lima-39, Julian "Scratch" Kanach joined me for two afternoon exfiles. It marked the first time that I had flown with Scratch since the early January uncharacteristic and poorly planned Special Mission when we had been hosed in open rice paddies ninety miles to the northeast. Not able to challenge a Customer's proposal, we had learned a difficult lesson that day, and I did not relish a repeat incident. Moreover, despite his proclivity to be hardheaded at times, more than any other pilot in our group, I trusted Scratch's judgment and ability to a fault.

The first two aircraft exfiltration missions, with Robbie Robertson flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH) as a backup SAR ship, was to WD9949, more than sixty miles east of Savannakhet. The second was flown to XC2889 at a site seventy miles east to the Phou Mali range, five miles west of Route-23, where the trail led into the Toumlan Valley on the way toward Saravane.

We spent a total of two hours and twenty minutes in the denied area and recovered at dark.

On 27 March, after loading personnel at Long Tieng, Jarina returned to the eastern hills in the contested Sam Keo area near Site-239. From there he conducted many shuttles to a landing zone two miles southwest. After flying less than a fuel load, Mike was relieved on the Padong (LS-05) strip and deadheaded back to Udorn on 60F and Papa Charlie Alpha (PCA).

The same day, while Scratch ferried PFG to Udorn, John Melvin and I joined Robbie in PFH and relocated to Pakse. After some local work around PS-22, we flew to Ban Kong Mi for a Special Mission. Infil of a team of eight was conducted at YB3323, sixteen miles northeast of PS-7. Since the area was used numerous times, a diversion was conducted along a maze of trails, seven miles north of the insertion.

Because of his agenda, and upper Taipei management's desire to assess our Bell program and discover the reason for our increasing accidents and greater parts requests than Saigon's, Hitchman flew in the field (at least with me). I was surprised to see him, for Bob, like others who departed Udorn, was not fond of our spate of physically and mentally challenging SAR work during the 1964-1965 period--not that anyone was particularly enamored of the hazardous tasks. Perhaps he flew with me because I had worked many years for the Company, knew areas well, but primarily with nothing to hide, was a willing participant to his investigation. Other pilots were either away during his Udorn "sabbatical," or refused to fly with him.

I flew, with Bob observing from the left seat, on the 28th and 29th. That Thursday we worked the entire day in areas away from Pakse. This was advantageous because project pay was not reduced as was flying in published "safe" areas around Lima-11. Flight time was respectable, which made me happy, for I was well above seventy hours, earning a premium overtime wage. That did not happen often, and I was likely accorded more than two weeks in the field because of my upcoming home leave. The day proceeded well and Bob seemed satisfied with my performance--at least he proffered no comment.

Friday was atypical. First, shuttles out of Pakse to the Saravane area almost halved my logged project pay. Second, while working a SGU landing zone on Phu Kate's southern rim, I experienced an incident perpetrated by my "stick buddy" that was definitely not an operational norm. I was still a little spooked from my nearly disastrous landing at Pha Thi carrying a load of napalm. Located at an equivalent altitude at Site-85, Phu Kate also always presented challenges. Because of its height and location, daily heat conduction and air temperature variations stimulated cloud formation at a certain level on the

mountainside.⁴⁷ This generally occurred at certain times during the day when the dew point was narrow, and clouds moved up and over the mountain obscuring the landing zones. In addition, pads consisting of boulders close to the rim were always beset with some of the trickiest and dangerous wind patterns and currents imaginable. It was my custom when landing on very high, questionable pads to conduct sufficient recon passes in order to check my power, and to assess and obtain a feel for prevailing wind currents.

Constituting a difficult landing during normal times, it was doubly so this time, mainly because Hitchman was onboard observing my technique. On this particular day, I might have flown one too many passes. While on short final, Bob took the controls and said impatiently, "*Here, let me show you how to do this.*" He showed me. Carrying excessive speed while descending rapidly toward the landing zone, he smacked the rocky pad hard, resulting in a terrible landing. Describing the situation, I might have humorously considered the maneuver a positive landing. Until PFH stopped vibrating and came to rest, I thought he was going to either destroy the ship or kill us. I was disappointed and unimpressed by Bob's performance. As PIC, and concerned about skid and crosstube damage after the hard landing, I exited the aircraft to examine the gear. I felt relieved when the undercarriage appeared intact. Of course, divorced from Lao mountain work for some time, Bob could not possibly have been proficient in mountain work. Furthermore, my landing technique for that landing zone was entirely different from his.

Before I left him at Pakse and deadheaded back to Udorn in CASI Dornier Papa Charlie Tango (PCT), perhaps hoping that I

⁴⁷ Usually the upper third of the mountain's southern face.

would not relate his terrible landing to anyone, Bob allowed that I was doing fine in the Huey. After that close call, I wish that I had been able to harbor the same opinion of him. I did keep quiet, but never forgot.

A tiger never loses its stripes or a leopard his spots. Before leaving for Saigon, Bob reputedly prepared a scathing report on our many deficiencies. Apparently, no one in our Bell program was spared. He concluded in the paper that he was the only person who could rectify the situation. However, Assistant Base Manager, Tex Dew, filling in for Ben Moore, also on home leave, would not allow him to depart Udorn until he substantially altered the tone of the report. Tex was well aware of the pressures Udorn pilots had endured for months in Laos, and that we had been doing a commendable job. Therefore, he considered the report merely Bob's particular brand of BS, and many of Hitchman's observations were considered no more than a bad joke. Some still consider Hitchman's credibility and decline as a manager dated from this period. It was his last trip to Udorn until being cashiered in Saigon and permanently transferred back to the Udorn base. ⁴⁸ ⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Marius Burke Interview.

⁴⁹ Wayne Knight believed Hitchman's save-the-Bell-program-visit was pre-planned and calculated to take advantage of his absence. Moreover, the same thing had happened in 1965 when Bob was rehired through the backdoor. At that time, during Wayne's absence, Abadie had likely sanctioned Bob's return, but this particular time Knight believed that Abadie would have informed him of a visit of such magnitude. The episode was generally considered a non-event. Upon his return to the office after leave, Wayne received no debriefing on what had transpired during his absence, and did not recall any lasting results of the episode.

As to his plumbered landing on Phu Kate, Bob's Bell performance in Saigon was not without incident. On at least one occasion he had bent skids during a hard landing, when a midnight raid produced a new set of skids from Army stocks. Furthermore, in addition to other unreported accidents, some in Taipei management knew more about

LUANG PRABANG

Bob Glover, still based at Moung Nane during the last two weeks in March, wrote to people in the States:

21 March:

"I just got back from Ban Na Lao and beyond. I'm supposed to have an army escort to go so far from my quarters...When I agreed to go, I had no idea how far afield the rice paddies ranged. The paddies were located along the valley bisected by the Moung Nane River.

I noticed that the Ag Agent was getting quite visibly agitated. Finally, he said, 'this is the last one.' After this last one we headed back to Moung Nane. After we had gone about a kilometer, he told me that we had been very close to Ban Na Fai. Ban Na Fai is a village that is visited by the Viet Minh whenever they are in need of eggs or fresh pork. The inspection trip had not been preplanned, as it was a Sunday, and also my whereabouts had not got into the bamboo telegraph, otherwise I might not be writing this."

Friday:

"Sometimes it seems cruel to have to uproot some of the people and move them to a different area, but it does have its good points. We see the results from too much inbreeding. When these people are forced to live in a closed tribal unit there tends to be too close a union of families. This often results in a regressive gene becoming dominant.⁵⁰ When the tribals are

Hitchman's activities than was widely known. On more than one visit to the "head shed," Wayne learned about Hitch's philandering and extreme unpopularity with his pilot staff. This was a primary reason why he never advanced further up the management ladder.

⁵⁰ This situation, producing albinism and other genetic abnormalities, was much the same problem in the Meo culture and throughout other tribal regions of Laos.

forced to become refugees as a result of the war in Viet Nam they are often resettled close to a different tribe. This new environment results in marriages between non related partners. The resulting offspring show a marked improvement in intelligence and facial features.

The people here were a little uneasy last night; the soldiers posted guards around the Chao MOUNG and me. We have no solid evidence that the PL are even close. It seems to be a form of PL psychology to try and get the populace openly hostile to the presence of the Americans. I feel that my popularity and respect is my best protection up to a certain point. The uncertainty of just what this point is, in the weak spot. I try to be careful not to have a constant itinerary or remain in one place too long at a time..."

Since it was a holiday period of Lao Army Day, Glover described Lao Lao served in connection with the fish feasts:

"It is a raw alcoholic liquid made by distilling a mash made by fermenting rice in a crock and hoping that the proper wild yeast will make its home in the crock. If it does, in due time' the brew will produce a liquid that can be distilled into a high proof alcoholic liquid...It was the duty of the marriageable girls to proffer this drink to the guests and it was customary for the guest to drink it...I soon learned that it was the duty of the girl who proffered the drink to be required to drink an equal amount if the guest insisted..."

26 March:

"Today was hot and the air is smokier. We can't smell the smoke and the air is good, but hot. There is so much smoke in

the upper atmosphere that we can hardly see the mountains. This phenomenon is known as 'slash and burn.'

This being Tuesday morning, there are the usual requests for passage on the chopper to Luang Prabang. This morning it seems more hectic than usual. Perhaps it only seems that way to me. Maybe I'm getting a little edgy. I have had a rather busy schedule. The RO chopper is scheduled to arrive shortly and then later the USAID chopper. ⁵¹

There have been a number of sporadic engagements around the province lately, nothing to talk about yet."

27 March:

"Yesterday was an extremely busy day...Soon after the radio check the RO chopper came in bringing Jerry Sylvester, Major Grace, and Colonel Chansom...the Lao army will make a sweep through the area, and hopefully will keep the PL off balance for a while. The USAID chopper was to have gone to Pak Beng before coming to Mounq Nane, but due to last minute changes it came here first...[Passengers were:] John Perry (area coordinator), Doctor Thomas (deputy director for rural development), Dwayne Hammer (community development advisor), Bob Sakan (refugee relief officer), Bligh Debussey (area education officer, and several Laotian ministry officials."

An extremely rare accident with potentially disastrous consequences occurred at Luang Prabang on Thursday. During IRAN heavy maintenance at the Udorn maintenance facility, in addition to other repair work, Hotel-33's tail cone was replaced. The aircraft was released from the barn by the 20th. As late as the

⁵¹ RO: The Requirements Office imbedded in the U.S. Mission contained military people.

27th, the helicopter displayed bad medium and high frequency vibrations during test flights.

With Udorn IFR in seasonal smoke and haze, Ed Rudolfs and Flight Mechanic Nery departed in Hotel-33 under a special VFR clearance, designed to expedite helicopter departure and separation away from jet traffic. During the flight to Lima-54, a slight medium frequency vibration was felt. The crew landed at 1030 hours, refueled, taxied to the 713 area, and shut down next to Hotel-32 to obtain loading and briefing instructions from the Customer. The two-aircraft mission entailed delivering troops to a northern outpost at the junction of Route-4 and the Nam Ou.

At 1110 hours Ed cranked up, taxied straight, turned perpendicular to the runway, and set the brakes to await his turn to load.

After releasing the brakes and preparing to taxi onto the macadam runway for takeoff, Ed heard a loud noise and felt something snap. Directional control was immediately lost, with the ship vigorously yawing to the right. To counter the sudden and unexpected movement, the pilot split the needles (disengaged the rotor system from the engine) and applied the rotor brake while part of Hotel-33 came to rest parallel to the runway.⁵²

Investigation revealed that the tail section had failed at station 406, resulting in almost complete separation, as the tail pylon twisted and fell to the right. Rudolfs had been fortunate that such a failure did not occur in the air as it had to my former USMC HMR-261 squadron mate, Simeon McDaniels, while he was working over the jungle in South America for the

⁵² Air America XOXO Accident Report for Hotel-33.

Petroleum Helicopter (PHI) Company of Lafayette, Louisiana. ⁵³

Bob Glover missed the fun at Luang Prabang, but managed a short trip there when alerted that a helicopter was inbound to Moung Nane:

"... [I] trotted up the hill to the chopper pad and boarded the chopper.

We had a load of soldiers to take to an outpost on the Nam Ou River. The visibility was poor due to the smoke from the burning of the High Fields. We followed the Mekong River up to the vicinity of the Nam Ou, then the valleys to the outpost on the Nam Ou. We landed long enough to discharge the soldiers, and then followed a different route back to the Mekong. The reason being, to evade any enemy fire, should they be on the lookout for us on the return trip. We followed the Nam Ou to the Mekong, then south to Luang Prabang. We passed by Pac Ou on the east side of the Mekong. I felt a little better after we left Pac Ou...

It was after six PM when I arrived at the airport."

Bob returned to Moung Nane the following morning. ⁵⁴

⁵³ I witnessed a similar occurrence one evening at Sam Tong under different circumstances to a ship parked next to the bank between the runway and the Air America hostel. It was part of a conscientious Flight Mechanic's daily post flight duties to fold the tail pylon. This facilitated manual greasing of the tail rotor assembly zerk fittings from the narrow cat walk on top of the tail cone. I watched as the Filipino walked around the ship's nose. Suddenly, after a cracking noise was heard, the green pylon slammed to the ground. I had never seen anything remotely like that happen before, and I am reasonably sure the Filipino mechanic had not. The culprit was discovered to be a double hinged component failure that joined the tail pylon and cone with a ratchet type device. Apparently, vibrations, metal fatigue, time and stress had taken a major toll on the part. As a result, all double hinges were retrofitted with triple hinges.

⁵⁴ Glover Book, *Laos*, 131-133, 136-141.

PROGNOSIS

Communist activity during the first three months of 1968 stimulated issuance of a comprehensive March Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) covering the months through June.⁵⁵

Much of the report dealt with relatively old assumptions and issues, but other items were quite revealing in the whys and wherefores of the current situation in Laos and enhanced comprehension for the reader in regard to that highly elusive term "The Big Picture":

"...Communist intentions in Laos are highly contingent on developments in South Vietnam...capability to reduce the area controlled by the Laotian Government to a few enclaves in fairly short order...primary concern is with the security of the vital panhandle infiltration routes...it is unlikely that the Communists would wish to over-extend their forces in Laos or run the grave risks of destroying the general framework of the 1962 settlement...they will probably take a few more positions and then reduce their military pressures during the rainy season.

...the possibility remains that the communists might press their advantage. The chances of Hanoi adopting this course would increase in the months ahead if the war in South Vietnam reached a critical juncture and Hanoi saw advantage in opening a 'second front' in Laos in order to place further strain on U.S. resources. Or if Hanoi were confident at some point that negotiations on South Vietnam were at hand, it might think it useful to take as much territory in Laos as possible to strengthen the communist bargaining position...

⁵⁵ SNIE: A SNIE was normally a compilation of intelligence from organizations of the Central Intelligence Agency, State and Defense Departments, and the National Security Agency. The report was generated prior to the President's 31 March address to the nation.

...the communists, with their ability to reinforce rapidly from North Vietnam, have long had the capability to defeat the qualitatively inferior RLG forces and seize most of Laos. Every year Hanoi has strengthened its forces in Laos for the dry season. What is noteworthy this year, however, is the extent of the reinforcement and the intensity of operations...The communist position has also been strengthened by their recent advances westward and by the losses in manpower, material, and morale that they have been able to inflict on the RLG. Accordingly, we estimate that the communists could, in fairly short order, reduce the RLG area of control to a few enclaves.

There are, however, other factors more important than raw capabilities which bear on the future scope of communist actions in Laos. North Vietnam of course desires to preserve communist control over border areas. Hanoi also has a continuing concern to protect and strengthen the Pathet Lao territorial base while retaining the option to return the Pathet Lao to active participation in the tripartite government. In part, recent military moves have been a reaction to the RLG's "nibbling" tactics and to the raids of guerrilla forces deep within territory nominally under communist control.

For the present, however, Hanoi's overriding concern in Laos is with the infiltration system in the Lao corridor. [Generically called the Ho Chi Minh Trail.] The security of the supply and infiltration routes developed there since the early 1960s has become even more critical to the communist effort in South Vietnam in recent months. The communist 'winter-spring' offensive in South Vietnam has clearly required not only additional men and material in preparation for major and widespread military action, but also increased use of the corridor.



Shaded area of map depicts the enemy territorial gains running the length of Laos as of spring 1968. Lightly dotted areas are contested areas.

SNIE #58-68 Map, p5.

Hanoi's normal concern with the Panhandle has thus been intensified, while at the same time U.S. bombing and other expanded allied activities [SOG cross border and Lao trail watch teams] have been imposing greater strains on the communist logistic system in Laos. Hanoi almost certainly desires to improve the routes in the Panhandle of Laos, expand the area of control there, and possibly **develop alternate routes further west**. Although the present communist logistical system is adequate for the delivery of needed supplies, additional routes would provide the communists with greater flexibility and force the U.S. to spread its interdiction efforts over a wider area. In protecting the corridor and in advancing other local objectives in Laos, Hanoi would not wish at this time to take actions which unnecessarily complicated or hindered support of the war in South Vietnam. If, for example, it employed its capability to seize and hold most of Laos, the task of supporting and defending these extended lines of communication [LOC] could detract from the main effort in South Vietnam. Such a military campaign would completely upset the Geneva arrangements which still have some advantage for North Vietnam, and more important, might precipitate larger scale U.S. operations against Hanoi's supply lines in the Panhandle.

Hanoi probably believes that its present offensive in Laos will not by itself provoke large-scale U.S. intervention in Laos. Instead, it may believe that these operations tend to deter such action by showing the U.S. and Souvanna [Phouma] that the communists have the capability to make such intervention extremely costly. Finally, Hanoi may believe that even the present level of its military activities in Laos will cause such

concern in Thailand as to affect the Thai commitment in South Vietnam..."

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⁵⁶ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968 Volume 28, Laos, Document 346, 03/21/68, Special National Intelligence Estimate SNIE #58-68, Communist Intentions in Laos; Document also seen at Internet [URL \(foia.cia.gov/browse_docs_full.asp?doc_no=000166459&title=SNIE+5852D\)](http://foia.cia.gov/browse_docs_full.asp?doc_no=000166459&title=SNIE+5852D), 1-6;

In deference to the Author's Cold War bias, unlike Washington generated correspondence, he has chosen to use lower capitalization for the word communist. As a major region in the interdiction program, Panhandle is capitalized.

"Johnson's speech last Sunday sure took us all by surprise and now it's up to Congress to pass the surtax and keep us away from inflation."

3 April Letter from the Author's Father, Harry R. Casterlin

While awaiting home leave tickets and after coordinating with the CPH office, needing a rest, I began the amoeba "cure." On the fourth, I posted a final letter home stating, *"...Perhaps there won't be a war to come back to. The Reds are edgy as they have all they want in Laos now. They have parts that we have had for years..."*

I secured the Cortina to a carport support with a stout chain and made arrangements with the landlord and Kuhn Yai to care for the house. Taking leave of hot and dusty Udorn, we departed on the night train for Bangkok. After obtaining our necessary visas from the U.S. Consular Section at the embassy on Wireless Road, and the tickets and flight itinerary at the Pan American office, we were ready to depart Southeast Asia. Accompanied by retired Supreme Court Judge Prasat and his family, we assembled at Don Muang. Kuhn Yai was also present, along with Bung Orn's husband, Charlie Carlson, who appeared at the last moment. Charlie had fallen on very distressing times and certainly looked the part. For some time, he and Bung Orn had been experiencing very serious family problems. Their acrimony had reached legendary proportions and the "reformed" alcoholic had reverted to his past imbibing ways. In addition, he had been spreading vicious rumors about the family to anyone who would listen, especially among my peers at the Air America bar. One always had to consider the source, but because that

kind of talk negatively impacted my reputation, I took extreme umbrage, ejecting him from our house one evening. Charlie was not working. Unusual for him, a person who formerly carried wads of Thai baht in his pocket to dispense to friends, lacked money and borrowed some from me. Little did I know that I would never see the man alive again.

Very tired travelers, we arrived in Honolulu, Hawaii, purportedly one of the most difficult customs gateways entering the USA. Although the heat and humidity were oppressive, the customs check did not prove bothersome.

The final leg of our killer trip half way around the world ended with the 707 landing at John Fitzgerald Kennedy Airport on Saturday, the thirteenth, at 1630 hours. Before flying across the Hudson River to Newark on a New York Airways helicopter, I phoned Dad to see if he could pick us up at the airport. He was surprised at my call because we were about two weeks earlier than expected, but he complied, and after fighting rush hour traffic on Route-22, we were home just about dark. Probably because of a large temperature change, little Ricky, whose health was fragile anyway developed a temporary cold.

MR-1 LUANG PRABANG

The area in and around Luang Prabang was relatively quiet in early April. Having lived and worked in Laos for a year and a half for IVS/AID, the Glovers considered themselves short-timers. In addition to nearing the end of their tour, work permitting, they were planning well-deserved time off later in the month in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Bob was still living and working at Mounng Nane, thirty-three miles southwest of LP, while Jane remained at the royal capital because of a potential security problem at Lima-254.

"...I have noticed that I have been furnishing quite a lot of courage to these people, and that my presence seems to have a quieting effect on the rumors that float around from time to time.

Things have been quiet for several days now, just the usual rumors of Pathet Lao in the forest near Ban Na Fai. ¹ I made a trip up there a couple weeks ago and that helped to quiet rumors for a while. I'll try to get up that way again soon. There are Lao troops in the mountains so the security should be quite good...

The air is still extremely smoky. The last two evenings we could see the fires creeping up the side of a mountain over to the west."

3 April:

"...In a way I'll be sorry to leave Laos but in view of the security situation it will be a relief. I keep so busy and the work is so interesting that I am apt to forget the tension that I work under.

Coming back this morning I saw a string of bells on a Meo pony, small cast bronze. The bells hung in pairs on a leather strap, about 40 with a larger one in the middle. I wanted to buy them, but didn't try as I know that they set quite a store by things of this nature. The mountain people are 'Animists.' That is, they see spirits in material things..."

5 April-early rains:

"It is a nice cool morning. I woke up in the night to the sound of thunder. It was almost continuous, off in the distance,

¹ Na Fai was located four miles southeast of Site-254 in a small valley surrounded by hills.

and at times coming nearer. Finally, it came into the valley. It was not heavy but just light showers off and on; now it seems to have settled down to a steady rain...Rain this early doesn't usually last long. Most of the high fields have been burned. So after about three rains like this, they will start planting. Last year, it seemed to us that they planted the high fields much too early, but the rice crop proved us wrong..."

Saturday:

"It really rained for a while last night. I have no rain gage, but other stations reported up to one inch...the air is good, but high clouds. I noticed the Lao planes didn't have to dodge the mountains. I don't mind dodging mountains in a chopper, but winged craft is another story.

This morning, a villager came down from Ban Na Moug to get medicine. He reported that on the 4th of April, three Viet Minh plus eleven Meo Pathet Lao (one a woman) were seen near the village, just passing by and headed away from here...

Jane is quite anxious that I should come to Luang Prabang over Phi Mai (Lao New Year). Last year, I was in Houei Sai, so was unable to accept the invitation to the palace...

We are beginning to get the roads open that the French built when they were here. There used to be a taxi-type bus that ran regularly during the dry season from Vientiane to Luang Prabang [on Route-13]. A year ago, a convoy of trucks and jeeps made the trip. There is a good road south as far as Xieng Ngeun and as far north as Moug Kassy. Another year or two, and it will be fairly good **if** things don't worsen. I expect any day to hear of an attack north of Moug Kassy. We have recently lost a lot of stations in Xieng Khouang Province, and expect to lose the rest soon...Wish we could get a glimmer of light on the outcome of all this, but all we can do at present is to keep

picking away, and hopefully keep what we have, of if not, fall back and keep picking..."

10 April:

"Yesterday-Tuesday-² I left for Moung Nane. We stopped at Kok Thom on the way back. Kok Thom is on the [Mekong] River and this is the only place suitable to off-load the heavy machinery needed to build the road from Moung Nane to Tha Deua. ³ This is the third attempt to start the construction of this road. On the chopper we had both American and Lao engineers as well as government officials. We have but 4 to 6 weeks before the rainy season starts...

[At Moung Nane] we located a spot where we could build a STOL strip. We can service the area at a substantial savings with STOL aircraft as compared to the usual chopper transport. We have lost an inordinate number of choppers lately and there is a great deal of high priority work for the choppers now and cannot be spared for this type of work...

Probably you have heard, by now, that the Chief of Police of Luang Prabang died the other day. Apparently, a bomb planted in his Jeep exploded when the ignition was turned on. This incident was typical of the actions being taken by the Pathet Lao to discourage support of the non-communist government...

After radio check I attended to the needs of recently arrived refugees from Nam Bac...the road to be that I have mentioned, from time to time, from Moung Nane to Tha Deua will bisect a plain. We have laid out four areas to resettle four distinct village political units [there] from Nam Bac..."

² John had spent two days at Luang Prabang.

³ This road consisted of an uncompleted portion of Route-1. Tha Deua was the ferry location that connected to the west bank and to Sayaboury.

Thursday:

"...very few villagers were working. I don't expect anyone to show up tomorrow. That will be the first day of the New Year. Officially the [Buddhist] New Year starts Saturday and ends Monday, but celebrations have been going on for the past three days and will continue for several more.

Jane is looking forward to my coming to Luang Prabang tomorrow."

Claiming too much work just before vacation, Bob did not return to LP for Phi Mai celebrations.

*"The last two days hundreds of mountain tribe's people have been in the area, Meo, Yao, Lieu, and Kha. Many of the visitors have come to the house for USAID handouts, some for gasoline for their lighters, and others just to visit. It gives me a sense of well-being to know that these people back in the mountains like to identify with me..."*⁴

MILITARY REGION TWO

Soon after President Johnson's announcement to halt bombing above the 20th parallel, Hanoi Radio, after a scathing denunciation of the bombing raids and other U.S. "acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," acquiesced to meet with U.S. representatives to discuss "unconditional cessation" of the bombing campaign. In response, LBJ announced an intention to establish contact with communist North Vietnamese representatives. Diplomatic efforts eventually led to Paris negotiations in which the Vietnamese representatives excelled and exploited-the Maoist technique of talking while fighting. Using this philosophy, the NVN employed the talks as a bully

⁴ Bob Glover, April Letters Home, 143-144, 147-156.

pulpit, spouting propaganda and refusing to listen to serious American proposals.

Despite a loss of considerable face over the defeat at Pha Thi and other sites, and now USAF tactical air in upper Military Region Two, Vang Pao was undeterred from his task to strike back at the enemy. Flushed with success, enemy units moved down Route-6 toward Na Khang for a third attempt to take and hold the site since 1966. If their momentum was successful the next step would be the PDJ and then major river towns. The site had to hold.

As in past years, Major General Vang Pao proved a master at creating timely diversions to delay or eliminate enemy advances calculated to grab as much territory as possible before impassable monsoon impacted roads bogged down their offensives. This year it was also considered important to minimize enemy territorial acquisitions in anticipation to some kind of negotiated settlement. Therefore, on 10 April, prior to the onset of torrential rains,⁵ using RLAFF T-28s for cover and helicopters, Air America crews lifted troops to landing zones in proximity of Mounng Son north of Mounng Heim. By early evening, Site-59 and the immediate area was under government control.

Too large an area for such few troops to control, Site-59 was subsequently lost during the month. However, before rallying in surrounding hills, guerrilla units held the valley long enough for civilian and military principals to eliminate the confusion over bombing restrictions and the contentious issue of the failure to provide sufficient American air support in northern MR-2. Thereafter, weather permitting, U.S. air normally assigned to North Vietnam was reallocated to Vang Pao's use in

⁵ Possibly foretelling an early monsoon season, some rain had already begun to inundate the north.

thwarting expected advances on Site-36's outer perimeters. As before, when Site-36 was threatened by Vietnamese forces, air support again proved beneficial to its survival. ⁶

JARINA WORKS FAR AFIELD ⁷

On 20 April Mike and Flight Mechanic Rudy Seraficio arrived at Sam Tong in Hotel-56 to continue moving refugees generated by the enemy action in upper Houa Phan Province to permanent locations. During a long day of thirty-five shuttles, Mike delivered people and their goods to village areas near Phou Nam Khuang, twenty-two miles southwest of Sam Tong and nine miles west of Moung Phun (LS-37). Other work included shuttles to Skyline Ridge.

Sunday, after early morning fog lifted in the Site-20 bowl, the crew of Hotel-56 was directed to Luang Prabang for work and a northern intelligence gathering mission to LS-187 (Ban Y) near Route-19, where, like in other areas in Sam Neua Province, enemy efforts to create all weather roads was underway. Information regarding accelerated road work and area movement in these LOC areas was deemed necessary after LBJ's recent bombing reduction. Following a shortened day, Mike and Rudy returned to Sam Tong for the night.

Continuing refugee work, Mike shuttled people east from Site-20 to Khieu Manang (LS-192) in the valley east of Phu Bia and a few miles from Moung Oum (LS-22), an original Momentum

⁶ Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam War*, 549.
John Bowman, *Almanac*, 201.

⁷ Mike's comprehensive flight information and comments regarding his H-34 participation in Laos during the Author's leave periods has tended to fill gaps and provide an uninterrupted and continuing story. Except for a one-day break, over a hundred-day period, Mike worked in many areas including MR-2, MR-1, and MR-4.

site. After delivering troops from Long Tieng to various positions on Skyline, Mike was again assigned to Lima-54 for a late mission one hundred miles north to the Nam Houn area (LS-243), located close to the border. After completion, he and other crews RON at Luang Prabang.

The 23rd began with shuttles to a northern FAR position three miles downriver from the former outpost at the junction of Route-4 and the Nam Ou. Skirting Nam Bac, another 713 (Agency) mission returned him to Ban Y to retrieve the team inserted two days before. A final trip took H-34 crews back to the Site-187 area. This time the landing site was located eight miles southwest of Ban Y. Attesting to enemy inroads in the region, full project pay was allowed for all work in and out of Luang Prabang.

Later in the day, Mike was advised to switch to Hotel-63 and relocate to Tony Poe's domain at Nam Yu (LS-118A). Pilot rotation was not unusual for a ship that was at or near time for a maintenance inspection. Mike's new Flight Mechanic was Louie Moser, an older Filipino who alternated between crewing the H-34 and lead man ground maintenance duties. ⁸

VIENTIANE

On the 23rd, Ambassador Sullivan met with Souvanna Phouma. Discussions included bombing restrictions on critical areas in Military Region One and Military Region Two. Both men concurred that it was essential to continue air strikes on major northern LOCs leading into Laos from North Vietnam. Highlighted were Routes 6, 7, 65 in Military Region Two, and Route 19 in Military Region One. Storage depots along these routes were also mentioned as lucrative targets.

⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.

Intelligence gathered from visual reconnaissance and ground teams (like the ones Jarina et. al. dealt with) indicated a concentration of men and accumulated supplies moved along the LOCs. Vehicles were now travelling unimpeded along these routes during daylight hours.

Within Sam Neua Province, in a region known as Area Bravo, current bombing restrictions prevented tactical strikes on a previously authorized cave and storage center. In addition, important RLG guerrilla sites that generally merited defensive air were no longer being supported.

Route-19, in Area Alpha, leading from the Dien Bien Phu logistic center into Phong Saly Province, and Nam Bac was no longer interdicted. Like those in Sam Neua, Agency-sponsored guerrilla sites were seriously threatened by the influx of enemy forces over this road.

Requests were bumped to Washington. During a 30 April high-level meeting, President Johnson authorized the mentioned targets in Bravo and Alpha areas. The sanctioned bombing was timely and largely instrumental in sparing Na Khang from the concerted enemy push south in Military Region Two. ⁹

THE GLOVERS TAKE TIME OFF

On Friday, 19 April, the Glovers departed Luang Prabang on a Porter for Ban Houei Sai for a vacation in Chiang Mai, Thailand. To save money and see the countryside, they boated across the Mekong to Chiang Khong, and then bussed to Chiang Rai. That night, RTA tanks were heard rumbling out of town to investigate and counter a bandit or insurgent attack on a bus

⁹ Action Memorandum Bundy to Rusk, Modifications of Restrictions to no U.S. Bombing Operations in Barrel Roll, 04/29/68.

moving along the identical gravel route the Glovers had just travelled from Chiang Khong.

During mid-April, an estimated one hundred well-led and highly motivated communist guerrillas attacked and overran a Thai Border Police Post (BPP) at Ban Huai Khu in Chiang Rai Province. Using automatic weapons, grenades, and rocket launchers, they killed fifteen of seventeen BPP, while capturing weapons, communication equipment, and sensitive documents. Army forces were ambushed entering the area, and the insurgents still held the post in early May.

The government post had controlled several tribal villages and was a center for the RTG's effort to expand its area influence. The victory indicated an insurgent movement northwest of Nan Province, which had been subjected to guerrilla activity for months. ¹⁰

Continuing bus and taxi rides, the Glovers arrived in Chiang Mai. They spent several days in and around the city visiting people and points of interest.

The Sunday *Bangkok Post* newspaper contained an article describing trouble in the Ban Houei Sai area. An item of considerable concern, Bob and Jane realized that American Consulate advice on security was essential to their well-being, and required a direct return trip to Lima-25. Because of the en route risk through Chiang Rai hill country and unsettled conditions in northwestern Laos, embassy personnel recommended they deviate south by train to Bangkok and then travel north to Udorn, and Nong Khai. From Nong Khai they could cross the Mekong to Vientiane and return to the royal capital, on a scheduled USAID "milk run." The trip would involve a long, convoluted

¹⁰ CIA Weekly Summary, Insurgent activity spreading in northern Thailand, 05/03/68, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).

method of return, but one in which they would see more of the Thai countryside.

Opting for this safer route, the Glovers left northern Thailand a day early and returned to work.¹¹

SITE 118A

To assess enemy intentions in Houa Kong Province, and stiffen areas south of Nam Tha, Tony Poe and his cohorts assigned Mike Jarina work between Nam Yu, Ban Houei Sai, and the Ban Vieng (LS-135) area along Route-3 southwest of Nam Tha. That night, Mike RON at the newly acquired Air America hostel in Ban Houei Sai. The facility was overseen by a Filipino and cook-entrepreneur Oscar (of the Joe Flipse era). Jarina spent three nights at the villa, one formerly occupied by CASI Pioneer pilot Eldon Walker. The establishment of this hostel marked what could be considered the final civilized RON location at major Mekong River outstations.

Enemy activity in the Site-25 area generated dozens of military and civilian shuttles between Ban Houei Sai, Chiang Khong (T-516), and Nam Yu. One trip took Mike further afield to Xieng Lom (LS-69A) to support local sites.

On Friday, following a stop at Nam Yu to pick up personnel, Mike returned to Site-69A, where Agency-sponsored training by RTA troops was getting underway. Later trips from Site-118A were directed twenty miles southeast to Ta Fa (LS-216), again in proximity of Route-3. Like Ban Vieng, the areas were likely reinforced against a potential enemy push toward Site-25.

¹¹ Glover Book *Laos, Vacation* 04/19-05/02/68, 162-163, 165-166, 168.

Before returning to Tango-08 for scheduled maintenance, Mike continued supporting positions around Nam Tha (L-100) to gauge enemy area intentions. He flew forty miles east of Nam Yu to Team-11, then made several trips to Ban Vieng. Other assignments were conducted to six miles south of Lima-100; eight miles south southwest of the valley.

The crew of Hotel-63 recovered at the H-34 ramp well after dark.

On the 29th, Jarina completed his month with a 440-mile roundtrip to Pakse and back to Udorn by last light. The day flight attested to the importance the Kong Mi Customer attached to local road watch missions and disregard for expense to assemble assets. Along with another H-34 crew, Mike Jarina, Phil Jenkins, and Louie Moser crewed Hotel-58. Except for a flight to PS-38, most of the flight time was devoted to ferry. (Eight plus fifty-five total; two plus forty project) ¹²

POLITICS

"History shows that the tolerance of aggression increases the danger to free societies everywhere.

The rule of law should prevail and that international agreements should be honored and steps taken to make them operative; and

The elimination of aggression is essential to the establishment and maintenance of a reliable peace."

SEATO Council Meeting 2 April 1968

¹² Mike Jarina Interviews and Flight Logs. Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1985), 282.

Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) nations still conducted periodic meetings at major capitals to discuss events in Southeast Asia. ¹³ Largely ineffective because of a lack of any collective military bite (something Chinese leaders often called a "Paper Tiger"), the organization possessed some influence through worldwide media. It also conducted joint military exercises, like the ship-to-shore Operation Tulungan against a theoretical foreign insurgency that I participated in on Mindoro, Philippine Islands in 1962.

In early April at Wellington, New Zealand, when the subject of the state of Laos was broached, the SEATO Council reiterated a serious disquiet regarding North Vietnam's continuing "and open violation" of the July 1962 Geneva Accord agreements on Laos. Their argument cited several glaring violations:

"The maintenance in Laos of units of the regular army of North Vietnam; the intensified use of these forces against the Government [RLG] and territory of Laos; the expanded use of the territory of Laos to supply and reinforce the communist forces in the Republic of Vietnam [SVN] and to support insurgency in Thailand; and the refusal to the International Control Commission [ICC] of access to the communist-held portion of Laos."

As proposed during previous meetings, the Council appealed to parties for "implementation of the 1962 Geneva Accords." Forthcoming were words encouraging and supporting Souvanna Phouma's RLG of National Union in seeking "peace, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity."

¹³ SEATO: Originally formed and conceived to protect the region from communism, organization members were from Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Britain, and the United States. France was absent; an observer from the Republic of Vietnam attended.

They commended attempts of the British Co-Chairman of the 1954, 1962 Geneva Conference to reduce hostility and foster "*respect for the 1962 Geneva Accords.*" Members expressed a desire that the Soviet Co-Chairman would cooperate and actively seek to "*maintain the neutrality and independence of Laos.*"

Despite the SEATO Council's good intentions and proclamations to reduce problems facing the small country of Laos, nothing tangible was accomplished and the war continued unabated and even escalated.

Following the March announcement to terminate bombing north of the 20th parallel, the North Vietnamese government announced a willingness to establish limited contacts with USG representatives. Prior to this, Johnson Administration officials had contacted Soviet, Polish, and other diplomats for a conduit to North Vietnamese leaders without much success. Communist leaders in Hanoi were not initially responsive to Washington's overtures to use Geneva as a negotiating site. American government representatives, opting for purely neutral sites, were equally dissatisfied with suggested sites at decidedly unfriendly sites at Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Warsaw, Poland.

In addition to wrangling over potential locations for initial talks, two weeks after Johnson's announcement, the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry complained about increased U.S. air strikes between the 17th and 20th parallels, and the recently appointed Defense Secretary, Clark Clifford's statement that American reconnaissance would continue above the announced parallel.

With Vietnamese leaders stalling for better negotiating positions, LBJ and his associates elected to directly contact North Vietnamese diplomats. Vientiane was one of the only places in the world where both American and communist diplomats functioned. Even though both protagonists engaged in warfare

against each other, either directly or by proxy, it seemed a logistical place to commence a dialogue. Therefore, because of the proximity of communist officials and diplomats in Vientiane and Ambassador Sullivan's interface with top North Vietnamese diplomats, the ambassador was tapped by State Department superiors to contact the Vietnamese officials and attempt to find a suitable place to begin negotiations. His participation and acumen gained during the 1962 Geneva Accords agreement also lent credibility to his involvement. However, excessive media present in Vientiane eventually motivated secret talks to be relocated to Paris on 13 May. Experienced in former negotiations, Averell Harriman and his team represented USG interests.

Thus, began a series of protracted meetings that would last for several years at the cost of much bloodshed and wealth.

SOUTHERN LOCs

From early 1965, existing roads were improved and new sections had been constructed in south eastern Laos. During the dry season of 1967, with plans to link North Vietnamese, Lao, and South Vietnamese road infrastructure, North Vietnamese engineers and laborers began construction on several new quasi all-weather routes in the Lao Panhandle and to the south.

During the 1968 dry season the main objective centered on protecting and constantly repairing and expanding LOCs to South Vietnam. Most efforts focused on the Panhandle region, where five new cross border routes were completed connecting north-south Lao arteries with communist base areas in South Vietnam. These much-improved roads facilitated the North's ability to greatly increase support operations in the South and facilitate major military offensives (which included the Khe Sanh and TET offensives). Truck movement was estimated to double the amount

of goods to South Vietnam when only a fraction was required to sustain military operations.

During the six-month period to early May, off shoots from the major Route 92 and 96 north-south arteries thrust directly toward and across the border toward major U.S. and ARVN military bases in the northern portion of South Vietnam.

New or refurbished crossings of 215 miles were completed. Two roads paralleled Route-9 toward Khe Sanh; another winding through Base Area-607 connected to a road in the A Shau Valley leading to Hue. Route-165, the eastbound segment north of Chavane and Route-96, bisected Base Area-614. Despite the extensive work, the jury was out whether traffic would become mired during the height of the rainy season. A final road connecting Route-110 crossed Base Camp-609 at the junction of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, then extended eastward toward Dak To. Feeder roads led toward provincial capitals of Kontum and Pleiku.

Work also continued on portions of Route-911 and the intersection of Route-9. Elevated terrain supporting narrow roads with sharp curves had been constantly interdicted at selected spots. These choke points had been circumvented by new bypass sections, one twenty miles long. Logistic leaders were confident that the bypasses would contribute greatly to overall wet season capability to move goods.

SOG units from South Vietnam and our Lao road watch team missions provided abundant information on the construction and progress of these new road systems. Fueled by this information, General Westmoreland and other American military leaders had pushed to cut off the head of the snake before it could crawl into the main battle area. Air alone could not accomplish this objective; the task required substantial boots on the ground, which was a sore subject with Bill Sullivan's Embassy team, who

overtly strived to maintain Geneva Accords protocols in maintaining Lao's overt status as a neutral country.

Therefore, on the subject of cross-border incursions to interdict the more important LOCs with ground forces, Ambassador Sullivan and General Westmoreland were constantly at loggerheads regarding Prairie Fire operations, particularly any undeniable large-scale troop movement from South Vietnam into overtly neutral Laos. Controversy was generated in the U.S. diplomatic community when Westmoreland, Admiral Sharp, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and eventually President Johnson recommended and requested authorization to employ special SOG Prairie Fire forces up to battalion strength into Base Area 607, a large region lying directly across the border. The operation would last for several days in conjunction with a proposed A Shau Valley undertaking.

Seeking to protect Lao neutrality, and certainly Souvanna Phouma's objections, Sullivan was not amenable to such a large incursion into Laos that could not be managed covertly. At a time of a possible political accommodation with the North, disclosure of such a military operation would be deemed a major escalation of the Vietnamese war. The ambassador also judged the MACSOG organization of minor value. Therefore, he recommended that State defer the question of cross-border operations until General Abrams assumed the COMUSMAVC billet in early July. State concurred in the Ambassador's assessment and recommendation.

Since major changes in any USG political or military policy impacted Southeast Asia, the Department of Defense requested State's reassessment of Laos' status in the theater. This in turn was referred to embassy Vientiane.

Ambassador Sullivan represented USG's man in Laos. Therefore, he responded to his superiors first, citing a bit of history and then definitive points, albeit in frank but

diplomatic language. Although probably elucidated in previous messaging, Sullivan's arguments aptly explained the situation during the turbulent spring of 1968:

"Our commitment in Laos is hedged and deliberately obscured and our reaction to events in Laos has to be less precise, less overt, and less conventional.

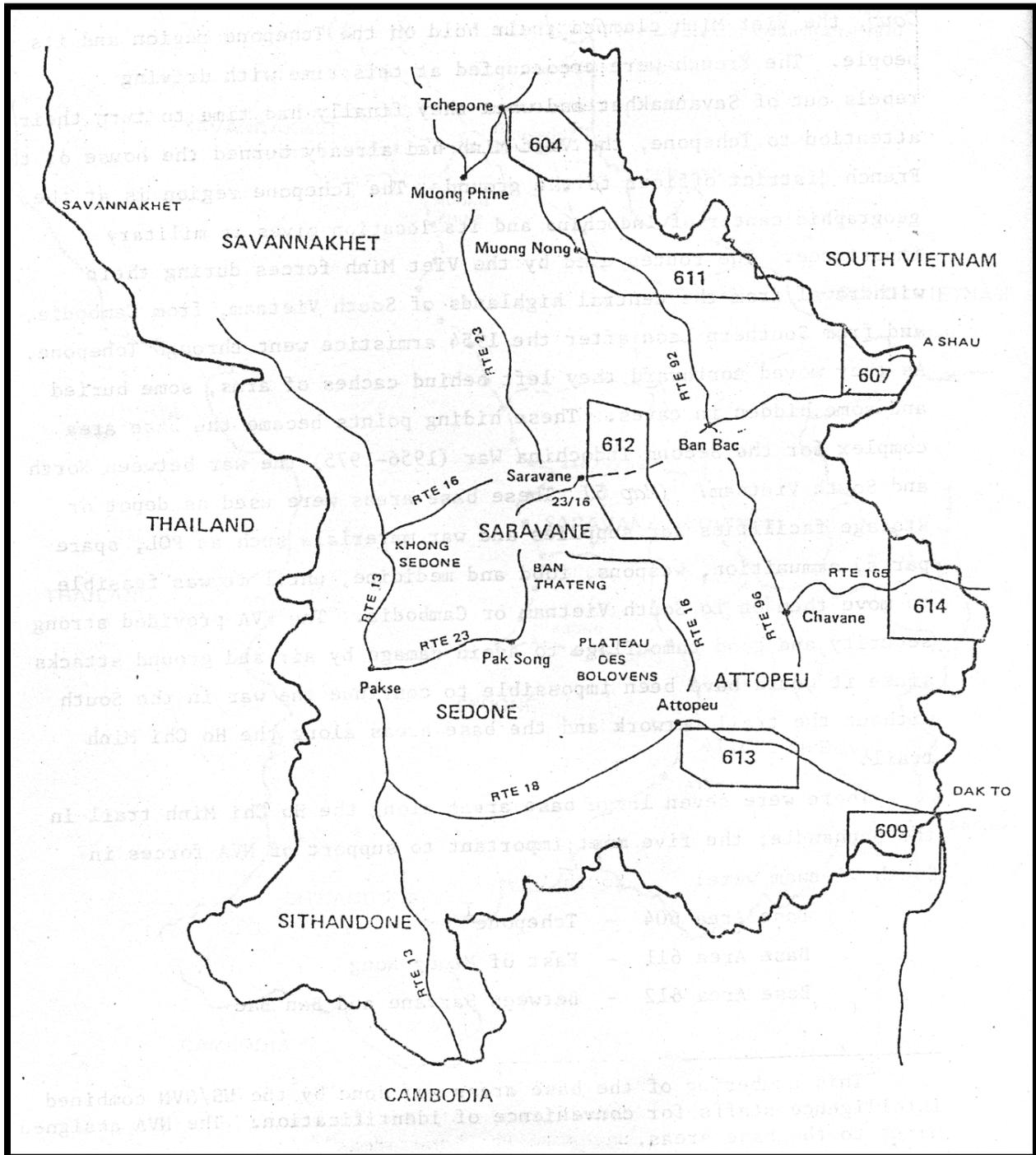
The troubles in Laos are not indigenous, but stem from NVN [meddling]. To resolve difficulties in Laos by military means without regard to political consequences [would require an invasion of North Vietnam].

Laos is a buffer in [the] protection of Thailand and South Vietnam. We would opt for the protection of Thailand [as being] the most important..

We [the U.S. Embassy Country Team] have concluded the framework of the Lao state envisaged by the Geneva Accord of 1962 is most feasible. Those agreements are important because they incorporate a tacit U.S.-Soviet agreement to collaborate in the support of independent non-communist states on the south flank of China as a means to contain [a potential] southward thrust of [Chairman] Mao Tse-tung, the subject generated much discussion between parties.

It should be agreed the primary violator to the [Geneva Accord] agreements is North Vietnam, egged on by the ChiComs. The Poles, supported by the Russians are also violators, because of their default in observance of the protocol governing ICC matters. Our attention should be on the withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces from Laos [and] the active participation of the Poles in the [correct] functioning of the ICC.

If we are prepared to use military force necessary to invade, invest, and defeat North Vietnam on its home territory, then we will have solved the problem of the Vietnamese military in Laos.



Geographical locations in Military Regions Three and Four depicting major enemy logistic base camps, located in proximity to major LOCs leading to allied military installations in South Vietnam. Many of our Bell or H-34 road watch missions in Southern Laos delivered SGU teams close to, or within these areas to observe and gather intelligence.

Soutchay Vongsavanh Monograph.

Introduction of U.S. [and] Government of Vietnam (GVM) forces into the area of the Ho Chi Minh Trail is the hard way [to accomplish our goals]. It would require at least 206,000 additional U.S troops. We do not have the will to make the only military move which would be effective [the invasion of NVN]. We do not have the means to make [such] a military move. [Furthermore, the] North Vietnamese (maybe the ChiCom) would exploit [the situation] in north and central Laos. More U.S. troops [would be] needed, some in Thailand. Souvanna Phouma would quit; the country would split up into smaller units. [The] Soviets would withdraw recognition from whoever replaced Souvanna Phouma and transfer [this former recognition] to the Pathet Lao."

Sullivan then briefly addressed sections of President Johnson's 31 March speech:

"If Hanoi insists, we must have total cessation of bombing over NVN, then we must insist upon some reciprocity and a system to enforce it. Like establishment of ICC teams on the passes leading into the Ho Chi Minh Trail [system] and other areas of interest in Laos.

It is not clear that [the] Soviets would ever be able to influence Hanoi strongly enough to change its policy.

The maneuvering room in Laos is quite limited.

The major new opportunity for action in Laos arises from Hanoi's new-found willingness to move to the conference table. It is a retreat from their previous cocksure ambition of winning the war militarily. [We] have to examine where Laos fits into the negotiating picture."

Six days later, reiterating a need for military restraint for possible involvement in Laos, Sullivan wrote to Country Director Herz:

"[There is a] premium on political restraints. Overt U.S. military operations in Laos would carry an undeniable U.S. commitment to Laos. The advantage in Laos today is [that] we could fold our tents and fade quietly away, for we have no overt military commitment. ¹⁴

The Lao regard the Geneva Accords as a vehicle for their protection and would look to the signatory nations to honor their commitment to maintain Lao sovereignty. Souvanna Phouma has made this point.

Our reasoning is if the enemy were to violate the Geneva Accords in a manner to threaten Lao survival, Souvanna Phouma would press hard within the Accords for meaningful Article 4 action. He would look to us. We would have to rely on political-psychological measures, as military means were not feasible. ¹⁵

We like to keep the possibility of an invasion of North Vietnam dangling before military eyes should Hanoi go crazy..

Your efforts are better expended on relating Laos to the negotiating picture and seeing what advantages can be drawn from the strengths of the position we do have here, rather than reinforcing our weaknesses."

Within a week Westmoreland cancelled the large cross-border operation (Haymaker) that was to be part of the incursion into the A Shau Valley (Delaware), because of what was stated as

¹⁴ Disconcertingly, this is exactly what occurred years later. In addition, Sullivan also testified to Congressional leaders that USG had no written agreement to protect Laos and could leave the country at any time. This statement failed to address what over time increasingly became a moral factor: to help the hordes of men who had fought and died for USG policy, particularly in regard to Meo and other indigenous tribesman.

¹⁵ Article 4 of the SEATO Treaty committed USG along with other treaty nations to act to meet the common danger if a communist attack in Laos were not simply a threat, but was part of a concerted armed attack against Thailand.

potential disclosure to the media and a lack of enemy in the area.

Entering a new period of negotiating with North Vietnam, while continuing the conflict, presented problems that prior to making gross policy decisions regarding military operations required some deliberation as to the implications of future actions. On the other side, although the end result of reunifying Vietnam was obvious as North Vietnamese leaders' goal, the means to achieve unification were not, especially as pertained to Laos. ¹⁶

A conundrum existed. Escalating war in Laos during 1968 and an enemy capability to engulf the entire country fostered considerable concern and debate among Washington agencies. Therefore, State, Department of Defense, and Central Intelligence Agency intelligence personnel combined near-term views in a comprehensive contingency study for consideration by major principals in the event Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces moved toward the Mekong River.

There was little doubt that small enemy units could conduct rapid and largely undetected movements to strategic points on the Mekong River. However, any major campaign to occupy the Panhandle flatlands would necessitate detectable and considerable prior logistical efforts; to seize the entire country would require months of preparation.

If this should occur, USG was committed by treaty to Thailand's defense. Project 22 was cited.

Project-22 formed a nebulous plan developed from concerns of both USG and Thai leaders about the ongoing communist disregard of the 1962 Geneva Accords and danger to Thailand. The

¹⁶ Author's words.

contingency plan was first authorized by President Johnson in June 1964 for a joint U.S.-Thai response in the event of a serious communist drive toward the Mekong lowlands, which Thai leaders regarded as vital to their country security. Drafts of the plan to provide for the defense of Thailand were created and continued to evolve over time. They included *"military operations to hold the Mekong Valley, its principal cities, and military facilities in Laos as well as Thailand."* In addition to repelling communist incursion into Thailand, the plan covered counter-insurgency operations in both countries. Still by the time of the 1968 crises, without sufficient American ground troops established in-country, it was only a plan, not a tangible commitment, and was deemed of no consequence as a deterrent by Ambassador Sullivan. It did look good on paper, representing a bilateral agreement to protect Thailand.

In contrast to Thailand, USG had no official defense commitment with Laos except under Article-4 obligations contained in the SEATO Organization pact.¹⁷ In order to satisfy participating parties and "ensure" Lao neutrality, the 1962 Geneva Accords committed the Royal Lao Government not to recognize SEATO's protective umbrella, and not allow the introduction of foreign troops into Laos. In order to preserve the Geneva Accords framework, Souvanna Phouma's present government would not likely require the introduction of foreign troops even if such action was warranted. However, in the most extreme circumstance, should the entire country be in danger of falling under communist military domination, Souvanna might seek outside help. But he would most likely resign and allow a successor to make that decision.

¹⁷ See the explanation in William Sullivan's messaging.

In Thailand, government leaders were concerned by the magnitude of the earlier TET offensive in South Vietnam, the increased insurgency in the Northern provinces, and the communist advances throughout Laos. Furthermore, particularly following Johnson's bombing halt announcement and current efforts at negotiation, any indication of USG's reluctance to enforce commitments to Thailand would foster a serious and adverse reaction. Such action might abrogate the close cooperation and operational flexibility in the use of in-country air facilities. Because of Thai (Siamese) history and sensitivity regarding foreign occupation of their homeland, any large troop deployment like the one the Author participated in during the 1962 Nam Tha crisis was not considered acceptable. Instead, the RTG wanted USG prepared to introduce troops from areas outside Thailand.

From a diplomatic standpoint, should military deterrents fail to stabilize the current situation in Laos, politicians could request a reconvening of the Geneva Conference through the ICC to the Co-Chairmen to dramatize events. Appeals could be forwarded to the United Nations, but this action would require time, and from a dismal past experience, Souvanna Phouma considered the United Nations an unimpressive and ineffective organization.

Employing SEATO, Thailand could sensationalize a deteriorating situation and cite Article-4, requesting consultations with the other members.

USG could initiate a meeting with Soviet officials informing them that unilateral military deterrents would be forthcoming.

Should the enemy pursue a goal to push toward the Mekong, under the auspices of Project-22, forty-six Thai T-28 pilots

could strike Lao targets. Thai F-86 and F-5 jet planes could also be employed.

Although B-52 air facilities at Sattahip were being fully utilized, an air base at Nam Phong near Khon Kaen could be erected to provide additional room for the large bombers. In Laos, target areas could be expanded for Arc Light (B-52 strikes) tactical air operations.

The Thai Army's strength, currently estimated at 100,000 men, could quickly deploy additional ground forces to Isan as a show of force, but the lack of logistical channels would restrict the flow of supplies and restrict operations. Activating 200,000 reserves would provide additional strength.

Two U.S. brigades (6,000-10,000 men) would require activating reservists or stripping other Army units. This could be accomplished by July, and a full division would be available by September.

Equally important would be unconventional measures. To facilitate more effective operations when weather prevented incursions from South Vietnamese bases, Thailand's bases near the border at Nakhon Phanom and Ubon could be employed to stage Prairie Fire assets.

Any increase in Agency-sponsored operations would not be immediately forthcoming. However, given sufficient time and threat location, some special guerrilla action could provide intelligence on enemy movement, and harassment of the NVA/PL would be possible. Increased tactical air and helicopter support would greatly aid such an operation.

The April SEATO meeting in New Zealand also addressed internal Thai issues, a distinct and important principal in the mix of the Southeast Asia quagmire:

"The Council noted the Royal Thai Government [RTG] is making a continuing major contribution to the defense of the

Republic of Vietnam [RVN] by making Thai facilities available to other SEATO powers for common defense purposes. During the past year Thailand has further increased its contribution to the struggle in South Vietnam by agreeing to dispatch a [Cobra] division of ground forces. It has done this despite the threat posed by communist insurgency within Thailand..

The Council noted that during the past year the [RTG's] program to provide greater security and increased development to its rural population had made notable progress, particularly in northeast Thailand. The Council reiterated its firm determination to take all necessary measures to assist Thailand in meeting the communist threat."

SEATO Council's offered kudos for Thai progress dealing with the country's insurgency problem that accounted for a low level of activity in Isan (the northeast), where armed propaganda meetings were almost nonexistent, and engagement with government forces on the decline over the past eight months.

This success was not equally the same for border regions in the Northern Provinces. Because of 150 casualties suffered by the Thai Army since December, little progress had been established while attempting to pacify Nan Province. Therefore, army leaders contemplated temporarily terminating the offensive, pending a new more effective strategy. And it was recognized there would be problems reversing the damage and the situation in the border areas.

Measures proposed were long term in nature and calculated to modulate aggressive tactics in dealing with hill people. One was to curtail the indiscriminate T-28 bombing of villages. Another was related to the massive relocation of tribal clans.

Calculated to deny communist guerrillas the where-with-all to pursue insurgency in the north, during the course of the year hill tribe populations were relocated and villages leveled in

Nan and Chiang Rai regions. By April, 2,000 refugees overflowed one of the larger camps in a valley near Pua, southeast of Chiang Mai. ¹⁸ Because of government mismanagement and inadequate planning, problems developed and escalated within the camps. The list of complaints was long. Mainly, refugee camps were ill constructed, which contributed to overcrowded conditions, and relocation was improperly timed to allow the people to clear and plant food grains prior to the rainy season. Also, used to centuries of highland slash and burn techniques, the mostly Meo people were not attuned to lowland agricultural procedures. There was hostility and problems with neighbors over land allocation and usage.

By June, several hundred refugees reputedly planned to flee into Laos, where they could escape government interference. Other Meo fled into Laos after RTG action against their villages for pro-communist activity.

In general, at least in the beginning, the resettlement program merely increased tribal friction in Thailand, creating far more problems than those solved. The policy also fostered an avenue for communist ideology and recruitment for communist goals. Instead of cooperating, many fiercely independent tribesmen reputedly elected to join guerrilla bands rather than forcibly be resettled to unfamiliar areas.

Because of the failure to exert RTG will on area tribal people, fresh approaches were sought to create effective security measures. As a partial solution, U.S. Special Forces would train area troops, and more helicopters be devoted for increased mobility and logistics in the rough terrain. In addition, plans to form hill tribe security forces (much like

¹⁸ Pua is where I searched for peaches with the commanding general of JUSMAG in 1963.

our Indian police forces on early reservations) and increase assistance to tribal refugees. Overtures were also proffered by the RTG to Chinese KMT holdovers living along the border to assist in addressing the guerrilla problem and settle the area in question; initial attempts generated little interest. ¹⁹

¹⁹ End of Chapter Segment Sources:

Foreign Relations 1968, 13th SEATO Council Meeting in Wellington, New Zealand, 04/02-03/68, 302-303, 305-307.

William Sullivan Book *Obbligato*, 227-228. (foia.usia.gov/scrips/cgiserv), FBIS Trends: Vietnam, 04/17/68.

Intelligence Memorandum Directorate of Intelligence of the CIA, Road Construction in the Lao Panhandle and Adjacent Areas of South Vietnam 1967-May 1968.

June CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Road Construction Wet Weather Logistics in Lao Panhandle.

Memorandum Director of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Acting Secretary of State (Katzenbach), CIA Analysis of the Military Situation in Laos, 10/09/68.

Telegrams Sullivan to State (2), 04/23/68.

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Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam War*, 549.

Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh Graphic of Enemy Base Camps, RLG Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981) 10.

Agency Weekly Summary, Thailand Looks for New Approach to Insurgency Problem, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).

CIA Directorate of Intelligence, *Geographic Brief on North Thailand and Northwest Laos Border Area, 12/68*, (foia.ucia.gov/scrips/cgiserv).

Memorandum from Former Secretary of State (Reed) to Walter Rostow, Contingency Study Laos and Thailand, 04/26/68.

Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume 20, Southeast Asia, 1969-1972, Document 23, 09/09/69, Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Thai-US Contingency Planning (<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d23>).

CIA Weekly Summary, Insurgent Activity Spreading in Northern Thailand, 05/03/68.

By early May, since the contingency study regarding the early year deteriorating situation and reassessment of Lao policy had been previously approved in Washington, there had been no major enemy attacks. However, pressure continued around Saravane, Attapeu in Military Region Four; Thakhet in Military Region Three, and government outposts in Northern Laos. Enemy units still possessed a distinct capability to inundate the country; however, the approaching monsoon season would appreciably restrict movement and supply efforts.

To quell enemy advances, additional tactical air power was required. Because of the sorry state of the FAR and RLAF, particularly the latest scandal over a gold smuggling incident in Saigon, the Lao military was in the process of reorganizing. Therefore, embassy personnel from Vientiane and Bangkok conducted meetings to assess the utilization of clandestine or overt Thai-28 assets and deployment of additional American planes to Thailand. Ambassador Sullivan believed the obvious use of Thai Air Force T-28s and pilots would be politically detrimental and provide little advantage. Instead, he favored an increase in "B" Team pilots, and Ambassador Unger envisioned no Thai objection to a request for more U.S. planes for the defense of Laos. ¹

Sullivan revealed that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and King Savang Vatthana believed Laos would benefit from a reduction in South Vietnam hostilities. They were also eager for continued USG support while negotiations were underway, but at

¹ The "B" Team, differing from "A" Team American Air America pilots, was comprised of undercover T-28 Thai pilots.

the same time they wanted the Geneva Accords respected by the North Vietnamese.

Expanding on this subject, participants were reminded that if USG *"were to abandon its formal adherence to and observation of the limitations of the Geneva Accords, any inhibitions on the communist side would disappear and the Geneva settlement would collapse entirely; the RLG would quickly lose much of the international support which it now enjoys by virtue of its adherence to the Geneva Accords, and leave us the sole supporter of the no-longer neutral Laos. We would then have to deal with a government whose area of control was rapidly shrinking and which would have lost the ability to appeal to the Geneva Accord which had created the basis for its very existence."*

As previously noted, the enemy dry season campaign had been largely successful in Military Region One and Military Region Two. Sometime before Vietnamese units commenced an attack on Na Khang, Hanoi leaders elected to establish a precedent and modify the normal seasonal pattern of the war. Instead of withdrawing to northwestern North Vietnamese sanctuaries prior to the wet season, given proper all-weather route structures to implement monsoon supply, increased numbers of troops could continue to remain in Laos to consolidate gains, and pressure RLG troops. Furthermore, with additional territory under control and upcoming talks about to commence in Paris, the North would possess considerably more bargaining power. Therefore, a concerted effort continued to greatly improve all-weather capabilities on Route-602 from Sam Neua to Phu Pha Thi, also on

a road leading toward the Moung Ngan Valley; in Military Region One, work continued on Route-45 toward Moung Sai (L-27).²

NA KHANG DEFENDERS CHALLENGED AGAIN

"Be careful what you wish for..."

Anonymous

Notwithstanding Washington's contingency report that no major enemy attacks had occurred for several weeks, during the final week in April, an estimated eight enemy battalions roamed the Hua Phan region at will, while four units assembled to attack Site-36. Vang Pao's forces of 1,500 at, or in the vicinity of, Na Khang roughly approximated those of the enemy. While FACs and ground patrols developed viable targets, until 4 May activity on both sides was generally limited to probes and skirmishing. On the same day, Commanding Officer Major U Vang Ly, a tough, seasoned warrior who we called "the Indian" because of facial resemblances to our western Native Americans, dispatched patrols five miles south to the rice paddy and trail system area where Captain Bill Wilmot was killed two years before during an operation to retake Site-36. Their mission was to discover enemy bivouac areas. Toward evening, a patrol spotted enemy assembling approximately six kilometers east of Na Khang.

The expected attack on Na Khang's outer five-kilometer perimeter commenced early Sunday morning when two special guerrilla unit (SGU) outposts at UH451075 were assaulted three

² Letter Katzenbach to Nitze, Contingency Study Laos-Thailand Report as of 05/01/68 (prior to the attack on Na Khang), Letter Dated 05/08/68.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 197.

miles east of Site-36. Mortar rounds were launched into Na Khang without causing injury to the defenders.

While 105mm howitzer counter fire from the base was employed to discourage the attacks, A-26 Nimrod 40 and a C-123 flare ship, Lamplighter 02, were diverted to the area. Before the aircraft arrived on station one outpost was captured. A second position was overrun during the next two hours. Thereafter, all planes aloft in the Barrel Roll sector were diverted to Site-36, but an adverse weather forecast forced some to delay entering the fray. Therefore, in addition to already-scheduled A-1 coverage, two more A-1 pilots received the nod to launch toward Site-36 ASAP. Skyraider aircraft, which saved the day the previous year, were preferred because of the heavy load of mixed stores carried, loitering ability, and precision bombing capability.

Action was not restricted to Na Khang. Prior to dawn, not far northwest enemy units overran four government companies positioned in the hills ten miles north of Mung Heim, an area overlooking the trail network leading north from LS-48A to Mung Son.

At Site-36, by 0715 hours, with his men having generated proximity targets, General Vang Pao requested maximum USAF air support to include the ultimate terror weapon: napalm.

Funneled through 7th Air Force channels, a strike package was approved with time on target (TOT) set for 1330 hours. Over the course of the afternoon, two F-4, two F-105, and seventeen A-1E pilots pounded seven lucrative targets. Excellent battle damage assessment (BDA) was reported. By early evening, enemy forces were regrouping and massing for another attack on Na Khang. Therefore, a similar strike package was ordered for 6 May. Furthermore, 7th Air Force committed thirty-five sorties a day for the duration of the operation.

With Vang Pao riding in a Raven FAC O-1E, communicating and directing air strikes and ground movements, airborne attacks commenced shortly after first light and continued throughout the day. Napalm was employed to good advantage and Vang Pao was well pleased with the overall results of the timely air support.

Tuesday proved much the same scenario: acquire suitable targets and then pound them into oblivion with a mix of airborne weapons. By the end of the day it appeared that the enemy assault and will to persist in the quest to capture Site-36 had been nearly broken.

Tactical air support continued on viable targets. On 10 May, moving out of their trenches to press their advantage before the enemy could react, Meo troops advanced north and east, while developing targets and recovering lost terrain. Indigenous T-28 pilots contributed additional sorties on Thursday.

By the 13th, after reclaiming formerly lost outposts, Vang Pao's warriors had reestablished the original perimeter defense line and additional territory.

Relative calm prevailed for a week, but despite savaging four Vietnamese combat battalions, four additional reserve battalions still lurked at various staging areas. A suggestion by both Ambassador Sullivan and Souvanna Phouma that Arc Light missions be employed to send these units packing was denied for political reasons. Despite this refusal, additional tactical air was promised.

While Na Khang defenders prepared for a worst possible scenario, many targets were plotted in anticipation of the second phase attack believed set to commence on or about the twentieth.

The second offensive kicked off as expected, but because of pre-planned air strikes, the offensive lacked the punch and

enthusiasm of the first attempt to capture the site. Within four days enemy units were back to their initial positions. By the 27th the latest battle for Na Khang was over. Failing again to take the site in an allotted time frame, in anticipation of the impending monsoon, the communists withdrew from the immediate battlefield to rest and refit, while Vang Pao's troops cautiously nipped at their heels. Vang Pao's exhausted troops initially pursued the enemy and then stopped to consolidate their hard-fought gains and take advantage of a well-needed rest.

Although there were accolades for Seventh Air Force assets, battles are not won by air alone; sandals on the ground are always essential. Once again, our tough little guys, in combination with ground and air artillery, defeated the "dreaded nine-foot-tall Northern giants" and saved the day...until the next time.

JARINA IN THE CONTESTED AREA

Mike Jarina, along with other pilots, participated in the battle. On Wednesday the 22nd he deadheaded to Na Khang on CASI Dornier XW-PCJ. He joined Bob Swartz (DOH 08/12/67) and Flight Mechanic Tom Nery on Hotel-57. A two-hour Special Mission was conducted to a landing zone in Sam Neua Province, likely to gain intelligence regarding current enemy movement to or from the Site-36 area. With the mission complete, Jarina returned to Sam Tong on Hotel-57, switched to Hotel-30 for a ride to Long Tieng, and boarded Volpar 42Z for Udorn. A long day and much deadhead was required for a single mission.

Two days later, Mike returned to the fray. Flying Hotel-39 with Flight Mechanic Bill Goodwin and Flight Mechanic Ernie Cortez, the crew arrived at Long Tieng in the afternoon.

Receiving an abbreviated briefing and picking up supplies and passengers for Na Khang, Mike popped over Skyline Ridge to obtain a quick fuel load at Sam Tong. He delivered the necessary items to Site-36 and flew south to Boum Long, now referred to as Site-32 and no longer Site-88. Then Mike returned to Sam Tong for the night.

Mike and Bill worked a full day Saturday for AID, moving refugees and supplies north from Sam Tong into and around the Moung Soui-Xieng Dat areas. Some trips were assigned to a refugee ville three miles north of Xieng Dat and south of Route-7, where Ray Semora crashed an H-34. Other flights distributed maintenance goods and people to both Xieng Dat sites (LS-26, LS-117).

Wayne Gentry joined Mike on the 26th to continue AID refugee shuttles. After a weather delay, they delivered a load to the site above Xieng Dat, then proceeded "around the horn" to upper Military Region Two, thirty-three miles north of Phu Cum (LS-50) in the hills two miles east of Houei Tong Ko (LS-184). Refugees and troops were then distributed between various area sites, some more than once: twenty-six miles south of Site-184 to San Pa Ka (LS-33), northeast to both Moung Heim Valley sites (LS-48A, LS-48), and nine miles southeast to Na Khang. On the return trip to Sam Tong, they delivered refugees to the site located above Xieng Dat.

Bob Peterson replaced Bill Goodwin on Hotel-39 and refugee work from Sam Tong continued on Monday. The forty-landing day began with a trip south to the rim of the extensive Phou Khao Khouai Mountains overlooking the Vientiane flood plain. Mike, with an AID Customer, was likely surveying an area for refugee settlement. Generically known by pilots as checkpoint Ritaville, the area to the northwest had some historical significance as a

Vientiane paramilitary police site prior to the Phoumi Nosavan inspired coup in 1965.

Following a stop at Site-20, the crew flew north past Xieng Dat to Muang You (later designated LS-261). The site was located in the hills on the west bank of the Nam Khan, ten miles north of Phou Fa (LS-16), a site early pilots named "Agony" because of adverse winds and the arduous landings and takeoffs the poorly constructed strip provided. Even cargo planes had a difficult time air dropping supplies, as the number of accidents there attested. The next stop was at Sam Sen (LS-112) in the eastern foothills of the Phou Long Pot range, overlooking the Khan River flowing downstream from Xieng Dat and the Plain of Jars. Site-103 was also located on this range and was noteworthy for the presence of the mysterious stone jars like the ones on the Plain of Jars.

So as not to mix incompatible people, a lengthy shuttle commenced from New Xieng Dat (LS-117) sixty-five miles east to Ban Sa Noi (LS-119), located in a pleasant valley eighteen miles northeast of Xieng Khouang Ville and ten miles north-northeast of Ban Peung (LS-95), where Bill Zeitler was shot down. With the fall of Moung Ngam (LS-236) in February, there also might have been a push to repopulate an area where people were in a position to observe and report on enemy movements.

The long day ended after dark.

After flying less than one fuel load, Mike returned to Udorn on Tuesday. Before he was relieved, he retrieved an Air America Porter pilot at Khieu Manang (LS-192) in the hills above Moung Oum (LS-22) east of Phou Bia. Runway reconstruction was underway at Site-192, with most of the village people chopping and grading the strip with metal hoes and manually dragging earth on top of jute sacks. Work was completed halfway down the strip with a two-inch difference in the incline not visible from

overhead aircraft. Unaware of the danger this presented, the Porter pilot landed, reversed his prop, and during the uphill rollout struck the lip and sheared off his landing gear.

Mike deadheaded from Long Tieng to Udorn in CASI C-47 Papa Alpha Papa (PAP).³

Upper Military Region Two was not the only region where enemy forces caused problems for the RLG. Areas east and south of Xieng Khouang Ville were also affected. Under pressure from King Vatthana, who promoted bombing and killing enemy regardless of where they were located, Souvanna Phouma requested the embassy provide additional U.S. tactical air strikes in lower Military Region Two. Despite the presence of many friendly villages in the region, the policy was predominantly recommended in the area from Paksane to Xieng Khouang Ville. Although previously sanguine regarding North Vietnamese civilians when recommending bombing the Red River and other major river dikes, the Prime Minister had never proposed inflicting similar injury on Lao citizens.

The Country Team considered the top Lao leaders excessively overconfident as to airpower's accomplishments, and elected to continue Ambassador Sullivan's avoidance approach in targeting villages.⁴

³ Mike Jarina, Flight Time and Interviews.

⁴ Ken Conboy, 196-197.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 262-264.
Edward Vallentiny, *Project CHECO, USAF Operations from Thailand 1 January 1967 to 1 July 1968* (HQ PACAF Directorate Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division) 33-34.
Telegram Embassy Laos (Hurwitch) to State, 05/16/68.

BACK IN CONUS

Following a standard week of rest, allowing our jet lagged biorhythms to slowly return to normal, we began to enjoy stateside life. I completed the course of medicine prescribed to eliminate the amoeba parasite, and even played golf with Dad at the Netherwood course near home. Rarely engaging in the sport, I was never much of a golfer, as evidenced during the first few holes. Toward the end of the first round, I was performing measurably better. More importantly, I felt good and opted for a complete eighteen holes. We played on, but Dad sensitive to the heat, was close to sunstroke, so we were obliged to terminate the fun.

On 2 May we celebrated Rick's second birthday in the backyard, with my cousin George Casterlin's children and his wife attending.

At the time, another cousin, the Reverend Colonel Robert T. Anderson, was stationed at Fort Dix, New Jersey. He and his family lived in the bedroom community of Mount Holly. Since he had processed and trained at Fort Dix as a U.S. Marine during World War Two, one might say his military career had essentially come full circle.

One of our tasks while in the States was to have Ricky baptized a Christian. It was really intended to please Mom. I was not an active church member, and although Tuie had attended Saint Joseph, a Catholic boarding school in Bangkok for many years, she was not particularly active in either the Christian or Buddhist religions.

To implement the baptism, we coordinated with Bob for the ceremony one Sunday morning at his church services. Afterward, at their house in Mount Holly, Bob, Phyllis, and the girls had an opportunity to meet Tuie and spoil Ricky.

After tardy government literature arrived for the citizenship study, we schooled and drilled Tuie on U.S history, the three forms of government to foster check and balances, and current events. Her years of excellent education provided by foreign teachers at the Saint Joseph boarding school in Bangkok paid off and she did well. Our efforts were supplemented by several evening classes at Plainfield High School for aspiring citizens. Since our time in America was limited, through one of Dad's friends who worked in Elisabeth New Jersey, her interview and examination for accelerated U.S. citizenship was scheduled in Newark on Friday the 24th.

Don Valentine's father had passed from colon cancer in late January. During our first home leave in 1966, Doug had initiated my interest in the Sunray Land Corporation business in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and encouraged my investment in the development company. With Doug's demise, I lost my most reliable contact regarding the inner workings of the company, and buffer between Doug and his son. The gap in communications persisted and I received little information from either Don or Charley Williams. Don was either too busy or seemed disinterested in writing letters. Therefore, as was my custom since the 1966 home leave, I planned a trip to Steamboat on the 17th for a short business cum pleasure trip to scrutinize and assess the current situation. All appeared going well in the business and as an answer to my complaints of no information, Don arranged to have the *Steamboat Pilot* paper delivered to me in Thailand.

Return travel plans to New Jersey and investigation of business affairs took longer than anticipated; therefore, my stay was slightly extended. A group of Denver investors were issuing securities in a private stock named Baja Colorado SA. The purpose was to develop and erect structures in the fledgling coastal Mexican resort area of Baja California. As per

government regulations, the business included Mexican investors. Meeting my ideas of land development, although remote, the site was located in a potentially good area and the perks and the concept appealed to me, so I invested a small amount in the venture. Over a period of years, a lack of capital and perhaps mismanagement eventually caused the business to fail. Consequently, I became yet another gullible aviator, while seeking his fortune, to make a poor investment. It would not be the last.

Before leaving Steamboat for home, I wrote a postdated check to Sunray to purchase additional stock in the company.

At this time, no local airport of consequence served the Steamboat area, and an individual was obliged to journey to Denver to obtain commercial air travel. Therefore, the inability to obtain firm travel plans home forced me to spend a few extra days in Steamboat. This caused me to miss Tuie's appointment in Newark with the District Director of Immigration for her citizenship examination. These sessions were difficult to obtain, so fortunately Dad and Mom accompanied her. Naturally, she passed both written and oral examinations. The interviewer wondered where I was and asked her if she really wanted to live in the U.S., and if I was good to her. There was no problem and the citizenship ceremony was scheduled for June.

The room was jammed with new citizens and the ceremony brief. Dad sent Tuie's Social Security card and permanent registration voting card to us in August.

MINI-TET

Despite the severe beating the communists had taken during the TET holiday offensive, they were not finished their aggression. In the months since the battle, tens of thousands of ill-trained troops shuttled down freshly repaired or newly



Flanked by rhododendron bushes, Tuie Casterlin stands tall and proud in front of the Dorsey Place house on the day of her official naturalization to become an American citizen.

Author Collection.

constructed LOCs to conduct phase two of the South Vietnamese offensive that became known as Mini-TET. This time, however, both American and South Vietnamese intelligence had adequate warning of the attack. The new offensive, using both Vietnamese and what was left of Viet Cong troops, commenced on 5 May. Although over a hundred targets were programmed to be hit, including Saigon, most attacking forces were intercepted and preempted from achieving their objectives. Within a week the enemy withdrew after incurring heavy casualties.

As within any political structure, there were pros and cons to overcome in abrogating established momentum. Following the initial TET failure, and especially the second fiasco, it became obvious to certain North Vietnamese leaders that because of the recent failures in direct offensives, accelerated warfare was not yet the key to success in South Vietnam. Therefore, the massive offensives had to be toned down to again reflect the Chinese preferred philosophy of measured and protracted guerrilla warfare.

Consequently, enemy assaults after May were nearly all restricted to mortar and rocket attacks. However, Phase-3 was already planned and a weak offensive was attempted in August, this time using only Vietnamese troops. Once again, the allies were forewarned and commanded the battlefield. ⁵

UPCOUNTRY AND DOWNCOUNTRY

During a short flying day related to weather, Wayne Knight continued Tim Woosley's line check on 1 May. They shuttled the never-ending horde of refugees south from Sam Tong to Phone Sai (LS-211) and the Ban Nam Mohr (LS-207) areas.

⁵ Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 542-544.
Wikipedia, TET Offensive.

Sunday, 12 May, Mike Jarina and Flight Mechanic Pratt departed Udorn late in Hotel-32 for Pakse. The one-way trip was the only flight time logged that day.

The next day Larry Henesy joined him for work on the Bolovens. As Mike could now be considered an Old Timer, Henesy remained with him for the remainder of the RON. A new Flight Mechanic, Jenkins, was also part of the crew to learn the ropes. They worked out of PS-22. ⁶ The crew covered Pakse-based T-28 strikes in the Kong Mi (PS-7) area, which Mike euphemistically called "Mickey Mouse" SAR duty. Mike had first coined this term while providing SAR for T-28 strikes around Nam Tha in northwestern Military Region One. Mike worked the rest of the day between PS-38 on the southern rim of the Plateau, Attopeu, and PS-7, before returning to Pakse for the night.

Tuesday was much the same, position to the Plateau rim at PS-22 to work and cover "Mickey Mouse" SARs. En route to Pakse, a stop was made fifteen miles south-southeast at PS-38, where an artillery battery commanded the high ground on the rim above Attopeu.

More Plateau work followed on the fourth day of the RON, when the crew of Hotel-32 flew two early morning trips to PS-38 from Pakse with personnel and artillery shells. Trips to PS-22, L-10, and PS-7 filled out the day. On the way back to Pakse, an interim landing was made to the intercept-relay site, "radio mountain," PS-17 on Phou Batiene, located six miles east of Pakse and overlooking the Route-13/23 junction.

Flight time increased to a high point on Thursday and flights necessitated flying until well after dark. Following a stop at the Houei Khong (L-56) strip and paying respects to the

⁶ PS-22: Also listed as LS-190 or Ban La Tee, both designations helicopter pilots never verbally used.

Davis family, Mike went to Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165), where SGU soldiers were being mustered for movement to counter enemy pressure on Thateng (PS-28), located adjacent to Route-23. While this was underway, he travelled to PS-22 to commence shuttles southeast to PS-20 (Ban Sok) in the Se Kong Valley near Route-16. With this task complete, Mike returned to Site-165 and delivered troops north to positions at Thateng. Before continuing the troop movement, he participated in a "Mickey Mouse" SAR out of PS-22.

Jarina's work venue changed to Saravane Province on the seventieth. As in the Attopeu region, with the enemy relatively quiescent in anticipation of the monsoon season, FAR and Agency assets were shifted forward to advantageous positions to protect the northern flanks of the provincial capital. Following a trip to the top of the TACAN unit at Phu Kate (PS-21), flights were conducted north from Lima-44 to Senammana (PS-19) and eight miles north to Ban Yonh (PS-9). Another mission was directed to Ban Kok Mai (LS-171), three miles northeast. Additional shuttles to Phou Kate followed. After returning to Lima-11, the crew was redirected to a landing zone on the Plateau and then to Site-165, for yet another so-called "Mickey Mouse" SAR. A recovery was effected at Pakse after a thirty-one landing day.

After working most of Saturday, the crew of Hotel-32 returned late to Tango-08. ⁷

BAN HOUAY MUN

Successful FAR/RLAF air-ground coordination during offensives were rare. Therefore, a small operation to clear and capture the Houay Mun (later designated LS-310) area sixty miles

⁷ EW Knight Flight Records and, Email, 09/04/00.
Mike Jarina Interviews.



A C-47, CASI Pilatus Porters and a UH-34D helicopter parked on the common Air America-Continental ramp at Pakse, Laos. The upper right shows Phou Batiene (PS-17), a large 1,968-foot hill mass to the east along Route-23, which was the location of a FAR radio relay and intercept site.

Jarina Collection.



With the mountaintop partially obscured beneath gathering storm clouds, Phou Kate seen five miles northwest from the provincial capital at Saravane (L-44), Laos. Designated PS-21, the 5,210-foot mountain supported a USAF TACAN navigation facility known as Channel-72.

Jarina Collection.

north of Pakse and northwest of Saravane was particularly noteworthy.

Previous attempts to clear this area had resulted in failure. Now, with enemy pressure waning, a charismatic U.S.-trained colonel, Thao Ly Liddhiluja, Commanding Officer of Savannakhet-based Group Mobile-21 conceived and developed a detailed plan that encompassed targeting, and coordination between Lao air and ground units that afforded actual close air support. All this was discussed at Seno on 18 May with representatives from AIRA, ARMA, USAID/RO, RLAF, and Ly's staff.

A ten-day operation kicked off the following day. Taking a page from recent Meo tactics at Na Khang, government ground troops located the enemy, T-28 pilots bombed the targets, and the troops moved forward to occupy and consolidate territory before the enemy had time to react. Other RLAF pilots flying C-47s provided ground troops logistical drops and night flare capability.

Working out of the Lima-39 Air Operations Center (AOC), Colonel Ly maintained excellent contact with his people and the overall battlefield situation. He also visited his GM units by H-34 and briefed all RLAF missions.

Heralding the combination of great leadership and a personal touch, the entire concept worked. Losses were light on both sides with Pathet Lao forces preferring to withdraw rather than endure the unaccustomed unusual double whammy of RLG air and ground attacks. By 29 May, the troops entered the village of Houay Mun.

Not long after the successful operation, and in line with the countrywide FAR/RLAF military reorganization Colonel Ly was elevated to Military Region Three Chief of Operations.

Following the poor performance and humiliating defeat at Nam Bac that decimated or scattered a majority of the RLG army

and subsequent coup rumors, appeals and pressures from interested parties' stimulated demands for a continued countrywide reorganization of both the FAR and RLAF. However, typical of Asian, and particularly Lao politics or military matters, nothing ever moved forward at a fast pace. No one wanted to lose a position, so it was several months before any tangible plan saw the light of day from the General Staff. Even then Asian rationalization took precedence. Rather than admit gross corruption and incompetence, instead the need for downsizing infantry regiments (GMs) to battalions (set at 666 men) was blamed on an inability to properly supply the larger units.

By early May, after much wrangling, Souvanna Phouma signed an order to reorganize the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff. It abolished the north and south tactical headquarters and the Group Mobiles in order to diminish the power of regimental generals, who in the past had caused political problems for the civilian leaders in Vientiane. The Ministry of Defense would be run by colonels rather than the ineffectual general. Other generals and colonels needed to be either downgraded or weeded out of the system and replaced by higher-quality and talented men. Problems of the Air Force needed to be addressed, namely the cargo planes employed for smuggling and private commerce. This would take longer to resolve. FAR directives were slow to be implemented, and most did not take effect until July. ⁸

⁸ John Pratt, 62-67.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 266-267.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 199-200.
Telegram Sullivan to State, 05/07/68.

THE GLOVERS RELOCATE, AND THEN LEAVE LAOS

Soon after completing their vacation, since they were relative short timers, Bob and Jane were temporarily reassigned to Ban Phong Hong (LS-133) on Route-13, well northwest of Vientiane. Using the AID-provided Jeep, they visited several villages in the area, one populated by refugees displaced from Sam Neua Province.

Remote area assignments for volunteer workers were becoming more dangerous. Earlier in the month Pathet Lao had attacked an IVS couple's house in Ken Kok (LS-139) in Military Region Three, east of Savannakhet. The attack commenced during the early morning hours with a grenade exploding under the stilt-type structure, followed by automatic gunfire into the house. No one was injured and the army unit stationed next door failed to investigate until sunrise.

20 May.

Three weeks of substantial rain provided a good medium for rice planting in the Phon Hong area. Attended by their handlers, water buffalo towed the hand plows through the paddies. Seed beds were already growing and would soon provide shoots for transplanting.

Bob had left on Friday on a Porter for LP, and then Moung Nane, to participate in the first landing on the new airstrip that he had surveyed and chosen for the location.

At month's end, the couple planned to fly to LP, where Jane would pack and then journey to Vientiane, while Bob cleared things up at Moung Nane. Plans were to depart Laos on 16 June.

The work at Phon Hong was satisfying, but hard with little time off. Bob considered the living at Phon Hong luxurious compared to Moung Nane with the amenities of electric lights,

running water, shower, flush toilet, kerosene freezer, and refrigerator, gas stove and a house boy.

Bob produced a first-hand view of the havoc war can create:

"The war has displaced many people from northern Laos, even whole villages at times. We have had the privilege of seeing and talking with people from parts of Laos that are off safe limits to us. The news reports in the States are not exaggerated in regards to the number of refugees or misplaced persons in Laos."

On 9 June, Bob and party departed Ban Phong Hong (LS-133) along Route-15 to the uncompleted Nam Ngum dam. He noted a few government soldiers at points on the road as a camp had been attacked the previous week:

"We are hearing reports of enemy action quite frequently now. A week ago there was an ambush on the new road leading from Hong Sa north to [a riverside port on] the Mekong and enemy movement reported near Luang Prabang. These are things we hear about, but there are probably two or three times as many things that we don't hear about. There was a little problem between here [Site-133] and Vang Vieng this week also. There is much more enemy activity in southern Laos than we are experiencing here."

Upon return to Phong Hong, they continued their drive north up Route-13 to Ban Hin Heup on the Nam Lik.

The Glovers departed Laos on 16 June with bittersweet feelings. Realizing that living and working in a war zone was not conducive to a normal life, they looked forward to the remainder of their lives in a calmer environment. ⁹ ¹⁰

⁹ Bob and Jane Glover lived on a farm in western Maine when the Author contacted and purchased the book from them early in 1999.

¹⁰ Bob Glover, *Laos*, 169, 172-174, 177-179, 186, 189.

Mid-year message traffic between civilian and military principals presented a synopsis of past events in Laos, posed new questions, and proposed some solutions to existing problems.

A good news-bad news telegram to experienced Ambassador Sullivan, then in Paris honchoing peace negotiations with North Vietnamese representatives, commenced by stating that the military situation in Laos was comparatively calm, and that activity in both countries had already adopted the pattern of relative inactivity, typical of a normal monsoon season.

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who adamantly maintained that until the North's leaders agreed to withdraw its forces from Laos, USG should reject communist demands for a total bombing halt of the North, was firmly in charge of the country. He was characterized by indigenous power brokers to represent the only viable solution to the current situation. Concurrently, the FAR military reorganization was evolving well, as was FAR/FAN integration.

Despite former encouraging developments, a financial crisis fostered by a feeble gold market reportedly threatened Lao fiscal policy. The country represented one of only two major gold-importing nations in Southeast Asia, and a fifty percent decrease in Lao gold imports over the past six months created a 1.8-million-dollar deficit in tax revenues. Laos was the source of most gold smuggled into South Vietnam and the earlier TET offensive had disrupted the smuggling routes during 1968. This, plus a two-tiered world gold market and serious price fluctuations had contributed to the economic problem.

The following day, Mister Hurwitch, standing in for the ambassador, updated the State Department with what was called a "dry season wrap-up."

"Rains have recently been falling steadily throughout Laos ending a dry season which saw the enemy aggressively retake much territory picked up by FAR in the past two years.

[The] enemy has taken from FAR substantial pieces of territory in the north and northwest, hurting regular and irregular units in the process. A route of FAR forces at Nam Bac and the capture of most paramilitary bases north of the PDJ put the enemy in much better positions in these areas than one year ago. In the south, enemy territorial gains have been less extensive, however, in MR-4 the enemy has significantly increased control over the area around Saravane improving his capability to move through the western fringe of the Ho Chi Minh Trail structure. In most areas of southern Laos, FAR units have been forced by enemy pressure to move into defensive alignments around major population centers, leaving many agriculturally areas relatively unprotected. Enemy raids in these areas have seriously hampered USAID and other rural development activities. The enemy maintains the capability to simultaneously attack Saravane, Lao Ngam, and Attopeu.

At the moment, the enemy appears to possess sufficient strength to protect his holdings and, if he wishes, to pick up additional terrain in some areas. Enemy activity has diminished in the past weeks as weather has deteriorated. [We] will observe in the coming weeks.

[During] past years FAR has used rainy season logistical advantage (airlift) to take ground from the enemy. This year, major offensives by FAR and irregular troops would not seem prudent unless current conditions change markedly. Many FAR units are under strength and, although most units are adequately

equipped and provisioned, morale is not good and unit effectiveness in battle situations is uncertain at any given moment. [It] appears that FAR and irregular troops should concentrate on holding the line against further enemy encroachment."

President Johnson's late March surprise directive to terminate a large portion of Rolling Thunder and all northern overt and covert operations continued to cause the great minds of Admiral Sharp's CINCPAC planners in Hawaii to scramble for answers should the bombing cessation edict be extended to all North Vietnam. Should that be the case, large focused interdiction efforts would be necessary against the DMZ and Lao of communication (LOCs).

The JCS pursued this trend of thought, indicating that if all bombing was ordered ceased, then more air assets would become available for Lao interdiction. However, with Paris talks not proving fruitful and the current military situation in South Vietnam negative, it was considered unlikely that bombing of the North would soon be curtailed:

"There was also the prospect that a resumption and expansion of the air and Naval campaigns in North Vietnam may be required."

A telegram forwarded to the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon continued with this theme. A drastic diversion of existing ground operations in Laos was not deemed desirable. Westmoreland's deployment of large numbers of U.S. units involved in cross-border activities into Laos was not militarily or politically feasible, and could tip the balance of power and stimulate an enemy response that would engulf Laos:

"The cessation of all bombing in North Vietnam would permit a sharply accelerated and unimpeded flow of men and supplies into Laos and South Vietnam resulting from the release of forces

previously occupied in LOC and facility repair and in air and coastal defense. [There is a] need to emphasize the restriction of enemy movement through the DMZ, along the South Vietnamese coast, and through Cambodia."

Should the above occur, several options were proposed. They included expanding existing Rules of Engagement (ROE), to include targets of opportunity within 1,000 yards of a vehicle capable road in the Panhandle, increasing the Muscle Shoals/Igloo White hand-emplaced sensor program on the Trails, installing a MSQ all-weather radar bombing facility on the hills overlooking Long Tieng or another location to provide greater coverage, and expanding guerrilla operations.

The current Military Advisory Program (MAP) for FAR and FAN was recommended to be continued at its present level. Years of training was foreseen necessary to produce an acceptable RLA combat force. Any drastic increase in the existing program was seen as fostering negative political implications and a sense of escalation.

Continued reconnaissance of North Vietnam was considered necessary to gather intelligence on enemy movement. The same effort was required over Laos.

An earlier message to the Secretary of State from the JCS dealt with Royal Lao Government (RLG) counterinsurgency operations, considered paramount to USG policy in achieving objectives in the Theater. There was considerable unease at the Pentagon regarding the successful enemy dry season offenses and current threat to Laos. They concurred with CINCPAC's opinion that added tactical air assets would provide much to the RLA forces.

On the subject of sending extra A1E squadrons to Nakhon Phanom to support RLG counterinsurgency operations, the message stated that construction work was needed to expand the parking

area and additional facilities would be required for aircrews, support personnel, and equipment. Pending completion of the facilities, first Skyraider units could be in place by the fall; the remainder by February.

An increase of air assets and expanded operations from NKP was expected to present added responsibility to USG's already-taxed logistical support system in Thailand. This action was an overall unknown, and the logistical aspect could prove lacking in goods to support both Nakhon Phanom and increased B-52 operations from U-Tapao.

Toward month's end, tactical air problems in Laos were discussed in a telegram to CINCPAC's Hawaii headquarters. Sufficient U.S. air support was considered a paramount factor in future counter-insurgency operations in the country. Over a period of months, response for air assets to hit enemy targets in Laos were tabulated to be less than fifty percent, and strike aircraft to address road watch team sightings on Trails, forty-five percent. It was deemed that adverse weather patterns contributed to the failure to honor requests, while available assets were another cause. Cessation of a considerable portion of Rolling Thunder provided more jets for strikes, but more were required on a daily basis.

Seventh Air Force generally provided adequate assets during emergency situations, as with the current enemy buildup around Na Khang. Such last-minute crises could be averted by providing sufficient assets on a daily basis to disrupt enemy troop concentrations, and strike staging areas and supply areas before major garrisons were at risk. Therefore, concentrated strike forces would likely be needed to address rapidly developing tactical situations such as those at Pha Thi and Na Khang.

Future daily air estimates in the North were calculated to require nine A-26 and twenty-six A-1E sorties with supporting

flare ships. Thirty A-1E aircraft were required daily in the South: four to satisfy infil/exfil work, the rest to strike increasing hard tactical targets. Minimum helicopter requirements in the country were calculated at 700 hours per month; 200 hours in the North, and 500 hours in the South.

There were follow-ups to requests for continuing and increased air support for irregular paramilitary operations in Laos. Stuart Methven, former Lao "Civic Action" CIA Agent, had functioned with tribals in Laos very early in the war. As a perceived expert on the Lao paramilitary situation, he met with General Brown, the man selected to soon replace Seventh Air Force's top officer, General Momyer, in Saigon.

Methven briefed Brown on the military action conducted in north and south Laos by Agency-sponsored SGU troops. He stressed that a combination of ground forces and tactical air permitted the irregulars to fix, target, and destroy enemy forces and supplies, a process that, done separately, was not likely.

Agency concern stemmed from the ability to count on a USAF continued commitment to provide air support to these forces. If implemented, USG efforts in South Vietnam would certainly be bolstered.

Brown admitted to knowledge of the air support problem, and would attempt to continue honoring prior commitments. However, he stated that until overall priorities were abrogated to include more support for Lao irregulars, then Laos would continue to receive low precedence in the Theater.

Expecting some resistance, Methven produced the CINCPAC directive pertaining to *"additional helicopter support for CIA operations as soon as helicopter could be positioned."* He also advised Brown of the JCS recommendation of locating additional aircraft to support a maximum of sixty-five air sorties for Agency operations. Like a true Washington bureaucrat, Brown

replied that, with budgetary constraints and other factors, he harbored doubt that any additional aircraft would be forthcoming for the paramilitary work. This would be the case until priority to Agency operations was increased. ¹

WAYNE KNIGHT

CPH Wayne Knight was busy during June performing functional flight checks (FCF) and training incoming pilots.

On the ninth he left Udorn in Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot (PFF) with "Scratch" Kanach to conduct a two-day line check in the Nam Yu area.

On Tuesday the eleventh he flew with Larry Henesy (DOH 01/09/68) in Hotel-50, an H-34 that Mike Jarina had ferried late from Udorn to Ban Houei Sai via Wattay Airport and Luang Prabang. From the beginning of his training, Wayne had considered Larry generally a "weak sister" with limited talents in the H-34, and possessing a very defensive attitude. Still, he had since been upgraded, but had failed an upcountry line check. It was a rare occurrence for a pilot, but a few people did wash out of the H-34 program for dangerous or gross mistakes during

¹ Segment Sources:

Telegram from Embassy Vientiane (Hurwitch) to his Superior, Ambassador William Sullivan, who was visiting the U.S. Embassy in France to Assist with North Vietnamese Negotiations, Situation in Laos, 06/20/68.

John Bowman, *Almanac*, 206.

Telegram Embassy Laos (Hurwitch) to State, 06/21/68.

Telegram Sharp to the Director of the JCS (Spivy), 06/24/68.

Memorandum Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara.

Telegram Embassy Laos (Hurwitch) to CINCPAC (Sharp), Tactical Air Requirements for Laos, 06/30/68.

Memorandum of a Meeting Between Stuart Methven and General George S. Brown, 07/11/68.

Memorandum from the Chief of the Far East Division Directorate of Plans (Nelson) to Director of the CIA (Helms), Air Support for Paramilitary Operations in Laos, 07/12/68.

line checks. An individual could pass all the local in-pattern proficiency work to an instructor pilot's satisfaction at Udorn, but a pilot had a lot more to demonstrate upcountry when weather, altitude landing techniques, hostile activity, and the sort were factored into the work in Laos.

Knight was contemplating failing Henesy again on the twelfth, until the crew experienced ground fire along the river near Pak Beng. The aircraft was hit twice and Wayne believed Henesy handled the incident quite well. Therefore, against his better judgment, he passed the man. It was a decision he came to regret several times in later years.

After returning to Tango-08, Wayne conducted local H-34 training sessions with Bill Gibbs and Ben Van Etten.

VAN ETTEN

Ben Van Etten generally typified the helicopter type that Air America hired in 1968 (DOH 05/15/68). Although not really a generation removed from those of us who had already been flying in Laos for years, Ben entered the fray at a time of change in our protracted war.

In 1963, while assigned to Germany as a recently-trained Army pilot, Ben first became aware of the paramilitary company. Some of the more senior pilots had or still worked for Air America. Erroneous rumors abounded that normal pay was supplemented by gold. Ben was interested, but still had a considerable amount to learn about flying, and placed the information on the back burner.

Late in 1965, while assigned duty in Vietnam, a friend working for Air America in South Vietnam told him how much money he was making without being subjected to hostile action, in contrast to U.S. Army pilots.

In 1966, Ben separated from the Army in favor of employment as a civilian instructor pilot with military contractor Southern Company at Mineral Wells, Texas, home of the Army's primary helicopter school. Bob Flynn was his immediate superior.²

Ben subsequently applied for a job with Air America. Within two months, Washington Personnel Director "Red" Dawson phoned him with a UH-1 job offer in Saigon. Because of a young and rapidly growing family, Ben was unwilling to accept a job in South Vietnam, stating that he preferred an assignment in Udorn, but there were no openings in late 1966.

Almost a year and a half later he received a telegram from the Air America office offering him a job in Thailand; if interested, to call Washington ASAP. Excited about an opportunity to earn a considerable amount of money and experience challenges and high adventure, the following day Ben journeyed to the Company office at 33 Street Northwest in Washington, D.C. for an interview. If hired, he anticipated *"joining a small, select group of reputedly the most professional and highest skilled helicopter pilots the world had ever known."*

Ben considered Dawson's dark, unimpressive office a gloomy place, well hidden from normal civilian traffic. In addition to being the only stateside employment office for Air America personnel, he had also heard unsubstantiated rumors that "Red" Dawson hired Case Officers for the CIA. Ben considered his interview satisfactory, but Dawson appeared suspicious of how he had originally learned of the Company and asked who Ben knew at the Agency. He showed Ben photos of the Udorn Club and swimming

² The Author later became well acquainted with Bob Flynn while working as an instructor pilot for Bell Helicopter International in Isfahan, Iran.

pool. Ben learned that First Officers earned a base pay of 750 dollars per month, which would increase upon upgrading to Captain. Although the type of aircraft was not discussed, this advancement could be achieved more quickly in helicopters as opposed to fixed wing.

Within four days of the interview, Ben received an employment offer and contract to sign and return.

During the long flight to Taiwan, he encountered three other new hires bound for Southeast Asia: two recently retired helicopter pilots and one fixed wing pilot. He spent a week processing in Taipei and attending ground school to acquire an Airline Transport Rating. After the check-in period, he left for Bangkok, where he was subjected to more in-processing and Drexel Morgan's comprehensive UH-34D ground school.

With CPH Knight away, CJ Abadie provided Van Etten's initial acceptance flight. Ben was understandably nervous, for he had not flown an H-34 in over three years. Therefore, his preflight and cockpit procedures were quite poor, something the dour Abadie was quick to note and dwell upon. His ensuing performance was not much better, leading him to wonder if anyone had been fired after their initial flight. He was quite embarrassed, so that night he spent two hours in an H-34 cockpit, reviewing and memorizing the checklist.

The following day Ben performed to an acceptable standard. However, there was some unpleasantness with Abadie over a minor item. During shutdown, the established procedure was to pull out the overhead fuel boost pump circuit breaker. After Ben did this, Ab said he had forgotten to perform something. Curious, he reread the shutdown check list and could not find any missed item. Abadie then indicated that Ben had forgotten to disengage the boost pump circuit breaker. At this, Ben pointed to the pulled breaker. The manager then looked at him with his cold,

black fish like eyes saying, "That's the last time you will ever sharp-shoot me." ³

After those first flights, he never flew with Ab again.

Wayne Knight flew with Ben on 14 June. Wayne does not recall Ab being particularly active training or flying at this time, but with Base Manager Ben Moore on home leave, Ab likely had time on his hands because Tex Dew did not always involve Abadie too deeply in facility functions.

Over the next two months Van Etten flew a considerable amount and was upgraded to Captain.

Ben's family arrived after the probation period. Their first residence, surrounded by rice fields, was located a few miles outside the main town. Owned by a prosperous Chinese merchant, it was a large house comprised of many windows and several levels. One day Ben observed a twelve-foot king cobra ingest a toad. He told the landlord, who indicated that it was not a snake, but a spirit. He and his son returned with venerated flowers, and food. Along with burning candles and smoking joss sticks, to appease the phi, they placed these items in the small spirit house common to all Thai houses. After intoning a few prayers, they departed, indicating that the snake would never bother them again. This became fact, for after Ben returned from a RON, he discovered that his wife Linda had moved the family into town.

As the Van Etten family acclimated to Southeast Asia, they discovered that an added benefit of living in Thailand and working for Air America was the liberal time off policy.

³ Perhaps Abadie created these situations to judge a man's reaction and performance under stress. When brand new in the program, I had the same unpleasant experience while performing unrealistic confined area approaches. It was a unique individual with which Abadie did not find some fault.

Foremost were the frequent visits to Bangkok allowed under the monthly STO policy. The modern city provided shopping for jewelry, outstanding restaurants, cozy watering holes, and first-class hotels like the Siam International to enjoy the good life.

During most trips to Bangkok they would drive south for seven hours. Upon arrival Ben would park the car and they would hire taxis to use for around town activities. Ben played golf at the Bangkok Sports Club or at the Navy Club at Don Muang.

While Civil Air Transport was still a viable airline, a CAT office was maintained on the corner of Pat Pong and Suriwongse Road, across the street from the Montien Hotel. Pat Pong supported a couple of bars, like Max's, catering to the Soldier of Fortune types. Ben often encountered reporters sniffing out news stories. He enjoyed fabricating outlandish tales for these types.

Taking advantage of deep airline discounts provided through Company reciprocal agreements with other air carriers, leaving stress demons behind, the Van Etten family often journeyed to Hong Kong. Airfare on Cathay Pacific was about twenty dollars, and offered amenities like ice cold cloths to cool one's brow and the back of the neck. Twenty degrees cooler than Bangkok in the summer, Hong Kong provided first class hotels, super restaurants, and the world's finest shopping mall at the Kowloon Ocean Terminal. Among the cheapest prices anywhere in the world, Hong Kong was famous for custom tailored clothes and shoes. Although he considered the Hilton Hotel exceptional, Ben preferred the Peninsula Hotel in Kowloon. After every trip Ben felt refreshed and was ready to return to work.

Ben had compliments for the Air America wives:

"When the pilots were upcountry flying missions, performing manly things like getting shot at, the wives were back in Udorn

worrying about them. In retrospect, the pressure might have been greater on the spouses than the pilots."

Ben harbored little apprehension regarding the dangers of his occupation. He was confident that he was at the top of his flying game and the bad guys were not good enough to get him. He thought Air America pilots would not remain on the job for extended periods if they placed much credence in thoughts of dying.⁴

On the 25th, Knight flew with recently arrived Dwayne Keel (DOH 05/29/68). During the month, new hires Ron Allendorfer (DOH 05/01/68) and Dave Ankerberg (DOH 05/01/68) arrived for the H-34 program. Knight noted nothing remarkable about Allendorfer's performance.⁵

ACTION NORTH OF LUANG PRABANG

Mike Jarina turned over Hotel-50 to the CPH, RON at the Houei Sai hostel, and assumed command of Hotel-33. While Wayne conducted the line check with Larry Henesy, Mike and Flight Mechanic Bob Peterson worked the Nam Yu areas and the Yao site of Ban Nam Kueung (LS-150) upriver from Ban Houei Sai. A trip was made to the Ban Dam refugee site three miles northeast of Site-150. The crew returned to Udorn after stopping at Pak Beng. Whether this flight triggered ground fire the following day that damaged Hotel-50 is an unknown quantity.

⁴ Van Etten worked with Air America until November 1972. He had several interesting experiences and gained notoriety, one of which tagged him with the name, "Burma Ben." Some of his adventures as related to the Author will be presented in later books.

⁵ EW Knight Emails, 09/04/00, 09/07/00, 09/08/00, 09/09/00.
Ben Van Etten Interview at the Author's House, 12/03/94.
Phone Call and Interview at the National Guard New Orleans Lakefront Airport.
Ben Van Etten Accounts, The Snake House and Lofty Goals.

The following day Mike departed Udorn late in the morning for Luang Prabang in Hotel-41 with Flight Mechanics Bob Bedell and Ernie Cortez. The Customer directed them sixty-five miles north to a road watch launch position five miles north-northwest of the former Site-169 and south of Route-19. SGU troops were busy surveilling enemy road repair, vehicle traffic activity, and generating intelligence information for interdiction. After returning to Luang Prabang, during the shortened day, he landed at an often-used site forty-nine miles north-northeast of the capitol. The position, located to the west of the Nam Thuam Valley (LS-176), overlooked the Route-4 road system thrusting south from Nam Bac.

Weather patterns somewhat restricted flight activity on the thirteenth. During the monsoon season, generally some helicopter flying was always possible, although there were some risks involved, and other hazards besides weather existed in the Luang Prabang area. Mike returned to a location two miles west of LS-169, near a spur from Route-19 that connected to the Nam Bak. Like enemy tactics in the Military Region Four Attopeu region, when monsoon rains slowed or prevented travel on main arteries, rivers could be utilized to move men and materiel south through the Nam Bac Valley to the Nam Ou and farther south toward Luang Prabang. Three trips were made to the site. Forced to generally follow the same route, while flying four miles to the south low over the hilly terrain, he observed ground fire, but received no battle damage.

HOTEL-40

Since the fall of Nam Bac and loss of many former sites to the north, attempts to reestablish a government presence was met with mixed results. Naturally, wet weather and the ability of Air America helicopters to perform during this season were

instrumental in this process, particularly maintaining or seizing remote high ground that was difficult for enemy units to approach or attack. As the buildup of defense forces proceeded, helicopter pilots were tasked to resupply or rotate troops to the base camps. Operations did not always go smoothly when pilots discovered that more soldiers and officers were caging rides south than were being delivered. This was particularly the case at the most forward base camps not far from enemy LOCs, where troops had to cope with nightly probing attacks. Assuming all northern bases were surrounded, most pilots routinely spiraled down to a landing zone vertically from altitude, reversing the process when departing.

Attempting to stem a flow of purported sick, lame, and lazy types back to Luang Prabang, except for bona fide wounded, the Customer advised helicopter pilots not to allow families or unauthorized personnel out of the camps. Over the years, we had learned that such an order was easier to issue than to implement. During times of stress, refusal to board an individual fostered potential danger to both crew and helicopter, especially when officers were not present to control a thorny situation. This was evident when attempting to offload troops while a nervous mob gathered to board. Pilots had developed a technique to discourage such events. Maintaining high RPM and power to generate considerable rotor wash and dust clouds when offloading generally discouraged unauthorized personnel from climbing into the cabin section. If still ineffective, the aircraft could be lifted to a hover to discourage further problems.

On the fourteenth, Larry Egan, Dan Carson, and Mike Jarina were assigned to conduct a three aircraft troop rotation well north of the royal capitol. Egan, flying Hotel-40 with Flight Mechanic M.A. Baccay, landed at a site close to Ban Ban Pha

Thong (LS-247). The loader wanted Larry to load ladies of the night still dressed in high heels, who had previously been sent to service the men. Since Larry had been advised not to bring anyone back except soldiers or WIAs, he refused. While Flight Mechanic Baccay attempted to keep the cabin door half closed to control the situation, excess troops began to climb on the landing gear struts. Egan raised Hotel-40 to a hover and troops began dropping off to the ground. The officer in charge at the site became so incensed that he began shooting at the departing helicopter with his pistol. Firing continued as the PIC struggled to attain some altitude and "get out of Dodge".

During the next five minutes, while heading east the engine quit. Larry expertly autorotated into the area's only open dry rice paddy available at TJ4312. A few low stumps protruded from the ground in an area covering about two acres. The site was in a questionable area, almost equidistant between Ban Pha Thong and Ban "Y" (LS187), west of the village of Ban Nom Lom Neuo, and fairly close to Route-19. Eagan and Baccay did not have long to wait on the ground. As Dan Carson provided overhead SAR cover, Jarina plucked the crew from the ground. While Mike was departing, Carson radioed that he had been hit and was losing transmission pressure. ⁶ Dan managed to RTB Luang Prabang.

Mike radioed Udorn with information of the incident. He told Abadie that Larry had performed a beautiful landing of Hotel-40. He indicated that although the cause of the engine failure was unknown, if maintenance could determine what was wrong with the engine, perhaps someone could fly it to safety.

After depositing the crew of Hotel-40 at the royal capital, Jarina finished the day working thirteen miles southeast on the

⁶ Dan had a load of troops onboard and it was later determined that a soldier had discharged a round while clearing his weapon.

northwest side of the Phou Pha Banh range. His efforts included sixteen landings and thirty minutes night time.

The next morning Jarina was jeeped to the Air America radio shack at the airport to discuss the disposition of Hotel-40 with management people at Tango-08. He learned that, because of the tenuous situation in the denied area, to prevent the H-34 from falling into enemy hands, consideration was being made to ask the Air Force to destroy the machine. As an alternative, Mike proposed that someone accompany him to the Hotel-40 site to assess and possibly attempt to start the engine. After management conducted a quick check of assets, Mike was informed that Beng Bengston was en route to Udorn from Ban Houei Sai. Jarina was to sidetrack Beng for the mission. Dan Carson and Larry Egan would provide an SAR complement in another helicopter.

Upon landing, carrying his brown bag of sandwiches from the hostel, Bengston asked Mike why he was diverted to Luang Prabang. Mike promptly answered that he needed a copilot. Suspicious, "Shaky" was curious, wanting to know where they were going and if it was in bad guy country.

Mike indicated, *"Yeah, it could be. It is in denied area."*

It was late morning when the two-aircraft flight launched and made their way north toward TJ4312. Beng opened his sack lunch and asked Mike if he wanted one of his sandwiches.

Mike looked across the cockpit at him and said, *"You had better save that sandwich. You might need it later."*

At that statement, "Shaky" became alarmed and asked, "Where are we going?"

The day was rainy with low clouds. The farther north they proceeded, the more the weather deteriorated. Consequently, after encountering worsening conditions and eventually fog, they

aborted the trip, making a 180-degree heading change and returning to Luang Prabang.

Bengston continued on to Thailand while Jarina completed the day flying between Luang Prabang, Mounng Soui, and Sam Tong.

The decision to destroy Hotel-40 was still on the table, but attempts to recover the H-34, if possible, took priority. Consequently, on the sixteenth, Mike and Dan Carson each shuttled two loads of troops to a point two miles southwest of the downing site. The SGU troop mission would be to observe activity in the area, and to secure and protect the aircraft if possible. On his way back to Luang Prabang, Mike stopped in the hills west of Mak Phout (LS-137). Other trips took him twelve miles northwest of LP on the north side of the Mekong and to a sizeable mountain seven miles south-southeast of Luang Prabang.

First Officer Ron Allendorfer joined Mike in the cockpit, and on Monday, the weather again turned sour. They only managed to eke out thirty-five minutes. During the day, John Tarn arrived from Udorn along with "Shaky" Bengston. A briefing took place in the Customer's air operations office to discuss the situation and explain the proposed mission to retrieve Hotel-40 on the eighteenth. Conversing over the HF radio, Udorn management indicated that Mike would fly three shop mechanics into the site to troubleshoot and determine if a minor engine glitch was the problem. If so, an attempt to start the engine would follow. Tarn was to also land, and wait until the mechanics performed their jobs. Cover aircraft would include fast movers, two A-E drivers, an L-19 FAC pilot, and a C-130 as command and control for the air assets. With so many friendlies, a reputed 400 around the site, Doug Swanson (code named Cobra) ⁷

⁷ Doug Swanson had either already transferred, or was in the process of relocating from Attopeu and Kong Mi to Luang Prabang.

was optimistic as to area security, indicating that he was going to install a beacon there.

John Tarn, who had served as a U.S Navy instructor pilot at Ellison Field when Mike was also there, objected to the plan and considered it foolish as proposed. To him, the scenario smacked of previous classic ambush traps the enemy employed on both sides of the border to thwart rescue efforts. Although likely designed to provide the mechanics encouragement, Udorn planning diverged from the usual, whereby the pilots involved planned the operation and management coordinated assets.

Following the briefing, John informed Mike he was not going to participate in the mission as delineated by Udorn. He did not object to the mission per se; hazards of combat flying were an accepted and integral part of the job. However, two aircraft sitting on the ground in an untenable position failed to pass his calculated risk test. It served no tactical military purpose except to expose additional personnel to danger and provide the enemy with a more lucrative target. His opinion was likely reinforced by his nasty incident in April where he and Flight Mechanic Hope were struck by enemy fire while on the ground.

Mike, always up for a challenge, was unimpressed and said that he was going to fly the mission regardless of Tarn's decision. This tended to make Tarn look bad, but he was not concerned about being fired, for he had previously submitted his resignation a month before, intending to complete his education at Penn State.

After the heated talk with Jarina, Tarn called Udorn on the HF radio, informing management he was not going to fly the mission as planned. The response indicated he would be relieved early the following day and another pilot would relieve him. Rodger that. Shortly afterward, Udorn returned the call saying a C-123 pilot would deliver another pilot, necessary equipment for

a quick engine change mounted on a stand (QEC), and three mechanics the following morning. When the pilot's name was divulged, John smiled, for he knew there was no way that pilot would fly such a mission.

John's prediction proved spot on. When the plane arrived, and his relieving pilot learned the details of the mission, he complained that he was too sick to fly. Udorn was alerted and Tarn was asked if he would carry the "A" frame and remain aloft until it was determined if an engine change was necessary. Since the plan now appeared more reasonable than the original, John agreed to fly the mission. The risk seemed more acceptable. Recalculating odds, pending engine inspection results, there was only a fifty percent chance he would be required to land. In that case, he could control ground exposure time should a landing be necessary, and any rescue attempt could be controlled to a certain extent.

With Copilot Allendorfer and Jarina in the cockpit, and Bengston, Cortez, and five soldiers for security in the cabin section, the crew departed in Hotel-41. Tarn and his Flight Mechanic flew wing on them in another H-34. John's Flight Mechanic was an experienced Filipino whom he thoroughly briefed and was charged with monitoring the "A" frame and other equipment. The engine would be delivered later if considered necessary.

After landing at the site, Mike asked Beng to help him evaluate Hotel-40's engine problem and attempt a start. He would maintain 2500 RPM in case a fast departure was required. If there was trouble, he would split the needles and change RPM to alert everyone to hurry to the helicopter.

John orbited at 10,000 feet to avoid potential 12.7mm fire. After more than an hour of circling, John called for a ground status report since his fuel state for a return to Luang Prabang

would soon constitute a problem. Within ten minutes, Mike replied that there was no apparent battle damage and the engine was found to be in good condition. However, during attempted starts there was a lack of oil pressure displayed and the R-1820 failed to start. Work continued, but the crew was nearly finished and he would soon let John know what action to take.

Ten minutes later, Mike called John to land and offload the gear. In order to conduct a rapid descent, John subsequently entered an autorotation and again briefed his Flight Mechanic on particulars. Marring the needles on short final, Cortez and Allendorfer arrived to direct the landing. They inadvertently set John down on a stump and then signaled for the Captain to lift and maneuver to another spot about twenty-five feet to the left. As John's main gear touched the ground, the first mortar round splashed to his right side, close enough that he felt the heat and blast on his right arm through the open cockpit window. Survival instincts prevailed. Certain that enemy fire was not finished, Tarn grabbed a handful of collective and took off.

Mike observed the first-round hit. He found one of the hardest things to do at the moment was "split the needles" and rev the engine to signal the ground crew and avoid temptation to depart. Cortez and Allendorfer headed for Hotel-41 at high port. Needing no further incentive, the ground mechanics, Bengston, and the soldiers were not far behind.

While the latter were dashing for the H-34, Mike was arguing with Cortez to eject some unauthorized people who had boarded without permission. When Mike looked out, not a soul was in sight.

"Let's go Mike."

"Do we have everyone onboard?"

"Let's go Mike!"

"We are not leaving until everybody is onboard."

Unknown to Mike, while looking around and futilely attempting to determine if everyone was onboard, Ron entered the cockpit and strapped in.

Then, reporting that all were accounted for, he breathlessly said, *"Let's get out of here."*

After they were airborne and well established on a heading south, Mike asked Bengston about his experience on the ground. "Shaky" replied that after the round hit, he departed Hotel-40's cockpit and began running to the helicopter, but smoke drifted across the ship entirely obscuring Hotel-41. This caused him a few seconds of doubt and hesitation regarding the helicopter's status, and he was in a quandary whether to run to the ship or head for concealment in the woods.

Passing through translational lift, Tarn commenced a climbing right turn to avoid rising terrain. Still in a turn to the south, Tarn observed a second mortar round splash half way between Hotel-41 and where his ship had been sitting. Then he shivered, when enemy gunners perfectly established the target area and another explosion occurred exactly where he had been parked.

By pure chance, during his ascent, John headed directly toward the enemy gun crew and mortar tube. He alerted the Raven FAC to this fact, who excitedly replied that he also noted the firing position and would mark the spot with a white phosphorous smoke round. He fired while still in a right turn, causing the rocket to skew and assume a looping trajectory that missed the target by two hundred meters. A-1E pilots immediately commenced a retaliatory attack on the smoke marker. Although John attempted to inform the Air Force team that they were off target, he was unable to observe the final results, as he was still in a climbing turn south trailing Mike toward Luang

Prabang. Established at cruise altitude, he ascertained that his Flight Mechanic had jettisoned the "A" frame as pre-briefed.

While refueling at the airport for the long trip to Udorn, an investigation of Tarn's ship revealed minor battle damage in the form of several shrapnel holes in the tail pylon. As usual, the enemy gunners were quite accurate, only off on azimuth by a degree or two.

The incident was the final attempt to recover Hotel-40. When Ban Pha Thong was overrun on the morning of 21 June, Hotel-40's fate was sealed and the Customer ordered destruction of the H-34.

The Tarns went to Bangkok on STO and even though no one in the family had been sick during three years in Southeast Asia, they all tested positive for amoeba parasites at the Bangkok Christian Hospital. As previously reported, they departed Southeast Asia the last week in July. After completing his education, John later requested rehire, but was rebuffed by Udorn management. ⁸

SAIGON SHENANIGANS AND SEAT BELTS

Jim Campbell was CPH Bob Hitchman's assistant in the Saigon Bell program. Classified as a superior helicopter pilot, Jim had been a test pilot with the Boeing Vertol company during Chinook development, when he knew fellow test pilot Jim Brown. The

⁸ Segment Sources:
Mike Jarina Interviews.
John Tarn Letter Written for the *Air America Log* and forwarded by Tarn to the Author, 05/24/10. John believed he was being censored and was perplexed at the Log's refusal to publish his article.
John Tarn Emails, 10/29/11 (2).
Ron Allendorfer Email, 11/02/11.
Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America, Hotel-40*.
Bill Leary, June 1968 Notes that included Air America XOXOs and phone interviews with Mike Jarina and John Tarn.

antithesis of Hitchman, who at times faced near rebellion from crews over his questionable actions and policies, Jim was very popular, a manager most pilots both trusted and whose counsel most sought. He was also the brother-in-law of Air America Bell Captain Bill Frazer.

In addition to performing most local training, Campbell produced the daily flight schedule. Air America served four bases in South Vietnam: Saigon, the main base for daily missions; another was scheduled for a week or ten days at Can Tho in the Delta; Na Trang, in the middle of the country, or at Da Nang. Before forwarding the daily schedule to the Operations Department, it passed through Hitchman who modified it to suit himself for his money laundering scheme or philandering. While his wife and children resided in Saigon, Bob scheduled Emmet Sullivan, Ted Helmers, or others upcountry when he wanted to conduct illicit liaisons with their wives. These last-minute changes played havoc with operations clerks who had to schedule the early morning minibuses to pick up and deliver crews from the large city to Tan Son Nhut airport. Jim, considered a decent person, was aware of Bob's shenanigans, but for personal reasons chose to avoid any direct confrontation.

On Tuesday, 18 June, the same day as the aborted mission north of Luang Prabang, Jim C. Campbell was killed in Bell 204B N8511F at Long Thanh during a routine proficiency training flight. Jim was monitoring Jim Rausch and Emmet Sullivan's progress from the rear seat. During a poorly executed autorotation, the helicopter bounced and flipped over. At this time, cockpit lap belts were still attached to the seats. During the crash cockpit seats without backup restraint, pulled out of the floor mounted rails. All the aircraft occupants survived relatively unscathed except Jim Campbell. Rausch required a set of false teeth replacing the ones lost in the accident.

The lap belt anchoring question, which we at the Udorn facility had recognized and noted in logbook entries as an obvious flight safety item the previous year, was never properly addressed. Udorn Maintenance Chief Jack Forney often resisted change, but whether the Maintenance Department was actually reluctant to effect a change, or whether an insurance, Bell Helicopter, or FAA problem arose was never resolved. Because many of our Bells were bastardized ships, justifying the cost of a major refit to an "N" registered aircraft was difficult until a requirement was overwhelmingly obvious. Like the installation of traffic lights or stop signs at intersections after the fact, it often required a death to foster progress. Our vindication became reality when lap belts were finally relocated and anchored to cockpit decking.

Jim Campbell's death presented a void in the Saigon Assistant Flight management (AMF) structure that was soon filled by talented former U.S. Army aviator Dick Lister. Dick, who also had issues with Hitchman, endured the billet for a time, and then when an opening arose in Udorn, transferred to our program in 1969.⁹

JARINA CLASHES ANOTHER CRASHES

Three days after the aborted mission to recover Hotel-40, Jarina test flew Lao UH-34D 5812 with Ernie Cortez.

On the 22nd, Mike deadheaded to Long Tieng on 617, a Fairchild C-123B,¹⁰ to relieve Bob Davis in Hotel-33. Mike

⁹ Jack Knotts Interview at Author's House, 05/26-27/99. For additional Comments regarding Bob Hitchman, see the Author's 1966 Book.
EW Knight Emails, 09/08/00, 12/05/00.

¹⁰ The plane was not converted to a K model incorporating wing-mounted turbine engines for takeoff until 1969.

waited a long time, while impatiently pacing the ramp, but Bob failed to return to The Alternate. Finally, ACP Jerry McEntee arrived in Hotel-49 with a tail rotor assembly and mechanics to accomplish a field installation. Apparently, Bob had damaged the component while working a landing zone (UF1594) in the hills south of Moung Oum (LS-22). Jerry instructed Mike to fly the tail rotor and mechanics to the site.

Taking umbrage to Jerry's order, Mike stated, "*That is your job.*"

"Ok, then this is a route check."

After completing this task, Jarina finished the shortened day working between Sam Tong, Moung Oum, and Khieu Manang (LS-192), then RTB Tango-08.

Not long afterward, Mike was scheduled for a route check. He protested that he had recently completed one with McEntee. Knight countered that that flight was definitely not a route check.

Wayne often harbored reservations regarding the thoroughness of Jerry's route checks, and did not consider completing one in two hours sufficient to assess a pilot's overall ability in the field.

On the same day as Jarina and McEntee's tete-a-tete confrontation regarding delivery of the tail rotor assembly, during a Special Mission east of PS-22 in Military Region Four, Hotel-47 received serious battle damage. Similar to Egan's incident in Hotel-40 north of Luang Prabang, the engine lost all oil, followed by a complete failure. This time the ship and crew were not so fortunate; the H-34 crashed, ending up on its side in a confined and densely wooded area. The three crewmembers



Captain Harvey Potter, wife Jean, Mrs. Webb and Wayne enjoying libations at an Air America party.

Wayne Knight Collection.

were immediately recovered, but all incurred injuries: PIC Harvey Potter, a back injury; Co-Captain Tim Woosley a chest injury; and Flight Mechanic Tom Nery, a jaw and back injury.

Salvageable parts of the helicopter were subsequently recovered and returned to Udorn for repair. Hotel-47 returned to service in September. ¹¹

Toward month's end, Jarina, along with Van Etten, and Flight Mechanic Baccay tested Hotels-56, 46, and 32.

Saturday morning, Jarina and Allendorfer deadheaded on C-123 555 (known as triple nickel) to Pakse via Savannakhet and PS-22. Mike assumed command of Hotel-30 with Francisco as Flight Mechanic. The shortened day allowed only a flight to Phou Kate (PS-21) and Saravane.

On the 30th, with new Flight Mechanic Baragan, the crew worked a long day (fifteen landings) covering parts of two provinces. They flew shuttles to PS-21 on top of Phu Kate from Saravane; Attopeu to Kong Mi, back to Lima-10, and then to Site-44.

The first of the new month, after flying to Saravane, PS-21, and back to Pakse Mike was relieved. He deadheaded to Tango-08 on CASI C-47A, Papa Delta Golf (PDG). ¹²

THE MOVE NORTH IN MR-2

Toward the end of June, Vang Pao's troops commenced an offensive in upper Military Region Two. The operation was not

¹¹ Hotel-47 had a checkered history. The previous year, Captain John Ford had plunked Hotel-47 into a river in Military Region Three. Dropped by an Army Chinook pilot during recovery, enough was salvaged to build a new Hotel-47.

¹² Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Email, 09/09/00.
Bill Leary June 1968 Notes Regarding the H-47 XOXO.
Joe Leeker H-47, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Air America Website.

initially supported by the ambassador, who "threatened to withhold helicopter support." Sullivan reversed this decision when the feisty general was not dissuaded, and indicated that his troops would move with or without air support. ¹³

Vang Pao's tactics were simple. With the aid of helicopter support and air strikes, small units were tasked to uncover the enemy, after which, air or larger forces would move forward and destroy them.

In addition to reclaiming lost territory, other goals included finding a suitable site for a TACAN installation and, if enough momentum was achieved, possibly retaking the revered heights of Phu Pha Thi.

Moung Son (L-59), located in the valley north of Moung Heim, appeared to satisfy both Vang Pao's and USAF aims; its seizure would provide both a viable location for electronic gear and also constitute a marshalling area for movement northeast toward Site-85. However, Site-59 had to be first reclaimed from an enemy determined to hold territory. To implement these plans, two ADC battalions consisting of 750 men were lifted by helicopter to Houei Tong Ko (LS-184) and guerrilla units were moved into the hills south and east of Moung Son. ¹⁴

BACK IN CONUS

During early June after being nominated presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated in California. We watched the funeral and the sad

¹³ As the Author later discovered first hand, Vang Pao was independent, persuasive, and a very tough individual when challenged.

¹⁴ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 197.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 282-283.
CHECO.

event on Dad's black and white television set. The event was kind of a head shaker, leading one to speculate as to who was next to die in the seemingly cursed Kennedy family.

I received a call from a nurse at Doctor Loizeaux's office informing us that the rabbit had died. In the dark ages of medicine, before the miracle of advanced technology evolved, this was the only positive pregnancy test in the doctor's arsenal.

Mom and Dad's next-door neighbor, John Lacamera, owned two houses at the Lavalette, New Jersey shore. Not long after the start of our vacation John kindly offered to rent us one unit for a week toward the end of June, before the beach season began. Despite the fact that Tuie was suffering from morning sickness, Dad, Ricky, and I drove to the Jersey shore. Although we did not linkup with my cousin Bob Anderson, we had fun on the beach for a few days when Mom called informing me that Tuie was very ill, could not eat, and was losing weight. Always a slight person, she could ill afford this. Therefore, we returned to Plainfield and, on the basis of Doctor Loizeaux's sound advice, cut our leave short and made immediate plans to return to Thailand.

Early in July, Dad dropped us at Newark airport to board the New York Airways helicopter shuttle to Kennedy International. He watched as the helicopter lifted off and either saw or imagined Ricky looking out the window mouthing "Pop-Pop, his term for Dad.

We departed JFK on 707 Pan Am One for the long, tedious trip to Japan. Perhaps happy to be going home, Tuie ate well on the plane until we arrived at Haneda Airport, at which time, she began vomiting again. After resting overnight at a Tokyo airport hotel, we continued our trip to Thailand. Rick was a good traveler until in the Don Muang landing pattern, when he regurgitated on himself and my suit. At that stage in our trip, there was little to do but enjoy the smelly result. ¹

Tuie, Ricky, and the maid boarded the night train for Udorn on the sixth. Having business at the Air America office, I left Bangkok on the train the following evening.

At the Benjarn Road house I discovered that the ravages of a tropical environment had claimed its due, rendering many of our precious creature comforts inoperative. In addition to other things, the car, television, and radio failed to work. On the plus side, during our absence, the landlord had the leaky roof repaired, cemented a small area at the rear of the house, and attended to other minor items.

A CURIOUS PASSING

As if we did not have enough on our plate with jet lag, a pregnancy, and readjusting to the idiosyncrasies involved in

¹ At that time in U.S. aviation history, despite the cramped and smoky planes, people dressed to travel.



"Uncle" Cha Tha Musagablert, a dentist visiting from Pattani holding Ricky on the front porch of the Benjarn Road house.
Author Collection.

living in Southeast Asia, just prior to our arrival in Udorn, Charlie Carlson expired, viciously murdered by unknown assailants. Except for seeing him at the Bangkok airport as we departed on home leave, we had had little contact with him in recent months. His on-again-off-again relationship with Bung Orn was highly stressed, and the couple had not cohabited for some time. He lived outside of town on the Sakon Nakhon road next to a commercial animal farm or zoo, and had not worked at the Air Force base for five months. Drinking heavily, he was not well, either mentally or physically. Therefore, although saddened, I was not entirely surprised to learn of his demise.

Since I was the brother-in-law, like it or not, I was obliged to identify his remains, which resided in a makeshift Air Force morgue, a special refrigerated Conex box tailored to hold unfortunate airmen. Although prepared for the viewing, I was still shocked when the door was opened. Ravages and mortification of the Southeast Asian climate had already taken its toll. I had to look carefully, for Carson's body was almost indistinguishable, a hugely swollen lump of decaying flesh, displaying several purplish and discolored wounds from at least nine stab wound penetrations to his lower body. At the time, I wondered how he possibly could have managed a trip to the Air Force base in that condition. Naturally, the military personnel were anxious to know who would assume responsibility for the disposal of Carlson's body. I did not know, but indicated I would attempt to find out as soon as I investigated further.

As soon as able, I returned to the base and talked to the doctor who treated Charlie after the patient or someone else had driven him to the Air Force hospital. Having worked as a power plant specialist, who spread the wealth, Charlie was well liked by most Air Force personnel, and for some reason the doctor was somewhat hostile and reluctant to talk to me at first. After I

explained who I was and what I was attempting to do, he revealed that Charlie had a bottle of whiskey with him in the truck upon arrival. I was surprised to learn this, for I had never known the man to imbibe any alcohol but beer. He further indicated that had Charlie been even slightly more physically fit, he most likely would have survived the wounds. While operating on him, attending doctors discovered that the man suffered from multiple medical problems such as emphysema and cirrhosis of the liver. Having such complications there was not much they could do but close him up. Severe shock and a combination of health problems ultimately caused his death.

Charlie had also told people that he had terminal cancer with only six months to live. However, the man's veracity was often seriously in doubt, particularly while he attempted to ingratiate himself with people. Marked as a congenital liar from the first time I met him, it was difficult to separate fact from fiction. I learned this twist of personality early when he told me that he had received the Medal of Honor for participating in the momentous flag raising on top of Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima. There actually was one Navy corpsman that helped hold the second flag during the posing of the vaunted photograph, but absolutely no proof Charlie that was ever involved.

Comprising part of his convoluted personality, Charlie loved small children. After digging deeper into the dreadful quagmire of the incident, I learned that several urchins of various years were living in or present at his house during the incident. They were eyewitnesses to the assault on the evening of the attack when two mysterious men arrived to perpetrate the deed.

Often writing bad checks, Charlie had not paid rent on his house for several months. Under Thai law a landlord was not permitted to evict a tenant until the individual found new

accommodations. Therefore, one theory circulated that the landlord had hired men to kill him. QED. A trip to the police station revealed that Carlson, a man well known by personnel there, had previously caused them and others in town a great deal of trouble. Therefore, no one in the department was particularly anxious to expend energy to investigate the murder. All this seemed strange to me, for Charlie had earlier been well liked by all, and had formerly been a pillar of the community. His altered personality and method of dealing with people were surprising.

During a family meeting at the Nisagonrungsee Adulyadej Road residence, despite the vitriol and animosity between the Nisagonrungsee family and Carlson, the family unanimously elected to help bury him.² Without really knowing exactly what action to take, I said that I would attend to the details. I knew that Carlson had provided funds to the monsignor of the local Catholic Church, a long-time resident of Udorn. Attesting to Carlson's Jekyll and Hyde personality, the priest, who Charlie had confided in during the couple's problems, allowed that Charlie had been very generous to the organization and he considered it only fitting that the church volunteer a burial lot in the Saint Mary's cemetery. The priest also agreed to officiate and conduct the funeral. Since Carlson had few or no worldly possessions, this offered a far better prospect than being interned as an indigent soul in an unmarked "potter's field" grave. The family provided a wooden coffin, and during the heat of the season, Charlie was afforded a Christian burial. I helped with funds; it was the least I could do for the man in a very bad situation.

² The family was correctly upset when Charlie reputedly kicked Bung Orn in the abdomen while she was pregnant with her second child, Mike.



Saint Mary Mission Chapel in Udorn, Thailand, where Charlie Carlson's funeral service was held. Note the discarded jet engine to the left of the building.

Author Collection.

It was not over. Repercussions and more headaches followed. In searching through his possessions, no passport, legal papers, or next of kin could be found. Furthermore, any person or business person to whom Carlson had written bogus checks, now directed his debts to the Nisagonrungsee family for payment. At the same time, I realized how very little was actually known about the mystery man's past. He indicated that he had served in the U.S Navy, and mentioned something about a cousin or aunt living in Alaska. That was all.

An American civilian had been murdered in a foreign country. Local Vice Consul, Bob Charlton, who maintained an office at the USIS building located on the corner across from City Park, was understandably upset over the incident, for there was considerable pressure from his Bangkok superiors to obtain answers. Asia was often a strange place for Westerners, and at times no answers were available to some questions. ³

Orn was living at home and had two babies to rear. Consequently, she required money to support them. During my investigation at the Air Force base, I discovered that while working for Philco Ford Charlie was covered by several insurance policies. However, these were only active while he was employed. Still, I visited the current Philco employees at the Air Force facility and wrote to the company on the chance that any monies were due. I never heard from the company.

Then I had an inspiration: because the children were legally American citizens, they might be entitled to Charlie's

³ Employing the reading library to read three-day old newspapers and periodicals in the early days, I was well acquainted with the USIS building and the American representatives working there-USIS representative Gordon Murchie and then Consul Ralph Jans. Pradit Kampermpol worked there for twelve years. After we won the Lao War and went home, he eventually developed the only purportedly fragrant orchids in the world.

Social Security, a sum amounting to about 200 dollars per month. Although not a great amount of money, in Thailand this would help Orn buy a lot of rice and cover most ordinary expenses. Orn and I checked with the vice consul regarding this subject, and as a compassionate person, Bob indicated it was entirely feasible. Along with writing to the mythical aunt in Alaska, I sent several letters to the Social Security Department in Washington requesting forms and answering questions verifying the marriage, births and other items. I also wrote to the Veterans Administration to verify Charlie's military service. Charlton, who I believed liked Orn, a very good-looking woman, also helped all he could from his end. Although it took a long time, Orn eventually received entitlements until Myron and Michael attained the age of eighteen years.

However, the incident was not finished and continued to plague us for some time. In August, vicious rumors circulated that the wife or family hired thugs to kill Charlie. From his actions against Orn and scurrilous slander Charlie had issued against the family, they certainly had sufficient incentive to put him down. But they never acted like the kind of people who would commit murder. Instead, they helped bury Charlie, paid his debts, and even hired an investigator from Bangkok to ferret out the mysterious perpetrators. No, that theory was unlikely, besides Charlie had alienated numerous and varied individuals during the months prior to his death.

Still suspicion lingered, reaching a crescendo when Phil Goddard entered the Air America bar one evening and approached me with hot information. Phil, a consummate political type who had the ear of many people, warned me to be very careful, for some U.S. Embassy people in Bangkok suspected the Nisagonrungsee family of killing Carlson for Social Security benefits. This was a rather shocking statement, for owning land and receiving

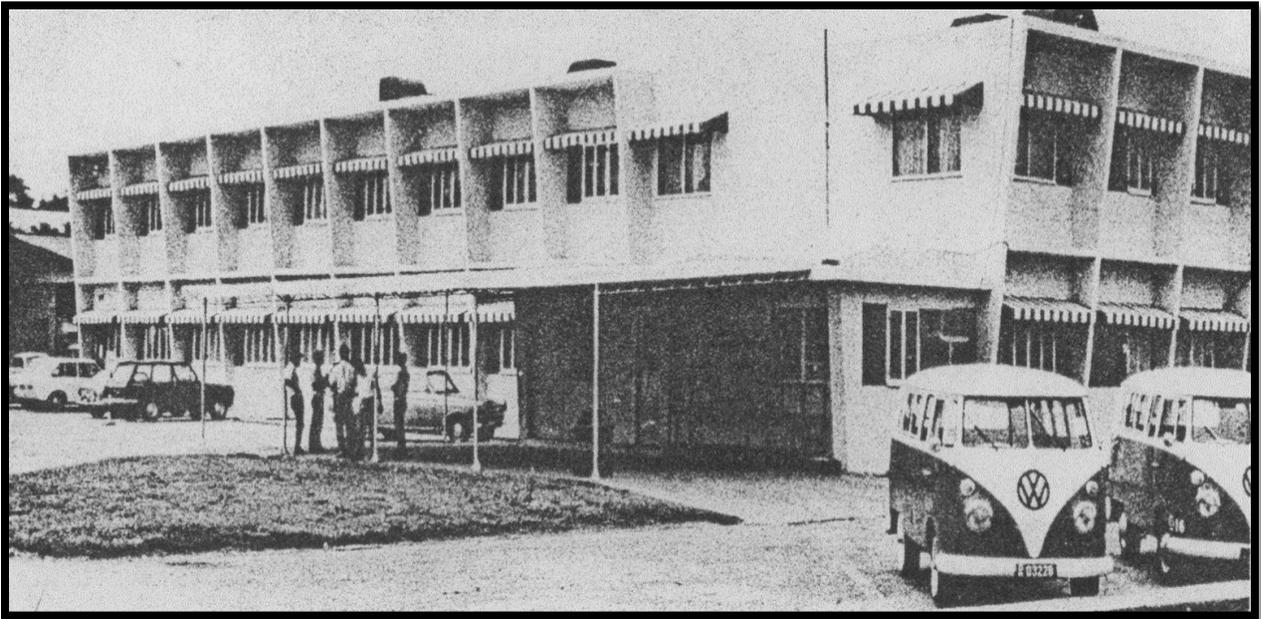
rental income, the middleclass family did not need money. When I recovered, I became angry telling Goddard to let his REMF informants know that no one in the family knew about the U.S. Social Security system; I was the first person who initiated and pursued the request. The innuendo that I was next on the family's hit list was repelling and devastating to my mental stability and reputation.

As everyone suspected, Charlie's killers were never apprehended or brought to justice, and with other important events evolving in Udorn, the incident faded into yet another Asian mystery.

NEW BUILDINGS

Another change occurred to the Air America facility while we were still on leave. By mid-June, a two-story 5,400 square foot addition to the Administration-Operations building, begun the previous August at the building adjoining the Mad River, was completed and occupied. In addition to more office space, the new structure provided highly functional pilot amenities that included a briefing and planning room, a crew lounge, and crew locker room which included hot showers. Compared to past accommodations, it was truly luxurious. Now we had a secure, quiet place to bathe, rest, and store clean uniforms and our upcountry weapons.

In 1967, when the Agency decided to expand their presence and participation in the Lao war, sometime after the Administration-Operations building was built, attention focused on constructing a larger more modern and efficient building to replace the outdated AB-1 building and house the Thai sections under one roof for better coordination (Headquarters 333). However, when a team of architects arrived from the States itching to spend allocated money, Bill Lair informed the



The new addition to Air America's Administration-Operations building. Company drivers are standing under the overhead cover in front of the Ground Transportation Department office. Two Volkswagen busses used to pick up and return crews from their homes are parked to the right. This area also contained an office to distribute upcountry emergency equipment like flack and survival vests.

Photo from the *Air America Log*, Volume 2, Number 4, 1968.



The super-secret "White House," a CIA headquarters facility located across from the Air America facility on the Royal Thai Air Force Base, Udorn, Thailand. The building adjoined the CASI ramp and "rice" "Q" warehouse loading area. Several parked UH-34Ds are visible in the upper right-hand corner.

Photo loaned from James Parker's book, *Codename Mule*.

designers that he deemed the present office sufficient for his operation. They countered that to accommodate additional personnel for the envisioned operation required a sizeable two-story air-conditioned building. Looking much the same as the Air America building, the new one-million-dollar structure was erected across the parking ramp adjacent to the CASI and "Q" warehouse area. Just as predicted, the many rooms were eventually filled, but with individuals who performed mundane make-work jobs.

Various names were accorded the new digs by individuals over the years. I called it the "White House" because of its appearance, while others preferred the "Taj Mahal."

Equipped with a coded push-button entry system, run-of-the-mill field pilots were not allowed access to the facility: only Air America management when necessary for consultation or special missions. ⁴

In May, former U.S. Army pilot Tom Lum arrived in Udorn to supplement Ken Martens, Roy Lewis, and Dick Secord in the Air Liaison section. During his tour Tom and his wife Sherry added a bit of color to our lives.

During Tom's first tour that lasted until August 1970, he worked out of Udorn, performing TDYs to Long Tieng as a TACAIR coordinator. He worked with the FAGs and Americans, providing advice for TACAIR procedures. He noted that some of our people refused to listen, "since they knew it all." ⁵

⁴ Later, in 1972, when in the Special Project, I was accorded access to the "White House" and adjoining building for the purpose of planning missions, briefings, and viewing maps and stereoscopic photographs.

⁵ Bill Leary July/August 1968 Notes of an Interview with former chief of AB-1, Bill Lair.
Knight Email, 08/05/00, 09/15/01-answer to some of my questions to Tom Lum.

THAI INSURGENCY

Early in 1968 communist infiltrators from Laos and North Vietnam posed a dilemma in the northern border areas of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, and Nan Provinces. Several measures were taken to deal with the problem: Massive sweeps through the hills by Royal Thai Army (RTA) units had largely failed to eliminate the insurgents, and had not provided the necessary security to calm and protect tribal peoples in the region. Moreover, government actions tended to further alienate the hill people. Therefore, to help rectify the situation, the Border Police organization (BPP) was taxed with greater responsibilities, and more stringent measures were taken to seal off borders. People- to-people civic development programs were initiated to curry favor with the tribes in trouble areas. During the long-term planning process, it was recognized that, like the Seventh Cavalry used to advantage in the American West, tribals would have to be utilized for intelligence gathering and scouting missions. In some cases where none of these measures were successful, entire village populations were relocated from hot spots to safer areas under government control (Pua).

In contrast to the north, communist insurgency (CI) in Isan had been relatively quiescent for a year, mostly attributable to RTA, police, and civic action programs.

There was some increased insurgent activity beginning in remote hills along the Thai-Malay border on the southwest peninsula. However, this trouble had been ongoing for several years, partly from leftover communist rebels of the Brit era, and part from separatists who wanted reunification of that area. There were also roving groups of bandits to cope with, who had no political connection to other bands.

A CIA memorandum prepared in July admitted to a somewhat confused and convoluted situation regarding CI in Thailand: a conundrum as to the big intelligence picture. The report concluded that:

"Because of the nature of an insurgency movement, plagued with information gaps and other deficiencies, there can be no full and comprehensive intelligence on such a situation."

The synopsis contained history relating to the problem.⁶ Four years of intelligence gathering on the subject enabled an accurate outline of the problem. From early 1965, despite lackluster Thai security and intelligence organizations, field intelligence revealed that a bona fide CI problem existed in the northeast.

By late 1965 and early 1966, information provided by prisoner interrogations and captured documents added to overall knowledge of the insurgency that concluded CI would increase during the next two years but stay controllable.

By the end of 1966 more information was available to analysts, but pieces were still missing from the puzzle. However, the ChiCom function in the insurgency was better understood, as was the relationship between the Chinese and Thai communist parties.

Additional information was required regarding activity in Bangkok, and in the rural areas especially, as to political issuers as opposed to the paramilitary side. The covert activity was difficult to uncover because of the large Chinese presence in the CI organization.

Intelligence measures were being refined within government agencies to generate better results, and included efforts to

⁶ The Author covers Thai insurgency in previous books.

infiltrate CI ranks at all levels. ⁷

JARINA ASSISTS INSPECTIONS

During a lull in the Jansky and Bailey (J&B) radio research project in the Bangkok area Tom Moher's white UH-34, 148803 had been ferried to Udorn for a detailed maintenance inspection. After an FCF, Mike and Flight Mechanic Rick Sterba ferried the ship to Tango-09 via Korat (T-13). Following the delivery, Mike took a refreshing STO, scuba diving in Pattaya.

On Thursday the eleventh, in a break from upcountry work, Mike, new First Officer Duane Keele, and senior Flight Mechanic Moon Centeno departed Udorn in Hotel-30 and flew west to the RTSF and Agency training camp at Pitt's Camp (T603), near Phitsanulok. The two-day trip entailed working with the Thai police who, as part of the RTG's continuing communist insurgency program, planned to conduct an inspection tour of police stations, border police posts (BPP), and refugee villages and to recon recently completed roads in the Northern provinces. Mike would supplement two brown and white Bell helicopters the police aviation department had just received. The man in charge of the National Police and his entourage of VIPs rode in the Hueys, while Mike provided a backup and did what was requested.

Trips the first day were conducted to Phrae (T-07), and Chiang Klang (T-504), with a RON at Ban Pua (T-506), an area

⁷ Segment Sources:
World Book Online Americas Edition, Thailand (1968),
 (aolsvc.worldbook.aol.com/na/bt/cp1691113.htm).
 United States Foreign Relations (FRUS) (State) 1968 Thailand, 36th
 Meeting of the Senior Interdepartmental Group, Review of Thailand
 (Insurgency), 05/13/68.
 FRUS (State) 1968 Thailand, Memorandum Prepared by CIA, Intelligence
 and the Thai Communist Insurgency, 07/10/68.
 1971 Handbook Thailand.

where more than 2,000 hill tribe people were previously relocated.

At one location, Mike observed six Thai UH-34D helicopters sitting idle and inquired why they were not being used. The police chief indicated that all the ships were grounded and mechanics could not repair them. Mike considered this strange and inefficient. Since there was always a demand for H-34s in Laos, he thought Udorn would love to be recipients of the ships.

Apparently, perhaps because of inexperience, there was a problem with the Bell pilots performing at one site, therefore, the police chief asked Jarina, *"Is this a good helicopter?"*

Mike chuckled and replied, *"If it is not, I would not be flying it."*

"Is it alright if I ride with you?"

"It is your helicopter. Do whatever you like with it."

The police chief then smiled and asked Mike if he would fly them out of the village. Mike answered in the affirmative. He then qualified this saying that because of the confined area and his fuel load, he would have to shuttle a few people at a time to a small strip nearby, where he could make a rolling takeoff with all hands.

Chief liked Jarina's can do attitude and chose to fly with him the remainder of the trip. That night they billeted at a nice hotel and enjoyed dinner with the chief, getting to know him fairly well. They learned that he had eleven relatives undergoing professional training in the U.S.

During dinner, Duane Keele received his first good introduction to Thai food. He was sitting beside a policeman at the large gathering. When the courses were placed on the table, the policeman pointed to one plate saying, "Be careful-hot." Attempting to show off, Keele scoffed that he was used to Tex-Mex food, a cuisine that he considered really hot. To make a

point, he scooped and swallowed a large dollop of mushy green substance from a bowl. The chemical composition of capsaicin took effect only seconds after swallowing the mess. After chugging an entire quart of Singa beer, through tears clouding his eyes, he glanced at the policeman and his friend. Being polite, pretending not to look at the farang, the two shared a private grin. The burning sensation continued for thirty minutes.

Because Jarina insisted that he pay closer attention to the maps, Keele thought he was testing him during the trip. The newbie was confused, for at no time was he lost, and he believed his navigation to be accurate.

The final day of the combined inspection trip, they conducted fifteen landings, stopping at Ban Chiang Kham (T-514 where a new USAID road had been built to Sayaboury Town), then at Xieng Lom (LS-69A, where an improved Thai road had been completed north to Muang Ngap, nearly to the Lao border in western Sayaboury Province, the T-514 area. The roads would allow rapid movement to the borders and monitor areas of potential CT infiltration or invasion.

The last leg of the multi-day trip ended at Pitt's Camp to discharge the police officials. The crew arrived at Tango-08 after dark.

DOWN SOUTH

Early the following afternoon, except for a Flight Mechanic change to Ernie Cortez, using the same aircraft, the crew flew southeast to Pakse. During a shortened day, they completed one Special Mission out of Khong Mi.

After a customary recon of the landing area in a CASI aircraft, missions continued the next day from PS-22. Then shuttles commenced from PS-22 to PS-38 and area. Keele

considered that first exposure to the Bolovens a sightseeing wonder. After returning to Lima-11, they were assigned a trip to Phu Kate (PS-21) TACAN site with technicians. The crew was then directed to Savannakhet to RON pending a mission in Military Region Three the next day.

Along with a Thai crew flying another H-34, Mike repositioned to Thakhet (L-40) to perform road watch team supply missions at two sites for Mike LaDue. The first mission was programmed to drop rice at WE5854, forty-eight miles northeast of Thakhet and twelve miles west of Mugia Pass. Then, on the return trip, they would proceed south down the river valley to another site. We had worked the high mesas in the area for several years (the shifting Yankee Pad) and Mike felt relatively confident flying in the area.

While closing on the Phou Vang Hao range, they encountered marginal weather. In the early days Mike had flown with Charlie Weitz, who taught him how to punch through clouds while going into Sam Tong. They arrived at the position on a karst that was shrouded in clouds. Spying a hole and the landing site on the opposite side, he flew through the opening and landed. Then he called the other ship saying it was a piece of cake, *"Just come through that hole; punch over the top. It is all open here; no trees and clear."*

The Thai pilots penetrated the cloud, landed, and unloaded the bagged rice. When Mike indicated they had to return to the same site, the Thais objected, *"No. We do not fly instruments."*

After completion of the work, they returned to Lima-39 to RON at the Air America hostel.

The following morning, they returned to the same landing zone west of Mugia. The return trip took them west to a position east of Grove Jones to retrieve a team for L-40. Another mission awaited the crew at Savannakhet. Picking up a team sixteen miles

northeast at General Ma's former Keng Ka Boa (LS-235) strip, they flew to the remote landing zone.

The crew RTB Udorn on the seventieth.⁸

KNIGHT

More pilots were transferring to Udorn or transitioning to the Bell program. On the first of the month, Wayne conducted local training with Herb Baker (DOH 04/01/65) and Billy Pearson (DOH 09/29/61) in Bell XW-PFI.

Herb actually had flown with Air America in the very early days, but, like a revolving door, had chosen to terminate and then return. He had experienced health and family problems from time to time and was often absent from Udorn for long periods. Now he opted to upgrade and fly turbine engine helicopters. Billy P had been the Rendezvous Club manager, but relinquished that billet in favor of flying H-34s.

Training continued the following day in the same 205 with Herb and Pat Colgan (DOH 08/16/65) who had been flying Bells in Saigon. Herb was receiving his final upgrading check ride.

Colgan, a Mormon from Rapid City, South Dakota, an older low-key type with pure white hair, was an interesting person to fly with, and had an excellent grasp of investments. One evening while RON at the Long Tieng hostel, he discussed with me the pros and cons of purchasing a McDonalds' hamburger franchise chain. It sounded like an interesting investment and in 1968 one could obtain a franchise for 10,000 dollars. He also cited an investment advisor company, Spear and Staff, which had tripled his money in the stock market. Naturally, I was impressed with

⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Duane Keele Emails, 11/13/11; 12/09/11.

his business acumen and chose to look into doing business with the company.

Wayne went upcountry on the eighth with Wayne Gentry in Hotel-45 to conduct a route check. He also flew a night ferry to Udorn in PFG with one of the six "safety pilots," Nikki Fillipi.

Management types were not exempt from recurrent training. Consequently, three days later, ACPH Marius Burke gave Wayne a local proficiency check in PFJ. The same day, Wayne, Herb Baker, and Flight Mechanic John Melvin proceeded north in PFJ for Herb's field line check. They RON at the Company hostel at Site-20A.

While I was on leave, the AID-U.S. Embassy Bell contract, let during April 1966, was completed in Chiang Mai. Therefore, 204B N1196W had been transferred to Udorn to fulfill the 713 contract.⁹ Our Bell inventory had been steadily diminishing, so the Bell was a welcome addition to the fleet. The machine was no stranger to our facility and had been ferried to the base several times for scheduled maintenance. Jim Kemp, Jack Barnheisel, Bill Hutchison (DOH 02/27/66), and Pat Colgan (DOH 08/16/65), had shared flying duties out of Chiang Mai. "Barney" was Station Manager. Hutch, had volunteered for the Chiang Mai assignment to allow a family life and escape the Saigon caldron.

During the year and a half he was in Chiang Mai, Hutch's tasks involved all phases of the Embassy operation. In addition, he worked with refugees, the U.S. Seabees who were constructing roads, and the Thai border police. On one trip with a team to the border, his ship was hit by ground fire.

The contract expired and after taking home leave, Hutch transferred to the Udorn Bell program. With 96W's departure,

⁹ Wayne Knight first logged time in 96W in July.

Captain Jack Smith satisfied the area's fixed wing Helio Courier-Porter requirements.¹⁰

THE FIELD

On Friday the 12th, with most of the initial footwork complete in regard to disposition of Carlson's effects, I began flying again in 96W. The machine was similar to 39F and was equipped with a cockpit and cabin-activated overhead hoist system. According to Company regulations, excessive time off the flight schedule required a local proficiency check prior to release for upcountry work. Flying several hours with both Robbie Robertson and Marius Burke, I completed a warm-up flight and the required check ride, all sandwiched between FCFs.

Deadheading on Hotel-46 to Long Tieng, I returned to the field on 13 July to fly a route check in XW-PFF with Wayne Knight, who was already upcountry and had flown a line check with Herb Baker in PFJ. When I arrived, Wayne had performed a FCF on Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Flight Mechanic Kania. We worked a long day out of Alternate supporting Meo units at Padong and to the east. Although I felt comfortable flying the machine after the long vacation, I was very careful. Wayne was surprised that I was not "rusty" and made the comment that I had not lost a step. It was relaxing and also fun flying with a person who was not overly critical.

While I RON at Long Tieng, Wayne ferried Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot to Udorn with instructions for me to fly PFJ the next day with Kania.

Dark thirty on Sunday morning, I departed Alternate to work at Na Khang. Five days previously, maneuvering during a spate of

¹⁰ Knight Emails, 09/09/00, 09/12/00, 09/13/00, 11/06/00.
Bill Hutchison Two Phone Interviews, 12/06/11.

adverse monsoon weather, several hundred Military Region Two guerrillas had moved down from hill positions, tightening the noose around Moung Son (LS-59) and surrounding the valley. However, the enemy was resolute, only slowly giving ground to the guerrillas. It was not until the 22nd that the valley was completely in government hands. Even then, the complexion of the offensive had changed, with the enemy assuming the role of antagonists. For this reason, it was difficult to supply troops or evacuate the "sick, lame, or lazy."

To further support Vang Pao's rainy season operation in reclaiming previously lost territory, because the Moung Son operation was still proceeding slowly, perhaps as a temporary measure, the USAF had a TACAN unit slung by helicopter into Na Khang. The metal CONEX box was installed on prepared high ground just to the north of the main fortress garrison. As they had at Pha Thi, military technicians, scurrying around in civvies, operated the navigation facility. The TACAN unit, the first in the area since the loss of Site-85, already was proving its worth, enabling government units with the assistance of Seventh Air Force strikes to cautiously probe northward from Moung Son and Na Khang toward Pha Thi.

Naturally, the TACAN unit and resulting influx of Americans required additional security measures and forward outposts. When I arrived, everything appeared to be in a state of frenzy, a work in progress with most of the hastily developed pads still rough and largely unimproved.

I worked almost twelve hours that day moving men and munitions to outposts, and landed at Long Tieng well after dark.

The following day, I returned to Na Khang and damaged the machine. I worked northern outposts all morning. Tricky winds burbling over the ridges were fairly stiff and caused some turbulence. Outbound to the north, while still low on the

western side of the Site-36 complex, I crossed a ridge, experienced a severe downdraft, and banged the underside of the tail cone. Inspection revealed some minor damage, but nothing that would cause an adverse airworthiness condition. Still, some fuselage metal work was required, and since only four bolts held the cone to the main fuselage, to be safe, I wanted the ship inspected by a ground mechanic and cleared for continued work upcountry. Therefore, I RTB Alternate early to await a mechanic from Udorn. Considering a machine my life's blood, I hated to damage one. I was not only embarrassed, my ego was shattered, and despite Wayne's analysis of my performance, I considered that perhaps I was truly rusty after the long layoff.

SOUTH

Following minor cosmetic repair work (fortunately, I had not damaged any stringers or longerons), clearance, and a couple of local trips, I relocated to Savannakhet for a Special Mission. After parking at Lima-39, I joined another pilot in Papa Foxtrot India to satisfy the double crew requirement. "Ski" Olkowski was the Flight Mechanic. Although from a later generation, blond-haired "Ski" was also from Plainfield, New Jersey and lived on 6th street, the same area where a former high school girlfriend of mine had lived.

The infiltration mission was planned to drop a team at WD6899, almost seventy miles northeast in a low but remote area between Routes-23 to the west and 911 to the east. ¹¹

Toward mid-afternoon, with mission commander Phil Goddard leading, the flight launched and joined the Air Force escort

¹¹ In contrast to the ill-conceived mission earlier in the year conducted on low ground, there were no populated areas listed on the map.

planes. As an aid to airborne visual navigation, we often allocated names to prominent terrain features like mountain ranges or distinctive river locations, such as "the battleship" or "the boot."

Upon reaching the target point, but still at ten thousand feet, Goddard called, complaining of a control problem. Without servo boost or redundant irreversible valves installed in the hydraulic control system, the Bell could be very difficult to fly. Indeed, we practiced servo off run-on landings during proficiency flights. Depending on the ship, controls could be very stiff or heavy, and require strenuous pilot inputs. An extra set of muscle could mean the difference in a safe or bad landing. Our mission SOP included a provision that if anyone in the flight experienced a serious maintenance problem, the mission would be aborted. Therefore, we reversed course and headed home. Because of marginal controllability in the thin air, Phil elected to descend. He leveled at 8,000 feet, and we continued toward Lima-39 at a much-reduced speed. He landed without incident and we headed for the hostel for a well-deserved beer.

The next morning, I deadheaded to Udorn with PIC Mike Jarina.

On the 18th, Mike deadheaded late to Luang Prabang. The next morning, he and Flight Mechanic Bob Peterson ferried Hotel-50 to Udorn.

Spending a lot of time in the field, Jarina deadheaded to Pakse. Arriving late, he relieved the PIC of Hotel-64 at Lima-11 and flew one mission with Thai Flight Mechanic Tombaiyai to the TACAN site on Phu Kate.

Because of adverse weather, he flew a little more than half a day. He worked at Saravane and Ban Khok Mai (LS-171), three

miles northeast. Then, before returning to L-11 for the night, he shuttled men and supplies to Phu Kate (PS-21).

On the same day, Sunday, the 21st, I deadheaded on Hotel-45 to Pakse. Logging almost four and a half hours in the helicopter, we continued on to Kong Mi, where I joined Scratch Kanach for a late mission in Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG). Mixing a Bell with an H-34, we conducted a combination infil-exfil to two sites nine miles north of PS-7 near Route-110. Good landing sites were limited in such a restricted area, and I had previously been to both places. North Vietnamese Base Area 613 was located generally between Attopeu and Route-110, and supported enemy activity in southern Laos and Cambodia. Consequently, there was considerable interest within Agency and U.S. military intelligence offices to constantly surveil and update intelligence in this area. ¹²

Leaving me PFG, Scratch departed for Udorn. With missions stacked up, and on standby at the hostel pending better weather, I did not fly on Monday.

Not subject to the same Customer induced restraints regarding missions as us Bell pilots, Jarina eked out four hours flying between Kong Mi and Saravane.

While I relocated to Savannakhet for another Special Mission, Jarina ferried Hotel-64 to Udorn.

¹² Scratch, a member of the large dairy farming Kanach family, originated from Flemington, New Jersey. Generally, once a year, Mom and Dad drove north to visit several glassworks factories located there. It was preordained that on one of these trips they would eventually meet one of Scratch's relatives. Consequently, in early September, while attending the Flemington Fair, they met a Kanach sister-in-law, who stated that Scratch was due to arrive on home leave that same month.



Air America Hueys and UD-34D parked in the Pakse area. Because of a lack of Bells, H-34s often supplemented road watch missions from the PS-22 training base near the eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau.

Jarina Collection.

Feisty Don Leach joined me as Co-Captain on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. As one of the mission commanders, I spent an hour and a half with the pilot of CASI Porter Papa Foxtrot Bravo (PFB) reconning the infil-exfil sites. The combined mission locations were remote, with the infil landing zone (WD277463) in a clearing just short of low foothills eleven miles east of enemy-held Moung Phalane on Route-9. The exfil position was five miles further east, located near the Khao Khay range (WD 856477) and a gap leading toward Route-23.

Relieved after the mission, I departed the next day for Udorn, obtaining a ride on 78-Gulf to Wattay Airport and later to Tango-08 on Hotel-41. Patience was the key word while deadheading. Depending on rides, sometimes it took all day to return home, hauling RON gear and a weapon.

Since road watch missions assumed the highest priority in Military Region Three, as I was leaving Savannakhet, Mike Jarina, Tim Woosley, and Stan Waite were inbound in Hotel-39 to help conduct another two hour mission. Had I waited, I could have deadheaded home with them.

After returning from an upcountry route check with me, Wayne Knight continued his local FCF and training duties in Udorn.

Preferring our helicopter program to CPH Hitchman's authoritative foibles, when an opening for a pilot occurred in Udorn, senior men still opted to transfer from Saigon. Phil Payton (DOH 02/08/66) was the latest employee to arrive. Starting on the 19th, Wayne conducted two-day sessions with Phil in XW-PFJ. With only Bell 204Bs in Saigon, transition training to the 205 was obligatory, necessary, and required minimum effort. However, high mountain training and familiarization was

a different matter, generally requiring as long to achieve as for new hires.

Old time employee Elmer Munsell returned from working on the Bell 47G Nepal contract later than Jerry McEntee. Elmer had originally been hired as a UH-34D pilot a month earlier than me in 1962, and was fortunate enough to have been upgraded to Captain before the Captain cutoff occurred. He flew a couple of days with Wayne in Hotel-41 and Hotel-33.

A chap by the name of Burden entered the H-34 program. He likely did not remain long, for neither Wayne nor I can recall this man and his name never appeared on the rolls again.

Jerry Toman was hired on 06/12/68. Jerry received an evaluation flight with the CPH on Monday the 22nd in Hotel-50.

Systems Chief Pilot Don Teeters was in Udorn toward the end of the month conducting a fact-finding tour for management types at the head shed. Wayne invited Don, an old-time fixed wing pilot with the Company, for an FCF flight to round out his overall experience.

MILITARY REGION-1

On the 26th, I was scheduled to travel to Nam Yu (LS-118A), RON, and take command of 96W. Because of the site's remoteness in northwest Military Region One and relative lack of air traffic, if not flying an aircraft, it was difficult to get to, and RONS there were generally extended to a week or more. Consequently, I was in the region eight days. This amount of time spent in the field was acceptable if the weather and machinery cooperated and there was sufficient work to occupy one's time.

I was fortunate, deadheading to Wattay Airport on 57Z, and then switching planes to Beech Baron N522C, a CASI aircraft scheduled to Long Tieng, Luang Prabang, and then Nam Yu. The

twin Beech was fast, and I arrived at Site-118A with enough time left to fly more than four hours with Flight Mechanic Kania. The monsoon weather was evident, but I was more comfortable flying over broken cloud layers with a reputedly "reliable" Lycoming turbine engine than the old H-34 R1820 piston banger. However, it still paid to know exactly where one was, for I normally did not work the region, and although there was a radio beacon at Nam Yu, another bogus NDB using the same frequency was reported across the border in China. Even internationally, the enemy always played tricks and this smacked of a similar situation in the Pakse area with a phony navigation aid installed in Cambodia.

RAID ON UDORN RTAF BASE

"I was upcountry when the communist terrorists hit Udorn Air Force Base...It has taken a long time in coming, but everyone knew it would happen."

Author Letter Home 08/03/68

Located close to the constantly expanding Udorn Town, the Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base proved an ideal selection for an initial communist insurgent attack on USAF personnel and assets in Thailand. Beside difficult problems identifying sappers within a country of Asians, the Udorn base perimeter was close to aircraft and maintenance parking ramps, which largely negated a defense in depth and radius of action for security forces. In addition, deep drainage ditches, called klongs, avenues of approach, led to and alongside the base, affording cover and concealment and only minimal detection. Much of the southern perimeter was shared with Air America and CASI facilities that were only minimally defended by fences and unarmed Thai guards.

Vulnerable to attack by rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire, a fuel farm (POL) was located adjacent to the main road. ¹³

Military action in Laos temporarily took a backseat to that in Thailand. Later specified communists by Thai Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC), on 26 July members of a specialized Dac Cong unit, likely aided by a small local communist unit were detected by an alert Thai security guard. Like the March assault at Phu Pha Thi, Laos, the discovery triggered a premature attack, and at 2225 hours enemy gunners opened fire on the air base with automatic weapons from the pitch-black northwest perimeter. Using the heavy base of fire from two positions, a few sappers armed with AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and satchel charges penetrated the airfield, intending to create havoc by destroying a special medevac C-141 waiting for the arrival of three recently released Americans from the Hanoi Hilton in North Vietnam, and as many F4D jets as possible. The ensuing attack lasted approximately twenty minutes, as crewmembers scurried about tall grass seeking safety, and a quick reaction security unit rushed to the scene. The invaders inflicted some damage to the Starlifter (forty-nine holes and a destroyed engine), a Phantom jet, and ground handling equipment. During the frantic melee, a HH-43 Pedro was hit by cascading small arms fire, while the crew attempted to contain the fire emanating from the C-141 engine.

Even during grim times local color prevailed. USAF radio repairman Bob Bennett was entering the chow hall for a quick

¹³ Earlier, when I lived across the street at the Sopa Villa stilt house on Soi Wat Po, I could see white fuel tanks poking high into the air from my porch and worried about an accident or attack on the facility that would detonate the tanks and flatten area houses. After moving to Soi Mahamit, only two streets south, even though destruction to our area would have been substantial if the tanks exploded, I was no longer concerned-sort of like an out of sight, out of mind situation.

snack prior to his night shift in the radio shop when a commotion was heard toward the end of the flight line. One individual offered an opinion that an ammunition dump had exploded.

Arriving at his shop, Bob was ordered to report to the Air Police headquarters as an air police (AP) "augmentee." Once there, he and fifteen other "augmentees" were issued M-16 rifles and two five-round magazines per man.

The men were then driven to the area in question, where every hundred yards, two or three men were discharged, told to spread out, take cover, and remain vigilant. Bob chambered a round, but the AP in charge of the detail made him remove the magazine, eject the round, and reinstall the magazine. He was also cautioned not to shoot anything. Confused as to his mission, Bob re-chambered a round, backed into the weeds, and without the slightest idea of what to do, crouched down in the dark. Within a half hour flares lighted the entire runway. This continued for what he believed an hour or so.

When the last flare extinguished, it became so dark that Bob could not see anything but the blue taxi and runway lights. After what seemed an eternity, about 0200 hours he saw headlights moving slowly along the flight line. Although the vehicle occasionally stopped, Bob did not show himself and was bypassed. In doing so, he became one of those fabled ten percenters who invariably fail to get the word.

At 0500 hours another set of headlights bobbed around the end of the flight line. Men in the truck were shining a spotlight along the base perimeter. Bob stood up when the truck arrived abeam of him. After acknowledging his presence, Bennett was ordered to approach the vehicle and explain exactly what he was doing in the weeds. Answering a question with a question, he replied that they should tell him what he was doing there.

During the course of discussion, Bob learned all the members of the detail had been retrieved at 0200 hours and he had been alone since that time. This information did not make him particularly happy, and he experienced emotion and reactions of fright, stupidity, and anger.

Topping off the event, Bob was told to wait in place for the arrival of another truck. Moreover, he had to relinquish his M-16 and was left alone in the dark with no protection.

There was some delay, and it was during false dawn when his transportation arrived and stopped to pick him up. Bennett calculated that he could have easily walked back to the airbase in less time, but the chance of being mistaken and shot for an enemy sapper was too great.

Two attackers were reputedly killed, the remainder driven off by a combined Thai-USAF security force which vigorously pursued them toward the base perimeter. Later investigation revealed blood trails, two AK-47s, several grenades, ammunition, and plastic explosives. The outlying Thai guard who had discovered the enemy was later found dead in a klong, and four Air Force personnel were wounded, one who later died at Clark AFB on Luzon, Philippine Islands.

A C-130 lamplighter, rushed from Korat RTAFB and a HH-43 circled the area until 0700, dropping flares and performing recon duties. There was no further contact or sightings.

My wife and curious citizens in Udorn town observed flare activity throughout the night in the direction of the airfield. However, the action was too far away to unduly concern the population.

Problems of this sort were recognized as quite possible and even preordained, particularly since only a minimum of adequate internal base defense equipment was allowed the U.S. military to prepare for and prevent such an attack.

When permission to develop airfields and operate aircraft out of RTAFBs was initially implemented, strict bilateral agreements between the friendly governments were signed with the proviso that *"No foreign force could bear arms on Thai soil."* Such stipulations were calculated to placate Thai sensitivities regarding foreign involvement in the country, and to maintain the façade of American activity at a low profile. Therefore, Air Force base security units were prevented from patrolling or maintaining listening posts outside the base perimeter. This task was left to the Royal Thai government, who relied on relatively inept Thai police forces, the local Royal Thai Army, and Special Forces. Furthermore, although carrying M-16 rifles, heavy weapons (mortars) were not sanctioned for the already under strength Air Force security forces. Boundary fencing, outpost lighting, bunkers, watch towers, trip flares, access roads, defoliation, free fire zones, and sentry dogs were all lacking to bolster internal defense. All these items awaited deaths from hostile action to be installed.

With the advent of the attack, investigation revealed the weakness of all in-country bases. Therefore, over time, and with the cooperation of the RTG, former defense discrepancies were addressed and improved. Perimeter fencing was erected, security systems implemented, and the Udorn air base gradually became an armed camp. However, like medieval European and Mideast castles, the heights of Masada, and recently Phu Pha Thi, given enemy persistence, no fortress defense ever proved totally impregnable.

Soon after the raid, Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn issued statements during a press conference with information known at the time regarding the incident. He also ordered all RTAF airbases to full alert, and implemented previously conceived defense plans for the bases "and other strategic

installations". Thai police were instructed to conduct security checks within seven miles of the Udorn base.

Before the raid on Udorn, enemy plans were coalescing to attack Nakhon Phanom Air Force base. During July and early August communist units were detected south of Thakhet, Laos. Spies reported that local villagers in Laos and Thailand engaged in crossing the Mekong near Nakhon Phanom for the purpose of *"intelligence gathering, spreading propaganda, and encouraging people to serve the enemy cause."*

Beside the major July attack, Wayne Knight later recalled at least two other minor attacks of incidents within a year of each other. He arrived at work one morning and was informed that certain portions of the air base were off limits. Sappers had been observed emplacing explosives, and USAF security forces had two or more sappers surrounded under a building.

An early August CIA weekly summary stated, speculated, and explained:

"Communist terrorists have made no attempt to follow up their raid on the Udorn AFB, which appears to have been locally inspired.."

Although Thai military and police units have now been alerted to attacks against U.S. occupied air bases in insurgent infested northeast Thailand, U.S. officials consider the bases still vulnerable to similar attacks. The raid may prod Bangkok to implement more effective base security measures previously handled by local officials.

The lack of discipline and the poor condition of the equipment of the attackers suggest the raid was undertaken on a local initiative. Thai insurgents have, however, received training, arms, and guidance from the PL and Hanoi.

The Thai commies have been notoriously unsuccessful in their military efforts against Thai security forces and may have

hoped that a dramatic move would improve their image and also demonstrated their capability to strike a blow against the U.S. "aggressor." With national elections coming up, the Thai commies may also believe the time is right to bring susceptible and politically influential Thais to question the continuation of a massive U.S. presence."

The Office of Special Investigation (OSI) soon followed with a comprehensive in-depth analysis of the event:

"Vietnamese communist plans and activities, a significant factor in assessing the security threat not only at Udorn but also at Nakhon Phanom and Ubon RTAFB's appear to have been revitalized since the beginning of 1968, with greater emphasis being placed on future joint cooperation with Thai insurgent forces. Current communist propaganda appears to show a growing emphasis on activities against the U.S., forces in Thailand and the bases from which they operate. Perhaps the most significant factor in any communist plans for future attacks on the bases will be the reaction and effectiveness of Thai Government forces in suppressing and/or punishing the participants of the first attack. The absence of any effective retaliation, other than the killing of two of the group during the attack, will likely lead to a repetition of the same type activity if presently increased security procedures have been relaxed.

...the relative vulnerability of the air bases in northeast Thailand to a future attack of the same type appears to be as follows: Udorn, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon and Korat. Although some installations in other regions of Thailand, such as U Tapao Airfield, possibly offer a more desirable target than do the bases in the Northeast, available intelligence does not indicate either the presence of guerrilla units within a reasonable distance of these bases or the existence of communist support in the villages near their perimeters. This would not preclude a

possible one-time strike at any of these installations by a highly trained raiding squad. Since inexperience and faulty explosive devices appear to have helped minimize the damage caused in this first attack, a repetition of the same could be vastly more destructive."

Notwithstanding the apprehension of another attack on the USAF base at Udorn, there was even more concern of an enemy attack eighteen miles south along Freedom Highway at the super-secret 7th RRFS U.S Army Ramasun communications and intercept facility. There, redundant internal perimeter defenses stood in depth in the form of fences and military police. However, there was no announced plan to arm the technicians should the base be penetrated. Indeed, as supervisor Bob Wheatley learned in later years, the MPs had standing orders that if the station was ever in danger of being overrun, no one was to be left alive so that if captured no technician could divulge information helpful to the enemy.

Following the raid, the implications and speculation as to the civilian American community's security at the Air America facility, and in town, became choice fodder for female coffee klatches and subject to male conversation in the Club Rendezvous Bar. Moreover, within an intellectually challenged and somewhat sterile group, where individuals had to search for or manufacture the next subject to talk about, the episode provided fresh talking points--at least for a few hours.

Later, perhaps massing for yet another attack on the Udorn airbase complex, while conducting confined area landings on a ridgeline in the Phu Phan Mountains fifteen miles southwest of the airfield, an Air America Huey crewed by "Frenchy" Smith, RP Ferrante, and Gary Gentz, was hit a number of times by rapid gunfire. With several enemy firing weapons, Ferrante was wounded in the hand by flying Plexiglas.

After the crew returned to base, AB-1 and officials at JLD a pseudonym for joint American-Thai Headquarters 333) were notified. Sanctioned by AB-1 and Colonel DHEP, CPH Wayne Knight flew a BPP team to the site. Minor trouble arose later, for Air America was not supposed to meddle in Thai internal problems.

Several months later, Mike Jarina was attending a function at the Harvey Potters' residence on Christmas day. A young airman was also there expounding in dramatic fashion on the danger involved in working at the Udorn airbase. Mike thought he might not have known who the majority of the men at the party were. ¹⁴

NAM YU

Assigned most of my upcountry flying in Military Region Two over the years, I did not work a great deal at Site-118A. In general, long absences from the region did not seem to matter. Situated like an orphan in one of the most remote spots in northwestern Laos, original sites rarely changed, and from information provided by spies, enemy locations were generally known. It was perhaps what military instructors might laugh about and refer to an area of a low intensity conflict.

¹⁴ Segment Sources:

Vallentyne, Ed, *CHECO, Attack on Udorn*, 2, 5, 14, 17-19, 21-22, 24, 36. Knight Emails, 09/06/00, 09/08/00, 09/09/00, 09/11/00.
 CIA Report, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgise), pg 14, 08/02/68.
 Barnette & Barrow *CHECO, Base Defense in Thailand*, xiii, 5-6, 73-74, 02/18/73.
 Udorn History 2, (udornrtafb.tripod.com/id47.html), 1-4.
 Bob Wheatly, *Sitting Ducks and Sappers at Udorn 68*, 1,3, Mekong Express Mail, Volume 6 Issue, June 2005.
 Agency Information Cable, 08/09/68.
 Mike Jarina Interviews.
 Gary Gentz Interview, 01/15/93.
 Bob Bennett, 1968: *Waiting for NVA Sappers with 10 Rounds of Ammo*, Mekong Express Mail Volume 7, Issue 4, 4.
 General LT Seith, United States Air Force Oral History.



A grainy photo taken in 1968 by the Author from the crew quarters showing the northeast Nam Yu area including thatched houses and protecting mountains. Like the Sam Tong-Long Tieng (LS-20-LS-20A) complex in MR-2, the Ban Nam Thouei-Nam Yu (LS-118-118A) sites divided Yao and other ethnic refugees from training/action functions with separate, but congruous agencies that worked together to create a comprehensive war effort.

Author Collection.

Once one learned the few area navigation checkpoints available, it was virtually impossible to become disoriented for long periods. Furthermore, Houa Kong Province was bounded on two sides by the Mekong River to the west and south and the Nam Tha to the east. If one flew too far north as did Marius Burke and Ellis Emery in XW-PFF out of Luang Prabang, noticeable changes in terrain and the presence of terraced rice paddies would eventually reveal the Chinese Yunnan Province landscape.

What actually seemed to change at Nam Yu was an increasing emphasis on team missions to northern landing zones for cross border operations. Begun by Customer Bill Young, later continued by Tony Poe, listening posts and launch pads for clandestine cross border teams had been developed along the extensive river border between Laos, Burma, and parts of China. To my knowledge, to preclude international incidents, we were never assigned missions or consciously flew into these adjoining countries. An exception was when flying north from Moung Mounge (Site-93); rather than divert from straight line flight, to expedite passage, I generally overflew the Burmese bulge into Laos at altitude.

During northwestern flying assignments, I was somewhat concerned regarding rumor that Chinese jets were staged at airfields not far inside Yunnan Province. Radar stations were also reputedly strategically staged as first alerts. During a briefing, Tony asserted that his intelligence reported that a lack of fuel generally grounded the jets. However, well aware of Casterlin luck (or lack thereof), I did not want to be the first pilot to disprove this theory. Therefore, I elected to fly to northern areas at altitudes deemed below radar coverage. Using this method, I never encountered enemy patrols or ground fire. In fact, in contrast to other areas, to my knowledge I was never shot at working in northwest Military Region One.

Forward landing pads lining the tops of riverside cliffs were small, surrounded by forest, and not elaborate. Depending on existing wind conditions, some landings required an approach from the river. This was always exciting and beautiful to view, for untold millenniums of water flow from the Tibetan plateau highlands had worn wide, deep channels through primordial rock. Hundreds of feet below, the river churned and rushed southward for 2,703 miles through six countries on its way to the South China Sea. I took great satisfaction knowing that I was among only a few people in the world to ever observe and enjoy this spectacular bird's eye view from the air.

While at Nam Yu, I learned that the Moung Sing Valley (L-42) to the north was largely uninhabited by either civilians or Pathet Lao. Over the years, I had landed at virtually all the sites in the region, but never at Nam Tha or Moung Sing, a former important provincial market town known for its salt deposits. ¹⁵ I was cognizant of the historical significance of these sites and that our pilots had worked at both in the early days, but I had only seen the broad valleys from altitude at slant range. Therefore, always looking for an additional challenge if the opportunity presented itself, I planned to land in the Lima-42 valley-for bragging rights-and to say I had. During the next couple of days, while returning to Nam Yu empty, I landed in the middle of the long, wide valley well away from the Chinese-built Meng La road thrusting from Yunnan Province and through whatever town might have still existed. Not sure who might be observing me from surrounding hills, I did not push my luck and only remained on the deck a short time. After accomplishing my goal, I departed for Nam Yu. Naturally, I did

¹⁵ Although visible from the air, the Author never landed at Nam Tha.



Nam Yu. Rear row: L-R, Jack, Customer Anthony Poshepny (AKA Tony Poe) with son on his shoulders, unidentified, unidentified. Front row: L-R, Yao leader Cha La, Mrs. Cha La wearing traditional clothes, Tony's wife Sang, unidentified, Colonel Kham Pai.

Mac Thompson Collection circa 1968.

not say anything to Tony, or for that matter to anyone else regarding my unauthorized landing. Moreover, I was not sure if Kania was aware that we had landed at Moung Sing, or had later mentioned the fact to his buddies.

On Monday the 29th Tony departed Nam Yu to spend time with his family in Udorn. As somewhat of an insider, from information received from a suspected buddy lodged deep in the bowels of spooky Washington, but who he claimed was an astute broker, Poe accumulated a considerable paper profit from his Continental Airline security holdings.

More than a year earlier, during Chief of Station Ted Shackley's tenure, Joe Flipse was sitting on the old, moldy couch at Tony's house drinking beer and listening to Poe's sage, extensive advice regarding selected stock market issues. Joe had previously acted on some of these touts, which actually proved rewarding. However, he lost out on one financially advantageous deal in 1966 when the USAF, intent on replacing the O-1E Birdog spotter plane with the faster and more maneuverable pusher-puller engine O-2 Skymaster, was about to award a lucrative contract to Cessna Aircraft. Poe's unnamed source had informed him of this selective transaction long before knowledge of the contract became public. He in turn told Joe, who immediately wrote his father instructing him to investigate the Cessna company for purchase, and, if considered viable, to obtain some stock. However, the broker dissuaded his father, indicating that small aircraft companies business reflected the general economy with only small businessmen as customers.

While they were chatting on the porch, the mail pouch arrived by a plane containing an Agency letter telling him to vacate his Continental holdings. Since Tony interfaced with both CASI pilots and management types, the Agency considered that

these securities constituted a forbidden conflict of interest and he was "advised" to divest the issues. ¹⁶

Tony stalled unloading the stock for several months. Depressed, but not going into detail, he mentioned the Agency mandate forcing him to sell his Continental stock a few times to Joe and the fact that there was nothing he could do to avert selling the issue. Since Tony was not the type individual with whom one could solicit or enlarge conversations, when queried further regarding the Continental stock, he might simply grunt, "*...bastards want me to sell my Continental.*"

After selling his Continental securities (he told me that he unloaded all his holdings), he used almost all the proceeds to purchase a sizeable multi-house compound in Udorn, where his family lived and which produced impressive income from rentals. Employed for many years as rentals, most of the compound's housing had been used by Air America, Bird and Son, Agency families, and other Westerners. Mainly because of his small children and their difficulty with stairs, Wayne Knight moved his family there from the Chet compound to a newly built more modern single-story house. ¹⁷

After Tony departed, we RON at the Air America hostel in Ban Houei Sai. Following dinner, the large Filipino man in charge of the facility asked if we would like to see some 8mm pornographic films he had obtained from Hong Kong. Being red-blooded American Boys, we nodded in the affirmative and paid the small amount he required for the viewing.

¹⁶ Since Tony was free with information to pilots or anyone who would listen regarding his stock portfolio, there also could have been a modicum of jealousy among uninformed peers.

¹⁷ Joe Flipse Email, 06/08/97.
EW Knight Email, 06/02/01.

On the 29th, we flew over eight hours before the PIC of PFG arrived at Nam Yu to swap aircraft and ferry 96 Whiskey to Udorn for a required maintenance inspection. Onboard were Bill Fraser and Flight Mechanic Werth. Fraser, a good friend of Phil Payton, and brother-in-law of recently deceased Jim Campbell, represented yet another pilot who had recently transferred from Saigon to escape Bob Hitchman's tyranny. Bill was well liked, by Charlie Weitz in particular. Bill should have remained in Saigon, for within a few months a tragic event occurred to him that saddened us all.

The final day of the month provided good flight time, and I ended the month with almost ninety-four hours.

With a sufficient amount of area familiarization, Bill Fraser left for Udorn.

After fifteen minutes in the air, on the first, the electrically activated fuel boost pump failed. Like the human body, most aircraft have some redundant systems installed. This was so for many Bell components (unfortunately, there was only one set of hydraulic irreversible valves on the aircraft). Of the two boost pumps in the fuel system providing positive fuel flow to the engine, the electric one was more reliable. A vane on the air driven boost pump installed in the aircraft belly had a tendency to stick at times. Sometimes this could be rectified by externally tapping the component or executing a good swift kick. However, it was not wise to operate with a primary boost pump out, and it was also a no-fly item.

I had no choice but to ground (AGP) PFG and await a replacement part. Depending on aircraft availability, this could take a short or long time. At any rate, Nam Yu could be a lonely place if one was not flying. I had my trusty Yashica camera that I had purchased in Singapore on a trip to Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, I elected to conduct a walk-about and snap photos of



Photo of the 4,360-foot strip taken from the western Nam Yu Valley. Oriented 07/25, the laterite dirt runway was capable of landing Caribou, C-123, and C-46 aircraft in dry conditions. In the foreground, a Lao Theung lady with an umbrella walks on a path toward a small village.

Author Collection.



At the Author's request, Lahu tribal ladies paused on the Site 118A runway to have their pictures taken. As evidenced by only one smile, fearing photographs would snatch their souls, not all tribal types enjoyed the picture taking process.

Within the native culture, in addition to planting and harvesting, cooking, and other mundane duties, women were normally used as "beasts of burden." As depicted here, they carried corn and other products of the field in wicker baskets. Men normally hunted.

Author Collection.



In the valley further west of the runway, with mama to the right, an indigenous Yao family stands in front of their village. Female clothing and head gear defined a particular tribal group. Like Meo in Military Region Two, Yao represented the majority group in Military Region One. Similar in cultures, both built houses on the ground.

Author Collection.



A recently married Yao couple at the Ban Houei Sai runway in northwestern Laos' Houa Kong Province. The red neck ruffle is typical of Yao female dress. Originally from Yunnan Province, the Man's "pigtail" displays a Chinese cultural influence.

Author Collection.



In contrast to Yao houses, woven bamboo and thatched stilt Lao structures were raised for cooling and security from vermin, reptiles and thieves. Water was precious during the dry season and discarded fifty-five-gallon fuel drums were employed to store and catch rain water.

Author Collection.



A young trooper standing tall next to his dad, likely a Thai Dam or some another ethnic group. Note the boots on the porch. When not on duty a soldier switched to more traditional and cooler shower shoes. Although an established part of the uniform, boots often did not fit properly.

Author Collection.



To placate and ward off the many evil spirits present in Lao society, superstitious people incorporated many talismans and taboos on their houses-like this scarecrow displayed at the pinnacle of the roof.

Author Collection.

the area and various tribal groups. It was fun and provided a fine record for posterity.

A replacement part along with a relief pilot arrived on 22C the next day. It was the way to travel. Taking advantage of the presence, comfort, and speed of the reliable twin engine Beechcraft Baron, I RTB the 231 nautical miles to Udorn.

A BOO-BOO

Soon after his arrival in Udorn, Kania perpetrated a flap of major proportions. Late one night, under the influence of a substantial amount of alcohol, the mechanic decided to test fire his Swedish K automatic machine gun.¹⁸ He lived on the southwest outskirts of Udorn, adjacent to open fields and paddies stretching toward the base. Standing in the field to the rear of his house, he broke the silence of the night with several volleys of .45 caliber fire. Sounds of the bursts carried a long distance over flat terrain and panicked Air Force security forces. Occurring so soon after the communist attack, the base was placed on full alert until Kania's foolish act was discovered. Somehow the chastened man survived termination.

JARINA TAKES LEAVE

Near the anniversary of his third year with Air America, Mike elected to take both accrued annual and home leave combined with a back-to-back STO in Pensacola, Florida. He did not return to Southeast Asia until 6 November.

During a visit to the Pensacola Naval Air Station (NAS) facility, a maintenance officer informed Mike that he could rejoin the Navy, remain in the area, and fly with students. A

¹⁸ The Swedish K was fed bullets from a side mounted magazine.

major attraction was the large increase in pay military personnel enjoyed. The offer was tempting.

Not long after arriving in the States, people stationed at the Ellison Field helicopter training facility located between Mainside and Whiting Field learned that an Air America pilot was home and they wanted to know more about the paramilitary Company and the work involved. They asked for permission to come to the house, but Mike said, "*We don't provide press conferences.*" A couple of men continued to urge a meeting, so Mike invited two or three to his house and told them the minimum about Air America without revealing confidential or sensitive issues.

Later, one of the individuals called again inviting Mike and his wife Delores (Dee) to a party with five other men and their wives. Learning that wives would be there, Mike was reluctant to attend at first until Dee indicated that she would take the women into the corner and talk about Thailand.

After reiterating that as per Company policy, he did not give press conferences, did not keep a diary, or take pictures,¹⁹ he asked what they wanted to know about Air America. He stated that Air America was a good company to work for, but Southeast Asia was a very primitive place to live. He continued that Air America was a private company selected by USG to support overseas government contracts. Mostly former military pilots were hired to fly USAID missions. When asked what he generally carried in his helicopter, Mike harkened back to his original interview in Taipei when he inquired of his briefer regarding the very same question and received the answer, "*Tell people you*

¹⁹ Which was not true.

carry "rice, refugees, and rooftops." ²⁰

As to pay scales, he replied that the men probably earned more in the service than he did as a civilian. He had made only 700 dollars as a First Officer and 1,200 dollars as a Captain. Then someone mentioned the 100,000 thousand-dollar parties held by pilots who had achieved that sum. Shocked, Mike wanted to know where they had obtained this information. He was informed that it was common knowledge circulating throughout military circles. ²¹

Without revealing another Ellison instructor pilot, Marine Major "Razor Blades" quip to him regarding Air America pay when he was looking for employment, "About 2,000 dollars a month and all the lead your ass could hold," Mike indicated that pilots never earned large amounts of money. Then he considered this answer a bit flat. Therefore, to remain credible and dispel the group's suspicion as to his response said, "Yes, there was a person who might possibly fit that category." Base Manager Ben Moore, a retired Navy captain, had worked several years for Air America. In addition to his salary, he had received free housing, food, laundry, and many other perks.

Throughout the party, Mike never revealed there was an actual shooting war going on in Laos or that Air America pilots and their aircraft were constantly subject to battle damage.

Irony rules supreme. Several years later, a Customer approached Mike's aircraft on the Long Tieng parking ramp, wanting a ride to a recently recovered pad near Sam Tong. He

²⁰ Courtesy of Mike Jarina, this wonderful explanation of the less innocuous portion of our multi-varied operations morphed into the titles of the Author's books.

²¹ This goal had been established and a few parties actually conducted long before Mike arrived on the scene. Dick Crafts' was one.

carried a case of beer that he wanted to deliver to the troops as a reward for their outstanding effort regaining an important position. In lieu of landing, he planned to throw the case out the door from a low hover because of a possibility the area was mined. Mike did not think this was a particularly good idea because of a danger of the object's weight triggering an explosion. Instead, he said that he would make sure the beer arrived safely at the position.

Later, Jarina was talking with some other crewmembers regarding an upcoming mission at Site-15 when a young Customer asked him, *"Do you remember me?"* Mike squinted, looked puzzled, and answered in the negative. *"Rice, refugees, and rooftops. Mike, I was one of the individuals at your house in 1968."* ²².

²² Mike Jarina Interviews.

"I never believed we would win in Vietnam."

Bill Lair Oral Interview Texas Tech University, 12/11/01.

In AB-1's Chief Bill Lair's estimation, with the arrival of Ted Shackley in 1966 to assume the Vientiane COS slot, the Agency's efforts in prosecuting the Lao war gradually changed from a purely guerrilla operation to a more conventional nature. Shackley also arrived with an agenda to implement superiors' policies to more closely employ Lao assets in tailoring the war to support USG's Vietnam policy. Citing past successes, Agency planners desired to expand the Lao war as a pressure relief valve to USG's effort in South Vietnam. It was believed that a larger war in Laos would ensure more North Vietnamese participation there and divert even more men from the South Vietnamese conflict. It was a simple concept. To create a larger more successful operation in Laos all that was needed was additional money and personnel to accomplish the goal. While still attempting to be a good soldier and not create waves, Lair was ambivalent as to the effect these changes would have on his Meo program. The policy bothered him even more by early 1968, when VP and his Meo soldiers were gently nudged in the direction to accomplish more than he considered them capable of.

Such transformations conflicted directly with Lair's inflexible philosophy on how the Meo program should be conducted and implemented. From the onset of his dealings with Vang Pao and the Meo in early 1961, Lair always attempted to maintain a small American presence in Laos, while advising and monitoring upcountry operations overseen by a minimum number of "round-eye" types.

In 1967, Lair lobbied for continuance of a low intensity guerrilla operation. He reiterated to his Washington superiors that the prime reason for past success in Military Region Two could be attributed to the Meo role as hit and run guerrillas. Intimate with all facets of the terrain, they could easily maneuver from high ground to interdict enemy LOCs. This technique tended to confuse the road bound enemy, who found it difficult to cope with the clandestine unconventional warfare. Moreover, all this was accomplished by surrogate warriors at a very low cost to USG.

Lair's rapport with General Vang Pao was always first-rate because he would help Vang Pao and allow him to accomplish what he generally planned. In cases where Vang Pao significantly departed from established norms, attempting to exceed his extraordinary capabilities as a guerrilla leader, Bill was generally able to counsel and restrain him. However, this all changed when VIPs and sycophants began journeying to the Long Tieng base attempting to inflate the general's ego and urging him to commit to a major defense or more conventional operations, which he had neither the experience or talent to undertake. The coddling had a tendency to make Vang Pao *"believe that he was a bigger person than he actually was."* The most recent evidence of this push to alter Meo fighting techniques was 7th USAF's insistence, backed by Embassy Vientiane, that Vang Pao's people commit large forces to defend the Phou Pha Thi radar facility. In the end the effort failed, for the mountain people never were good defenders in the past, in the present, and never would be in the future.

By mid-1968, with Laos teetering on the brink of total defeat, a thoroughly disillusioned Lair decided he had had enough of the bureaucratic cancer eating at his insides. He had worked extremely hard for so many years pursuing his goal to

maintain a tight, manageable operation with minimum indigenous casualties and assets. Now, with all that changed, it was like an Asian losing face.

The concept to refocus the war on conventional warfare sullied and abrogated his philosophy, and he considered that he had lost total control of his original concept. Over the years, Bill had accrued a vast amount of leave on the books. Therefore, he requested transfer to the States for vacation, additional training, and to attend the Army War College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Because of high level Thai contacts and his untarnished reputation as a person who did not lie, he could return later to monitor the Lao situation, advise, and coordinate items from the Bangkok U.S. Embassy.

In this manner, Lair did not consider his exodus abandoning his mountain people or immediate workers. His second, Pat Landry, knew the ropes. Landry, who had worked with him from almost the start of the Meo Program, and shared his identical philosophy of "smaller was better" in unconventional war, could assume his former command at the Udorn 4802nd Joint Liaison Department (JLD).¹

After my return from Nam Yu my wife and others described what they knew about the attack on the Air Force facility. Apparently, the bad guys were discovered in time and chased away before inflicting major damage on men and materiel.

Rick adjusted quickly to the change from western to eastern venues. Because of frequent monsoon rain he was restricted to

¹ Bill Lair Interviews with the Author in Bangkok, Thailand, 11/06-08/95.
Bill Leary Notes, July-August 68, his Interview with Jim Glerum regarding Bill Lair.
Ken Conboy, 205, fn 46.

playing inside the house. This was no problem, for since the living room area was large, he still had plenty of space to maneuver.

UPCOUNTRY

Deficient as to total yearly flight time, I was afforded little respite from the job to be with my family. On the fourth I was scheduled to deadhead to Long Tieng on C-123 4576. Following a one hour 109 nautical mile direct flight north, I joined Flight Mechanic John Simmons in Papa Foxtrot India. Flying locally, we knocked out seven and a half hours before terminating on the ramp after dark.

Ted Moore joined me on Monday for what could only mean an impending mission. In the morning, along with another senior pilot, I departed The Alternate to recon an exfil location at UG3959 with the PIC of CASI Porter XW-PCB. Sometimes a local trooper or the Customer accompanied us to verify team status and their bona fides.

The proposed site was located in the eastern hills off the Plain of Jars four miles northeast of old Momentum site, Tha Lin Noi (LS-18). Under serious pressure from Vietnamese army regulars late in 1963, Site-18 was abandoned and classified as unfriendly. Like other French-Marquis inspired Meo sites, Tha Lin Noi had played a major role in the First Indochina War, and was later employed as a forward refugee center and launch pad to conduct recon and harassment of Route-7.

The exfiltration position was strategically positioned within a few miles walking distance of Route-7, the storage caves at Ban Thang, and the Route-7/71 junction at Nong Pet. ²

² Because of many enemy AAA guns, pilots later called this location the dreaded "7/71 split."

Located at points on the northeastern Plain of Jars where Route-7 entered the Plain, the geographic positions were considered important to the enemy war effort and required constant surveillance by our side. Already the enemy was preparing equipment for dry season plans to improve Route-71 and push a spur north toward Bouam Long (LS-88; more commonly known as LS-32) to enable the positioning of long-range artillery for shelling Site-88. Once completed, the road would also facilitate troop movement toward Na Khang, sixteen miles north of Bouam Long. In addition to the intelligence gathering value, our mission also likely constituted efforts to re-establish a Meo presence in the hills ringing the Plain of Jars.

Unusual for a location so close to a main base, we spent an hour and forty-one minutes in the area searching for the landing zone, creating diversions, and conducting visual reconnaissance. When low, blanketing clouds prevented a clear sighting, and no radio contact was established with the team, we returned to Long Tieng. We were then directed north to Na Khang for normal work supporting Vang Pao's northerly movements from Moung Son and Site-36.

The next morning, we again launched for Na Khang. Flying almost eleven hours, we were very busy the entire day, managing to extract the team from the formerly reconed Tha Lin Noi area.

A combination of factors merged to hold flying to a minimum on the seventh. Weather turned marginal for part of the day. Between spates of rain squalls, fog, and low clouds, we conducted a couple of local missions totaling less than one fuel load. Also curtailing flying, VIPs Ambassador Sullivan, AIRA, ARMA chiefs, and Larry Devlin, who had worked in the Congo and was slated to replace Ted Shackley as the incoming Chief of Station Vientiane, arrived in the valley. In addition to introducing Devlin to Vang Pao, the purpose of the trip was to

award a medal to the widow of Captain Moua Chong. The Forward Air Guide (FAG), killed in 1966, was better known as Tall Man by aviators he guided to communist targets.

During the trip, Ambassador Sullivan noted:

"VP [is] active and energetic with time devoted to problems of resettled Meo. [He] has 50,000 [people] in the hills and valleys near his headquarters.

VP regards Sam Neua lost, but [he] will continue to mount operations there as intelligence, psychological, and harassing raids. [He] hopes to rebuild a few selected areas of guerrilla strength but indicated no plans for major holding operations in the province. (Vang Pao had not yet penetrated areas leading to Phu Pha Thi, or he did not admit this at the time)

His attention [is] concentrated on Xieng Khouang Ville and specifically on the PDJ. [He] plans to re-establish positions and to mount campaigns which would effectively encircle the Plain. [He] gave no time frame for these operations, but [is] starting 2 or 3 this rainy season.

He feels the quality of NVA he is facing has deteriorated. Assumes the more experienced sent to South Vietnam. [He] notes the presence of greater numbers of ethnic minorities [in the NVA]." ³

Lastly, part of the day was used for airborne reconnaissance of a Special Mission planned for the Dien Bien Phu area. This was conducted in the speedy VIP Beech Baron, but with weather not cooperating, it was difficult to spot the landing zone.

Following the loss of Dien Bien Phu to the French in 1954, the communists employed the long, narrow valley as a major

³ Telegram William Sullivan to State-Long Tieng Visit, 08/09/68.

supply region and rear headquarters for the 316 Infantry Division. ⁴ The logistics point at Dien Bien Phu supplied men and supplies to upper Military Region One along Route-19 and its many offshoots. It was instrumental in providing the wherewithal for the capture of Nam Bac in January.

From the early days, before helicopters were readily available to Case Officers, attempts had been made by Saigon Agency-sponsored assets to parachute infil recon teams into the area. They all failed miserably. Because the need-to-know policy persisted, emphasis to provide critical intelligence from the source regarding enemy plans was shifted to Case Officers at Luang Prabang. Teams consisting of Special Guerrilla Units (SGU), trained at Phou Kao by "Burr" Smith and others, became the conduit for these hazardous missions. Teams were often mixed with both tough Black Thai and Meo who could survive in harsh mountain environments. With time and effort, the men were supposed to be more highly trained with special talents than regular units formerly used for road watch missions such as wiretapping. Although evidencing some improvement over earlier forays, the missions had so far not proven successful, with few, if any, troops returning to friendly lines. ⁵

On Thursday easy-going Norm Grammer replaced Ted Moore as my second. Toward mid-afternoon, we boarded a thirteen-member recon unit at Long Tieng that had just been delivered from the training center at Site-14. Based on latest information from spies in the Dien Bien Phu area, all were dressed in the purported Vietnamese uniforms of the day, carried Soviet bloc

⁴ The forward headquarters was located south along Route-6 at Son La in the Northwest Military Region where the Author nearly cashed in his chips during a 1965 SAR mission.

⁵ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 243.

weapons, radios, and other equipment critical to the mission. Seeing troops like this was enough to make one shudder. Next, our three aircraft flew to Luang Prabang, where a final briefing was conducted by Eli Popivich's folks for an insertion to high ground at TJ813339. The target area was located just inside Luang Prabang Province on a mountain finger ninety-four miles northeast of LP. In the distance, the landing site overlooked the western river town of Ban Houei Tha. It was also twenty miles south-southwest of Dien Bien Phu and within walking distance of Route-19 and the Ou River.

A Porter pilot with a Customer onboard preceded us north to gage the weather. More than halfway to the site, the pilot reported that the landing zone was clobbered and not likely to clear soon. As it was already late, we aborted, landing on the Luang Prabang strip at 1830 hours.

After a long delay, we achieved success in depositing our charges late at the assigned landing zone. Since it was already sunset when we arrived at Luang Prabang, tankers hot refueled us for the flight back to Long Tieng. These missions were frustrating, for we had little control over variables that included a lot of down time waiting for adequate weather conditions or cover aircraft to escort us.

To its credit, improved training allowed this team to remain in the field providing intel for over a month before being discovered and terminated. Although there was speculation, no one ever seemed to work out the actual mystery of how the enemy told the difference between bona fide Vietnamese troops and frauds.

On the tenth, I returned to Udorn with the machine.

KNIGHT CONTINUES HIS DUTIES

The Chief Pilot's month consisted of local FCFs, training, and upcountry line checks.

On the fifth, Wayne had a local training session with new hire Don Henthorn (DOH 07/10/68) in Hotel-57. Don was a former Marine Corps aviator and part Native American, who for his often-questionable actions attained the nickname, "The crazy Indian." As his physique attested, he had also been a champion wrestler in college.

Another experienced and senior Bell pilot, French Smith (DOH 09/07/65) transferred from Saigon. "Frenchy," a former U.S. Army pilot, was placed directly in the Bell program. His minimum transition to the 205 began on the eighth with Wayne in XW-PFG. "Frenchy," who brought a lot of experience and expertise to the Bell program, along with his wife Kay were well liked and accepted within our community.

Two days later, Wayne conducted proficiency checks with Dave Ankerberg in Hotel-57 and Ron Allendorfer in Hotel-62.

Occasionally, Wayne liked a break from office chores to view what was occurring upcountry and how his pilots were performing. Aiding in this endeavor was the Company requirement to conduct upcountry line checks.

On the 16th, he and Phil Payton left Udorn for Long Tieng in 96W. Wayne flew high time with Payton for two days. On the third day, he flew a line check with Bill Fraser, then RTB Tango-08.

Four days later he was again in the local pattern training "Frenchy" Smith in PFF. ⁶

⁶ EW Knight Email, 09/11/00.

SAVANNAKHET

Consistent with his occasional penchant for fugue, when relations with Chai spun appallingly out of control, sometime after the arrival of the Bell 205s, Captain Ed Reid approached Wayne Knight for permission to permanently transfer to Lima-39.⁷

Ed was a character, quite an interesting individual, and I am unsure if anyone truly knew just what went on inside his head. Moreover, Ed evoked a little different philosophy and lifestyle than the normal run-of-the-mill rotor head pilot. It was not the first time Reid had moved out of Udorn Town. In the early days, after sending his morbidly obese wife Ginger and bevy of children packing to the States, and taking up with Chai, embarrassed with the whispers, for a time he rented a house north of Udorn on the road to Nong Khai.

Ed enjoyed working at Savannakhet and established good rapport with Customers at Lima-39, who wholeheartedly supported his proposal to relocate. For several reasons they considered such a move a plus factor--one both efficient and functional. The cost of ferrying helicopters would be diminished to only required maintenance checks at the Udorn facility. In addition to ensuring that a machine was located and available on the premises, Customers would enjoy the benefit of a full time senior, experienced, and highly capable pilot. Furthermore, Ed was deemed a gutsy guy who was closed mouthed, kept his own counsel, and would attempt just about any reasonable request.

Since such a move would establish a precedent in the helicopter program, Wayne had to ponder Reid's request and query other local managers as to its viability. At first, CJ Abadie and other management types were strongly opposed to the proposed move; it might cause an exodus of pilots from Udorn, fostering a

⁷ Fuge: A psychological term relating to loss of memory and wandering.

loss of local pilot control. However, AB-1 types considered the idea constructive and forced the issue. Therefore, as the only helicopter pilot in recent history to ever request permanent transfer from Udorn to a Lao base, Ed was eventually granted his wish. The nature of his work revolved mostly around normal assignments, interspersed by Special Missions that were supplemented by other Bell crews.

Previous recon missions, like the one I conducted with Don Leach and another crew on 23 July east of Moung Phalane, revealed little enemy activity in the area. Therefore, on 6 August, a sizeable airlift was mounted from outlying Savannakhet camps to recover Moung Phalane. A competent SGU battalion was airlifted and infiltrated into the hills northeast of Lima-61.⁸ While units continued to sweep, search, and clear the area, other troops maneuvered toward and into Moung Phalane, encountering a minimum of enemy resistance. As enemy caches were discovered, helicopters were employed to fly captured items to Savannakhet. Enthusiasm was high that Phalane would soon be completely in the government camp for the first time since February.

A week later, Captain Bill Hutchison journeyed to Savannakhet to fly with Ed Reid in Papa Foxtrot Gulf for local area familiarization. Hutch, who had transferred from Chiang Mai along with Pat Colgan, had recently arrived in Udorn after taking leave, and was undergoing required area familiarization. That same day he obtained a helpful area overview as a passenger in CASI Beech Baron N4681.

Hutch continued his area familiarization with Ed on the 14th.

⁸ Composed mostly of Lao Theung, some SGU troops were on a par with or even considered better warriors than Meo guerrillas.

The following day, while SGU units were engaged in clearing operations east and north of Lima-61, Ed Reid, Co-Captain Bill "Hutch" Hutchison, and Flight Mechanic Tod Yourglich were tasked to deliver sacks of rice to government units in what was considered benign liberated areas. Also, onboard Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG) were Case Officer Wayne McNulty and the SGU battalion's deputy commander. McNulty had previously been assigned to Military Region Four on the Bolovens at PS-22 and other area sites. Wayne first supplemented, then replaced Mick McGrath, who developed leukemia, a normally fatal blood disease, which required stateside hospitalization and treatment.

As he had on previous days, Ed took the left seat and delegated the right seat of PFG to Bill for the mission. While flying about six miles east of Mounq Phalane, the Customer sighted twelve SGU troops in a confined area several hundred feet from the dirt road. After the SGU captain established radio contact, McNulty asked "Hutch" to land.

Once on the ground, Tod offloaded a few bags of rice. McNulty and the SGU Captain disembarked to stretch, consult with an non-commissioned officer (NCO) regarding the situation, and check their chart for the next location. To reduce noise and facilitate the Customer's pow-wow, Ed rolled the throttle to idle and then stepped out momentarily to urinate.⁹ Bill was a bit uneasy at decreasing the RPM, but Ed was the PIC and Bill merely a newbie. Then Reid reentered the cockpit, secured his lap belt and shoulder harness, and waited for the Customer to complete his business.

⁹ The pause that refreshes was a common practice for pilots between long flights, for one never knew when another chance might arise.

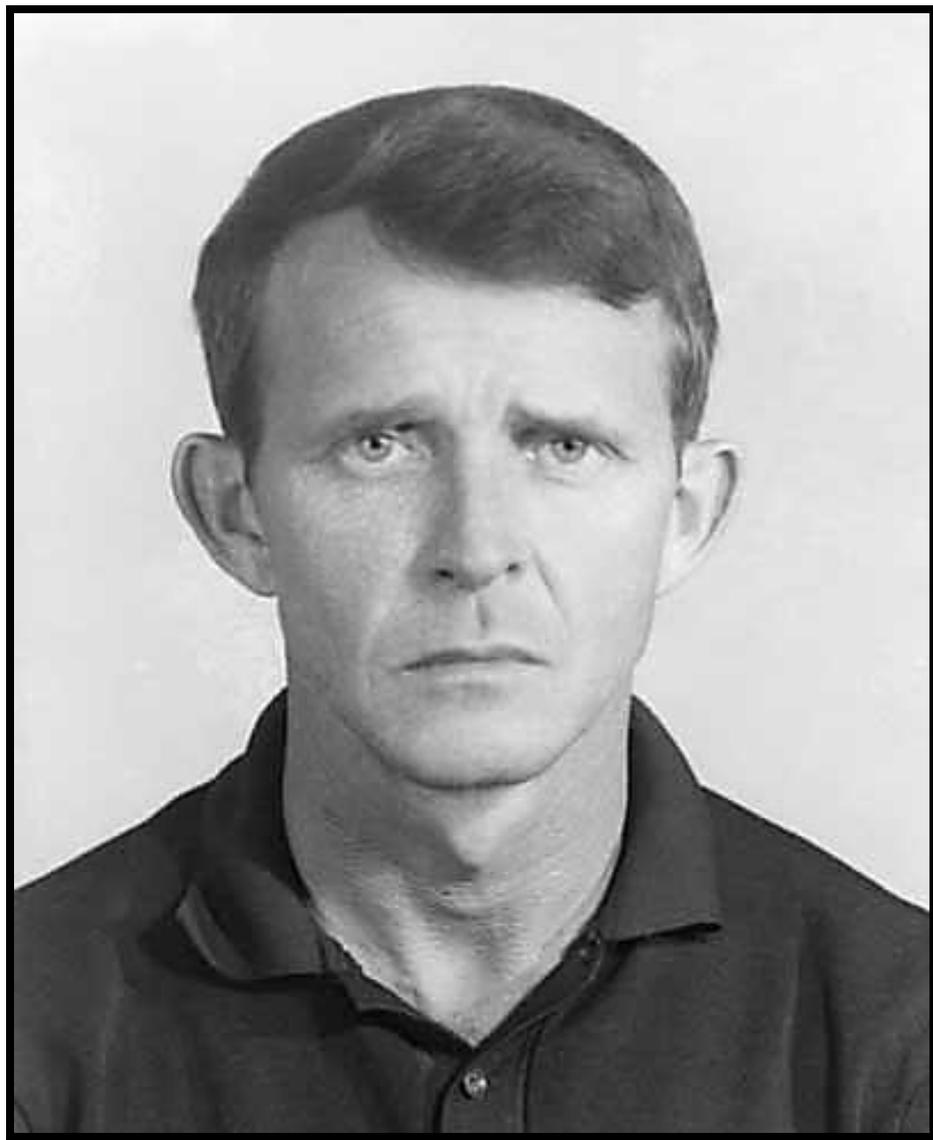
During the approximate ten minutes spent on the ground, a few enemy troops infiltrated through the trees toward the landing zone. Suddenly, heavy automatic weapons fire erupted from the nearby tree line. Friendly troops immediately returned fire and the fight was on.

While Bill frantically struggled to recover one hundred percent RPM, the passengers and a few supernumeraries hurried into the cabin section. Before Bill could regain flying RPM and depart, a round impacted the Plexiglas windscreen, spraying Ed with plastic debris and inflicting superficial cuts. Simultaneously, Tod struggled to retrieve his M-16 rifle and return fire. Assuming a prone position on the plywood decking, he detected a sticky wetness on his hands and arms. He soon realized that this was McNulty's blood pouring from a wound after a projectile penetrated his forehead, exited, and deflected upward through the overhead sound suppressing cover into the cabin honeycomb.

After attaining full RPM, Hutch pulled pitch to depart. However, with a minimum takeoff run available in the restricted space, the extra weight created a difficult situation and at first, he was unable to achieve sufficient altitude to clear surrounding seventy to one-hundred-foot trees. Therefore, using a yo-yo technique, during which he "sucked turns" down to near seventy percent, "Hutch" managed to attain translational lift and clear obstructions without losing aircraft control.

Safely airborne in cruise, "Hutch" turned toward Lima-39. En route, Tod attempted to staunch McNulty's blood loss with compresses from the ship's first aid kit. His effort was productive and Wayne was still breathing when the crew touched down at the Savannakhet airfield.

With help from Reid, Younglich, Tom Fosmire, and others present, McNulty was transferred to a Porter and quickly



Captain Ed Reid.

delivered to the medical facility at nearby Nakon Phanom. Unfortunately, the trauma and resulting swelling to his mid-brain proved too grievous to survive ¹⁰ and he expired that evening. McNulty's loss marked the Agency's first death from hostile action in Laos.

Investigation revealed that Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH) had received four hits. After the smoke cleared, with Fosmire's sanction, Ed elected to fly back to the landing zone in a CASI aircraft, while leading Lao T-28 pilots to conduct an air strike.

Tod was obviously unsettled, so "Hutch" directed him to the hostel to rest. After Ed and Tod left, "Hutch" spent an hour and a half cleaning the nasty mess of blood and brains from the rear compartment. He encountered more difficulty removing bone fragments from ragged holes in the overhead covering.

Because of the Customer fatality, CPH Wayne Knight debriefed Reid regarding the incident for Company and Customer records. During the early years, Ed, had often bragged in his cups with his neighbor Wayne about never incurring a hit because of a special technique he used on approach to a landing zone. Now he admitted that this mission had finally "popped his cherry." He also jokingly accused "Hutch" of bringing him bad

¹⁰ Excess damage leading to edema causes pressure on the mid-brain's respiration center.

luck. ¹¹

In relaying details of the incident to Udorn, Wayne asked Hutchison if he was able to fly the next day. "Hutch" replied in the affirmative. Therefore, after another somewhat somber night in the Air America hostel, on the 16th, while Ed ferried PFG to Udorn for repairs, "Hutch" deadheaded to Pakse on Hotel-44 to continue his area familiarization process. He flew in Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Captain Billy Pearson.

Wayne conducted a Lima-39 line check with Ed in XW-PFJ toward the end of August. He later noted that Reid had several additional battle and maintenance incidents in short order, prompting Ed to comment that all his "clean" years were catching up with him. One was at Na Khang, again flying with "Hutch," prompting him to reiterate that Bill was "his bad penny." ¹²

On the thirteenth, I deadheaded to Long Tieng with another pilot on Papa Foxtrot India. Glen Woods of Pha Thi AN-2 fame was

¹¹ If this declaration was truly valid, it was extraordinary, for at that time, few if any of us old timers had escaped battle damage. Dick Elder was another pilot who claimed the same charmed life. However, it was easy to pass an aircraft with minor BD along to a relieving PIC without admitting to an incident. Ed also sometimes displayed selective vision, like during the occasion we were hosed both entering and leaving the Sam Neua Valley while searching for USAF pilot Charles Shelton. The volleys were so concentrated and colorful in the subdued light that I was at a loss to understand why he had not seen the fusillades.

For some inexplicable reason, normally a no-no whenever working in what most would construe as the front line, Ed had rolled the throttle off to well below flying RPM. Although decreasing RPM in a forward area was not an accepted procedure, Ed's action most likely had little bearing on McNulty's fate; when your time is up...

¹² Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, 198-199.

EW Knight Emails, 05/24/00, 09/12/00, 07/05/01.

Bill Leary 1968 Notes of Interviews with Flight Mechanic Tod Yourglich and COS Lima-61 Tom Fosmire Regarding the McNulty Incident.

Bill Hutchison's Two Phone Interviews with the Author, 12/06/11.

Bill Hutchison Email, 12/14/11.

Central Intelligence Bulletin, 08/10/68.

the ship's Flight Mechanic. After landing at The Alternate, I took command and was directed north to work a half day.

The following day was no fly. Unlike Sam Tong, a place where clouds often lifted to expose gaps or conduits out of the bowl, fog and low clouds sometimes moved into the Long Tieng Valley rendering it inoperable the entire day.

Thursday, I returned to Na Khang. Flying locally most of the day, toward late afternoon, while making an operations normal report, I was informed by Udorn to switch ships and ferry PFH south for a maintenance inspection. I chocked in forty-five minutes after sunset.

Except for flying a short FCF in PFG on the 18th after a windscreen change, other battle damage repair work, and a thorough cleaning, I enjoyed several days off the flight schedule.

Monsoon rains continued in earnest, flooding portions of Udorn Town and our front yard, and restricting Rick to the house, where he was able to ride his tricycle that we brought back from the States. However, the flooding also drove red fire ants and cockroaches inside the house. After Rick was bitten by ants, I obtained an insecticide wax preparation in town that I laboriously applied to the wooden floor. Despite my efforts, the wax largely failed to prevent the beasties invasion.

Pregnant and slightly anemic, while driving the Ford Cortina in town the previous week, Tuie felt ill and faint. Therefore, she visited the doctor, who administered a B-complex injection that made her feel better. At only eighty-five pounds, her condition was beginning to show. To further lessen Tuie's burdens and help in the house, we hired the cousin of the present maid, Dom. With two maids and a little fellow running about, the house was becoming smaller.

UPCOUNTRY

On Thursday, 22 August, I departed Udorn early on Caribou 851 for Nam Yu and what would constitute my last RON of the month. We stopped at Long Tieng, where I transferred my RON kit to CASI Beech Baron to continue the trip to Site-118A via Luang Prabang.

At our destination, I took over XW-PFG and flew with Flight Mechanic John Melvin until dark. Although area conflict was minimal, all flight hours were recorded as project time. Since I was also over the seventy-hour overtime threshold, there was adequate incentive for me to push to fly maximum daily time. Of course, much of this depended on Customer requirements, weather, and maintenance-free operations.

I RON at Ban Houei Sai the second night in order to swap PFG for Papa Foxtrot Hotel. Actually, an overnight at the river town hostel afforded considerably more creature comforts than were available at Nam Yu. These consisted of hot showers, decent food, a comfortable bed, and pornographic movies, if available, and if one desired to watch. Such amenities were not available and never would be at Tony's primitive site, where one might be happy to "enjoy" an occasional cold shower with nasty water smelling like rust or a petroleum product, eating canned goods from one's personal larder, or partaking of weeds and rice offered by Thai PARU. A bed was normally a military cot, with mosquito net, and a filthy sleeping bag. That was SOP in former days, but this was 1968, when we deserved and demanded more.

During the following three days of diminishing flight time, I supplied area teams.

I was relieved on Tuesday and rode home on CASI Dornier XW-PCJ.

On the thirtieth, I deadheaded to Savannakhet with the PIC of Hotel-44 to fly a Special Mission with the crew of Papa

Foxtrot Gulf. Later in the afternoon, we launched on an infil mission to WE359965, 110 miles north-northeast of Lima-39 in Mike LaDue's backyard. One of the longest missions to date, the selected landing zone was on the Phou Koun Kalong hills, only a few miles south of the North Vietnamese border. Taking two hours and forty-three minutes to accomplish, the insertion required maximum fuel endurance and we landed at Savannakhet after sunset with an uncomfortably low fuel state.

The next day I deadheaded to Udorn on CASI C-47 Papa Foxtrot Tango.

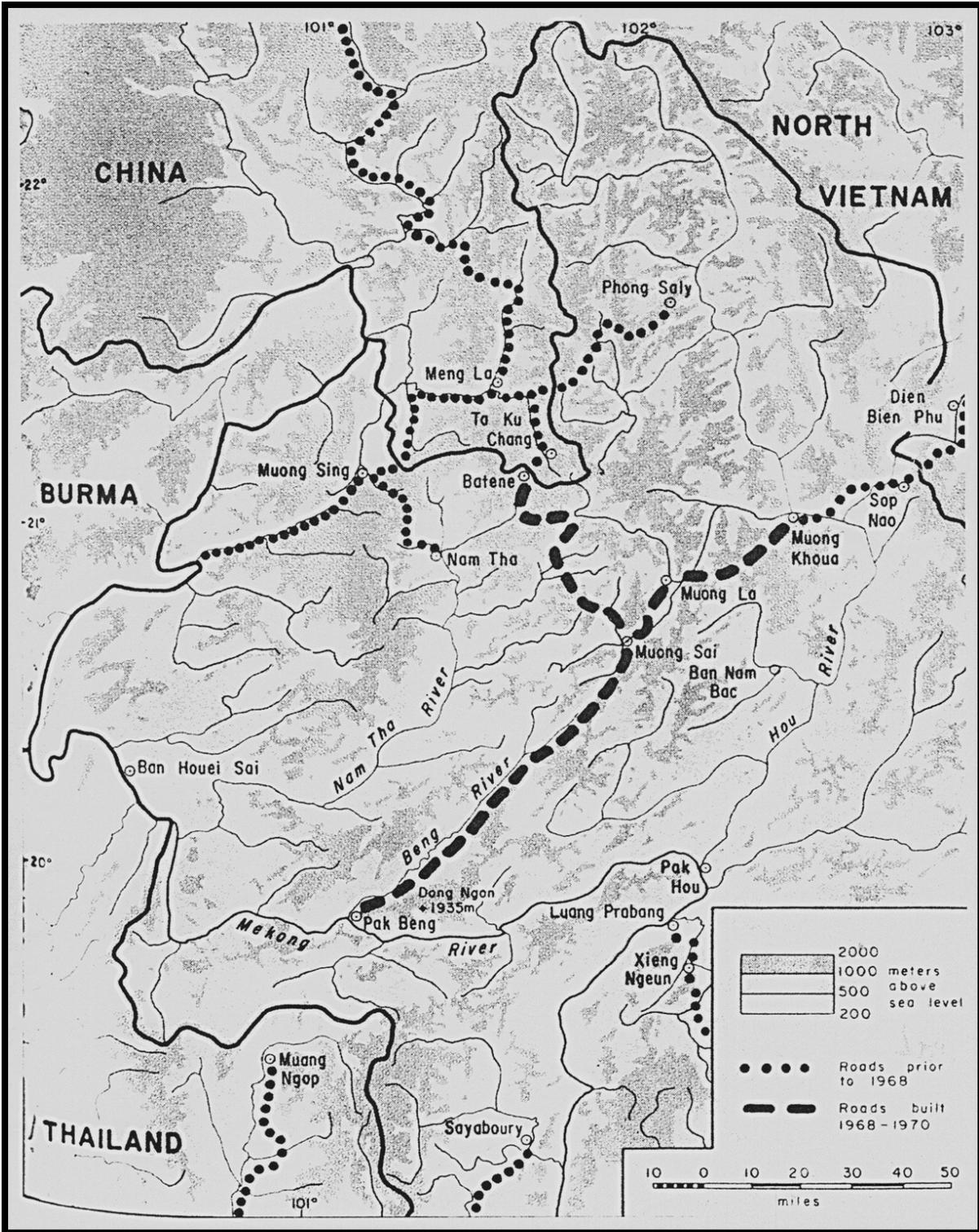
CHINESE ROADS IN MR-1

"China's basic objectives in Laos are to eliminate the U.S. military and political presence, and to ensure that Laos is controlled by a regime closely aligned with China. Until these objectives are achieved, Peking wishes to make certain that the areas of Laos bordering on its own territory are in friendly hands, and that it retains access through Laos to the communist insurgents in northern Thailand."

Special National Intelligence Estimate 58-1-68

The Ho Chi Minh Trail system was not the only road building project in Laos calculated to project communist power. Over the years, rudimentary roads in the northwestern region had been surveyed, constructed, improved, or expanded in upper Houa Kong and Phong Saly Provinces by Chinese engineers and laborers, who enjoyed relative immunity from ground or air interdiction.¹³ In the Nam Tha area, roads or trails eventually stretched from Meng

¹³ While I was working at Nam Yu, Tony Poe claimed to me that Phong Saly had been informally annexed by China.



Existing and future Chinese Roads inundating northern and northwestern Military Region One. Bottom: Route-13 terminating at Luang Prabang. Completed Thai roads thrusting to or past the border.
Conflict in Laos, Arthur Dommen.

La, Yunnan Province, China, through the valleys of MOUNG SING, NAM THA, and southwest to the prominent Burmese border bulge into Laos.

Farther east, using thousands of Chinese laborers in 1962 through 1963, another laterite dirt road connected Meng La, China, to the provincial capital at Phong Saly town. Completion of this road in May 1963 fostered a grand ceremony when the system was officially presented to the RLG. After accomplishing this feat, all construction workers purportedly returned to China and no mention of road activity was published in media accounts for some time. However, monsoon weather destroyed sections of the trail, which perpetuated an annual repair effort to reestablish the project until an all-weather road was built. By November 1964, rudimentary Chinese roads were being improved south and west of Meng La toward the PL-controlled border village of Ban Batene, just inside the Lao border (Route-412). Others pushed south from Meng Mong toward MOUNG SING and NAM THA (Route-411). At that time, the Chinese government announced future plans to construct a cross border road system linking southern Yunnan Province with larger Lao towns. Allowing for seasonal rains, the laterite arteries were generally completed by late 1966 and opened for vehicular traffic in 1967. After that, little more activity was noted for a time.

Except for innuendo or information from the occasional defector, it was difficult for intelligence agencies to ascertain exactly what the Chinese intended with all the activity, but it certainly appeared that the communists planned to expand their hegemony throughout the area. Moreover, it was very late in the Second Indochina timetable-perhaps too late and increasingly dangerous to counter such action.

With the loss of FAR-held Nam Bac in January to the Vietnamese, and the March partial bombing halt announcement, the

floodgates opened for relatively unimpeded communist road expansion. Aerial reconnaissance revealed that since early September, roadwork either commenced or continued from Ban Batene southward into Military Region One. When completed, the roads would enhance the capability to increase movement of supplies to PL and Vietnamese forces in remote portions of north and northwest Laos not presently linked to North Vietnamese roads.

The lengthy supply chain enhanced the wherewithal and capability to deliver needed supplies to establish and impose communist control over portions of Houa Khong and Phong Saly Provinces. Requests for desired material were first directed from the Northwest Military Region headquarters at Son La. Then the requirements moved up the chain of command to Hanoi and then to China, the prime sponsor and supplier of goods to prosecute the war.

Pathet Lao logistic requests were somewhat different, going first to Sam Neua Town and then along the same channels as the Vietnamese.

When assembled, the supplies were loaded on vehicles at Kunming, Yunnan, and transported along roads through Moung Sing to the Nam Tha Valley for storage and eventual use by enemy forces in the province. Similar storage facilities were also likely available in Phong Saly.

According to road watch reports, by 1968, construction efforts recommenced, joining Meng La from the northwest to Ban Batene with a permanent hard topped road. In January, on into the spring, reports indicated that Chinese soldiers and laborers were moving across the border. By June, a substantial number of engineering and infantry companies were at Batene. During the monsoon season, work proceeded on all weather roads west to Nam Tha, and then east to Moung Hai, and south to Moung Sai.

Route-19 from Dien Bien Phu ran southwest through Sop Nao to Moug Khoua, where the Nam Ou presented a formidable obstruction to speedy mobility. Consequently, movement of men and goods further south required laborious transportation methods across the river. ¹⁴

The partial bombing halt in North Vietnam released many Chinese and Vietnamese road personnel formerly engaged in repairing damaged arteries in the North for duty elsewhere. Therefore, during the year, construction laborers continued upgrading Route-19 from Dien Bien Phu to Moug Khoua at the Nam Ou.

In October 1968, as the rainy season waned, unsettling intelligence information from road watch teams and villagers reached western and Lao sources. Reports confirmed that 1,000 armed Chinese and 2,000 laborers with earthmoving equipment had initiated work on a major road project south toward Moug Sai, with intentions to push along the Beng River Route-46 roadbed leading south toward Pak Beng on the Mekong. It would impact western Sayaboury Province and Thailand. When completed, it was envisioned this artery would be classified as a permanent all-weather hard-top road. Agency sources speculated the effort might relate to Chinese support for the current Thai subversive movement and additional control of Pathet Lao units near the China border.

Advances in Military Region One Chinese road building efforts were duly noted over time and cautionary memorandums forwarded to interested parties cautioning to avoid inadvertent hostilities. Still, by mid-November an enemy buildup in the Pak

¹⁴ A bridge over the Nam Ou was never built.

Beng area close to the Mekong had been reported, which focused FAR attention there.

Watchful waiting continued. After a November meeting with a concerned Souvanna Phouma, Ambassador Sullivan apprised his Washington superiors that the Prime Minister requested assurances that no overt aggression would be committed against Chinese road crews (as long as the activity was not abused). This attempt at laissez-faire politics stemmed from late 1962 verbal agreements by Lao officials, including General Phoumi Nosavan, that allowed the Chinese government to perform broad intermittent road work in Laos as part of a comprehensive aid package. Contradicting this statement, from exile in Thailand following an aborted 1965 coup attempt, former top General of the Army, Phoumi, indicated that the RLG had never concluded official agreements with China to build roads in Laos.

Certainly, anything but a naïve politician, hedging his bets, Souvanna also requested continuing photo reconnaissance of the area to monitor activity, particularly if the Chinese attempted to continue construction south of Moung Sai or Nam Tha to improve supply efforts from warehouse stocks located in the Dien Bien Phu Valley instead of those in China.¹⁵

Following deliberations with his Embassy Country Team, Ambassador Sullivan elected to inform Seventh Air Force about new operating limitations in that area. Added to the entire restricted area north of the Quebec Delta (QD) line on the airman's chart and west to Tango Juliet (TJ) would be a small sector around Moung Sai.

AID worker Joe Flipse's input concerning the Chinese conundrum in northwest Military Region One is quite interesting.

¹⁵ A December report speculated that the Chinese could be involved in construction on Route-19 and in Phong Saly Province.

Although Joe was not privy to high level planning sessions, his following account indicates general thinking at the time regarding dealing with territory near the border:

"...there was not a lot of Chinese pressure in the area, but it was the big Boogey Man in the closet. I think the main fear was that if something happened to set the Chinese off, there were going to be a lot of non-career enhancing complications. In other words, the common screw ups and everyday inefficiencies could be tolerated and covered up in some fashion...If China squalled it was going to come from Washington. The whole [project] could be shut down and the gun shooters in Washington would have more leverage against the Agency. China was the big wildcard in the whole SEA situation [and always was]. This in itself made it difficult for there to be any Master Plan because the Chinese (what if) reaction was always a component.

As the intel teams started to move into [clandestine] cross border ops it was even more imperative that there not be anything that would be perceived as a threat to the Chinese. We could do pretty much what we wanted within the limits of our own sandbox, but we did not want to throw any sand on that big bad kid next door...The embassy was just scared...of any Chinese complications..."

Speculation as to China's overall designs to achieve expanded Southeast Asian hegemony continued into December. Since China and North Vietnam were considered transitional areas for regional wars of national liberation, it was expected that Chinese leaders would pressure North Vietnamese leaders to complete the takeover of Laos and accelerate support for communist insurgency in Thailand.

The subject of Chinese plans of encroachment caused concerns in world capitals. Hence, U.S. Government-sponsored "think tanks" generated interesting information and talking

points gleaned from diverse Southeast Asia sources, ones calculated to convey the issue to the forefront of political awareness.

At the Phnom Penh, Cambodia capital, word emanated from concerned Soviet agents *"that China is going to expand initiatives in Southeast Asia."*

There was anxiety among Burmese and Thai leaders regarding indigenous *"Chinese dissident groups and their encouragement by Peking."* Also, the amount of adverse propaganda in both countries was unsettling.

At the top of the list, Chinese road building in Military Region One was cited as the primary regional worry. Obviously, increasing enemy military activity in northern and central Laos was posed as being coordinated with Chinese road building. Attacks in southwest Laos were theorized as possibly opening Cambodia-Mekong LOCs. Taken in combination, these measures would position:

"the North Vietnamese and Chinese on the north, northeast, and southeast flanks of Thailand.

[Moreover,] the [political] instability of the ChiCom governmental structure is becoming more evident [during the Cultural Revolution], with the Red Army now providing the principal bond of order and administration in China heightening its influence"

During the past two months, Chinese reinforcement of the Indian northeast border provinces was noted with similar Indian military reinforcement. There also seemed to be ChiCom movement in previously quiet Tibet.

It was noted:

"A cross-border military adventure now from interior lines, would find India, Burma, Thailand, and Laos unable to effectively respond."

A limited offensive would redirect in-country mainland pressures to external issues and allow the Chinese army considerable latitude in gaining military experience without incurring undue response from SEATO or other involved countries.

Further Southeast Asian involvement would be unpopular in America, and only direct attacks against U.S. bases in Thailand would encourage USG and public support for increased U.S. participation in the Theater.

Well into December, Lao leaders were concerned regarding Chinese road construction in the northern portion of the country. ¹⁶

¹⁶ Segment Sources:

Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Praeger, 1964) 284.

Author's Research-U.S. State Department, LBJ Library, University of Texas at Austin, Texas.

Joseph Zasloff (Ed.), *Beyond the Revolution: U.S. Policy Towards Laos in Historical Perspective* (New York: St Martin Press, 1991), G. McMurtrie Godley and Jinny St Goar, Part 5, *The Chinese Road in Northwest Laos 1961-1973*.

An American Perspective, 291-295.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 11/26/68.

Directorate of Intelligence Central Intelligence Bulletin, Communist China-Laos, 11/08/68,

(foia.cia.gov/browse_docs_full.asp?coc_no+0000415090&title=CENTRAL+I).

CIA Intelligence Information Cable, Motives Behind Chinese Road Construction in Northern Laos, 12/02/68.

CIA (LBJ Library) Possible ChiCom Adventure, 12/02/68.

Paper prepared for State, U.S Negotiating Position Concerning Laos, December; Lao Situation Reports, 12/19/68, 12/24/68.

Joe Flipse Email, 07/06/97.

Ken Conboy, 313-314.

On the first of September, we commenced a pre-planned STO to Bangkok. With many items to attend to, we drove down. For flexibility, we were still driving the Cortina, but because of horrible traffic conditions within the congested city, generally parked the car, and hired taxis to appointments or leisure spots. Sunday, when traffic was at its lowest ebb, was about the only time I would venture out on the roads.

With the family about to increase by one, we were outgrowing smaller hotels. Therefore, I was anxious to stay at the Montien, a new luxury hotel located on Suriwongse Road at the west end of, and across the street from Patpong Road. However, it was currently undergoing finishing touches and would not be ready for occupancy for a couple of months. The "word" was that Air America personnel would be allowed a substantial discount from the normal tariff. In the meantime, we checked into the Suriwongse Hotel for, even though not the best accommodation, it was inexpensive, the personnel very helpful with Ricky, and it was within walking distance of the Company office and the Bangkok Christian Hospital on the corner of Pat Pong and Silom roads.

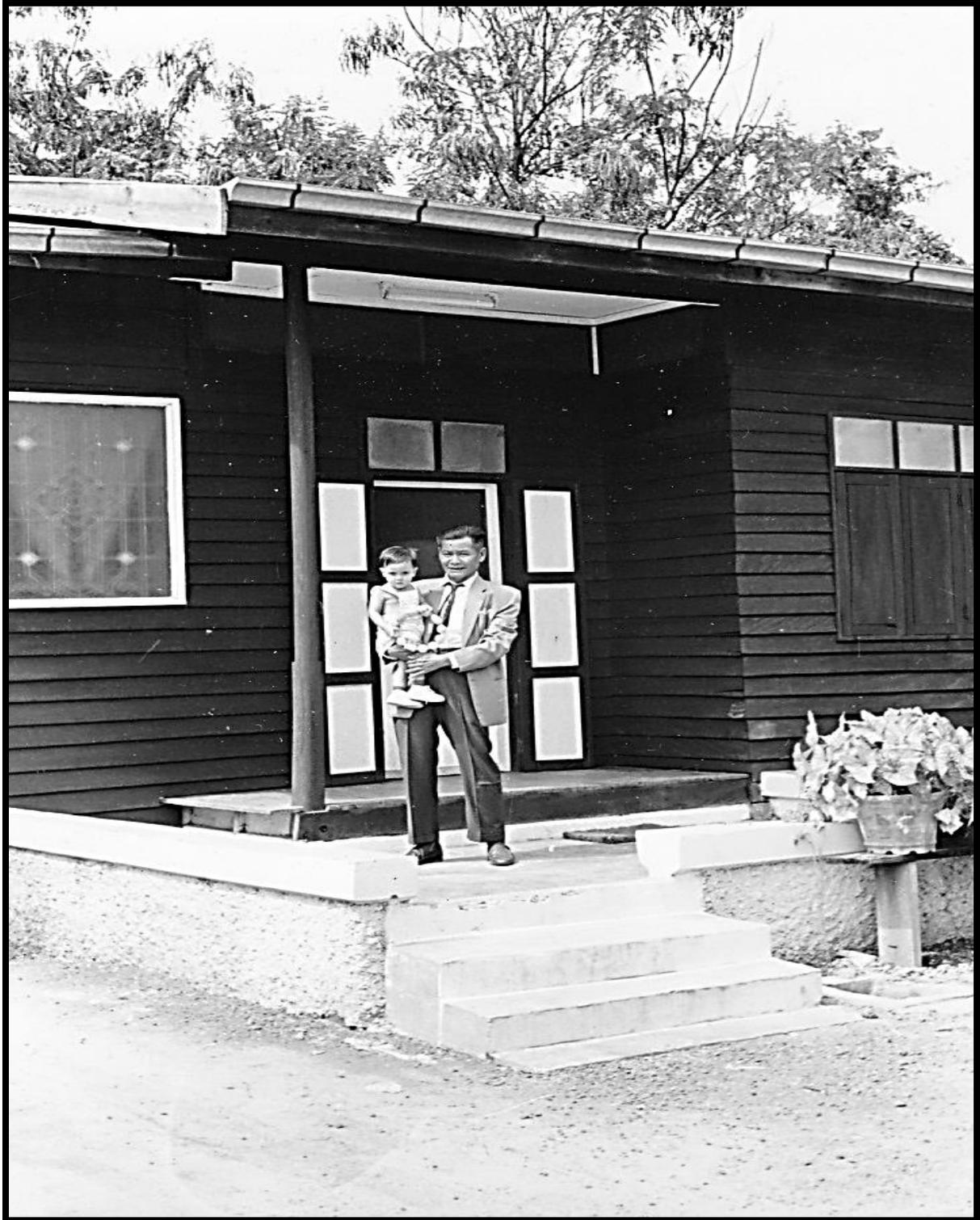
Because of problems with Rick's birth at the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, we elected to have the new baby's arrival at the Christian Hospital. Coverage was provided in the medical plan and I had some confidence in the American and Thai medical staff working there. During a pre-natal examination, Tuie discovered that she was a little more advanced in her pregnancy than we had originally thought, and our next child was targeted for birth in January.

When we were in the States, Rick's pediatric doctor had noted that he did not walk properly, and recommended orthopedic shoes to correct the condition. Because of the expense and delay in obtaining shoes that were not sold off the shelf, we elected to purchase the shoes in Thailand upon our return. Rick's foot had to be measured and his shoes specially manufactured by an orthopedic craftsman at the Sirirat Hospital located across the Chao Phraya River in Thonburi. At the time of the examination, we were advised that the footwear would be ready in August, but flying requirements during the month precluded a journey to Bangkok at that time.

The day was hot and it was a long distance across town in a small Japanese-built taxi to the pier and ferry crossing. The shoes made Ricky walk pigeon-toed, which the doctor indicated would eventually create a normal walking gait. Until that time, the special orthopedic shoes would have to be worn and periodically changed as he developed.

After crossing the river, we walked up the inclined street to a taxi station. About halfway there, heat, humidity, exertion, and Tuie's delicate condition caused her to feel faint, so we stopped at a small drink shop where the kind proprietor allowed her to rest.

I visited Jim Moore and his family near the Coke factory and apprised him that I wanted to terminate the note, and asked for the return my investment. I told him about Cham and Plang's plans for three two-story Chinese style shop-houses they wanted to erect and lease for ten years on their property facing Adulyadet Road. If I chose to participate, after completion and lease, I would supposedly receive my money back, plus a tidy profit. Should the initial dealings prove successful, four additional ones were planned. Jim, who knew something about the four by sixteen-meter shops, briefed me, and called them Dong



Plang (Khun Tha) Nisagonrungsee and Ricky in front of a rental bungalow in the family compound.

Author Collection.

Hows. Because I was unable to obtain a viable cost estimate for the project, I was lukewarm about proceeding, but still considered the Nisagonrungsee proposal. At any rate, it was time to sever my financial dealings with Moore.

STATE OF THE LAO WAR

"Not much to say about Laos. It is still a no-win deal in which we mercenaries are cannon fodder."¹

Author Letter Home 09/07/68

Toward the end of the monsoon season, an intelligence document recapitulating the 1968 Lao war (s) was circulated to agencies and individuals on a "need to know" basis:

"[The] rainy season in Laos brought no major changes [in the Lao military situation]. The lull in fighting, reluctance of the communists to press their advantage, [while consolidating their gains], has given the government a much needed respite, but although modest gains made by government troops since June have improved the tactical situation and morale, the communists are in the strongest position in Laos since 1963.

In [Military Region One during January] the [Royal Lao] government lost upwards to 3,000 troops in the Nam Bac debacle and there was virtually nothing left to contest the communists as they pushed south to the Royal Capital of Luang Prabang.

[In Military Region Two,] VP's Meo tribesmen, whose brilliant campaign deep in enemy territory had been a source of increasing communist frustration and concern, found themselves on the defensive due to the loss in rapid succession of a series

¹ Mercenaries: A rather sarcastic slap at the term, for we were anything but mercenaries.

of mountain tops which formed the backbone of the RLG effort in Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang Provinces and threatening gestures towards those Meo remaining left them in bewildered disarray.

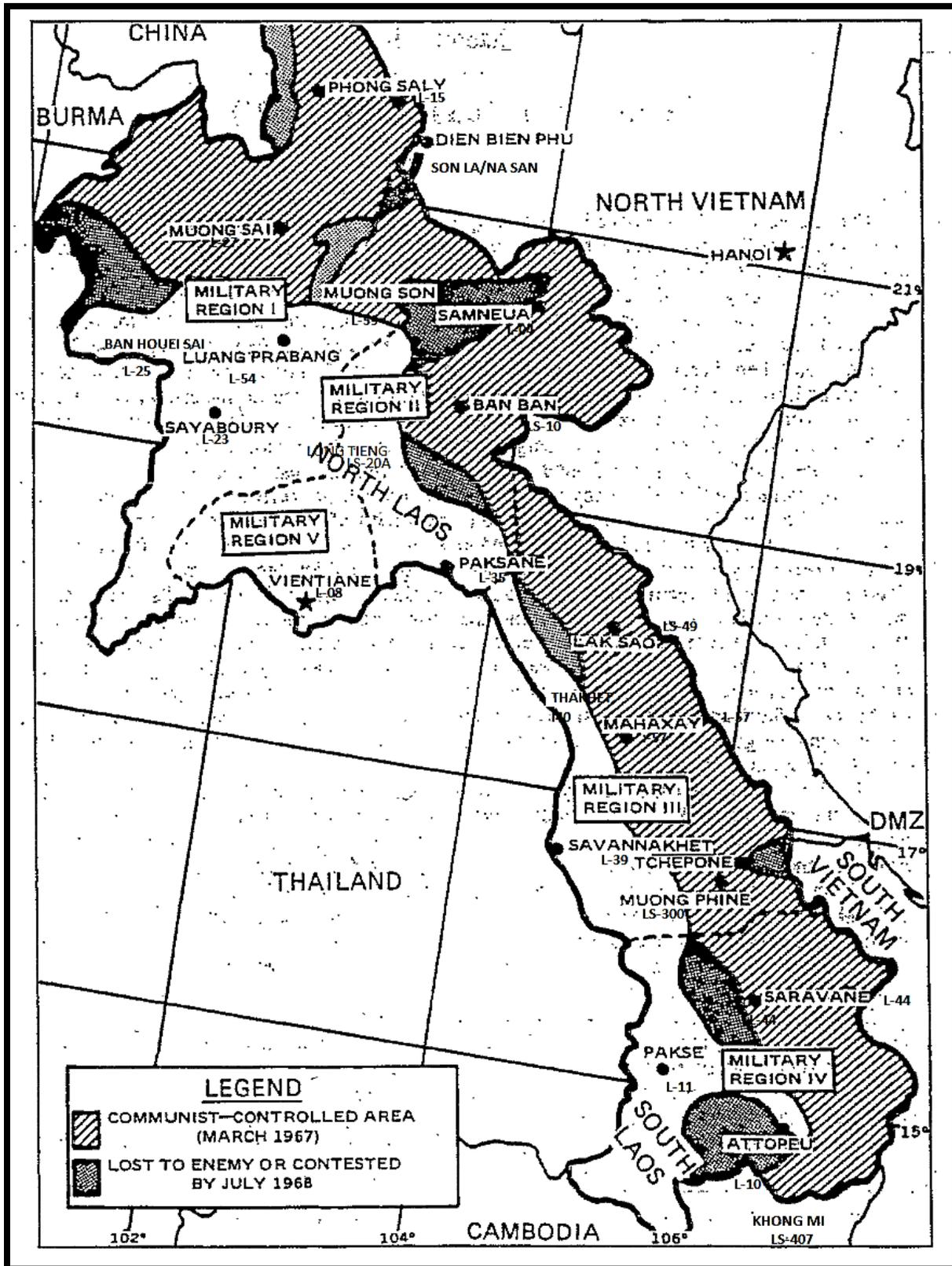
By late April, the NVA appeared to be ready for a push against Na Khang in what would have the earmarks of one last effort before the rains began. [However,] air strikes, monsoon rains, and defensive measures thwarted the offensive. Furthermore, enemy efforts to seize guerrilla sites used for launch pads to harass LOCs subsequently ended short of targeted objectives.

During past months, the enemy attempted to terrorize and dissuade the mountain people from aiding the RLG. Failing in this, they provided scrip for things taken and promised items they could never produce. These efforts were considered attempts to exert greater control over remote and sparsely populated regions in Phong Saly, Luang Prabang, and Houa Phan Provinces. Tribal cooperation and continuing road work around Phu Pha Thi would facilitate troop movement into isolated terrain previously too inhospitable. Also, sizeable vehicular movement had been noted over Route-65 toward Sam Neua over a four-month period.

Lately, government troops retook Moung Son and Phou Pha Louam [LS-228], a position lost in February. [VP's people were also confident of capturing Moung Peun (Lima-31), eighteen miles south of Sam Neua Town on Route-6.]

FAR lost no additional territory in southern Laos and managed to gain some advantage.

Against this backdrop, the most noteworthy feature of the rainy season is that nothing noteworthy had happened. The alarms of late spring have long given way to the summer doldrums on both sides as they mark time. Whatever hopes they [the enemy] may have had of forcing the Meo from Site-36 and removing the



Overall territorial holdings of the enemy during mid-1968 Laos.
 Anthony 270

government presence south of Sam Neua town, were dashed by the combination of U.S. air strikes and monsoon rains.”²

A PRELUDE: ALL WARS EVENTUALLY END

Ever since President Johnson's bombing cessation and subsequent bombing halts in most of upper North Vietnam, calculated to stimulate peace talks and serious negotiations with North Vietnamese leaders, there had been confusion as to what impact de-escalation would foster on Lao operations and with close ally Thailand. Ambassador Unger posited some thoughts to State, et. al.

He was looking forward to a transition to an eventual ceasefire or lower intensity conflict in South Vietnam; it was assumed that excess U.S. military forces would be required in other areas. However, a continuing concern for Vietnamese army resurgence against Laos or even Thailand and Cambodia would require a U.S presence, albeit smaller, as deterrence to renewed communist hostilities.

New plans to thwart renewed enemy action were required. For example, former contingency plans conceived in 1966 (OPLAN 1-66-Project-22) to introduce four USG brigades and supporting forces into Lao Mekong River towns, with Thai Army covering flanking areas, was no longer considered feasible. Logistics so far from a seaport and communist insurgence would pose major problems.

An "after Vietnam" scenario required Thailand to assume a major role in its own defense. The U.S. would have to assist in

² CIA Summer Intelligence Memorandum, 09/25/68. Combined with information the Author gleaned from State Department Files at the University of Texas LBJ Library, Austin, Texas. Author's recollection of conversations with USAID's Pop Buell regarding communist people-to-people efforts. Victor Anthony, Ambassador Sullivan's input during a high level Udorn Conference on 09/09/68, 279.

some areas using air assets until the Thai Air Force was more capable. The U.S. Military Assistance Program (MAP) should continue to bolster Thai defensive units, training and preparing for enemy incursions. Although reduced, USAF presence should be retained to cope with Lao requirements. Joint war games, demonstrating rapid troop deployment to the border, should be conducted to display a strong defensive deterrence.³

Southeast Asian "experts" later concluded that further aerial de-escalation in the Vietnamese Theater (North Vietnam) portended serious consequences for both Lao and Thai security.

A number of worst-case scenarios, opinions, and recommendations as to the negative aspects caused by a reduction of air activity were forwarded to interested parties:

"A decreased area [would be] available for air interdiction; air interdiction [would be] more costly due to [a] concentration of AAA for the smaller area; [the] greater conspicuousness of U.S. bombing, particularly in Northern Laos would prompt [the] Soviets to increase pressures on Souvanna Phouma to stop all U.S. bombing; [there would be] a greater vulnerability of forces particularly in the North because of reduced effectiveness of bombing on NVA supply centers near [the] Lao border; [there would be] anxiety in Thailand as well as Laos about U.S. intentions; less effective bombing in areas near [the] border [would occur] if there is a cessation of reconnaissance on traffic in North Vietnam headed for Laos."

Even though the overriding goal of de-escalation was envisioned necessary to conduct bilateral negotiations and eventually end the war, the enemy had been indifferent and

³ Telegram (403) Ambassador Unger to State via CINCPAC and Ambassador Sullivan, Future of U.S. Military Establishment in Thailand, 08/15/68, FRUS, Thailand 1968.

intractable in the past to USG's overtures as to peace talks. They used any effort on USG's part to continue to march. Having delineated the downside of reduced air activity, suggestions were presented to offset any enemy reluctance to reciprocate.

If this were the case, U.S. air operations in Laos would have to increase, additional propeller aircraft introduced, and no limit imposed on reconnaissance mission. RLAFF operations would have to be increased.

Current SOG Prairie Fire and Igloo White electronic ground operations in the Trail system areas should continue at the same level to support tactical air operations.

CAS (the acronym used for CIA in Laos) road watch operations should be continued and even increased in Southern Laos.

The Royal Lao and Royal Thai governments should be alerted to USG's intention to de-escalate.

There should be increased emphasis assisting the RLG in trumpeting North Vietnamese aggression in that country to justify the unacknowledged American air operations. Moreover, other countries should be encouraged to publicly recognize this violation of Lao neutrality.

Discussion of a total bombing halt in North Vietnam continued, with Ambassador Sullivan weighing in after consulting Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and other Lao principals:

"If and when we [completely] stop bombing North Vietnam Souvanna Phouma [is] willing to let us throw [the] entire weight of tactical air and Arc Light [B-52 strikes] into Laos. [However, expanded air operations in southern Laos would be predicated on increased support of MR-1 and MR-2.]

[The] strikes would have to be conducted within ROE [rules of engagement] which apply in Laos.

If cessation occurs in [the] dry season when enemy pressure is heaviest, there may be a need to increase U.S. air efforts against regions and objectives (northern Laos) which are not of direct interest to MACV [Saigon].

[Souvanna Phouma's] current position will come under considerable strain when the moment of truth arrives.

The King will remain steady and so will most of his Ministers.

[The ultimate] test will be the season of the year; duration of that period when Laos alone is being bombed and no general cease-fire is achieved [in the Paris talks]; [the] intensity of the campaign mounted against Souvanna Phouma by Hanoi [and other Soviet allies]." ⁴

MILITARY REGION-3 MISSION

On the eighth, Flight Mechanic Werth and I ferried 96W to Savannakhet. There were no Special Missions conducted that day and minimum time was flown.

Ted Moore joined me in the cockpit on Monday morning to conduct a lengthy infil eighty-four miles southeast of Lima-39 to XC054799. As per our Special Mission SOP, PICs departed for a recon in CASI Porter Papa Delta Juliet. The landing zone was located at a moderate altitude on the northeast portion of the extensive Phou Mali range. This site overlooked Route-23 in the distance on its way toward the Toumlan Valley, Saravane, and the

⁴ Information culled and abridged from a paper prepared by the East Asian and Pacific Interdepartmental Regional Group regarding a 29 May Request for Ideas on Repercussions in Laos of De-escalation in Vietnam, 09/10/68.

Telegram William Sullivan to State, 09/26/68.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 279.

Bolovens. Like almost all previous missions in Military Region Three, this one was successful and conducted without incident.

WIL GREENE

"I have met Bill Greene..Bill is nice to work for..."

Author Letter to Parents, 09/23/68.

U.S. Army Major Wilbur M. Greene retired from the military in 1967. Soon afterward, he was recruited by the CIA and sent to various Agency training schools including "The Farm" at Camp Peary, Virginia. ⁵

In June 1968 Wil, as he was known until later tagged with the code name, "**Black Lion**," was assigned to PS-22 on the Bolovens Plateau to assist Don Stephens in the capacity of Chief of Operations. At the time, Wil was the sole Negro Agency Case Officer in Laos. ⁶

Wil quickly gained a rare special trust and confidence among most pilots with whom he worked, many who feared Customers were not particularly concerned about their welfare. Greene changed much of this negative viewpoint by quickly establishing a good reputation as a no-nonsense Case Officer who accompanied

⁵ Don Courtney Email, 04/30/16. During World War Two, as a member of the 555th Negro parachute battalion, Green was stationed in northwest America to fight fires incurred from Japanese fire balloons sent across the Pacific. He had been the first sergeant of G Company. *Bill Leary article published in Vietnam Magazine 12/97. "Greene had seen action in Korea in 1951-1952 with the 5th Regimental Combat Team. He was advanced to second lieutenant in 1956. Greene was sent to Vietnam in 1963 as an advisor to the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps in 3 Corps."*

⁶ Don Stephens later rotated to Xieng Lom to help complete the camp construction and run the training school. He had several Americans assigned to assist him.

his SGU teams on missions, a no-no for Agency types. In this, he attained an exalted status akin to Tony Poe.

Not all pilots found it easy to work with Greene. One was Mike Jarina. One day, Wil assigned Mike to deliver a load of SGU troops just east of the Plateau into the Se Kong Valley in order to conduct a terrain survey. When Jarina returned to retrieve the unit, he discovered that they had been raiding area villages and were loaded down with loot. It was something Mike knew Vang Pao would never allow. When the troops attempted to load pigs stuffed into bags and other booty, his Flight Mechanic blocked the cabin door. When the NCO of the unit pointed his weapon at the Flight Mechanic, Mike took off empty and returned to PS-22.

Mike was a little upset, informing Greene that he was not going to return for the team unless Wil accompanied him. Of course, Greene wanted to know the reason. After explaining what occurred, playing the incident down, Wil said the man was just threatening the Flight Mechanic and never would have shot him. Not buying this, Mike challenged Wil, asking how he knew this. Then Mike suggested that he return the sergeant alone, take him into the woods to inform him that if he did not apologize, he was going to shoot him (Mike was not serious). Believing Jarina was overplaying the incident, Greene became angry and took exception to Mike's attitude.

Mike was aware of Greene's reputation as a good Customer, but the Se Kong Valley incident badly soured their relations. Consequently, he never achieved the rapport with Wil that he had with younger Customers who he often allowed to ride in the left cockpit seat.

Within a year, through unprecedented courageous combat actions, Greene assumed a "larger than life" status as **Black Lion** on the Plain of Jars in Military Region Two. ⁷

On the tenth, along with Norm Grammer, I relocated to Pakse and then to PS-22 to join two other helicopter crews for a late afternoon Special Mission. If not flying supply missions, while waiting for troops to move to acceptable locations, good weather condition, and our escort aircraft, I had an opportunity to converse with Customers who were not too busy or impressed with themselves to associate with an Air America pilot. During a break I met Wil Greene. After initial pleasantries and discovering that he had been a member of U.S. Army Special Forces, I asked the inevitable question-*was he acquainted with my cousin, the Reverend Colonel Bob Anderson?* The reply I received almost floored me. Not only did Bill know Bobby well while assigned to Fort Dix, the families had lived next to each other at Mount Holly, New Jersey. Moreover, Bill's wife worked for Bob as a secretary for a time. One could not ask for a more auspicious beginning to a pilot-Customer relationship.

Since his arrival at PS-22, Bill had trained a number of ten-man SGU action teams, which he sent across the Se Kong Valley to Route-96 and other arteries to stage ambushes, plant mines, and generally slow or disrupt the normal flow of enemy traffic. Normally, half his troop contingent was in the field at any given time. Although action team casualties were high, Greene's troops generally excelled, spurred on by his planning, attention to detail, and willingness to accompany them into

⁷ Bill Leary Article, "Wil" Greene, *Vietnam Magazine*, December 1997
Mike Jarina Interview.
Mac Thompson Email, 10/28/96.

questionable sites deep in enemy territory--something Stephens, McGrath and other Customers were reluctant to do.

The relatively short mission to YB0898, twenty-one miles northeast of PS-22, was similar to others we had been conducting. This one entailed a ten-man exfiltration from rough hills ten miles east of Chavane. It was also near alternate feeder Route-165, and enemy base storage area 614 farther east near the South Vietnamese town of Kam Duc and the country's lowlands.

Following the successful mission, we recovered at Pakse just after sunset.

There were no missions scheduled during the next two days, and I spent time away from Lima-11 supplying outposts on the Plateau.

On Friday Ed Reid joined me for a projected mission that never materialized.

Following a final night at the hostel, on the fourteenth, I returned to Udorn on CASI Porter Papa Foxtrot Delta.

Three days later I was scheduled for a local Bell proficiency ride with Company standardization pilot Wayne Webb. Since these flights involved emergency procedures, I studied the pilot flight manual. I paid particular attention to the height-velocity chart that portrayed a Bell factory test pilot's work displaying the correct parameters should an engine failure occur during takeoff. Data for charts was collated under optimum conditions that included working on a hard surface, something we line pilots rarely encountered. Still, it was the best information available.

The flight was conducted in Papa Foxtrot Juliet (PFJ). Wayne, as usual, chomped on his disgusting link trainer cigar. Thinking I would impress the IP, I launched from the grassy infield, remaining at a low altitude, one I considered within

the height-velocity chart's correct takeoff envelope until obtaining climb airspeed. I knew that I had committed a boo-boo and misinterpreted the H/V chart when Wayne chimed in that he "*had never seen anyone perform a takeoff like that before.*" It was not a particularly auspicious beginning to a check ride, but my normal work, followed by simulated governor failures, autorotations, and hydraulic off maneuvers, were deemed acceptable.

As we walked across the ramp after the flight, I was chastened by my initial error, but somewhat bolstered by the fact that Webb was not totally unhappy with my performance.

On the nineteenth, I deadheaded to Savannakhet on C-123 N4576 to fly 96W with Flight Mechanic Tod Yourglich. After a fairly good day's work and RON at Lima-39, consistent with the Customer sharing policy of our scarce Bells in Southern Laos, I was assigned to Pakse, where Glen Woods replaced Tod. With a scheduled mission aborted, I worked PS sites on the Bolovens Plateau most of the day.

GAUR

Toward the end of the day, while preparing to return to Pakse for the night I came upon a family cluster of four Gaur, a female, a large bull, and two smaller infants standing together on a rise above a stream. The sighting was rare, especially on the Plateau, as except for flocks of birds, the only gathering of animals I had ever encountered was a herd of elephant while flying toward the northern rim as a First Officer with Captain Nick Burke in November of 1962. Except for the previous year, when Billy Pearson announced that he observed a herd of Gaur on approach to a landing zone during a team infil out of PS-22, I had never seen the beast. Even then, before I landed, they had disappeared into the woods. Our mission had been to rugged,

remote hills on the east side of the Sedone Valley. Since Gaur meat was prized as a delicacy, and the head revered as a good luck item by the locals, we were encouraged to bring in what we could. Therefore, I elected to attempt slaying the bull and delivering it to the troops at PS-22.

Glen was reputedly a good shot, so in the seconds available to us, I asked if he might be able to bring the bull down, while I attempted to position the helicopter during a deceleration and slow flyby. So as to not unduly damage the meat, he flicked the firing switch lever on the right side of his AK-47 to the single shot position. Then he cranked off several rounds at the animal without any visible effect.

As I went around, the agitated Guar family began to move. Almost choreographed, just like they had practiced and pre-planned an escape route, it was amazing to watch. Mama and the kids rapidly surged downhill toward the heavy cover of trees lining the stream. As a diversion, Dad started over the ridge in the other direction. Glen quickly switched to full-automatic and began firing wildly at the retreating creature. It was an exercise in futility and difficult to imagine that such a huge animal could move and disappear so quickly. As I pulled off and out of the kill zone, I hoped that we had not wounded the brute. At any rate, the incident produced a rollicking good story for evening tales at the hostel.

The next morning, I was sent back to Savannakhet, and was relieved after a one hour and ten-minute flight. A CASI Helio Courier pilot flying Papa Bravo Zulu took me to Wattay Airport, where I managed to obtain a ride on C-123 N4556 to Udorn. Because the deadheads sometimes involved long waits and entailed moving heavy RON gear, the multiple deadhead flights were certainly not the envy of the helicopter pilot group.

I enjoyed a few days off the flight schedule during which I spent quality time with my family.

VANG PAO GOES ON SABBATACLE

With three quarters of the year gone, 1968 had proven an extraordinarily difficult year for the Lao military. North Vietnamese communists had delivered the worst losses to Royal Lao Government forces since 1962, generally eliminating RLG's painstaking military acquisitions during the previous five years. Despite some government gains since June, should they choose, the enemy was in a favorable position with sufficient assets to push to the Mekong River.

As the southeast monsoon season waned, events of recent months tended to fatigue and depress both government and military leaders. The Prime Minister had achieved only minor success in reorganizing the Lao military, with his efforts to eliminate corruption "deflected and evaded." Territorial gains, usually counted on during the rainy season, had met with only limited success in Military Region Two and Military Region Three around Moungh Phalane. In the southern Military Region Four Sedone Valley above Pakse, and Military Region Five Borikhane area north of Paksane, and other important regions, there had been no progress.

Further exacerbating a feeling of hopelessness and despair was a failure of the bilateral talks in Paris to produce a just end to the long war. Without real progress, the country faced another dry season of enemy attacks with only limited government assets available. In the U.S., a looming election posed intangibles as to future policies toward Laos.

Although a strong and resolute leader, General Vang Pao was human, not immune to the general funk pervading the country. Moreover, he was fast reaching a burn out point, which his

lowered immune system reflected. He had been constantly subjected to pressure, worrying about the many negative facets impacting the war and his people within his area of responsibility. For the first time in several years, the military balance of power was drastically shifting for the worse. Losing all-important face with peers and subordinates, VP's forces had lost Pha Thi, a large amount of former assets, men, and friendly population bases in Sam Neua, and parts of Xieng Khouang Province. In addition, he possessed fewer motivated troops and had encountered poor recruiting results to oppose an enemy increase to what was estimated at nineteen battalions. With objections that young people and some politicians in America were creating over the war, USG's plans fostered an enigma for Southeast Asia's future. Already the impact of less air power in North Vietnam, rumored soon to completely cease, and the Theater in general could be seen in Laos.

Therefore, with monsoon rains still impacting and slowing operations, with encouragement from individuals close to him, Vang Pao elected to accept standing invitations for a month-long visit to France (overtly for his son's school graduation) and then to the United States. Vang Pao's number one wife accompanied him on the trip. Case Officer, Jerry Daniels, would be his mentor, host, and sightseeing guide for part of the trip. Ambassador Sullivan and the State Department eased the way, scheduling secret meetings and dinners with top Department of Defense and CIA officials in Washington. On these occasions, Vang Pao made no bones about his desire for continued and increased bombing of North Vietnam to aid the Meo resistance movement in upper Laos. But, with a national election imminent, the die was cast; wheels were already in motion to unwind the war. Consequently, all his hosts could do was attempt to

reassure Vang Pao USG would continue its policy of communist containment in Southeast Asia. In light of a potential peace agreement, the general also sought support for his long-term goal to retake the Plain of Jars.

Before departing the U.S., Bill Lair and others vied to introduce Vang Pao to some high points in America. He visited several points of interest depicting U.S. history in Virginia, a manufacturing plant, and an amusement park. Overall, the recharged general was amazed with American energy and way of life, particularly in Jerry Daniels' Missoula, Montana home. ⁸

CRASH AT NA KHANG

The war did not cease in upper Military Region Two with Vang Pao's departure for his therapeutic vacation. Bullets, beans, and bandages still had to be distributed to the many defensive outposts surrounding the Site-36 area. Other sites still hanging on by mere threads had to be supported, as did the Moung Son operation. Of course, the trusty and versatile helicopters and cooperative crews of Air America were an important means to this end.

On Thursday, 26 September, Captains Ed Reid and Bill Hutchison, and Flight Mechanic Andy Anderson departed Long Tieng early in Bell 205 XW-PFH for Na Khang. Andy, formerly from the South Vietnam Theater, had brought and wore an unsightly heavy metal breast plate called a "chicken plate," for which he received a fair amount of ribbing. Andy also was accorded a

⁸ Segment Sources:

Memorandum Director of Intelligence and Research to Acting Secretary of State, CIA Analysis of the Military Situation in Laos, 10/09/68.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 10/-8/68.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 201, 205 fn 59.

Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, D.C.: CIA, 2006) 307.

Bill Leary Notes for October 1968.

moniker as a "tinkerer." This was derived from his habit of constantly inspecting, adjusting nuts and bolts on the rotor head components, and generally poring over the helicopter during stops. This was OK, but there was a limit to this kind of attention and kind of reinforced the adage of, "*If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*"

Shortly after commencing supply work at Site-36, the main generator failed. A redundancy of two allowed continued operation, Udorn was advised of the problem, and a request was made to deliver a replacement part and electrician to Alternate. Next, the bleed-air driven fuel pump became noisy and unreliable, but with Andy's gentle taps to the bell-housing, the crew continued to march for several hours.

Following a multi-aircraft Special Mission north to exfil a SGU team, which had been in the field a long time, the RPM low warning system began to malfunction. Encountering strike two was quite enough, and Ed elected to RTB Long Tieng for repair work. The Customer was notified and requested that Ed carry passengers.

After fueling, Ed air taxied 200 feet to the loading area on the west side of the wide runway. Then he turned southwest and landed. This position was downwind, as the prevailing winds at Na Khang during this time of year were normally from a northerly direction. Ten indigenous and one American passenger boarded. An attempt to takeoff downwind was not successful, so the pilot reversed his direction into a stiff up-strip headwind, where a hover check proved satisfactory. While nursing Hotel into the air, the added lift allowed the heavy aircraft to achieve translational lift and forward flight.

Clearing the end of the runway, the pilot turned right toward open rice paddies adjacent to the field. Then, with RPM drooping, Papa Hotel Foxtrot settling, and ground contact

obviously imminent, Ed attempted to reduce ground speed. As the tail skid dragged the ground, Ed held the aircraft in a nose high attitude. The helicopter impacted soft soil causing a jolt and minimum ground run. Such a sudden stoppage resulted in the ship rocking, flipping over, and cartwheeling twice before coming to rest in an inverted position a hundred yards east of the runway.

Fortunately, there was no fire. With both cockpit doors damaged and jammed shut, "Hutch" kicked out the windscreen for exit. Anderson was already out of Papa Foxtrot Hotel. "Hutch" looked for the passengers. Not seeing any, he thought they might be under the helicopter. Then he saw them on the hill a few yards to the west. Except for one possible jaw injury, and for considerable shock, no one was badly injured.

After walking a short distance to the strip, the crew was flown to Long Tieng on Papa Foxtrot Juliet (PFJ), and to Udorn on Air America Porter N392R. Ed and "Hutch" were debriefed by CPH Knight for the after action XOXO.

Contributing to the detriment of our program, the extensive damages to PFH caused us to lose yet another Bell, and it seemed there was always one in the hangar being repaired. Furthermore, loss of a Bell for a prolonged period diluted the flight time of everyone in the program. Consequently, this latest accident drastically reduced Bell crews' monthly flight time.

I did not fly PFH until January, when it was returned to the line.

Although Hutch voiced a statement for the record that he believed "*some form of power loss*" was involved in the crash, and two turbine wheels were discovered cracked after the fact, I was very skeptical that the accident was solely mechanical. The wheels could have been cracked during the crash or during the sudden stoppage.

The Na Khang strip was constructed according to existing terrain. After being extended to more than 2,200 feet, it was still considered quite dangerous for fixed wing aircraft. Landing was no problem, but a constant three-quarter tail wind from the north during most of the year created dangerous takeoff conditions. Several inexperienced Helio Courier pilots had crashed during takeoff in the downwind conditions. C-123 landings there were generally limited to "K" models that employed jet pod boost for lift to overcome the detrimental factors.

After hearing others talk about the accident, I was fairly certain of what had occurred. At certain times of the year, wind velocity from the north at Site-36 was very high--often twenty plus knots. This generally precluded a down strip departure unless empty. Therefore, although requiring caution and pilot technique, we launched upslope. As I and others discovered through on-the-job-training (OJT), it was imperative to continue a takeoff north beyond the end of the runway before turning. This ensured sufficient groundspeed for a climb and 180 degree turn to the downwind. Groundspeed was the key factor to success; indicated airspeed was disregarded as erroneous, and its use could portend trouble. Even with some altitude, if a pilot turned downwind at low speed, the aircraft might unexpectedly settle, and sufficient power for recovery prove questionable. I had experienced this to some degree and observed other pilots struggle to regain control. Because of these problems, it was wise to extend takeoff and not unduly overload a ship during windy conditions from the north. Of course, I was not there, but based on information provided me, I attributed two factors to the accident: an overloaded aircraft and a turn downwind with insufficient groundspeed to maintain altitude. At any rate, coming on the heels of the McNulty incident, the latest event

did nothing to enhance Reid's reputation. Of course, Ed made light of the incident, blaming "Hutch" for his current spate of bad luck.

CPH Knight sat on the accident review board conducted five months later and concluded that Ed had indeed skated. Mechanical defects were not deemed a contributing factor, for it would have evidenced poor judgment to continue to fly with a fault that might lead to an accident. ⁹

The accident seemed like a clear case of overloading for existing conditions. However, "Hutch's" testimony posed some doubt as to a mechanical failure leading to the "power loss." ¹⁰

Bell pilots were not the only recipients of field incidents; H-34 pilots were not immune to operational accidents. Another accident occurred the same day as Reid's, when Captain Ted Cash experienced a power loss flying Hotel-15. Ted was working at the Team-9 Bravo site thirty-nine miles north-northeast of Nam Yu (OD0239). After the malfunction, the air-oil oleo strut failed and the helicopter collapsed to the left. Both Ted and Flight Mechanic Pigott tobogganed down a forty-five-degree slope before striking a tree and coming to rest thirty feet below the landing zone. The crew weathered the crash in fairly good shape and was retrieved by the crew of Hotel-59.

⁹ Contributing factors was a legal term that included such variables as weather, winds, crew rest, enemy activity, and the sort. Usually some of these factors were included in a report, particularly for accidents that were shaded and not an obvious pilot error.

¹⁰ XOXO, 09/26/68; Air America Aircraft Accident Review, Bell 205, XW-PFH, 02/25/69.
EW Knight Emails, 09/13/00, 09/15/00.
Bill Hutchison Phone Conversations, 12/16/11.
Bill Hutchison Emails, 12/16/11, 12/17/11, 01/05/12, Today, Bill Hutchison Disputes the Air America XOXO statement of a twenty-knot downwind component.

The ship was recovered and repaired by the extraordinary team of Company mechanics, marking another maintenance kudo for the numerable times, like the legendary Phoenix, the aircraft was again raised from the ashes and returned to the field. ¹¹

Two days after Reid and Hutchison's Na Khang pirouette, I was scheduled for local night flying in Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot (PFF) with Billy Pearson and Bennie Shaffer. Sandwiching in GCAs, we completed five takeoff and landing assignments in less than an hour and a half.

The next day, I deadheaded in PFF to Na Khang via Long Tieng. I was scheduled to relieve the PIC of Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG) and fly with Flight Mechanic Bob Bedell. The trip was completed in a little less than two and a half hours. I was delegated to the left cockpit seat, sometimes an uncomfortable ride because of an enhanced two per vibration caused by the retreating blade, to some extent and degree common to all Hueys.

I arrived late in the morning and, after taking command of PFG, finished the day with over six hours.

The last day of the month I departed The Alternate early for Site-36 with Phil Payton, who joined me in the cockpit to conduct a Special Mission. During the long day, we retrieved a three-man team from high ground at UH9254, forty-two miles northeast of Na Khang, between Hong Non (LS-86) west of Route-6 and Sam Neua Town.

Since emphasis centered on Na Khang activity and support and Customer Special Missions to gage enemy intentions as to future dry season plans in the region, we returned to the site on 1 October. In addition to "normal" work, our mission for the day involved one road watch team exfil from VH3430, fifty-eight

¹¹ Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, UH-34D-Hotel-15.

miles northeast of our base. This location sat in a very remote area that had not been well mapped. It was in a vicinity of trails, two miles north of Route-65, that was under construction to the east. There were several parallel east-west roads from North Vietnam in the area: Route-65 leading west to Sam Neua, and Route-641, a feeder road from Route-65, eight miles north of our exfil spot. High mountain ranges and rough terrain separated these LOCs.

After the mission I left Payton with PFG and deadheaded to Long Tieng on Caribou 401. I anticipated an RTB to Udorn, but was held over at Alternate, for a multi-ship Special Mission planned far to the east on the following day.

ZONE STEEL

The Steel Zone region encompassed a vast area in eastern Xieng Khouang Province of more than 250 square miles. The area of responsibility stretched from the Plain of Jars to the Lao-North Vietnamese border and south of the Ban Ban Valley to the Borikhane Province border. In past years we had devoted considerable efforts supporting numerous hill tribe sites in the region. We also conducted sizeable evacuations during the fall of 1963 and again in 1964, when enemy units pressured road watch and launch sites at Tha Lin Noi, Phou Nong, Ban Phou Kha, and other sites on the fringe of the PDJ and along Route-7. In addition, Father "Luke" Broussard maintained leper villages in the region.

By mid-year, a PARU team and Agency Case Officer Jim Adkins were attached to the Moung Moc (LS-46) ADC unit to conduct and expand area operations. Located in the hills about twenty-four miles east of Tha Thom, Moung Moc had been employed as a major rally point for a major refugee evacuation from sites along Route-7 to the Moung Cha Valley (LS-113).

Over the previous two weeks, spies and villagers had reported that a Vietnamese battalion had infiltrated across the border near the Nam Mo (river) and a recently constructed offshoot from Route-7 that was directed toward the prominent border in southeastern Xieng Khouang Province.¹²

Continuing to march, by mid-November sizable Vietnamese units had moved toward at Nam Song (LS-199), seven miles east of the Muang Valley, to seriously threaten under strength government forces located there.

Tribal-generated intelligence further revealed that the enemy would soon attack and capture Ban Poungnay (LS-222), Ban Than That (LS-81), and Moung Ngai (LS-01), old tribal sites still loosely considered in the government camp and located sixty-seven miles or more east of Long Tieng. No one knew at the time if this push might herald a major land grab offensive in anticipation of a Paris ceasefire agreement.

We did not enjoy the former regional presence that we had in past years. Indeed, much of the area from the Ban Ban Valley south had been lost or abandoned, the Moung Ngan Valley (LS-236) as late as 1968. Remote, difficult to supply and hold, if enemy were actually present at any given site, they were generally few in number and without adequate resupply, could normally be ejected with a minimum of effort.

On 2 October, while necessary assets were assembled at The Alternate, together with other senior pilots, I reconed the UG474444 area in CASI Porter XW-PCO, forty-six miles northeast

¹² Route-7, a major all-weather line of communication (LOC), entered Laos from North Vietnam at Barthelemy Pass and passed through Nong Het on the way into the Ban Ban Valley and the Plain of Jars. Sixteen miles southwest of this pass where the Nam Mo flowed into Laos, a prominent bulge in the border existed, and was referred to by aviators as "The Parrot's Beak or Fish's Mouth."

of Site-20A. The recon included passes over formerly held Meo sites of San Tiau (LS-02), Ban Pha Kha (LS-40), and Na Xieng (LS-181) all positions a few miles north of our infiltration spot and ones I had supplied in former years. Although the infil site was thirty miles southeast of the purported enemy incursion, it looked as if the infil might be an attempt to test the waters in anticipation of a concerted return to the area. In addition, should some form of ceasefire agreement emerge from current bilateral USG-North Vietnamese talks in Paris, possession of as much territory as possible would be desirable.

I again joined Payton and Bedell in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Five heavily laden combat troopers entered the cabin section of our ship. The selected landing zone was located toward the lower eastern end of the sixteen-mile Phou Hao ridge (bench mark, 5,505 feet). Two other former tribal sites lay near the ridge or only a few miles south: Ban Nongla (LS-214) and Ban Sa Noi (LS-119). Upon arrival, it was apparent that our entire landing area was covered with high saw grass that prevented one from observing and accessing ground conditions. This could cause a genuine problem if committed to a touchdown landing, for an angled slope would be difficult to judge and stumps or boulders rendered invisible. Fortunately, these variables, along with the high altitude, had been foreseen and factored into our light loads.

The sizeable cord of a Bell's rotor blades generated considerable downwash at a high-power hover.¹³ Therefore, to negate potential damage to the underside of our machines, the first helicopter pilot entered the landing zone at a high hover to flatten the grass and expose the ground. Baring obstacles, he descended low enough to allow his passengers to jump to the

¹³ Cord: Basically, the width of a blade from leading to trailing edge.

ground. After departure, some, but not all of the ten-foot-tall grass rebounded close to its original height.

When my turn arrived, I used the same approach and landing technique. While blowing the grass down to reveal the ground, I observed an unarmed man dressed in local farmer attire scurrying upslope. As we had not been briefed regarding individuals in the area, I was a little concerned, but he quickly disappeared uphill into the grass without any apparent threatening or hostile intent. Discounting the person as a native who lived in the area, I continued to descend sufficiently low enough for my five SGU troops to jump from the skids without injury. There were no further sightings and the mission was completed without incident.

Upon return to Long Tieng, we were recalled to Udorn.

Friendly troops subsequently moved north into Ban Pha Kha and San Tiau. In response, after moving south overland from the Ban Ban Valley, enemy forces pressured the sites. Air strikes aided Meo warriors in retaining the sites until 2 November, when San Tiau was captured and Ban Pha Kha attacked.

Eleven days later, guerrillas returned San Tiau to tribal hands. ¹⁴

¹⁴ Lao Situation Reports, 11/04/68, 11/13/68, 11/19/68. Ken Conboy, 223, fn 3.

Following Jim Campbell's untimely death in June during an outstation training accident, badly damaged Bell-204B N8511F was shipped to Udorn for major repair work. The maintenance repair shop possessed Bell jigs to ensure proper alignment and highly experienced sheet metal people to effect a complete aircraft rebuild. Although the ship was transferred to the Udorn inventory by default, because of a lack of replacement parts and wiring issues, we were not able to employ it in the field again until October.

The ship was released from the hangar early in the month. Initially failing airworthiness specifications, it was returned to the barn to clear additional gripes. On the ninth, CPH Wayne Knight began conducting three days of FCFs on 11F. During one start he experienced a high-side governor malfunction. With the engine rapidly accelerating, he managed to close the throttle and stop fuel flow at the fuel control unit before a serious over temperature occurred.

Earlier, he had conducted a three-day line check in the Pakse area with Bill Hutchison, who had completed area familiarizations and survived flying with Ed Reid. While working on the Bolovens Plateau, they RON at PS-38 and PS-22.

On the twelfth, he conducted a proficiency check with Don Henthorn in Hotel-62.

Don, known as the crazy Indian for a purpose, was a consummate comedian who loved to play Liar's Dice--his way. One night in the bar he challenged Wayne Knight to a game. He explained that it was a two-man game, whereby the dice were tossed on the floor with the man who recovered the most dice being the winner. Knight, believing a catch to the game, thought about participating. However, to allay Wayne's concern, Don

moved his bar stool to a position that would move Wayne closer to the thrown dice. Wayne was still leery, but the people in the bar shamed him into accepting the challenge.

Don tossed the dice. Living up to his nickname, before Wayne could move, Henthorn tackled him to the floor, wrestled him to a standstill, and recovered all the dice.

The rest of the month for Wayne involved a regimen of time off, office work, or FCFs. ¹

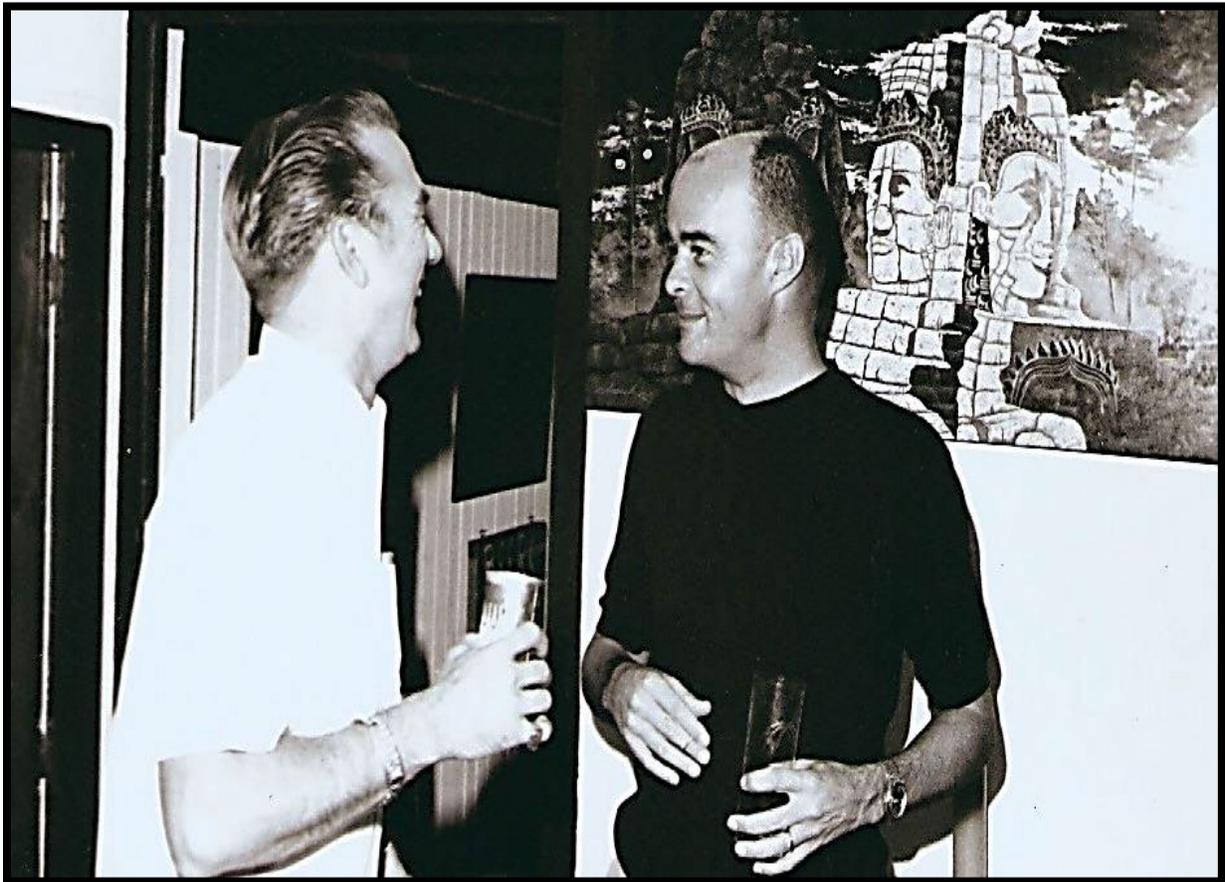
UPCOUNTRY

On Monday the seventh I was scheduled upcountry to join Charlie Weitz and Tod Yourglich in 205 Papa Foxtrot India for a Special Mission out of Na Khang. Joining up required two deadhead trips to Long Tieng on CASI C-46F N1447 and to Site-36 on Helio Courier XW-PEA.

Sixteen enemy battalions enjoyed an uncommon foothold in upper Military Region Two around Sam Neua Town. Consequently, pressure on Na Khang defenders by an estimated two Vietnamese battalions rarely diminished to zero. Employing heavy weapons, the latest Pathet Lao effort was the capture of an eastern flank outpost eight miles to the east near Houei Thom (LS-27). Such incidents, although not taken lightly by Site-36 defenders, were considered mostly a diversion to redirect efforts away from Meo forces' major northern push toward Site-85.

To counter this latest enemy aggression, we were tasked to conduct two infil shuttles delivering troops east to Uniform and Lima-India pads near Houei Thom. Within three days, lacking strong resistance, the SGU troops retook the outpost.

¹ EW Knight Emails, 09/12/00, 09/13/00, 09/15/00.



Air America helicopter Captain Charlie Weitz swapping lies with maintenance ground supervisor Pete Doris.

Knight Collection.

Upon arrival at Site-20A after sunset, I assumed command of Papa Foxtrot India (PFI). Charlie left for Udorn on the last flight out of the valley.

Early Tuesday morning, fortified with sandwiches for lunch, Tod and I departed for Site-36 to support the previous day's action. A Customer briefing indicated that Pathet Lao soldiers were spreading rumors that Phu Pha Louam (LS-220), more than thirty miles east of Site-36 and Na Khang itself, were prime targets for the upcoming dry season. In addition, the locals were going to be conscripted to move supplies to the battle areas. An attack was projected for November or December.

"The Tinkerer" Andy Anderson arrived later to replace Tod. Andy seemed fine after his bout with disaster in Papa Foxtrot Hotel on the 26th. I flew over eleven hours that day.

Located to the east beyond Site-20A, Phou Khao, and east of Phu Bia, in a refugee area generically known by pilots as the "golf course,"² Khieu Manang (LS-192) was temporarily lost on the tenth to what were likely Pathet Lao who controlled surrounding hills to the north and northeast. Because of harsh topography and relative proximity to Route-4 and Tha Vieng, incidents like this occasionally occurred over the years. Concerned over the safety of nearby Moung Oum and other area refugee sites, Vang Pao's forces immediately reacted.

With friendly air and the introduction of two SGU battalions, the site was restored to government control the following day. Government troops continued pursuit, pushing the enemy a few miles northeast. By the 15th, the enemy ceased retreating and established defensives on eastern high ground in

² Named for the green rolling hills around the Moung Cha-LS-113-refugee center.



Moung Oum, Laos (LS-22) airstrip and village complex located in a small valley east of Phu Bia, the highest mountain range in the country. Khieu Manang (LS-192) site can be seen on high ground in the upper right-hand corner.

Knight Collection.

and around Phou Tine. As air pounded suspected enemy, Vang Pao's guerrillas overran three enemy positions.

The see-saw continued. Further east in a large valley east of Tha Thom, FAR and ADC units attacked and captured MOUNG NGAM (LS-63) on the 24th. Six days later, enemy units counterattacked. Friendly forces abandoned the valley and withdrew into eastern hills.

As the southeast monsoon season gasped its last breath in Laos, enemy pressure continued in upper Military Region Two. Throughout the country, reports filtered into intelligence centers that preparations were being made for a strong upcoming dry season offensive. There were also reports of road construction, troop redeployment, and political reorganization.

Against superior numbers, it had been increasingly difficult to maintain both a defensive line and a push north. Consequently, by early October, after four months, the largely indefensible MOUNG SON VALLEY was mostly abandoned, and advanced SGU units returned to fortify and consolidate the HOUEI HIN SA (LS-215) area, fourteen miles west of Pha Thi. Courtesy of Route-602 improvements from Sam Neua, enemy concentrations and movements in the MOUNG YUT lowland area reportedly heralded a move cross country toward Site-215.

The enemy moved east toward their objective. During the last week of the month, they engaged two Meo sites southwest and several more positions to the southeast of Houei Hin Sa. Three additional sites were captured, then assisted by air strikes, one was recovered. There were indications that the enemy was preparing to retake positions lost at the end of the previous

dry season and move against both Mounng Heim and Na Khang. ³

With a sizeable offensive developing in western Houa Phan Province and an active region to support, over the following three days Andy and I flew maximum flight time from Site-36.

I was relieved late on site at Na Khang by an incoming pilot. Following an abbreviated briefing regarding the helicopter's condition and enemy situation, I boarded the final Caribou, B-851 to Long Tieng. Fortunately, I was immediately able to transfer to C-123 4555 (triple nickel), which was scheduled to land at Udorn.

THE OBVIOUS IS TOO OBVIOUS

While I was upcountry, Jim Moore stopped at the house on his way to Vientiane for business. He was exploring the possibility of building houses to accommodate the anticipated influx of embassy personnel. Before leaving he gave Tuie a large aluminum attaché case stuffed with red hundred-baht notes, proceeds of a stock sale and my principal investment funds and interest. Since he could have delivered a check, I was shocked and a bit angry that he would do something like this, as Tuie would have been a prime target for any thief aware of the contents. ⁴

I decided to deposit the money in the bank for safe keeping the following day.

Before going to the bank, we drove to the airfield to purchase household items at the small country store located on

³ Laos Situation Report, 10/21/11.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 201.
CIA Bulletin, 10/28/68.

⁴ Bung Orn was visiting Tuie when Moore left the case. Ever an outstanding soul, she advised Tuie that she should take the money and run. Fortunately, my wife was honest and not cut from the same cloth.

the site of the old Administration Building. After Tuie collected the few items available that we could use, I placed the aluminum case at my feet while paying for the goods. A clumsy individual stepped up to the counter next to me and accidentally kicked the locked case. I looked at him, smiled and calmly said, "*Be careful. There is ten thousand dollars in baht in there.*" Thinking my statement a wonderful joke, the man laughed, completed his transaction and left the store.

If I chose, I had two investment options: The pending Nisagonrungsee project to construct three shop-houses was a consideration. However, I still had not received a projected cost analysis. I think it confused the principals, for pragmatism was normally the Asian method.

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS

Toward the end of September, after a drought of information, I received a letter from Charley Williams, Don Valentine's associate in the Sunray Land Corporation development project--Charley was not a stockholder. Numerous projects at Mount Werner were underway and business was good: land prices were being marked up fifty percent. Furthermore, with ski area growth perched on the cusp of burgeoning into a major resort, opportunities abounded for someone with money and the proper enthusiasm.

Knowing I was interested in eventually transitioning to Steamboat to live and work, Charley went on to describe an opportunity to buy the Steamboat Airport then for sale at what he considered a bargain price. Included in the package were a new hangar, two Cessna planes, gasoline disbursement, other concessions, and a liberal lease agreement renewal. He was anxious to know if I was interested in purchasing the airport myself, or in association with Sunray. I had never considered

being a fixed base operator (FBO), but the thought of running such a business coupled with flying a helicopter in an area projected to soon host the Winter Olympics and become a premier ski area was both appealing and exciting. Since 1966, I had envisioned living and working in Steamboat, and this latest offer would present an opportunity to leave a no-win war zone, one that was becoming increasingly dangerous to air crews.

John Ford had previously owned and operated an FBO in Texas, so I asked his opinion regarding purchasing such a business. After receiving his input regarding the difficulty, I was really confused and realized that I was probably too inexperienced and naïve to be an FBO.

I was considerably more excited about starting a single helicopter operation in the Steamboat area should area activity warrant and support one. I required more information and asked Charley to research the region as to the feasibility of a helicopter business other than strictly seasonal charter and tourist activity.

Both Charley and Don were enthusiastic aviation buffs, and I had previously mentioned the possibility of starting a helicopter business in the Steamboat area. Consequently, Charley did his homework and I soon received a multi-page letter delineating reasons for obtaining a helicopter. They included, but were not limited to: passenger service from the Hayden airport to Mount Werner, Steamboat, or Craig; power line work for the Rural Electric Association; tower work installing an additional chair lift; work associated with cloud seeding; U.S. Forest Service work; gas line patrolling; shuttles to the top of Mount Werner; and sightseeing tours.

Team Sunray was particularly interested in acquiring a Bell 206B Jet Ranger. Since I already flew a Huey, they believed I could easily make the transition. The cost of a new machine was

95,000 dollars. Sunray would participate in a helicopter purchase, provide a landing spot, an office, bookkeeping requirements, and other needs. In addition to supporting the helicopter operation, they would help with the family's transition to Steamboat life. Williams and I had established an excellent rapport. Liking my attention to detail, he had long indicated that he wanted me in the Sunray organization to stabilize and balance the management.

As portrayed, the tempting offer was interesting, but after some consideration, I decided it would be foolish to leave a good paying job and relocate to an unfamiliar area based on only some individual's hearsay that a certain type of work was a possibility. A hard contract would be far better. I decided that I would have to initiate my own research to develop a sound decision. Moreover, it was not a good time, for we had another child on the way. Therefore, I procrastinated tabling any immediate decision.⁵

Ricky's orthopedic shoes were incorrectly manufactured and Tuie, who had not been feeling well lately, required a standard pre-natal examination at the Bangkok Christian Hospital. Apparently, the baby was moving frequently, leading her to conclude that the birth would be earlier than originally believed. Therefore, with time off the schedule for STO, we elected to drive down the extended "death highway" to the capital. I used this grim term for the Friendship Highway because Doctor Kassam, the beloved architect and driving force behind the old Udorn Hospital and his wife had been killed in their green Mercedes Benz on the narrow two-lane artery below the provincial capital of Khon Kaen. In addition, irresponsible

⁵ Charley Williams Letter 09/21/68.
Charley Williams October Letter.

driving habits were common, with Thai people passing at inappropriate times and young drivers of large trucks racing each other to alleviate boredom. On this highway, one had to drive conservatively, expect the worst, and be prepared to take immediate action in the event of trouble.

After a trip to the government hospital in Thonburi, we discovered the wedges installed in our son's shoes had been incorrectly installed. Fortunately, he had not worn them long and the fix was relatively simple. It was just another prime example of the degree of difficulty in obtaining correct work in Asia.

We had planned to vacation in Pattaya, but Rick developed a cold, so we remained in Bangkok for the remainder of the STO.

THAI ELECTIONS

Politics in Thailand was apparently changing, albeit slightly. After thirty-six years of generally benevolent military rule, ten years of martial law, and a new constitution in June guaranteeing a national election in the lower house of parliament within five months, it overtly seemed that the country was moving ever so cautiously toward a semblance of democracy. However, the constitution, designed to perpetuate the military-civilian establishment, took nine years to implement. It guaranteed present leaders led by Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn, his officers, and civilian cronies would continue to govern the country and little near-term change would be effected in either domestic or foreign policies.

In the five years since Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat's death, Thanom's government had failed to develop a unified political organization or power base outside his group. This led the aggressive and ambitious General Praphat, through his Free

People's Party and influence as Interior Minister, to exercise substantial power, perhaps leading to a political showdown.

The small opposition Democratic Party, with dedicated leaders, was strong in the capital.

A main issue of almost everyone interested in government politics was the long standing, but not flaunted, governmental corruption prevalent among military and civilian politicians. Although Thanom was considered basically honest, Praphat was not, and padding bank accounts seemed more important to the leaders than the country's interests.

The political left, considered by the common man as representing foreign interests, was not considered much of a threat to the establishment. Most of these politicians came from Isan, and a few had paid dearly in the last decade for raising unpopular issues in Bangkok regarding problems in the impoverished northeast.

In the previous ten years, through government efforts, positive progress had been made in the provinces to ease the population into a new era by providing modern conveniences and a change in mind set. Thanks to U.S. Seabee construction projects and USAID money, new roads had created conduits to markets and access to previously isolated villages. New crops and modern agriculture ideas had been introduced. Moreover, communications were enhanced to the backwoods through erection of microwave towers and wholesale distribution of transistor radios.

In addition, Thailand had made substantial economic progress under military rule. The growth rate compared favorably to other developing nations, but individual income was low.

Foreign policy was not regarded by opposition groups as a stumbling block to the present regime or a negative influence during the upcoming election. Despite the fact that Thailand served an integral part of the Vietnamese and Lao wars, and

50,000 American military had moved into bases, there had been little anti-American sentiment, and no general uproar. This could be attributed to good planning, and the kind nature of the Thai people. However, as negative incidents and inflation increased, this could rapidly change.

The bottom line regarding the election was that the existing government might not achieve a working majority in the lower house, but would continue to rule the country.

Into November, the Thanom government continued having inter-organizational problems preparing for the February elections. The government's party was beset by quarrels between Thanom and Praphat supporters and an inability to cope with the party leader. This occurred during a period when policy agreements seemed to be coalescing. Consequently, the campaign proceeded at a slow pace.

Much activity centered in Isan, where antigovernment sentiment was robust, and leftist parties held rallies in larger towns.

During an October Washington visit, at a meeting with JCS General Westmoreland, General Praphat assured him that the Thai Black Panther Volunteer Division would deploy on schedule.

The situation in Vietnam was now favorable, but resistance against communist insurgency in Thailand presented a lengthy undertaking. Insurgency in the northeast had declined somewhat because of the monsoon season, political upheaval in China, and North Vietnam problems. The communists had established a large guerrilla training base along the Lao-Cambodian border. ⁶ The insurgents consisted of Thai, Lao, and Vietnamese, assisted by

⁶ The Author worked out of Ubon for a day supporting Border Patrol Police (BPP) force's efforts in this rough, mountainous area.

ChiCom advisors. Reports indicated that four battalions, of 800 men each, had been trained.

Further south, Cambodia's Prince Norodom Sihanouk was considered an unpredictable factor in the Southeast Asian war. There was a reputed dissident group of 10,000 men wanting to overthrow Sihanouk, who should be supported. Intelligence from spies in Port Sihanoukville, the Phnom Penh capital, and the Bangkok Japanese Embassy, revealed that a stream of Chinese weaponry was directed by ship into Port Sihanoukville, and then by road through Cambodia into South Vietnam. This delivery system had temporarily increased at the time USG restricted bombing. After being warehoused, the supplies were moved by vehicles to storage areas near the South Vietnamese border. ⁷

HIGH LEVEL PROGNOSTICATIONS

The dry season was fast approaching, heralding renewed enemy offensives in Laos. With substantial combat forces entrenched in forward positions as never before (particularly in Military Region Two), with minimum effort, the enemy was poised to inflict grievous harm on government forces in some areas of the country. Devastating losses suffered by the Royal Lao Army (RLA) during the previous dry season led Souvanna Phouma to order a general reorganization of the RLA brass, but in actuality, nothing much had changed. Moreover, recruiting and

⁷ Segment Sources:

CIA Directorate of Intelligence, Intelligence Memorandum, Thailand: The Present Political Phase, #407, 10/18/68, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).

Memorandum #406, General Westmoreland Washington, D.C. Conversation with General Praphat, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior and Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army, 10/16/68, FRUS (State) Thailand 1968.

Weekly Summary, page 5, Thai Government's Election Campaign Disorganized, 11/22/68.

training was lagging, with only twenty-three out of seventy-three combat battalions deemed ready for deployment. These factors stimulated curiosity among Western principals regarding future enemy intentions and Laos' continuing survival.

It was policy time in Washington, which generated abundant and spirited discussions between the State Department and Embassy personnel. Major intangibles like the American national presidential election and negotiations in Paris regarding the Southeast Asian wars, loomed broadly on the horizon. The status of the "neutral" Royal Lao Government was in question. Prior to the Republican Presidential nominating convention, Souvanna Phouma had adamantly maintained to Ambassador Sullivan that if Senator Richard Nixon received the nod and was elected President he would resign as Lao Prime Minister. He clearly recalled Nixon's hawkish stand on Laos in the 1950s, and distinctively negative attitude toward him as a top political figure in a neutral tripartite government. In contrast, Souvanna knew, trusted, and favored Democratic Party nominee Senator Hubert Humphrey. Furthermore, Sullivan suggested there was more than an excellent chance that Nixon would win the White House.

Seeking viable answers to reassure his protégé, Sullivan forwarded a letter to LBJ's former National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy for sage advice regarding Dick Nixon's current attitude on Laos. He discovered that Nixon supported the 1962 Geneva Accords settlement on Laos and Souvanna Phouma's current position. Moreover, Nixon claimed admiration for the Prime Minister's accomplishments during recent years.

The Ambassador conveyed this information to Souvanna, adding that he should not be apprehensive that Nixon would drastically change Southeast Asian Theater policy.

When later queried by State Department superiors to generate a near term military assessment of what to expect

during the following six months in Laos, Ambassador Sullivan frankly admitted that he and his Country Team had no definitive impression as to overall enemy intentions, but whatever they were would, as usual, reflect the South Vietnamese situation.

COMBATANTS ORDER OF BATTLE ⁸

Including rear echelon support types, the RLG claimed a total of 100,500 men. Those combat units under arms: 29,000 FAR and 5,000 FAN. Irregular guerrilla troops numbered 39,000. ⁹

During the dry season, including advisors, support troops, engineers, and coolies, the enemy was estimated to have 48,000 Vietnamese and 51,000 Pathet Lao in-country. Pathet Lao and FAR units were thought to be at or near parity in regard to combat effectiveness. Meo troops were superior to both FAR and Pathet Lao. However, the Vietnamese were unquestionably better soldiers than the FAR and the image of dreaded nine-foot-tall monsters was often sufficient to terrorize and foster capitulation among FAR ranks. Losses would be far greater except for air assets from Thailand.

The Pathet Lao required Vietnamese support to mount large offensives. For years, Souvanna Phouma and General Staff generals considered that if Vietnamese forces were not a factor in the war, the RLA could have contained the Pathet Lao. Despite this enemy weakness, continuing FAR deficiencies and infighting limited FAR ability to perform. Currently, Vang Pao's Meo could

⁸ The following discussion is combined with a SNIE report issued within a week of Sullivan's Telegram to State.

⁹ Guerrillas in northwest Military Region One Yao, Lao Theung and others-7,000. North Central Military Region One at Luang Prabang and Phong Saly-2,000.
Meo in and around Military Region Two, 22,000.
Central Lao tribal-4,000.
South Laos-Lao and Kha, 4,000.

pressure the Pathet Lao, but RLG forces were in no position to quickly reduce the Pathet Lao and reclaim territory without sufficient logistical and air support.

Statistics relating to the enemy Order of Battle were obtained and collated from many sources: guerrillas, road watch teams, prisoners, ralliers, civilian refugees, spies, and other origins. Enemy estimates were deemed more accurate in provinces where guerrillas and spies were active. These included Houa Khong, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravane, Attopeu, and Sedone. Information was least reliable along the South Vietnamese border, northern Phong Saly, southern Sayaboury, and extreme northeast Houa Phan. Areas of responsibility mattered greatly when estimating enemy forces. The validity of information in other provinces diminished when relying on FAR and FAN reports. Reporting was good in Vientiane and Borikhane, poor in Champassak, Sithandone, and Wapikhamthong Provinces.

The estimates were deemed fairly accurate, and present enemy strength was considered greater than any time in the past. However, this was difficult to accurately assess since the numbers fluctuated seasonally. The Vietnamese generally introduced elements of the 316th Division into Laos during the dry season and withdrew units prior to the monsoon period (except for 1968). Vietnamese assets were greater than Pathet Lao in Military Region Four provinces of Saravane, Attopeu, and Sedone, where defense of the LOCs was most critical. The number of Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops in Houa Phan (upper Military Region Two) was considered equal. In other provinces, the Pathet Lao outnumbered the Vietnamese, with no Vietnamese battalions in Sayaboury, Vientiane, Champassak, and Wapikhamthong Provinces. The Deuanist neutralist forces, who defected to the communist

side in the early sixties, were concentrated in Xieng Khouang and Phong Saly.

The total strength now in the northeast, except for an addition of nineteen battalions, some 7,600 men, was unknown. So far, no evidence had emerged of Vietnamese forces withdrawal from Laos. FAR was still reeling from the January loss at Nam Bac that left the path to Luang Prabang open, but enemy forces had also received a severe pounding from air in all areas.

The enemy was not expected to drastically alter the balance of power parity by introducing additional forces and committing to major high visibility offensives. Realistically, it was incumbent for them to:

"Protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail [system] and countrywide LOCs; [maintain] pressure on [the] RLG by maintaining a threat to the Mekong Valley; moving against [the] irregular activity in [the] northwest; driving against Meo forward outposts with the aim of taking Site-36 and shutting VP up at Long Tieng; [and] disrupting USAID [sponsored aid and development programs] where possible. [In doing this the] enemy will attempt to extend and maximize its control over as much territory as possible to enhance the opportunity to propagandize and for political bargaining."

Political issues would influence future enemy military action near term. With the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHS), the communist political wing (the Pathet Lao was the fighting portion), claiming control over one half to two thirds of Laos and 50 percent of the population, it would be advantageous for the enemy to preserve already-occupied territory and continue pushing to amass more land for future negotiations in the reconstitution of the original Government of National Union.

Looking forward six months into 1969, it was believed that the enemy would commit to retaining as much land as possible

during the monsoons for political purposes. Sufficient supplies and troops might be introduced during the dry season to counter traditional RLG successful wet season offensives (courtesy of Air America helicopter and fixed wing assets).

Assurance of sufficient USG strike aircraft to counter enemy moves was deemed imperative. This was particularly important in the northeast supporting General Vang Pao's guerrilla units.

Taking advantage of his remote bully pulpit, Sullivan's lengthy telegram continued, citing more detailed information regarding past events and future recommendations.

Anticipating that 1968 would present a decisive military phase in South Vietnam, North Vietnamese hierarchy increased its logistical support in Laos, strengthened forces, and recovered lost territory to discourage RLG forces from encroaching on their de facto areas. Consequently, the dry season had been both militarily and politically costly to the RLG. In Military Region One, Nam Bac represented the worst RLG defeat since the early sixties at Nam Tha in northwest Military Region One. FAR reserves were destroyed, captured, or dispersed, leading to apprehension in Vientiane and Thailand that the enemy would continue to march south. Although still under government control, the royal capital at Luang Prabang was no better defended than directly after the fall of Site-203.

The loss of Phu Pha Thi in upper Military Region Two eliminated a long standing Meo guerrilla launch pad for intelligence gathering and an important radio intercept base. Pushing Vang Pao's troops back to Site-36 ensured an enhanced border security and improved security of the strategic and politically important Plain of Jars crossroads area.

In the South, the enemy was intent on acquiring territory to protect LOCs leading to South Vietnam, and regulating RLG

forces to static defense. There was ample evidence at the time that the enemy intended to expand west to seize and hold Saravane and Attopeu. They possessed the capability to accomplish this, but reconsidered the option because of the failed TET offensive.

As the monsoon season wound down, FAR was experiencing difficulty maintaining security in areas under government control. One example was the enemy's ability to assault portions of Route-13.

RLG's normal rainy season gains were not productive in 1968, achieving only limited success in the northeast (upper Military Region Two) and around Moung Phalane (accomplished by substantial numbers of irregular troops).

In Military Region Five, General Kouprasith had ordered several area sweeps. Some areas north of Paksane were reoccupied, but the heavily invested enemy areas remained outside government control.

Most government offensives were attributed to Agency-sponsored SGU and ADC units. In Sayaboury Province, coordinating with Royal Thai Army forces, irregulars were still engaged fighting communist terrorists and interdicting infiltration routes supporting insurgency in adjoining Thai provinces. In northwest Military Region One, tribals were engaging the enemy in minor clashes. In upper Military Region Two, Vang Pao's men, looking forward to establishing forward positions to counter expected enemy dry season thrusts, reoccupied areas east of Routes-6 and 68 south of Sam Neua Town, and were currently attacking enemy around Site-85 and the southeast edge of the Plain of Jars.

In the South, SGU troops were active along the entire LOC trail system, including Route-110. To the south of the Bolovens Plateau, heavy flooding and air strikes were thought to have

caused havoc to enemy food supplies and weapons caches. Aided by recent road construction in the rice-rich Khone Sedone Valley area, where RLG formerly sponsored the WAPI development program from 1965 to mid-1967, Pathet Lao took measures to improve and consolidate gains. For reasons purely his own, Military Region Four's Commanding General Phasouk had not yet initiated a pre-planned campaign to recover the Sedone Valley region.

POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The enemy considered political issues and agendas nearly as important as military ones. Reports indicated that the civilian NLHS was being reinforced by Lao political cadre who had recently completed political training in North Vietnam. Also, in Savannakhet Province, a Vietnamese core group was attached to the communist administration for the first time.

Rumors circulated that the Johnson Administration would soon announce a total bombing halt in all of North Vietnam. Thus, operating from a considerably stronger military position, the possibility of more serious negotiations, and other recent developments, elicited changes in the North Vietnamese' position regarding the Lao war. Internationally, during Paris negotiations, for the first time, Vietnamese representatives demanded:

"U.S. bombing in Laos be halted as a prerequisite to discussion of an internal political settlement, while still reaffirming the 1962 [Geneva Accord] agreements. They have also demanded that the internal settlement take into account the realities of the current situation."

By way of explanation, the communists' privately interpreted "realities" as recognition of PL control over two-thirds of Laos and half the population. ¹⁰

The explanation continued that USG had destroyed the tripartite Government of National Union originally established by the Geneva Accords of 1962. Also, that Souvanna Phouma no longer represented the Deuanist neutralist faction, hence, the government was considered illegal.

Assumptions arose that Pathet Lao leaders looked forward to the day when their politicians assumed a larger role in a new government. At the time, demands could be made that the dissident neutralist **faction occupy** posts presently held by the Prime Minister's Neutralists.

In contrast to communist opposition to Souvanna Phouma's government, deference to the Lao King and monarchy was reinforced.

A favorable Indochina situation was all-important to the communists. Leaders assumed that any major change leading to a positive settlement in South Vietnam would foster political pressure on Laos to capitulate. Lacking a viable political settlement, they would undoubtedly choose to increase hostilities.

Although combined enemy forces possessed the capability to conduct whatever operations it desired in Laos, it was assumed that no major changes would occur during the following twelve-month period, and enemy activity would generally follow the same pattern as experienced during past years. Consequently, no enemy drive to the Mekong was envisioned that might provoke U.S. entry

¹⁰ Communist representatives conveniently omitted that Vang Pao's guerrilla forces and friendly tribal villagers still lived in much of Military Region Two contested areas.

into Laos, or derail Paris negotiations involving withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam, leading to an eventual settlement to the Southeast Asian War.

Since the enemy likely possessed an adequate number of troops in forward positions to conduct necessary offensives, they would not add assets to those already in Laos. It was expected that the communists would continue pressuring isolated government outposts to obtain bargaining positions and protect countrywide LOCs. Pressure on Meo warriors in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces was expected, as was action against SGU activity in northwest Military Region One. Outpost clearing operations along the northeast border of Khammouane Province was expected, also in the northwest portion of Houa Phan and Luang Prabang Provinces. In southern Laos, pressure would be exerted on Mekong River Valley areas from Thakhet to Champassak.

It was incumbent on USG during the following six months to reassure RLG of continued U.S. policy and support, to make available strike aircraft, to work with FAR, and harshly penalize enemy attempts to gain additional territory. At the same time, FAR should diligently strive to recover lost ground.

Despite bilateral discussions regarding a negotiated settlement of the Southeast Asian War, no firm decisions or agreements had developed.

As previously stated, actual enemy intentions in Laos were still unknown in the Western camp.

The total bombing halt of the North was anticipated by the end of October. A week prior to the official announcement, Ambassador Sullivan briefed Souvanna Phouma regarding Washington's decision. That same day, while conducting a cabinet meeting, the Lao Prime Minister voiced a dubious stance regarding peace in Southeast Asia. He believed a total U.S. bombing halt would only add to Laotian woes.



Fall 1968 map of Laos depicting the greatly increased number of contested areas throughout the country.

SNIE #58-1-68, p11.

A later analysis from Sullivan's Country Team relating to the situation in South Vietnam stated:

"[The] NVA have failed in their objective to gain a military victory in South Vietnam by the massive introduction of main force units [the TET offensive]. [Therefore], they have decided to desist from further escalation of conventional combat in the South and move back to a clandestine guerrilla situation...¹¹

[USG's] purpose must be to exact a high price [from the enemy]. Anything which convinces the U.S. that it must retain its troops in South Vietnam is a defeat for the North, since U.S. troops are the immovable obstacle to their military success...

Later communication in November contained Sullivan's thoughts in regard to the political character of the Theater wars:

"...Political restraints operating on both of the contestants and their supporters make improbable the achievement of a decisive military victory by either side. [The] Lao political scene during this period had been relatively stable with nearly all of the major civilian and military power centers supporting Souvanna Phouma, who continues to enjoy U.S. and USSR support as well."

The Ambassador went on to indicate:

"The wars constituted a substantial drain on the small Lao economy, both financially and from a standpoint of manpower. Some progress toward self-sufficiency was made, and the

¹¹ A 13 November telegram prepared by the Saigon Embassy disagreed with the view that enemy military forces would revert to guerrilla warfare. Instead, the North Vietnamese would attempt to persuade USG that a continued military effort would not result in victory.

production of rice and lumber increased in the secure area. [The] U.S. continued to bear most of the economic burden assisted mainly by [SEATO members] Japan, France, Great Britain, and Australia.

[The] outlook for Laos during the next 12 months is directly related to progress or lack thereof at the Paris peace talks. Lack of progress would probably not have significant effect on the conduct and result of the wars in Laos. ¹²

If the peace talks were to achieve a ceasefire in south Vietnam but not in Laos during the next 12 months, we would not expect the basic character of the wars in Laos to change, despite the increased availability of NVN troops for duty in Laos.

The prospect to possibly imminent peace in SVN would goad the friendly Lao into a semblance of unity as they prepared to compete politically with the Pathet Lao. Various ethnic tribal groups would seek to assure their interests were considered in any future arrangements.

If peace talks were to end hostilities in both SVN and Laos during the next 12 months, pressures would be strong to scale down the opposing military forces. [The] most important international political problem would be of insuring all NVN elements departed Laos and means were devised to prevent re-infil. We would have to eliminate activities that could be interpreted as violating Lao neutrality and yet retain sufficient presence to be able to assist Laos in the ways the

¹² Author Note: The Ambassador alludes to **wars**. Although not widely differentiated into separate categories by the press at the time, in addition to the FAR effort, depending on the source, there were actually two "clandestine" wars being waged in Laos, one in the northeast, the other in the extreme south, both largely controlled by the CIA; the second war, mostly conducted by air assets, involved U.S. military interdiction of enemy logistical trail systems in MR-3 and 4.

agreement will require. We should not forget the ultimate [enemy] aim of taking over Laos...Retention of some bases in Thailand would be required for this purpose." ¹³ ¹⁴

UPCOUNTRY

It was Special Mission time again. On Sunday afternoon, 20 October, after boarding CASI Porter XW-PFD at the "Q" warehouse, I deadheaded 123 miles southeast to Savannakhet. I was scheduled to fly the following day with Phil Peyton and Jay Meyers in recently released 204B 11-Foxtrot.

We repositioned nineteen miles northwest to the remote site of Keng Ka Boa (LS-235). The area, formerly used by General Ma's T-28 pilots, afforded us more secrecy than Lima-39 and allowed USAF CH-3 helicopters to fly in from Nakhon Phanom and

¹³ From the Author's previous books, the reader might recall that in contrast to all the U.S military advisors, only a handful of North Vietnamese military departed Laos after the 1962 Agreements signing. Moreover, despite later evidence of Vietnamese POWs, the North, even to this day, have never officially acknowledged a physical presence in Laos.

¹⁴ Segment Sources:
 Telegram from William Sullivan to State in Response to State's 10/18/68 Request for a Lao Assessment, 10/23/68.
 Letter Bundy to Sullivan in Response to Ambassador Sullivan's 10/01/68 Letter, 10/24/68.
 William Sullivan to State, 11/11/68.
 Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), #58-1-68, Director of the Central Intelligence and the United States Intelligence Board, Communist Capabilities and Intentions in Laos Over the Next Year, 1-10, 10/31/68, (foia.coa.gov/browse_docs_full.asp?doc_no+0001166460&title=SNIE+58%2DI).
 CIA Bulletin, 10/28/68. These two reports were interwoven when and where the Author considered the information enhanced overall understanding of the situation.
 John Bowman, *Almanac*, 213.
 Aerogram Sullivan to State, Assessment of U.S. Policy for Laos, 11/18/68.

participate without theoretically being observed. A Customer briefing was followed by a recon of XD438021. This entailed flying ninety-six nautical miles east-southeast to the vast Phou Taling range, six miles south of the Se Ban Chiang. The large infil was aided by a Jolly Green crew and likely coordinated with the commencement of a Military Region Four SGU guerrilla sweep of the Toumlan Valley.

The movement proved partially successful. With air support the valley north of Saravane was retaken and cleared from 9 to 11 November.¹⁵

Following completion of the mission, marking the first time deadheading to Udorn on a military aircraft, I sat in a bucket seat in the cargo compartment of USAF helicopter 631331265.

After a deadhead on CASI Porter Papa Delta Juliet, on the 29th, I was back at Savannakhet to participate in additional Special Missions. During the week off I had contracted a strong cold from Ricky and was not feeling well. In the past I had been able to sweat a head cold out of my body, but this one was already rapidly moving down into my chest. Knowing I was going to double crew 96W with excellent pilot "Robbie" Robertson and Flight Mechanic Andy Anderson, I elected to proceed with the work.

The exfil was in Mike LaDue's area, eighty miles north of Lima-39 at VE9885, several miles east of the government tin mine and a good distance behind the needlepoint karsts. In relation to Thakhet the location was thirty-three miles north of Site-40, twelve miles south of Lak Sao, and just west of Route-8. Since Robbie was flying, on the way I snapped a photograph of the

¹⁵ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 224, fn 47.

Route-13 Se Bang Fai Bridge, destroyed by Pathet Lao sappers in February.

After reaching the Air America hostel, with the cold worsening by the minute, I began a search for a doctor. I did not know Savannakhet well, and by that time it was too late to accomplish anything useful except to obtain self-medication from a small pharmacy. Like in Thailand, drug stores in Laos offered medicine that did not require a prescription. The problem for me was what to purchase for the condition. The shop owner was understanding, but had nothing like Contact pills or high-powered medicine that would effectively attack a chest cold. The only medication he offered was a pint bottle of cough syrup.

The main hostel was filled to capacity, so after dinner I was obliged to trudge across the street to the annex, we called the "Bull Pen," so named because some pilots conveyed young lovelies there from the town's dismal flesh pots to engage in extracurricular activities. The cellar area employed for sleeping was like an elongated dark squad bay, equipped with adjacent cots. After a restless night, punctuated by the moaning of lovemaking in the cold and damp pit, I arose coughing and generally feeling terrible. I thought about calling Udorn for a replacement pilot, but rejected this, for even if one was available that would have delayed the day's activity.

With a total cessation of bombing North Vietnam imminent, it was incumbent on the Agency to position as many Lao road watch teams forward as possible in critical areas to gauge enemy movement and future intentions. Therefore, two infiltrations were scheduled on Wednesday. After we positioned to the forward launch site, the CASI Porter pilot of X-Ray-Papa Charlie Lima (XW-PCL) flew the required recon. Within a little more than an hour we were back at Site-235, where remaining crews waited to launch. Like the day before, I opted to sit in the left seat to

navigate and act as a backup pilot in case of trouble, while Robbie performed the actual flying.

The initial landing zone lay fifty-one miles northeast in the Phou Xanghe hills out of sight of a web of trails joining and twisting in the Xe Noy river valley to the north; Route-122 being the most prominent. The second infil, forty-seven miles northeast, was conducted west of the first at WD545807 on the Phou Khaovong ridgeline. The second infil looked better situated to move forward to the high point and observe vehicular activity on the spaghetti-like arteries of Routes-23, 122, and 124, particularly the road junction. A minor trail paralleled the long range of mountains south of the Xe Noy. In keeping with Customer concern regarding enemy activity in the infil areas, we were held over for potential emergency exfils. The only crew change was Flight Mechanic Glen Woods replacing Anderson.

That night was particularly bad in the "Bull Pen." My cold had advanced to the stage where a racking cough raised disgusting yellow-green mucus. Furthermore, I had a fever. I was coughing so badly that even normally stoic Nikki Fillipi, who slept in the rack next to me, was concerned. Furthermore, I was completely out of cough medicine and had no access to more.

Although we were still double crewed, there were no more Special Missions scheduled on the last day of the month. Still, we made ourselves available for whatever transpired in the denied areas. The coughing continued as I sat weakly in the left seat. I became concerned when I coughed up and spit blood into my handkerchief. Robbie did not say anything when I showed him the disgusting red sputum and continued to march.

Perhaps unwisely, I elected to wait until returning to Udorn to address the problem.

The same day I was coughing up my innards, President Johnson announced on primetime national television America's intention to implement a bombing halt, inclusive to all North Vietnam,. He cited recent positive developments during the Paris negotiations for his decision.

Behind the scenes, during Paris discussions American representatives had stressed that *"all acts of force, rather than acts of war would be ceased."* The semantics were carefully spelled out and clear to North Vietnamese and Soviet leaders. The bombing cessation would allow continued unarmed reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam, otherwise there would have been no bombing halt.

Apparently, word of the bombing halt did not reach the field or was disregarded, for enemy gunners continued to shoot at manned and unmanned U.S. reconnaissance planes. This elicited protests on our part, and another round of armed reconnaissance.

Toward the end of the year and into the second week in January 1969, AAA hostilities ceased. On 10 January Vietnamese leaders reported shooting down an unmanned aircraft.

Some considered Johnson's actual decision to cease bombing of North Vietnam more likely ego driven, political in nature, and a result of the expensive failure of the Rolling Thunder program in terms of men and machines lost, and the inability to destroy the North's infrastructure to wage war and stem the flow of assets to South Vietnam. LBJ wanted history to record him as a President implementing a just peace rather than a just war. In addition, he was aware that a bombing halt would certainly aid the Democratic Party politically in the presidential and congressional elections.

In response to the declared bombing halt, Hanoi leaders agreed to allow the South Vietnamese government to participate in the convened peace talks. In turn, USG sanctioned a role for the in-country National Liberation Front.

There was general acceptance in the USA, with both Presidential candidates Nixon and Humphrey claiming full support.

However, similar accolades were not apparent in Saigon, where the country's leaders were understandingly upset at a perceived sell out to North Vietnam. Taking exception to NLF participation in Paris, President Thieu's response was to boycott the negotiations.

On 1 November, following more than three years of bombing the North, during which 900 American planes and helicopters were destroyed, the Rolling Thunder operation was accorded a place in the dust bin of history. In addition to a large loss of machines, the effort had been expensive in terms of aircrews, with 671 killed and 702 declared missing.

USG's program of progressive baby steps, initially calculated to destroy the North's capability to pursue or wage war in South Vietnam, failed to consider or understand the Asian mentality to pursue a protracted war. USG policies revealed the civilian arrogance and the belief we could bomb the enemy into the Stone Age.

By 1968, the futile exercise and the unforeseen TET offensive proved that limited war and stringent, inconceivable rules of engagement were not effective in cowing a determined enemy, one who continued to be adequately supplied by allied nations.

Because of the country's diverse infrastructure, North Vietnam proved a difficult land in which to achieve satisfactory results during a massive strategic bombing campaign. Noting this

factor, intelligence reports produced as early as 1966 and in later years indicated that Rolling Thunder strategic bombing was not achieving desired results. "Too little, too late" might offer an apt buzz word coined for Rolling Thunder.

Therefore, as a sop to U.S. commanders for the negative effects anticipated by the Nam bombing halt, air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh trail system were envisioned to substantially increase.

As a result, additional air power to Laos, under newly formed rules of engagement, increased more than a hundred percent during the first week in November. Strikes in Barrel Roll supporting Vang Pao's operations were tentatively planned to triple from an original thirty to one hundred sorties a day. To counter increased U.S. air activity there was logical speculation that the enemy would relocate a majority of anti-aircraft assets from North Vietnam into Laos to expand its AAA capacity on LOCs and counterbalance the U.S. effort. This was indeed the case, and aircraft and crew losses were about the same as before, with SAR missions considered equally as difficult.

NIXON WINS THE NATIONAL ELECTION

President Johnson's last-minute ploy for a Democrat to retain the White House failed, and on 6 November, Richard Milhouse Nixon was elected the 37th American President. His challenges leading to decisions would be enormous.

In Nixon's words: ¹

"The most pressing problem I would have to deal with as soon as I became President was the war in Vietnam. During the

¹ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Touchstone, 1978) 347-349.

transition [Henry] Kissinger began a review of all possible policies toward Vietnam, distilling them into specific options that ran the gamut from massive military action to immediate unilateral withdrawal.

...it could be argued that military victory was still possible if I would remove the restrictions Johnson had placed on our commanders in the field and allow them to use our massive power to defeat the enemy. The most serious of these constraints was the bombing halt. Because of it the communists had been able to regroup their forces and amass supplies for a new offensive.

The obvious key to immediately winning and ending the war in Vietnam, although doable, presented heavily weighted unacceptable options.

"One would have been to bomb the elaborate systems of irrigation dikes in North Vietnam. The resulting floods would have killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. ² The other possible knockout blow would have involved the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Short of these methods, escalation would probably have required up to six months of highly intensified fighting and significantly increased casualties before the communists would finally be forced to give up and accept a peace settlement."

In the real world, each proposed option would lead to international geopolitical and domestic political issues. Since none of the quick victory options were acceptable, a fair negotiated settlement that preserved the independence of South Vietnam seemed the appropriate route to pursue...

Talk and fight, talk and fight. Like all previous American bombing halts, the cagey enemy took maximum advantage of the

² We had discussed this draconian possibility to end the war with Tony Poe during the early days at Long Tieng.

situation. By mid-November, U.S. recon flights revealed a quadrupling of enemy troops and supply movements north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). In addition, all previously destroyed bridges had been repaired.

The bombing halt fostered slightly different strategies relating to interdiction of LOCs on both sides of the borders. Since mid-year, suitable topography in North Vietnam had permitted saturation bombing of selected choke points leading through six mountain passes leading into Laos and to South Vietnam.

Interdiction was not as easy in Laos. Because of abundant by-passes and hidden alternate routes, the same strategy could not be successfully implemented. Therefore, to be effective, it was necessary to employ numerous strike and B-52 Arc Light aircraft against the entire Ho Chi Minh structure.

Since 15 November, an intensified air campaign was underway in Laos to cause maximum pressure on enemy efforts to move supplies and men on the Trails. Several methods were initiated:

"An increase in sorties; improvement in responsive command and control systems placement; coordinated monitoring of seismic and acoustic sensors (Igloo White); use of improved air munitions; and integration of other reconnaissance and intelligence resources."

Despite the improved measures, because of limited BDA, it

was deemed too early for anything but an initial evaluation. ³

Over the past week, Military Regions One, Four, and Five were relatively quiet. However, enemy resistance had stiffened in Military Region Two and Military Region Three, with pressure increasing in the form of six engagements in the Moung Phalane area. ⁴

A GROSS ERROR

To counter enemy activity, on the first, Captain Ken Wood and Flight Mechanic Glen Woods, both notable for their heroic actions at Pha Thi, were scheduled to participate in a SGU mission two miles southeast of Moung Phalane in and around Route-9 (WD6024126).

As no mission was scheduled until early Saturday afternoon, Ken remained at the Air America hostel. Feeling somewhat better, I elected to journey to the airfield to see if I could drum up a flight. The morning was unproductive until a group of individuals arrived wanting a ride well north of Thakhet to the Grove Jones area. Motivated by a desire to fly, I cleared the

³ Segment Sources:

John Bowman, *Almanac*, 215, 219.

John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 166, 215-217, 222-223, 229.

William Sullivan to State, 11/05/68.

Memorandum from Secretary of State, Clark Clifford to LBJ, 11/07/68.

William Sullivan to State, 11/11/68.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 283.

John Bowman, 216.

Memorandum from the Acting Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff (McConel) to the Secretary of Defense (Clark Clifford) in Response to an 18 November Query as to the Status of the Interdiction Program in Laos, 11/20/68.

Foreign Relations 1969-1976, Volume 7, Vietnam, July 1970-January 1972, Document 79, Memorandum from President Nixon to Secretary of State Rogers, Secretary of Defense Laird, and Director of Central Intelligence Helms, Speculation Concerning our Position on Unarmed Reconnaissance over North Vietnam, 11/30/70.

⁴ Lao Situation Report, 25 October-1 November.

request with the Customer, Church Bell (Ken Hessel, also known by pilots as "Stoneface"), who tactfully reminded me to be back in time for the afternoon mission. Calculating that I would have sufficient time and fuel for the 150-mile round trip, we launched.

Because of adverse wind conditions, or a miscalculation on my part, the trip took considerably longer than I anticipated. Consequently, it was late when we arrived at the destination and I had to effect a quick turnaround to arrive at Lima-39 on time for my PM flight.

I had not depleted 96W's fuel in the past to the point where I had confidence in the system's low-level calibration, but the fuel state indicated on the gage appeared viable for the return trip. If, by the time we over-headed Thakhet on the return trip, fuel replenishment was advisable, we could stop there. However, I had not refueled at Lima-40 for some time. During a previous low fuel state, I had discovered several old drums of 115/145 lying in weeds to the side of the runway. The containers had been stored properly, but there was evidence of rust and the stenciled expiration date was dated on the rusted tops. At the time, I needed fuel and had little choice. After the Flight Mechanic removed the metal cap and unscrewed the bung, I smelled the liquid and examined the color. Displaying a distinct purple color and lacking an odor of rotten eggs, we proceeded with the fueling process. If water or rust were present in the tanks, I was confident the chamois filtering procedure would remove these contaminants. My decision and the careful refueling process resulted in our ability to continue to march.

As we approached the river site, unknown fuel availability or status there, plus the time required to pump a drum onboard, convinced me to bypass Thakhet and continue toward Savannakhet.

Although the fuel state indicated on the gage looked sufficient to complete the journey, I later regretted the decision to continue.

While proceeding south, winds switched again to diminish our speed, while the fuel needle perversely dropped toward zero at an alarming and unanticipated rate. I pressed on until reaching a point of no return, I realized that we might not make our destination. Sweating profusely, I briefly considered calling for a barrel of fuel and landing in one of the small clearings near the river. However, with enemy patrols reportedly wandering areas adjacent to Route-13, I rejected this option and elected to continue.

When the red low-level caution light illuminated with several miles still remaining to touchdown, I really became anxious. Not wanting to waste a moment on final approach, I decelerated carefully and arrived at a hover downwind on the east side of the runway. With the fuel gage then showing zero, fearing the engine would quit from fuel exhaustion, I was even reluctant to turn the ship into the wind. However, as part of our proficiency training, we practiced hovering autorotations, so I swung 96W 180 degrees, plopped down, and immediately rolled the throttle grip to flight idle for the mandated two-minute cool-down to allow cooling and stabilization of dissimilar engine metals. Amazingly, the engine continued to operate until I pressed the idle stop button and twisted the throttle off. Amazed, I applied the rotor brake, and walked away considering what had just transpired. Thoroughly embarrassed, I did not discuss the flight with Glen or check how many gallons of fuel were pumped into the almost bone-dry tanks.

Needless to say, in retrospect my actions were stupid. I never should have subjected 96W and our crew to unneeded risk.

Marking a first, the unprofessional episode was a good object lesson, one I never repeated.

The previously scheduled mission had been scrubbed. However, shortly after our arrival, FAR officers hopped from a Jeep and proposed a local trip.

The following day I returned to Udorn on CASI Porter XW-PFD.

REVISION?

We were losing too many Bells to accidents, battle damage, and unscheduled maintenance. Unlike the UH-34D program, continued viability of the Bell program was tenuous and in question. Three Nine Foxtrot had been destroyed by friendly air to prevent it from being captured by enemy forces at Ban Tha Si; following the Reid crash at Na Khang, Papa Foxtrot Hotel was in the barn undergoing substantial repairs. Additionally, normal and particularly unscheduled maintenance often entailed considerable aircraft down time. Therefore, because of the shortage of airworthy Bells and anticipated Customer demand for machines and pilots to support current and projected government offenses in upper Military Region Two and other regions, a decision was made to retrain and prepare some senior pilots to fly UH-34Ds, if needed. Although cross training in equipment was wise from an operational standpoint, the first in, first out reversion was not voluntary and this caused some ruffled feathers. Pilot seniority was still not deemed that important in our organization. Some of us attended Drex Morgan's refresher ground school, followed by work on the flight line. ⁵

⁵ Senior pilot Julian "Scratch" Kanach was still on home leave in Flemington, New Jersey.

Away from the office until 5 November, Wayne Knight became quite busy with Bell FCFs (four in PFG, one in 11F, and one in 96W), and with recurrent H-34 training. Mike Jarina had returned from leave and required a warm-up proficiency check on the seventh. After sessions in Hotels-44 and 33, he left for Long Tieng on a C-47. Charlie Weitz was first in the barrel for H-34 recurrent training.

Herb Baker had an H-34 proficiency check on the eighth. Although I was still not feeling well, I endured a one hour and twenty-four-minute refresher training session with Wayne in Hotel-30. Although Wayne was patient, the transition took a bit of getting used to, particularly manipulating the throttle and hovering high enough to preclude banging the tail wheel on the ground while hovering. However, given years of previous experience, old habits easily return to the seasoned pilot. At the end of the flight, I was not totally comfortable in the cockpit, but had confidence that with another flight or two, I could manipulate the H-34 safely.

My next flight was scheduled with Baker, who had transitioned to the Huey a few months before. The session would entail flying instruments at a high altitude. By then, the cold had progressed up into my head. Because of serious congestion, I believed such a flight would lead to a severe ear block or infection and subsequent grounding, so I elected to beg off the flight. When I hoarsely conversed with Baker in the operations hallway, he agreed that I was not fit, and the flight was scrubbed. Quite frankly, I did not care to fly with him anyway and endure his incessant yakking and peculiar brand of BS.

Because of ensuing events, that was the last time I was scheduled to fly an H-34 in 1968.

On 20 November, Billy Pearson was the final pilot Wayne transitioned to the H-34. To my knowledge, none of us were tapped to fly the line in H-34s at this time. ⁶

DOWN TIME

The clinic doctor diagnosed my problem as bronchitis, an ailment that affected my mother and her family. It was something I had not experienced since I was very young. My illness was not unique, for everyone in the family, to include the maid, had colds. As usual, the bare-bones clinic did not stock the proper medicine. ⁷

My condition lingered, so we drove to Bangkok on the 12th where at the Bangkok Christian, Doctor Lewis, after examination of my vital signs, provided me with a packet of penicillin tablets. The medicine worked its magic. Within a week, except for a lingering head cold, I was feeling considerably better. Tuie, who was getting quite large and complaining of pain, also had her monthly prenatal examination, and as the Air America doctor, Doctor Lewis pronounced her fine.

Although helping to cure my chest problems, the penicillin antibiotics or something else caused me to break out in a rash that Tuie thought might be German measles. The Air America doctor was not certain, but thought I might have measles, dengue fever, or some other esoteric malady. Except for the waning head cold, I had no fever and did not feel unwell. Nevertheless, the rash lasted about ten days while proceeding down the length of my body. During this period, even though capable of flying, I

⁶ EW Knight Email, 09/16/00.

⁷ The reader might recall from earlier Author's books that the Company clinic was considered a great place to obtain vaccinations, and visit if one was not sick.

was grounded. I finally had to fake the rash's complete disappearance to return to the flight schedule.

Others experienced adverse reactions to medicine. In 1962, before he married Lai, Wayne Knight developed a pharmaceutical-induced medical problem. During a test flight, an unsecured ASE panel cover between the two cockpit seats dislodged and fell on his left arm, leaving a substantial scratch. Even though living in the tropics, he was not normally bothered by infections, so he did not treat the ding.

While conducting a short upcountry stint, the scratch became infected. The wound looked bad when he arrived late in Udorn after the RON. As he was leaving for Hong Kong the following day, he did not have time to see the Chinese Company doctor. Wayne had a little time in Bangkok waiting for his flight on the Golden Worm, so he saw the Thai Company doctor who provided him some pills, which he immediately began taking.

The next morning Knight awoke in the Hong Kong hotel with a severe case of tunnel vision and disturbed balance. His vision was also blurred at the edges of his eyes. At the time, he made no connection with the medication and the problems, so he continued taking the medicine. He did not leave his room for two days, preferring to wait until the problem subsided before venturing outside. The condition persisted and he went outside once briefly, employing one hand to feel his way down the sidewalks. After four to five days with no discernible improvement, he became convinced that he had contracted some esoteric disease that would forever curtail his flying vocation.

He completed the regimen of tablets a day prior to his scheduled return to Bangkok. When he awoke, his vision was clear and balance restored, allowing half a day of feeling normal before his flight.

He did not initially connect the pills as the culprit for his woes, but on the flight home the thought occurred, it had to be the medication.

Before returning to Udorn, he returned to the Company doctor and inquired as to what he had prescribed: Tetracycline. In the future he made sure that all doctors were aware of his allergic reaction to that preparation. Over time, he discovered that all Asian doctors were very paternalistic-*"just take what I give you and do not ask questions."*⁸

KHANG KHAY PRISON

A school teacher was captured when the Moung Ngan (LS-236) site and valley fell in early February. Driven west in a truck with other prisoners, by the ninth, they arrived at the town of Khang Khay (Khai, LS-08), located on the northeastern PDJ. Khang Khay had a checkered history. It was generally under Lao government control until the Royal Lao Army withdrew under Pathet Lao pressure in December 1960. Soon after Kong Le's coup and the January loss of the Plain of Jars, the town became a Neutralist-Pathet Lao-Vietnamese stronghold, and location of the administrative capital government in exile, where Souvanna Phouma and communist officials temporarily resided. Off limits to air strikes, when political assassinations occurred on a one-for-you, one-for-me basis in 1963, fearing for their lives, leftist Neutralists fled to Khang Khay. The town was left alone until 1964, when the war escalated and purportedly unscheduled T-28 air strikes hit the area.

While driving through the town, a Pathet Lao soldier pointed to a partially destroyed brick building claiming it was

⁸ EW Knight Email, 09/17/00.

the North Vietnamese embassy. The teacher also noted that other buildings in the town were totally leveled by air strikes.

The prison compound was located southwest of Khang Khay near the Nam Ngouan, between Khang Khay and Phong Savan. It consisted of two large houses for prisoners and six smaller houses for the prison staff. Since it was believed that no air strikes would target the prison, a large rice storage building sat in the compound.

Surviving airstrikes, AAA in the form of two 12.7mm and one 37mm overlooked the area on the forested hill at Phou Sani (UG1554), two miles northeast of Phong Savan. A generator that powered the Khang Khay radio station could be heard running three times during the day on Sani Mountain.

Every Monday, prisoners were assembled from 0700 to 1000 hours to listen to Pathet Lao radio. Following the broadcast, the prison commander delivered a lecture with additional information. Propaganda generally was always the same:

"It was foolish to rally to the RLG because the government was corrupt, did nothing for the Lao people, had sold much of Laos to the Americans, and was only a puppet of the Americans. The PL would soon occupy all of Laos and those who have rallied to the RLG will be punished.

PL forces were defeating the RLG everywhere in Laos. At Nam Bac five RLG regiments were defeated, and at Phou Pha Thi 500 RLG soldiers and 20 Americans were killed, while a great deal of radar equipment was captured.

The PL will soon attack and capture Moung Soui, Paksane, and Thakhet."

A political indoctrination school existed east of the prison for prisoners to attend prior to their release. Classes included a series of propaganda lectures which urged prisoners,

when released, to work for the revolution. After completing the school, the men were assigned to labor battalions.

During his incarceration, the teacher was subjected to about a hundred interrogation sessions. Numerous questions were asked by rotating high level Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, and one tall Caucasian who spoke fluent Chinese. Despite intimidation, most of the varied questions were virtually impossible for a common school teacher to answer. He was informed that most of the information was already known from Pathet Lao agents in the Sam Tong and Long Tieng areas; they would certainly know if he was lying and would be punished. To refresh his memory, one time he was placed before a mock firing squad and a pistol fired above his head.

Comprehensive questions asked by his captors during many interrogations included subjects pertaining to:

"The RLG educational system.

Construction of new roads and conditions of existing roads in government-controlled areas.

Attitudes of the residents and students in Vientiane toward the PL and the RLG.

The taxation policies of the RLG and governmental controls over private business.

The presence of Thai soldiers in Laos and the possibility of training Laos soldiers in Thailand.

The possibility of American soldiers in Laos.

The possibility of an American entry into Laos by LBJ or Vice President Humphrey.

The strength and deployment of troops in the Long Tieng and Sam Tong areas.

The possibility of villagers in Long Tieng and Sam Tong being armed and the attitude of these villagers toward the military leadership.

General Vang Pao: his health and the seriousness of the wounds he received at Na Khang; the strength of his security guard, the number of guards accompanying him at any given time, his standard of living, and the number of his wives.

The possibility of Long Tieng having radar to warn against an air attack.

The total strength of RLG forces in Laos and specifically in MR-2 and any future plans for attacks.

The RLG structure and the relationship between the civil and military authorities.

The important military and political personalities in Long Tieng and Sam Tong..

The location of Pop Buell in Long Tieng or Sam Tong and the nature of his work.

The import duties on goods brought into Laos.

The communications network between the different military regions in Laos.

The market prices in Long Tieng and Sam Tong."

Overwhelmed by questions about which he had little or no knowledge, he provided market prices at Long Tieng and indicated that most civilians at the two sites were armed. One day, he and four other men who had previously lived in Long Tieng or Sam Tong were ordered to independently draw maps depicting ammunition dumps and important buildings. Afterward they were informed the five sketches were not uniform. The teacher feared being shot, but the only punishment was denial of food for a day.

There were several, some prolonged, air strikes against the Khang Khay area during the teacher's imprisonment. During these periods, prisoners were taken to a bunker where they were able to watch the strikes.

In May, about a dozen jets struck the Khang Khay area for fourteen consecutive days. A few prisoners were trucked to Khang Khay to work salvaging supplies. When they returned, others learned that two ammunition storage buildings, three rice warehouses, and a military supply building had either been damaged or destroyed.

On 13 September A-1E pilots hit Phong Savan. They inflicted dozens of casualties at a military police camp.

With requirements in North Vietnam reduced to zero, air assets were diverted to Laos. Consequently, for seventeen consecutive days in November, heavy air strikes on Khang Khay and Phong Savan commenced. During this period a F-105 was hit by 37mm fire. The pilot landed in the northern PDJ area. Reacting to the downing, eight armored cars and 200 Pathet Lao soldiers hastened toward the pilot. However, the aviator was rescued before the enemy arrived. With caution abandoned, the column was caught in the open and destroyed.

Within a month the teacher was free and related his experience to interested Western parties. ⁹

JARINA BACK IN THE SADDLE IN MR-2

Needing pilots, the scheduling team did not waste time with returnees from leave. Directly after a warm-up flight, Mike was "once more thrown into the breach."

Following a night at the Long Tieng hostel he deadheaded to Sam Tong on 11-Foxtrot to fly in Hotel-44 with ACPH Jerry McEntee and Flight Mechanics Joe Siatong and a new man, Ferazza.

⁹ CIA Intelligence Paper, Enemy Prison and facilities near Khang Khay and results of airstrikes in the Khang Khay-Phong Savan Region of Xieng Khouang Province, February to November 1968, Distributed 01/09/69.

As a prelude to the dry season it was a busy time for Vang Pao's men, preempting potential and actual enemy movement with site reinforcement and intelligence gathering. Interspersed with aircraft swaps between Hotel-40 and Hotel-48, Jarina and McEntee initially worked sites to the north and northwest of Site-20.

After a somewhat calm period since mid-October, small unit enemy pressure in the form of probes to test FAN defenses resumed on Neutralist held Moung Soui (L-108). The route check began with troop movements to the Phou Vieng (LS-197) area located on Route-7, seven miles northwest of neutralist Xieng Dat. To protect Vang Pao's northern flank and counter suspected enemy designs to interdict Route-13 leading to Luang Prabang, shuttles began to Pha Langmou (LS-170) in the hills seven miles north of the Route-13/7 Sala Phou Khoun junction. A later trip was assigned thirteen miles northwest of Sam Thong to the Phou Long Pot area at Sam Sen (LS-112). Shuttles then commenced to Than Heup (LS-238) south of the Nam Ngum westerly flow from the PDJ and between the old sites of Houei Ki Nin (LS-38) and San Louang (LS-41).

Later in the day, following an aircraft swap, the work venue switched to supporting areas east of Long Tieng with a trip to Moung Ao Neua (LS-227). The refugee site lay in a broad valley fed by the Nam Hao and was separated by an extensive mountain range thirteen miles south of Moung Cha (LS-113). The day ended with shuttles to landing zones in the Moung Oum (LS-22) area, where hostilities erupted the previous month. Ironically, the area was the same one Mike had his run-in with Jerry over the delivery of a tail rotor assembly for Bob Davis' crippled H-34.

Since Sam Thong was filled to capacity, the crew was obliged to RON at Long Tieng until the following night.

Switching helicopters between Hotel-48 and 44 with Flight Mechanics Ferazza and Siatong, Mike continued local work from Long Tieng. Conducting an impressive forty-six landings during the day, he began with trips to Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) and other areas east in the Hin Tang Valley leading to what I coined the hilly "backdoor to the PDJ." Later missions rotated between the Pha Khao (LS-14) training site and defensive positions in and around Moung Soui.

On Wednesday, Mike and Joe spent the day beefing up defensive landing zones in the Tha Tam Bleung area. While performing forty-seven landings, he supported Meo high ground base areas east of Padong, at Khang Kho (LS-204), and Pha Phai (LS-65).

Before being recalled to Udorn on the eleventh, Jarina again briefly supported the Site-72 and Padong (LS-5) areas. ¹⁰

XW-PFJ INCIDENT

Our dismal fortune with the gods of war while working at Site-36 continued. Just when we were short on Bells, another operational incident placed Papa Foxtrot Juliet (PFJ) out of service for a time. The ship had already received extensive damage in January when Ted Moore crashed on a high mountain overlooking the Moung Ngan Valley (LS-236).

On 9 November, mild mannered and quiet family man Ellis Emery was loaded by Na Khang troops with cargo and one passenger for a short flight east to Moung Heim (LS-48A). Because of strong prevailing northerly winds Ellis elected to depart up strip. Since enemy patrols were reported north of the site, after achieving climb airspeed he immediately turned left to the

¹⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.

northwest and entered a narrow ravine to continue the climb out. While reducing power in the cut, the pilot claimed that he heard a loud report, followed by both rotor and engine tachometer needle decay. An immediate autorotation was effected from a low altitude that resulted in a hard landing.

We initially heard that a N1 tach generator had failed on Juliet, triggering events that led the pilot to believe he had lost an engine, but only a chin bubble had been damaged. Moreover, the engine was reputedly still running after touchdown. However, the Company accident review issued five months later reflected an "inflight powerplant failure" had occurred and the aircraft incurred "substantial damage."

We had previously experienced incidents of tachometer generator failures without similar adverse consequences. Although N2/Nr (engine/rotor) tach generator failures occasionally occurred, followed by a cautionary low rpm audio and a red console light, the gas turbine producer (N1) tach was more prone to failure without such warnings. A quick cross-check of the torque gage and normal sound levels would reveal if the engine was still functioning.

Whatever the case, management made a point of emphasizing that all Bell pilots pay closer attention to instrument cross-checks. This was no problem for former throttle twisting H-34 pilots, who were used to such activity, but not so for someone who only had experience in turbine engine equipment, where throttle manipulation was only necessary for start and

shutdown.^{11 12}

A MOUNTAIN TOO FAR-RETURN TO PHA THI

Vang Pao returned to Long Tieng from an eventful stateside tour during the third week in October. Finding the "barbarians at the gates" who threatened the strategic site at Na Khang in upper Military Region Two and his eastern Long Tieng flank, he immediately began planning preemptive offensives to upset the enemy time line intended to roll up remaining friendly controlled areas south of Site-85. Indeed, intelligence revealed that portions of three enemy battalions were already in the process of moving out of the Site-85 area, and relocating near Ban Yat along Route-6, ten miles south southwest of Sam Neua Town. This movement could only portend a counter to ongoing government probes in the Houa Moung area and future attacks on Site-36.

With many battalions already positioned in the field, the enemy certainly possessed the wherewithal to stage a second successful major dry season attack against the RLG. Pragmatic in his approach to the overriding problem, smarting from the embarrassing March loss of Phou Pha Thi, Vang Pao harbored

¹¹ As mentioned in past accident reports, a lack of pertinent PIC detail in the report, and Doug Dreyfus' accident investigation team's proclivity to slant findings away from pilot error and whitewash some accidents lent doubtful credence to the final report.

Chin bubbles were expensive and difficult to obtain from stateside contractors. Moreover, hard landings were notoriously difficult to assess initially, with hidden damage often later revealed. Another factor to consider, although the Author is unable to substantiate this speculation, padding aircraft damage could provide extra money from the Customer for much needed and expensive parts purchase from civilian suppliers.

¹² Air America Aircraft Accident Review, Bell 205, WX-PFJ, 03/08/69.
EW Knight Email, 09/17/00.

designs to recapture the revered site, as a morale factor for his troops, to regain face, and to reestablish a strong government presence there.

Much needed to be accomplished in a short time, not the least of which was to convince Vientiane and Washington principals, that beset with such skewed odds, a major offensive at this particular time was even advisable or could prove successful.

Eventually, with a bombing halt in North Vietnam projected to release additional air power for Lao operations, and the possibility of locating and destroying numerous enemy units, something that could restore a reasonable semblance to the military balance of power, the Vientiane Embassy finally agreed to support the ambitious dry season offensive. Moreover, an Air Operations Center (AOC) was established at Long Tieng to more efficiently coordinate and control regional T-28 air support. The enthusiastic AOC officer reported to his superiors that Thai, Lao, and Meo T-28 pilots had demonstrated so much improvement that they performed a more superior job while supporting the troops than did U.S. assets. In fact, the commanding officer was so confident in their expertise in Military Region Two (Barrel Roll) that he believed after the RLAF received additional planes and pilots, U.S. air could be solely relegated to "interdiction, special targeting, and striking troops in contact (TICs)."

Although somewhat diminished in importance from earlier days, Na Khang still afforded a major base to launch thrusts, and numerous troops were already located at and around the Houei Hin Sa (LS-215) area. Vang Pao's initial plan to relieve pressure on Na Khang and Houei Hin Sa, set to launch 1 November, was relatively uncomplicated in nature and programmed to last fewer than two weeks. Some 1,500 mixed government troops would

eventually participate and move to form a forward line from Site-215 to Site-36. After accomplishing this task, supported by air, troops would then cross Route-6 to interdict LOCs on Routes-68 and 61 south of Sam Neua.

The usual coordination and inevitable logistical problems postponed the projected offensive a week. Without the benefit of C-130 Specter gunships and Nimrod aircraft, deemed essential to Trail interdiction, by mid-month, Vang Pao's forces were advancing slowly forward, but adverse weather limited critical air support and strong enemy resistance restricted significant progress.

By the third week, accurate air support enabled the general's troops to move into high ground positions around Houa Moung (LS-58). Then with little further resistance encountered and the enemy withdrawing to the northeast, participants in the major offensive moved across Route-6 toward eastern objectives.

Flush with initial success, countering probes and attacks on positions east of Route-6 and well publicized enemy plans to attack Site-36, Vang Pao seized the initiative, electing to enlarge his limited dry season offensive. Instead, he abandoned plans to physically retake Houa Moung and focused attention on recapturing Phu Pha Thi, or at the very least, badly disrupting Vietnamese dry season plans for expansion in upper Military Region Two. The enlarged operation was code named "**PIG FAT**" in honor of Captain Gia Tou, who had perished in March while looking for refugees onboard John Tarn and Frank Stergar's H-34. Short in stature, displaying a porcine appearance, the captain

closely resembled the nickname accorded him by Long Tieng Agency advisors. ¹³

By the 19th, forward Meo elements, while foraging the area, discovered caves at Ban Yut in the Site-85 area containing enemy supplies of salt, rice, blankets and Meo school books.

Vang Pao's initial successes prompted a carefully scripted newspaper article stating:

"Anti-communists guerrilla bands of mountain tribesmen are slowly moving back into the isolated outposts in northeast Laos only a few miles from the North Vietnamese border from which they were driven last spring.

Sources report that SGU and small units of RLA have reoccupied some posts 10 miles from North Vietnam and have retaken ground about 12 miles from the city of Sam Neua, the headquarters of Pathet Lao forces. As the dry season [was] starting, they may not be able to stay long.

An elaborate system of 259 helicopter pads and dirt strips has been built over the years right in the heart of communist held territory. More than half the sites are in communist hands, partly as a result of a coordinated communist offensive that swept the pro government forces from the area of Sam Neua.

Meo morale has recovered. Sources believe that [the] communist spring offensive was undertaken mainly for diplomatic

¹³ The "PIG FAT" term may have had several derivations. Wayne Knight first heard the code name and jokes regarding it bandied about at AB-1 concerning a briefing officer who resembled the name.

Tom Ahern provided a slightly different explanation on page 308 of his book *Undercover Armies*.

While working in upper Military Region Two, Jerry Daniels, Don Sjostrom, and Ernie Kuhn assigned nicknames to things and people. Since the Meo were enthusiastic pig consumers, and the Phu Pha Thi area always seemed to be boiling over some incident or other, they referred to the area as the "boiling pig fat area." It was this term that Kuhn used when reporting the March attack to Jiggs Weldon in Vientiane.

reasons. If a new Lao peace agreement is to grow out of the Paris talks on Vietnam, Hanoi and the PL would probably like to establish such full control that the reassertion of RLG control of the northeast would be unthinkable even after the formation of a coalition government.

The government's motives seem to be similar; to try to hang onto as much population and territory in the area as possible to facilitate the eventual dream of a unified Laos..."¹⁴

JARINA AT LUANG PRABANG

On Thursday the fourteenth, Mike deadheaded to Luang Prabang on CASI C-47A XW-PFT. Upon arrival, he joined Phil Jennings and Rudy Serafico in Hotel-45 for a multi-helicopter insertion of a special road watch or action team mission to TJ4303. Located fifteen miles north-northeast of Nam Bac, east of Route-19's southerly direction toward Site-203, the landing zone was remote enough from the LOC to provide initial security, but within walking distance of the road.

Friday was an inactive weather day for H-34 drivers impatient to fly. However, a recon was conducted in CASI Beech Baron twelve miles north of Nam Bac to check on team progress, and for a mission the following day to a landing zone three miles north that was under considerable pressure. Low clouds and fog precluded flying over the TJ3909 coordinates.

¹⁴ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 201-202.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 283.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 308.
John Pratt, *CHECO, The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*.
Mohr, *The New York Times*, 11/12/68.
Lao Situation Report, 11/19/68.
Wayne Knight Email, 09/17/00.
Ernie Kuhn, 50.
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 155.

When weather improved sufficiently the following day, the armada launched with the intention of evacuating the site. Located east of Route-19 and old Lima Sites 169 and 247 that had been cleared out by the enemy, this unnumbered tribal strip marked one of the last of its kind in the area.

When H-34 crews arrived, the strip was under enemy mortar bombardment. A-1E escort pilots responded in kind, but were unable to obtain decent firing passes on the conical hill containing the enemy position. While the Skyraider drivers fired rockets and bullets, inaccurate mortar rounds fell short and around the pad. Chaos prevailed and the H-34 pilots began evacuating people to safer areas. With accustomed bravado, the pilots indicated that they would continue the operation until the enemy hit the strip. When mortar crew teams correctly registered and found the target range, the evac terminated and the ships RTB Luang Prabang.

Captain Jarina returned to Udorn in Hotel-48 the next day.

Four days later, he returned to Luang Prabang on Hotel-49 with Larry Wilderom and Wayne Knight, who would monitor Larry's Company- mandated periodic line check and attempt to obtain a first-hand taste of the current action (Wayne was that kind of a Chief Pilot). Upon landing, Mike joined Dan Carson and Flight Mechanic Bill Goodwin in Hotel-46 for a mission to TJ5282, almost a hundred miles north of Luang Prabang, nine miles south of Nam Houn (LS-243) in Phong Saly Province. Following a return to LP, the crew was reassigned to work out of Long Tieng. They finished the fourteen landing day shuttling troops from Phou Khao to Mounq Cha (LS-113). Following a pad on Skyline Ridge, the crew RON at Sam Tong.

On the 22nd, the crew was assigned to work at Na Khang, where a Special Mission was planned thirty-three miles northwest to UH0648. The location was several miles from Point Alpha, site

of the massive March refugee evacuation. After switching ships to Hotel-53 and gaining Tom Cournoyer as his Flight Mechanic, the crew RON at the Alternate.

The following day was very active, encompassing high time and forty-nine landings. It began with a trip forty-eight miles north near Pak Vang on the Nam Khan. The lengthy Khan River divided Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang Provinces and had reputedly been supporting enemy boat movement introducing troops into the Phou So (LS-57), Phou Fa (LS-16), and other Meo-controlled areas. Enemy boat traffic was nothing new, and over the years we generally flew at altitudes above small arms fire if near the river.

Mike returned to Sam Tong to refuel and stock up on sandwiches for his new assignment at Na Khang. The remainder of the day was spent supporting site defense and the "PIG FAT" operation.

Even though the dry season had officially arrived, perfect weather was never guaranteed in Military Region Two. This was particularly evident on 24 November when Jarina was grounded the entire day by low clouds and fog in the damp Long Tieng Valley.

The weather improved on Monday, but restricted work far to the north. Consequently, Mike was assigned local work. During a yeoman's effort, he performed an unheard-of ninety-five landings moving refugees and troops into or out of harm's way. He began the day going east to Padong and shuttling to Khang Kho (LS-204). This was followed by a trip to Site-72, then eighteen miles north of Long Tieng to Than Heup (LS-238), where he shuttled people to a refugee village at Nam Pha Noi (LS-218), twelve miles south of the Alternate.

After relocating to Luang Prabang and a full day working the area, Mike ferried Hotel-53 to Udorn. ¹⁵

BAD DAY AT SAVANNAKHET

For years, to expedite personnel movement for meetings, R&R, program investigation, and creature comfort supply from Vientiane to Mekong River sites and back, a periodic system of biweekly Curtis C-46D flights was conducted for the U.S. Embassy, USAID, and other agencies. Described as "milk runs" after their boring, mundane operations, until 25 November, there had never been a serious incident or accident.

That record was shattered when the Air America N1386N crew departed Savannakhet for Vientiane, when an engine failed on takeoff, resulting in a crash about a mile off the runway. After contacting the ground, a wing separated, causing the plane to cart wheel. The fuselage inverted, separating into two sections, and the plane burst into flames. First reports were sketchy as to the total number of souls on board and their nationality. Six Americans were killed. In addition to three Air America crewmembers, two AID employees, and a Navy contract employee, nineteen other people were killed. There were two reputed survivors.

Among the deceased passengers was Mrs. Saykham, wife of Chao Saykham, hereditary governor of Xieng Khouang Province, who had his headquarters at Sam Tong. Also included were Saykham's sister and niece. In his absence, all were visiting Lima-39 to attend the funeral of his younger brother who had died unexpectedly.

¹⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

Unlike Air America personnel for whom the personnel manual spelled out compensation in case of death on the job, there were legal issues to resolve for survivors of the deceased civilian passengers. Legal ticketing was one. A representative of the London aviation insurance underwriter for Air America believed there was cause for unlimited liability because of a lack of ticketing. This was pending clarification from an attorney in Vientiane. Near term, it was hoped that claim settlements would not exceed 16,000 dollars per individual. Negotiation of the majority of claim settlements would generally be delegated to Maitre Robert Ducret of Vientiane, Laos.

Issues had not been totally resolved over a year later, when Air America Managing Director, George Doole, Jr., was still receiving court summons and complaints against Air America, Inc and Air Asia Co, Ltd. ¹⁶

UPCOUNTRY

"Laos is getting very tough again. The enemy is all over the place and we are getting hit frequently. We have an operation going on to regain Pha Thi. It is sort of a morale thing for the Meo.."

¹⁶ Segment Sources:

Bill Leary Notes for 25 November 1968.

Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, Curtiss C-46D N1386N.

Ernie Kuhn-Arthur Dommen Interview, 03/25/95, 61.

Article in the *Washington Post*, At Least 20 Die in Laos Air Crash, 11/26/68.

Article in the *New York Times*, 32 Killed in Lao Crash, Including 6 Americans, 11/26/68.

Letter Sent to George Doole in Washington from Air America New York-based Attorneys Condon & Forsyth in regard to one 25 November 1968 death on N1386N. 12/02/69.

International Telegram, President Grundy, Taipei Air Asia to Washington, D.C., 11/26/68.

Two Letters from Beaumont and Son, London, to Jerry Fink, Deputy Legal Counsel, Air Asia, Taipei, Taiwan, 12/20/68.

Realistically, the enemy is pushing all over Laos to consolidate all the ground they can before a peace is declared."

Author Letter Home 12/10/68.

Toward November's final week, four columns of Vang Pao's PIG FAT assets were either airlifted or marched toward objective Pha Thi. To ensure operational success, Agency planners requested one hundred daily sorties equipped with napalm and cluster bomb units (CBU) in support of the movement, and one-thousand-pound bombs for use against mountain hard points prior to an assault. However, as during previous movements, prior Trail commitments and the scarcity of weaponry substantially downgraded Pig Fat's final allotment of U.S military aircraft. Moreover, the Air Force had designs on utilizing a majority of planes for more lucrative Sam Neua targets instead of supporting the ground forces.

During planning and implementation of his military campaigns, Vang Pao generally relied on a gut feeling, intuition, and superstition. He was rarely concerned about what his Case Officers or U.S. military advisors counseled. In fact, months before, when he originally conceived the push back to Pha Thi and was advised against it, he evidenced a typical stubbornness to go it on his own.

Surprised by the swift and unexpected offensive, the enemy yielded some forward positions, withdrawing toward Pha Thi's summit, where an estimated three enemy battalions defended well-developed hard points built following the March slaughter. Former government sites to the south, southwest, and west of Site-85 were easily reclaimed by the combination of tactical air

strikes and sheer force of numbers. As a consequence, many new refugees were generated requiring AID's support. ¹⁷

By the 28th I convinced the Thai clinic doctor the curious rash coursing over my body for the best part of two weeks had dissipated. Released to fly, I went into the CPH's office with the good news. The next day I returned to the schedule in 11-Foxtrot with "chicken-plate" Anderson. Andy's shiny plate was acceptable, but it was heavy and reflected light if the sun's rays struck the armor just right.

After arriving at Sam Tong, refueling, and gathering our brown bags, navigating through spots of low and deteriorating weather, we departed for Na Khang to shuttle troops and supplies to the front lines at Pha Thi. Rough landing zones, either remaining from the dry season action, or hastily established on ridges, were used to expedite operations and collect refugees for distribution to Site-36 or to Site-215. Working in the Houei Kha Moun (LS-111) area, Ernie Kuhn, who remained close to Vang Pao, was once again in charge of his people's welfare.

From pinnacle vantage points, looking toward the eastern Den Din hills and cliffs, it appeared to the naked eye that the wide slash revealing Route-602 had continued to be improved along mountain contour lines toward Site-85. I could only speculate as to what shape the concealed LOC took through the jungle and across the Yut River toward Houei Ma. Fostered by the danger of combat, there was considerable excitement involved in working close to the front lines, particularly with a bird's eye view, observing and listening to FAC and strike pilot action against the "Rock." Since Vang Pao's assault had begun a few days earlier than originally planned, except for A-1E planes

¹⁷ Ken Conboy, 202.
Victor Anthony, 284.

dedicated to the Barrel Roll sector and jet diverts from Sam Neua, many area strikes other than on the top of Pha Thi were conducted by Thai, Lao, and Meo T-28 pilots, who were not required to adhere to rules of engagement (ROE) specifying the necessity for a controlling FAC.

During the morning a tense call over a HT-2 reverberated throughout the mountains and valleys for all in the area to hear. Indicating he was in trouble, the person requested an emergency exfil from his location near Houei Kha Moun (UH6772).¹⁸

American in trouble...Red flag...Panic alarm...get going...now!
Since few of us were in the area and my ship was equipped with an operating overhead hoist assembly and seconds being precious during moments like this, I dropped everything and launched north.

These Bell 204B overhead hoists were a scarce commodity. Compact, visible, easy to use and control by the pilot, I liked the rescue system, but they eventually posed a maintenance nightmare. Consequently, they were on the cusp of being eliminated from our inventory. Primarily, necessary repair parts were expensive or not available.

All Bell rotor brakes also presented a problem. If not careful using judicious pressure while applying the rotor brake during shutdown, excessive heat could be generated causing a rotor disk to warp and foster a difficult-to-isolate high frequency vibration. Additionally, the hydraulic cylinder in the overhead cockpit had a tendency to leak fluid on the PIC. This was temporarily addressed by wrapping a mechanic's red grease rag around the unit, but a pungent odor like no other persisted. Eventually, following several inter-department discussions, all

¹⁸ When queried years later Ernie indicated to the Author that this individual was not him.

Bell rotor brake assemblies, both 204 and 205 disc and cylinder units were removed from the aircraft. ¹⁹

By the time I arrived in the emergency location, whoever called had resolved his problem, the hastily formed mission was aborted, and those involved went back to work.

However, the day's excitement and stress levels were not over, and our dual purpose for working in any area was triggered. Toward mid-afternoon a Mayday call from one of the airborne Customers broke over the airwaves. Within minutes we ascertained that a T-28 pilot had bailed and landed at UH6876, a touch more than three miles north of Site-111, and the same area as the morning's problem. Since I was only about ten miles south, within a short time, I was on scene. The extraction proved incident free, and Meo soldiers were already seen wandering along the ridgeline and staged in the trees. During my final approach to the spot, the pilot, a little guy ²⁰ enthusiastically waved at me. I did not know it then, but later discovered this SAR marked the first of my two recoveries of Captain Lee Lieu, VP's first Meo T-28 aviator who had managed to survive combat to this point.

With the Thai and Lao pilots refusing to fly support missions out of Vientiane during the Pig Fat operation, Meo pilots were the only T-28 drivers involved. Loyalty to Vang Pao and his pervading influence doubtless had a major hand in this.²¹

¹⁹ EW Knight Email, 09/17/00.

²⁰ Little Guy: A generic term we used for almost any of Vang Pao's people.

²¹ Lee Lieu had no compunction about bailing out of planes. He went on to become a legend among Meo warriors, RLAF, and American aviators. Within a year, With Vang Pao's help, I conducted another retrieval of the captain before he eventually lost a battle with an enemy 12.7mm machinegun crew.

I recovered at The Alternate for the night to rest, relax, reflect, stoke my ebbing furnace, and recapitulate the day's activity. Previously, to help calm jangled nerves, promote untroubled sleep, and unwind after a full day's accumulation of pressure and nervous tension, I had been ingesting Hudson B complex vitamin tablets, touted to reduce stress and strain, and to promote the unencumbered slumber that I considered so important for the long periods of high time flying. Not containing drugs or harmful opiates, the innocuous preparation was deemed safe. The pills seemed to help somewhat, but when we transitioned to the Long Tieng hostel, I eventually gravitated to consuming a beer or two prior to supper. The alcohol in the "elixir of the gods" more rapidly and effectively soothed and quieted my demons, and enabled a respectable night's rest without incurring stomach ailments or any other detrimental effects. This was the case as long as I employed discretion in the amount of liquid consumed, followed by a decent supper. Moreover, remaining within the Company eight-hour bottle-to-throttle regulation was considered acceptable to management. But, as always, there were those who violated the manual.

Saturday's ten-hour day, all project time, provided more of the same stimulation, but lacked the intense flavor involved in SAR requirements. However, there was some excitement. During the course of daily missions, the SAR phase of mission operations was replaced by two separate hostile incidents of being fired on. Fortunately, the ship was not damaged. I was not surprised, for we had just moved back into the front lines, covered broad areas in support of the operation, and it was obvious that determined enemy forces were never going to allow us to retake Pha Thi and the surrounding area without inflicting some pain.

Aircraft diverts were continually vectored to the site by FAC pilots, who directed the show. General purpose iron bombs

continually impacted Pha Thi's summit with little apparent result, for the enemy continued to fire at the planes from caves and narrow ravines lodged deep between the karsts. While loading for another mission, I watched in fascination while a jet conducting a pass released a Bullpup missile toward a cave on the southwest face purported to house a 12.7mm AAA gun. I had never seen one of these "Pups" fired before. After release, as if disoriented, the missile immediately went astray, curving, S-turning, and diving toward the lower strip and valley floor. I did not observe an impact, but since gravity rules, hoped our friendly troops managed to avoid injury. I wondered how such a weapon, structured for cave busting, could be so unreliable and dangerous. Was it the missile, or an inexperienced pilot?

During the day, Flight Mechanic Tod Yourglich replaced Andy
at Na Khang.

On the northern front, with no calendars available to gawk at, or more pressing issues to address, November morphed into December with little notice.

On Sunday, Tod and I were once again shuttling supplies and troops from Na Khang to landing zones near the contested mountain, and to fighting positions. Despite intermittent spates of inclement weather moving through the Sam Neua area, U.S. fighter bombers continued to arrive. In fact, so much air became available at times that when the Raven FAC pilot on station at Pha Thi binged and departed south for fuel, there was no one to immediately replace him (There were only a handful of Ravens available in Military Region Two). This created a dicey situation, whereby if unable to deliver ordnance on an established target, a pilot had to dump his bombs somewhere before RTB. I did not know where the "safe" jettison area was, perhaps the Plain of Jars, but there was always a chance that loads would be salvaged on friendly villages. Navigation errors were frequent with fast movers, and the destruction of villages considered under government control had certainly occurred in the past. Therefore, I elected to perform FAC duties until a bona fide controller arrived.

I relished the opportunity to FAC for the U.S. military, as I had done twice with our Alpha T-28 drivers in 1965. The situation provided my first occasion to direct air-to-ground fire since Ed Reid and I flew into the Sam Neua Valley on a SAR mission to look for USAF pilot Charles Shelton in 1965. At that time, we were escorted by our own Alpha T-28 pilots. After already being hosed inbound from Route-6, as a precaution, I directed Captain Jim Rhyne to unload his ordnance onto an

isolated pinnacle in the valley rice paddies that I suspected of harboring a 12.7mm machine gun.

During May of 1965, when called upon by Bill Lair to land next to Ernie Brace's Porter at Boum Lao and check for signs of life, unsure of enemy presence, I coordinated with the Alpha pilots to provide assistance by hosing the sides of the airstrip during our approach to landing.

I had either watched or listened to Air Force strike chatter for years and felt fully competent to direct a strike against Pha Thi's southeast crest. After all, most of the bombing so far did not require pin-point accuracy, but was directed at a generally suspected AAA area. Consequently, when a jet pilot with a youthful voice checked in and began screaming over the strike frequency about a relatively low fuel state and requesting an immediate target, I launched to assume the role of a bona fide Raven FAC pilot. However, I never identified myself as such.

The following closely approximates an abbreviated dialogue between an FAC and a strike pilot, i.e. the Author:

"Hat Trick-44 this is 11-Fox. I am your controller today. Say your present position, time on station, and remaining ordnance."

"Roger 11-Foxtrot." (There followed a brief description of weaponry and fuel state.)

"Hat Trick-44-11F have you previously worked this target?"

"This is Hat Trick-44. Negative."

"Hat Trick-44 do you see the large, isolated mountain at your twelve o'clock position?"

"This is Hat Trick-44. That's affirmative."

"Hat Trick-44, controller. Good. Your target is the upper southeast portion of the rock where smoke is presently rising. Bad guys are in caves, bunkers, and ravines with 12.7 and small

arms capability. Good guys are located at the southwest base of the mountain. Do you have any questions?"

"This is Hat Trick-44. Negative 11 Fox."

"This is 11-Foxtrot. Hat Trick-44 you are cleared in hot on the smoke. Good hunting."

"Roger that."

The pilot commenced his northwest run. During one high pass, he salvoed his entire load, called Winchester, then pulled off to the south. I did not observe any AAA fire directed at the plane.

As a rule, Air Force pilots insisted on bomb damage assessment immediately following a strike. It was sort of a macho ego booster the brotherhood required, probably to justify the effort and generate after strike bar conversation. Strike time was compressed to seconds, and there was rarely time for a physical assessment. Also, for obvious reasons, unless there were secondary explosions, actual assessment of a strike was often considered too dangerous. Therefore, critical BDA was necessarily canned; the words rarely varied from one strike to another. Consequently, the opportunity for creative blarney abounded, and one pilot was as good at this as another. Actual BDA would be later culled by highly trained photo interpreters assessing photographs taken by reconnaissance planes.

Recalling the difficulty Air Force pilots had destroying the TACAN and TSQ radar sites after the March loss, I wanted to sarcastically interject, "Congratulations chief, you managed to hit the damn mountain." ¹

Instead, I bit my tongue, keyed the mike, and spouted a time-honored standard line,

¹ The mountain top was at least one mile long and half a mile wide.

"Good job Hat Trick-44. Your BDA was such and such. Have a safe trip home."

With an obvious note of relief in his voice, the Hat Trick-44 pilot replied,

"Thank you 11F. You have a good day."

That was the extent of my fun as an ersatz forward air controller. By then I deferred to a professional Raven pilot who was inbound from Site-36. Even though other principals were aloft in the region, certainly the overhead USAF command and control ship (ABCC), no one challenged my authority as a civilian pilot to manage a military air strike. It was simply considered a field expediency, often determined necessary and accepted during times of war.

I went back to work, content in the fact that I had performed a task that I had coveted for some time. That episode marked my first and last FAC mission. Except for briefly noting to the folks at home about it in a letter, the event was never discussed and no one ever mentioned the incident.

As previously noted, indigenous T-28 pilots required no American controllers. Laos was their country, and unlike the American clandestine air effort, the RLAF was not obliged to conform to U.S. ROE or most constraints as to targeting. Instead, control relied on ground-based FAGs or airborne Customers. General Vang Pao often directed Lao air, particularly immediate action by his Meo pilots, either from his airborne platform or from his forward field command post. His real-time targeting information was generally gleaned from ground unit reports and requests for timely strikes on enemy hard points. Usually results were effective, but sufficient assets were never available. Moreover, slow moving T-28 endurance and ordnance capability was not great.

Throughout the day, while observing load after load of assorted weaponry dumped on Pha Thi's summit, with seemingly no effect except to make smaller rocks out of larger ones, I wondered if our efforts to clear the mountain might all be in vain. (Sort of like Air Force pilots jokes of bombing smoking holes.) Napalm was a capable weapon in this terrain, for the viscous liquid had a tendency to ooze into cracks and ravines and stick to everything it touched and the resulting explosive heat was intense. However, there was not sufficient napalm available or delivered for the large target.

The Second Indochina War provided a fertile testing ground for new weapons constantly arriving in the military inventory. I had heard stories about a very large ten-thousand-pound propane bomb which could be used to clear large helicopter landing zones in jungle terrain. After the bomb hit the ground and the contents disgorged, an incendiary device triggered an enormous explosion, overpressure, and great heat. This device seemed to me a simple answer and perfect weapon for Pha Thi's rocky terrain. If a C-130 crew could drop the bomb on the correct spot, after impact the liquid propane would vaporize with the gas seeping into deep areas where enemy troops were hiding. Then a delayed incendiary device would detonate such a massive explosion that would obliterate or at least discourage all further human resistance in that particular area. If followed by an immediate offensive, our little guys might save the day without undue loss of life. Also, depending on the weapon's efficacy, machines and money would be spared. Whether the device was even viable at this time was an unknown, and one was never used.

Furthermore, political correctness, a liberal phrase that would not enter the English vocabulary for decades, had to be considered. Even if a propane bomb had been available for use,

its use would have to clear Ambassador Sullivan, who was sensitive to the deployment of even minor weapons of mass destruction like napalm in the "neutral" country. This concern seemed strange in such a remote area of the country where thousands of enemy forces roamed at will. At any rate, it probably would have required months of deliberation before any decision was made regarding the weapon.

Monday, the second, we spent another full day shuttling troops from Houei Hin Sa into the battle area and refugees out. The day was fatiguing and repetitious, but there were no further incidents where the enemy got a bead on me. That night I was informed that my unnamed relief pilot would arrive the following day.² Consequently, I was scheduled to work locally.

Weather or available aircraft prevented the relieving pilot from arriving at Long Tieng early. This allowed me to work in The Alternate area for almost six hours. By early afternoon, Frenchy Smith stepped off CASI C-47 XW-PDE. By chance, I happened to be taking on fuel in the parking area, so while the C-47 was being unloaded, I shut down, grabbed my gear, transferred 11F to Frenchy, and strode toward the CASI plane which was returning to Udorn.

UDORN

When I returned home Tuie related that Ricky had been very sick with pneumonia and a high fever. As usual, our doctors, who lacked proper medicine to treat any but the simplest medical ailments were stumped and did not know what to do with him. Because of her advanced condition, Tuie was not able to take the youngster to Bangkok, so the Air Force doctors at the base took care of him. He was home, in apparently good shape, so I could

² Crew names were never transmitted over the air.

no longer be angry at the Air Force for past noncompliance. ³

Management policy still allowed pilots with families in Udorn time off for Christmas. Even though Wayne had a large family, setting the example, he flew on the 24th through the 26th. He did have New Year's Day off.

Within a few days we had the Christmas decorations up and the outside evergreen tree had grown twice as large as the previous year. Even at two years, Rick knew all aspects and meaning of Santa Claus.

I had a set of construction plans prepared at city hall for the Nisagonrungsee shop project, but because of an excess of similar shops in Udorn at the time and current adverse finance terms, we elected not to initiate construction. Although prices the contractors initially wanted were much higher than I expected, they eventually lowered these, but because builders just wing everything, I could never obtain a firm cost estimate from them. Also, with the Lao war and peace negotiations in question, and our jobs at stake pending an outcome, I did not relish any long-term commitment.

A brief letter dated 2 December was waiting for me from Charley Williams in Steamboat Springs. A former Marine pilot who served with Jerry Buffington and John Fonburg in 1961 was about to start a helicopter service in the area. ⁴ Since I had evidenced a prior interest in the same vocation, Charlie was interested to know my plans relating to the purchase of the Steamboat airport.

³ Decision to allow Air America personnel perks on the Air Force base was generally left up to the commanding officer. Since this billet rotated yearly, our status often changed and largely depended on cordial relationships between Air America and Air Force hierarchy.

⁴ See Author's Book One for reference to these men.

The revelation that another aviator was interested in starting a flying business was bittersweet. On the one hand, I had wanted to start a shuttle service at the airport, but on the other hand, without prior research, I harbored reservations regarding a cold operation without firm contracts and the initial expense involved. Since the area could not possibly support two helicopter operations, this latest letter effectively curtailed my ambition toward that end.

MILITARY REGION-4

On 29 November, Mike Jarina and Hal Augustine departed Udorn late in Hotel-57 for Pakse.

The following day, they worked close to L-11 at PS-17, "Radio Hill," Phu Batiene. This was followed by a trip to the Agency SGU training camp at Ban Khok Mai (LS-171) just north of Saravane, where the FAR was still attempting to hold parts of the Toumlan Valley, or at least provide a buffer zone between the valley and Lima-44. Next, he flew to PS-39 in the hills north of Nong Boua (LS-134); then southeast to PS-22 on the Plateau rim. The Customer there directed him to PS-38, five miles south-southwest of Phou Kham Phouk (LS-166) and PS-27, three miles east of Site-166. After a trip to Houei Khong (L-56), where the missionary Davis family still resided, and a local landing zone, he recovered at Pakse for the night.

While enemy forces began their dry season offensive, moving on the 250-man Thateng garrison and perhaps a forerunner of attacks on other towns and the Bolovens Plateau, Mike continued to work the Saravane area before recovering at Tango-08 on the second. ⁵

⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

PANHANDLE CROSS BORDER OPERATIONS

The efficacy of Trail interdiction proved difficult to judge from the air. Consequently, LBJ's total bombing halt of the North increased the requirement for additional and more accurate intelligence reporting of viable targets and BDA in Laos. During mid-December, comprehensive aerial reconnaissance revealed increased enemy military activity in the Panhandle. The entire logistics system, largely unserviceable during the rainy season, was being restored at seemingly lightning speed. Unlike the previous year, vehicular traffic was rolling from Mugia pass through Tchepone, Chavane, and Attoupeu areas to the South Vietnam and Cambodian borders.

Solutions to the problem included slowing or impeding troop and supply movement by either demolishing trucks or creating viable choke points along difficult-to-repair hairpin turns or river crossings. Since truck destruction had not been particularly successful in the past, choke points were considered the preferred method of interdiction. In November, two major choke points had been closed to traffic, one at Ban La Boy (called Loboy), located on Route-912 four miles south of the Ban Karai Pass, and the second located at the Route-12/23 junction of Ban Pha Nop (Hop), six miles south of Mugia Pass.

Seventh Air Force commanders believed closure of these geographic locations had been successful by reducing vehicular traffic into South Vietnam. However, although almost a month into the modified bombing campaign, no firm judgment was forthcoming as to USG's modified policy effectiveness.

The North Vietnam bombing halt necessitated increased air activity and vigilance along the border, and stimulated the continuous and always contentious issue of MACSOG Prairie Fire incursions vs. Lao intelligence gathering teams between military leaders in Saigon, CINCPAC headquarters in Hawaii, and

Ambassador Sullivan's Embassy group in Vientiane. As usual, MACSOG lobbied to enlarge the Prairie Fire operating zone at Mugia and Ban Karai passes.

Coordination between Prairie Fire operations and Agency-sponsored intelligence gathering was considered necessary to avoid friendly fire fights and because roles and missions were dissimilar.

Unlike SOG operations, which combined passive intelligence and active military operations in a mission, Agency teams either conducted passive intelligence that avoided enemy contact, or fielded special guerrilla units who performed pre-planned raids and ambushes on LOCs. The latter invariably produced enemy clearing reactions, which effectively chased intelligence teams from an area.

The Agency unit in Vientiane currently labored under an intelligence mandate issued by CIA, State, Defense, and JCS representatives in Washington. This directive included measuring Vietnamese movements in critical areas involving points inside North Vietnam and other areas near the Mugia and Ban Karai passes.

Realignment of intelligence teams was recently completed to adhere to the new Washington guidelines. Since these teams operated in identical areas as the Prairie Fire missions, it was incumbent not to mix these forces.

Additionally, as a precaution that Vietnamese logistic groups might decide to alter truck traffic to take advantage of cover and concealment in North Vietnam rather than risk exposure in Laos, the Agency had positioned road watch teams inside the Prairie Fire area where Route-1036 entered Laos. These moves into SOG zones were coordinated with MACSOG.

CINCPAC weighed in later with specific ideas that either agreed or disagreed with Ambassador Sullivan's points. As to the

subject of political sensitivity, it was common knowledge that Prairie Fire areas were tightly controlled by Vietnamese forces, not RLG. Moreover, since North Vietnamese leaders always denied being in Laos, it was unlikely they would make an issue of SOG operations. ⁶

Realistically, for obvious reasons, the two entities should never operate in the same area. The overall objective had to include gathering the most viable targeting intelligence. This was particularly important because, despite efforts of tactical air and the Arc Light activity, from the beginning of November, enemy LOC pursuits had significantly increased in the Panhandle.

Better intelligence reporting was required because of the overwhelming increase in enemy air defense. AAA still included 37mm guns, but there was a considerable increase in automatic weapon and larger caliber gun fire.

In defense of expanding Prairie Fire areas, the U.S. military requested unrestricted authority to employ assets around Mugia and Ban Karai passes. Admiral McCain went on to logically explain to his bosses that SOG:

"Insertions and air operations in the proposed areas could be coordinated since they were not in a positive control area. The interdiction effort should be the maximum devised and target selection was vital to the program.

SOG teams provided a real time target acquisition, reporting and exploitation capability Agency teams did not possess. SOG led teams could move quickly to and from areas, direct air strikes on targets of opportunity..., perform ground operations against selected targets, emplace mines and sensors,

⁶ Secrecy was maintained by both sides about Panhandle operations.

conduct wiretap operations, seize and evacuate prisoners, and report critical intelligence information.

Ground and air operations would be controlled by a single headquarters. Needed on the ground were U.S. personnel who could search beneath the [triple canopy] jungle, discover truck parks, locate portering points, identify road by-passes, pinpoint troop concentrations, and radio these findings to an overhead FAC pilot for immediate action."

In regard to the Department of Defense's desire to insert MACSOG units into the Mugia and Ban Karai pass areas, Ambassador Sullivan was still lukewarm. He acknowledged that team insertions might somewhat raise the truck destruction level, but he added that neither pass could be supported adequately from the existing base camps. Mugia would require a base in Thailand (NKP); and Ban Karai a launch site on the Bolovens. All in all, such an effort was considered marginal. ⁷

THATENG IN MR-4

While constantly attempting to expand their LOCs west to protect the logistical, infiltration system, and to avoid and cope with increasing MACSOG cross border excursions, the enemy had designs on capturing the strategic crossroads town of Thateng.

Also logged by pilots as Lima Site-210 or PS-28, the site supported a 1,500-foot crushed rock runway. Located on the northern edge of the Bolovens, Thateng provided a military

⁷ Segment Sources:
Memorandum Secretary of the Air Force (Brown) to Deputy Secretary of Defense (Nitze), Effectiveness of Air Operations in Laos, 12/11/68.
Telegram Sullivan to CINCPAC (McCain), 12/03/68.
Telegram CINCPAC (McCain) to Joint Chief of Staff Chairman (Wheeler), 12/11/68.
Situation Report, 12/19/68.
Telegram William Sullivan to State (Godley), 12/31/68.

strategic plum for anyone who occupied the sizeable town. Located in ascending foothills leading to the volcanic Bolovens, the highland town was the junction for Routes-23/16. The "major" road, Route-23, ran south from Saravane through a narrow slot guarded by high mountain sentinels on two sides, Phou Thiouom to the west, where John Coney lost his life, and Phou Tatun to the east. Teeing into the junction, Route-16 thrust east about twenty-five miles toward and down into the Se Kong Valley, linking with the elaborate system of enemy LOCs in that area. Military region four leaders believed enemy control of Thateng might lead to government losses of the provincial capitals of Saravane, Attopeu, and the entire Bolovens Plateau.

For most of the year enemy pressure was exerted in some form on the site. This increased exponentially on 27 November, when an intense attack commenced on the government base. Hostilities continued for a few days, with the enemy reputedly sustaining heavy casualties. A FAR relief column located at Paksong was dispatched from the west. Ambushed along Route-23, the small unit failed to arrive.

The attack marked the most significant enemy aggression in the Bolovens area since February. The reason was nebulous, perhaps an attempt to eject government forces from the Plateau, or a reaction to a recent RLG clearing action east of Thateng.

During the first ten days of December, SGU troops reported observing and making contact with enemy units. Villagers from the eastern Tourane Valley area also reported that large numbers of enemy troops were moving south. In addition, Pathet Lao units were stopping civilian traffic on Routes 23 and 16 between Saravane and Thateng, informing civilians that by 15 December the road would be closed to all traffic.



Lower portion of the graphic: Thateng is located at the junction of Routes 23 and 16, north of Paksong and south of Saravane.

RLG concern regarding military activity in Military Region Four was evidenced when Souvanna Phouma informed his cabinet members that joint Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces had surrounded Attopeu, and more reinforcements were arriving. With the town, airstrip, and two battalions of defenders under fire, the situation looked grim. Therefore, the Prime Minister considered evacuating dependents, something General Phasouk had recommended the previous year along with entirely abandoning the site.

The hammer fell on the Thateng defenders when three Vietnamese battalions struck BV-46 on 13 December. Despite numerous USAF air strikes directed by Raven FAC pilots 42 and 52, and the coordination provided by the daytime C-130 Airborne Command and Control Center, Hillsboro, enemy force rolled up two government outposts.

Enemy forces captured the village just before dark, while government troops withdrew to a small fort just south of the town's outskirts. As the enemy surrounded and besieged the BV, friendly air arrived, allowing the remaining defenders to survive the night. Paramount among friendly air support was an AC-130 (Specter) gunship that remained on station delivering withering fire on the enemy.

On Saturday, Mike Jarina arrived in Pakse after a deadhead flight on Helio Courier Papa Bravo Zulu (PBZ). He assumed command of Hotel-48 with Tombaiyai as his Flight Mechanic. Mike was loaded with supplies and a few troops for Thateng. Just before he arrived, a Caribou pilot completed an airdrop in lieu of landing on the north-south oriented strip. While Mike was on approach, small arms fire erupted from the north. It appeared to be coming some distance from the strip, not producing excessive danger to the crew of the ship. He landed, offloaded, and returned to Lima-11.

While planning to return to Site-210, Jarina informed the Customer John of the hostile action. John, a retired Army quartermaster sergeant from Oregon, originally had been dispatched to Pakse to investigate and solve the enigma of why the FAR was using more gasoline there than there were vehicles in the entire country. He was only supposed to remain until correcting the situation, but he remained four years.

Larry Hennessy and Boonrat ComIntra were also working the Pakse area, so John told Mike to take Boonrat on his next shuttle. Boonrat secured himself in the left seat. After loading ten or more troops, they departed, with Hennessy in the second ship. Mike briefed Tombaiyai that if they experienced enemy fire to discharge the troops without delay. However, Mike failed to inform Boonrat about the small arms fire he received during his last trip.

The crews ascended along Route-23 east on the Bolovens road until turning north toward Paksong (L-05). Approaching the Thateng strip from the south, Jarina commenced a hard-right hand turn to downwind. By the time he arrived on short final, small arms again began erupting from about the same area.

Alarmed, Boonrat glanced across the cockpit at Mike, "*They are shooting at us.*"

Mike used his customary humorous retort reserved for such tense situations, "*That's OK. It's on your side.*"

After landing mortars began impacting the area. They splashed close, but failed to inflict any immediate damage. Harboring a mindset that they were safe inside the helicopter, the troops were reluctant to leave their sanctuary.⁸ Jarina told the Flight Mechanic to get the troops off, for the ship was too

⁸ This was nothing new, for Mike had experienced such actions before on other occasions.

heavy; there was insufficient power available to depart the 2,700-foot elevation unless the troops exited.

After recognizing the serious problem confronting them, Boonrat said, *"Let me talk to them."* Then he commenced to rattle off rapid fire Thai, after which the soldiers hastily scurried off the machine and headed for the trenches.

Hennessey wisely rejected landing, so they RTB. When Customer John learned about the enemy fire, he terminated further helicopter missions to Thateng that day.

H-34 crews did not fly on the 15th. Over the years the Lao had been provided many aircraft, currently twelve H-34Ds, with major maintenance being conducted at the Udorn maintenance facility. Word had continuously filtered back to Washington agencies that the Lao military did not use the helicopters properly. Among other things, such as hauling drugs for General Ouane, Air America Flight Mechanics had observed Lao crews selling helicopter rides from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Therefore, the current situation at Thateng provided a perfect opportunity to test if the Lao could adequately support their own people under actual combat conditions.

Missions to reinforce Thateng were already planned for Sunday. Before leaving for the hostel, John informed Air America crews that they did not have to appear at the airfield in the morning; just ensure that their H-34s were fueled and ready to fly. By way of explanation, he indicated that three Lao H-34 crews were programmed to arrive from Savannakhet to provide support to Thateng. Mike asked if the Lao crews had their own aircraft.

John answered, *"Yes, but they will probably ground them as soon as they arrive."*

To Mike's knowledge, swapping Air America helicopters with Lao crews had never been done before and he was interested as to

what this entailed. To assuage their curiosity, both Jarina and Tombaiyai were Jeeped to the airfield early. A young man from a Washington agency waited by a vehicle in the parking area. Pre-empting Lao expectations, his intent was to provide Air America H-34s to the Lao when they grounded their own ships for dubious reasons. Hopefully, the shame involved in the ploy would supersede any reluctance to perform the assigned mission.

The Lao aircraft and crews arrived about 0700 hours. True to form, two ships were immediately grounded. Therefore, the crews were advised to substitute the parked Air America helicopters for the mission. Tombaiyai watched in horror as a Lao pilot mounted H-48's transmission deck and began violently shaking the pitch change rods, indicating the aircraft was not airworthy. The Thai Flight Mechanic complained to Mike that the Lao pilot was attempting to destroy his helicopter. Then he told the Lao pilots that his ship was in good condition and **his** pilot was prepared to fly it. The Asian face maneuver worked. Thus humiliated, the Lao agreed to execute the mission to support Thateng and extract the dead and wounded.

After the three ships departed Pakse, time passed slowly while Mike anxiously awaited word on the success or failure of the test mission. Moreover, it was a personal thing, for if his ship was badly damaged during the mission, he would no longer be able to fly.

The young man who observed the mission from a fixed wing aircraft returned later and related the somewhat bizarre events. He indicated that Lao crews were provided the best of available air assets: two Raven FACs to marshal them to the landing zone, A-1Es to provide low cover, jets for high cover, and Lao-piloted T-28s for escort and close air support.

After learning about all the help offered the Lao, Mike said, *"Give me the same protection and I will gladly land single pilot and not log a special."*

The armada departed for Thateng and arrived on station. Number one Raven pilot circled over the area; number two Raven led the H-34 pilots. Raven one asked Raven two his position. Two stated that he was two miles out of the landing zone. One then inquired about the Lao helicopter pilots' intentions.

"They are right behind me."

"Look again, my friend." Shockingly, the H-34s had reversed course with no intent of landing.

A Lao general observed the mission from the rear of a T-28. Incensed when he saw the helicopters headed away from the landing zone, he ordered the pilots to immediately turn around and resume the mission. Feigning multi ear hearing impediments, they continued flying in the opposite direction. The general then managed to receive their undivided attention by threatening to have his T-28 pilots shoot them out of the sky. Thus motivated, the helicopter crews swallowed their lack of intestinal fortitude and completed the assigned mission without incident.

As the enemy siege continued at Thateng, friendly air assets were also functioning as ABCC coordinated Ravens, directed strikes, and bombers provided death and destruction. With A-1E, fast movers, and T-28 pilots attacking during the day, a C-130 gunship at night, and Air America helicopter crews in support, the Thateng fort held. Despite enemy attempts to blast their way through defensive minefields, and concertina wire, and conducting massed attacks, air continued to save the day. Strafing, rocketing, and bombing sorties contributed to the deaths of an estimated two battalions of enemy. In the process, Thateng town no longer existed. Bloodied, but continuing to

mortar the airfield, the enemy withdrew on the 19th. What remained of the heavily savaged BV-46 unit emerged from the fort to view the carnage and devastation.

The next day, after the Lao pilots completed their enforced mission and returned the Air America H-34s in reasonably good condition, Mike, Boonrat, Tombaiyai, et. al. continued resupplying Thateng during four Special Missions. In between, they flew SGU troops from PS-22 to Saravane to reinforce that site. Missions were also conducted to the elevated TACAN site on Phu Kate. Tuesday included more of the same, moving troops to and from Phu Kate and PS-22 and supporting Thateng. Between 13 and 20 December estimates concluded 1,000 Vietnamese had been killed.

Recalled, Mike left for Udorn on the 18th on CASI Beech Baron N1413Z.

The current action at Thateng stimulated increased concern and communications among upper echelons from CINCPAC Hawaii to JCS Washington, D.C.

"The renewed enemy offensive at Ban Thateng increases our concern over NVN designs. The enemy's new aggressiveness there further emphasizes that Laos represents two geographic fingers, one reaching south to Cambodia flanking northern South Vietnam; the other pressing against northern Thailand.

The attacks at Thateng and the reported build-up against Saravane and Attopeu could presage a dramatic change of communist policy; all three are west of the de facto Geneva line on the 1962 agreements. These latest maneuvers could lead to the acquisition of net territory in Laos, threatening Vientiane's existing control in the southern Panhandle.

The main strategic value of [using] Laos has been as a corridor area [to SVN]. Communist forces are now increasingly active in areas which are of relatively minor import to the

LOC/logistics system serving South Vietnam. In the event of reduced NVA participation in South Vietnam, Hanoi could be expected to turn its attention westward.

Recent enemy actions in Laos could predict an initial attempt to seize the Bolovens Plateau. The moves might prompt the FAR to abandon Saravane. Additionally, the expansion of aggressive operations might be tailored to convince USG that continued presence in Southeast Asia was proving pointless.

Admiral McCain concluded his telegram by stating:

"As enemy intentions become clearer, we may have to re-evaluate [the] U.S position and strategy in Southeast Asia."

While Military Region Four troops continued consolidating positions around Thateng, and attempted to dislodge enemy rear-guard units, Lao leaders praised Prasouk's army for the victory and, as usual, ICC indecisive representatives stalled and could not agree on an investigative trip to Thateng.

The enemy continued shelling the Site-210 airfield into 1969, but in the absence of actual frontal attacks, airdrops kept the garrison well supplied. The defenders held through the spring of 1969. However, despite a stunning and unexpected victory and annihilation of enemy units, thanks to air strikes and resupply, they ultimately chose to abandon the fort. ⁹

⁹ Segment Sources:

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 285-286.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 22.

Weekly CIA Situation Report-4-19 December 1968.

CIA Intelligence Bulletin, 10/30/68.

CIA Bulletin, 12/13/68.

CIA Bulletin, 12/13/68.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Telegram CINCPAC-McCain to JCS-Wheeler, Threat in Laos, 12/21/68.

CHECO; Lao Situation, 12/24/68.

Extracts from ABCCC-Cricket and Hillsboro,

(ravenfac.com/ravens/articles/extracts-from-abcc).

LOSS OF A CREW

Other Bell and H-34 pilots spent time working in the Site-85 area during the PIG FAT operation. The day after I left Long Tieng, following an FCF in XW-PFF, Wayne Knight and Nikki Fillipi departed Udorn in the same machine for Nikki's semi-annual route check. Wayne also worked the area on 18 and 19 December providing route checks for Norm Grammer and Phil Goddard.¹⁰

Air Force attempts to interdict Sam Neua arteries leading west toward Pha Thi to impede the enemy's ability to reinforce and supply forces, although formidable, were not overly successful. During the previous bombing lull caused by either Thateng requirements in Military Region Four or adverse weather, the enemy re-infiltrated three battalions to the mountain.

Actual bombing in the immediate mountain area by all allied forces fared somewhat better, allowing major elements of Vang Pao's western thrust forces to move into and reclaim Houei Ma (LS-107) just south of Pha Thi, declaring it safe for helicopter operations on the sixth.¹¹ When word spread to the surrounding populace that the site was once more in government hands, it acted like a magnet, drawing many refugees who required movement to safer areas. This somewhat delayed, but did not prevent the build-up of a major jumping off point for an assault on the mountain. Not long after Houei Ma's recapture, an artillery piece was slung by an Air Force helicopter crew to counter enemy mortar fire from Pha Thi's southeastern rim.

¹⁰ EW Knight Email, 09/17/00.

¹¹ The site, containing a village and grassy strip, had served as my nightly hostel during the three-day Na Son/Son La, North Vietnam, SAR episode during June 1965.

Even though we worked the front lines, Customer considerations of the situation determined that dual pilots in the cockpit were not required and Udorn scheduled us to work as such.

As the USAID area coordinator, Ernie Kuhn had spent time at Na Khang since the concerted move on Pha Thi. When Vang Pao went to his forward command post at UH5056, or another site, with Customer "Pigpen" Ernie normally accompanied him.

On the seventh, Ernie departed Site-36 for the command post with Captain Bill Fraser, who was flying Bell 205 XW-PFI. Riding in the cabin section with Ernie were Flight Mechanic Pat McCarthy and training Flight Mechanic Bernardo Dychitan, boxes of ammunition, burlap sacks, and various other items. After dropping Ernie off, Fraser proceeded to a nearby pad. Then, as Ernie, Vang Pao, and Colonel Phan Syharat, RLG governor to Sam Neua Province, watched, Fraser departed in the direction of Houei Ma. Sometime after 1400 hours, just prior to touching down, two pops or bangs were reputedly heard by an eyewitness. Aircraft control was observed lost, Papa Foxtrot India plunged to the ground, caught fire, and exploded, incinerating the crew.

The explosion and ensuing small arms ammunition cooking off was visible from the command post. Consequently, Ernie began radioing Mayday calls for help in the blind on his HT-2. Since the helicopter had crashed on a landing zone containing cases of stacked inflammable "A" class ammunition, fires raged for hours. Frenchy Smith flying 11F and Nikki Fillipi in Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot, responded, and were able to load a reported eleven indigenous personnel suffering various degrees of injury and

ferry them to the Sam Tong hospital. ¹²

Toward evening, a helicopter pilot carried Ernie and Bag to the far end of the crash site. Since ammunition was still exploding, the PIC refused to move closer, so they returned to Vang Pao's command post for the night. Radio calls from Udorn and Vientiane to the CP and relayed to the crash site, advised the commanding officer there not to disturb the wreck.

The following morning a helicopter crew arrived early and the pilot ferried Ernie to the site. By then the wreck was cool enough to approach. Fraser, in extremis, appeared "quick cooked." His trousers were seared off, shoes were missing, and he "was lying on his side like a chair which had tipped over." His legs were bent and his hand curled as if still holding the cyclic. The Flight Mechanics were mostly ashes. Ironically, now two brothers-in-law had died violently while working for Air America. ¹³

An investigating team from Udorn arrived at the crash site, taking pictures and sifting through the ashes. The remains of the helicopter crew members were then returned to Udorn, where the Company doctor painstakingly identified each individual.

During accident reviews, since enemy action was not considered the source of the incident, and explosions were reported adjacent to the left cargo door, speculation for the initial blast focused on a loose grenade pin working its way out of a handle when one of the jute bags was tossed from the

¹² As often happened directly after an incident when specific details were fragmentary, skewed, and invariably wrong, the initial XOXO report proved erroneous. When the dust settled somewhat the following day, a clarifying XOXO reported that not including the crew of PFI, eight indigenous were killed and thirteen injured.

¹³ As I discovered during the SEATO Tulungan operation on Mindoro, Philippine Islands, during March 1962, charred human remains were not pleasant to view.

helicopter. The resulting detonation triggered sympatric explosions that impacted the ammunition stacked on the helipad.

Safety around munitions was rarely taught and never instilled among rank-and-file troopers. Therefore, a process to better contain Class A weapons gradually evolved from actual occurrences. Prior complaints from pilots regarding troops' carelessly wearing grenades on their belts in the helicopter had prompted measures whereby the mini-bombs were collected and sacked prior to boarding, then redistributed after landing at a landing zone. However, despite precautions prior to troop lifts, there were still instances where a gun might be accidentally discharged while clearing a weapon inside an aircraft. Attempting to circumvent the system, grenades were also hidden in personal bags.

Following this accident, which sensitized all of us, control of class "A" explosives became even more prevalent. New policies were established, with the Case Officers setting up new measures. Udorn management strived to make all pilots aware of the danger and to ensure conformity to the new measures. However, since the Flight Mechanic had to check for the instruments of war, the entire process tended to slow flight operations.

Over the years, many of us experienced hairy grenade episodes. The unpleasant event could have happened to anyone. Label the incident bad luck or anything else, but in the case of PFI's crew, the odds just caught up to them at that particular time and place. ¹⁴

¹⁴ Ernie Kuhn Email, 06/13/96.
Ernie Kuhn-Arthur Dommen Interview, 66, 03/25/95.
Air America XOXO, 12/07/68.
Air America XOXO, 12/08/68.
EW Knight Email, 09/17/00.

Scattered enemy patrols moved throughout the area. It became increasingly clear that working the forward battle area was very dangerous for aircrews, when on the eighth, Ted Cash and Flight Mechanic RA Legaspi experienced considerable battle damage to Hotel-57, a machine Mike Jarina had recently returned to Udorn. The ship was impacted by small arms fire three miles west of Houei Ma while returning to Houei Moun (LS-221), located to the southwest. Cash recovered at Site-221, where a hasty investigation revealed damage to two main rotor blades, a fuel line, fuel tanks, and the fuselage, causing the machine to be non-airworthy. The crew was flown to Na Khang. There parts were stripped from Hotel-49 to conduct emergency repairs to Hotel-57 and allow it to be ferried from the highly fluid area to Site-36, where blades, replacement parts and a mechanic were being shipped from Udorn. ¹⁵

The PIG FAT operation experienced some losses to American military aircraft and crews. In addition to Cash's battle damage on the eighth, an AlJ Skyraider pilot was shot down in the Sam Neua area. The pilot was recovered, and other planes received battle damage. Two days later another Skyraider was lost. In all, three aircraft were lost during the operation.

Houei Ma was firmly under Vang Pao's control. Therefore, confident of victory and supported by 105mm howitzer fire, the general authorized an assault on the mountain. Accordingly, a Meo company surged up the southwest slopes of Pha Thi toward the Site-85 village and airstrip. After achieving some initial success, the unit was pinned down by heavy fire from the upper karst. Within a day the troops were forced off the mountain. According to captured prisoners, Vietnamese and Pathet Lao

¹⁵ Air America XOXO Hotel-57, 12/08/68.

troops were not the only enemy combatants involved; Chinese advisors reputedly were "*hiding in a cave below the karst.*"¹⁶

Throughout the siege, enemy units continued to receive supplies from their Sam Neua depot over Route-602. The Doan 766 battalions still remaining on top of Pha Thi had taken a fierce pounding and suffered numerous casualties from air strikes, but still refused to grant an inch of ground. Life was harsh for the young Vietnamese and Pathet Lao defenders. Ordered not to surrender, they had to remain and die. There was no alternative, for to leave the "Rock" without permission guaranteed summary execution from rear echelon handlers. Perhaps a somewhat similar case was that of the rank-and-file Japanese soldier during World War Two who, preferring death, generally refused to surrender in the face of overwhelming odds. However, fealty to the emperor was the catalyst, not intimidation, threats, or some inane communist ideology.

Tactical strikes employing a combination of weaponry, took out a pesky mortar crew, and the situation seemed to improve for Vang Pao's operation. Moreover, teams managed to sever part of Route-602 and were moving on MOUNG YUT, since March, a major enemy logistical base.

MOUNG YUT

The small Lao Theung village of Ban MOUNG YUT was located in the Yut River Valley about three miles southeast of Site-85. Only six hundred feet of rice paddies, the village offered therapeutic hot springs that Pop Buell, Jiggs Weldon, and others

¹⁶ Over the years Vang Pao and others claimed Chinese were involved in the Lao fighting. There may have been some substance to these accusations, but nothing the Author ever saw in print or heard was ever revealed as accurate. Much of the time language was given for the "proof" of Chinese presence.

frequented with H-34 helicopter pilots. ¹⁷ Ernie Kuhn visited Moung Yut to interact with the people and seine the tiny fresh water shrimp that abounded in the river.

Huge caves located in the hills above the village and river were rumored to contain military supplies. After it was captured, Ernie discovered that the entire cave area had indeed been used as a Vietnamese army camp. Bamboo fences surrounded the compound to keep curious Lao Theung out. In addition to abundant military supplies, there were also large amounts of civilian goods the people could purchase in a communist version of a USAID people-to-people program.

Areas north of Pha Thi and along the Het River were noted for growing and harvesting sugar cane. In the months since March, the Vietnamese had transported huge iron vessels, like those seen in Louisiana, to reduce the cane stalks to usable sugar. In addition, there were sewing machines, clothes, cooking pots, knives, axes, and other commercial items for sale. There were also large amounts of school books written in various ethnic languages.

Seeing potential in distributing these goodies to the refugees, Ernie arranged to remove the booty to Site-107. After carrying items down the mountain to the rice paddies, H-34 pilots arrived to haul loads to the Houei Ma strip for further delivery south.

On the thirteenth, I arrived at Na Khang via Sam Tong in Hotel-64, and at Site-36 in Caribou 430. Once there, I had to wait until taking over XW-PFF with former U.S. Army mechanic Dave Crowell crewing. Because of a lack of Bell aircraft (only four operational), the scatter-shot procedure of scheduling that

¹⁷ For additional information about Ban Moung Yut see Author's 1963 Book, pp 376-377; Also Book 1964, page 120.

created long periods off between trips upcountry caused a general lack of battlefield knowledge at Pha Thi. The situation was changing so rapidly that FIC and the Na Khang Customer had problems briefing pilots. As was the norm, OJT seemed to be the only solution during the current situation, and that could be problematical in a fluid combat situation.

I only managed to fly a little more than one fuel load of operational missions before recovering at Long Tieng.

Despite a changing weather pattern created by the prevailing northwest monsoon that moved into the Site-85 area overnight, preventing most tactical air strikes, I managed to work underneath the overcast. Except for reversed roles in the battle for Pha Thi, the scenario reminded me of the March situation when air was also curtailed because of adverse weather and the enemy was on the march.

Instead of committing to larger scale attacks on the summit, friendly troops kept up pressure, probing and seeking weak points on Pha Thi's morale-ridden defenders who had already suffered fifty percent casualties.

I was recalled to Tango-08 and chocked in at the parking ramp with over eleven hours flight time, slightly more than one quarter of my monthly hours. Unless there was an emergency requiring all hands, I was finished for the month, with a little over forty hours in total time. As long as we had too few Bells and too many pilots in the program, it was something I was coming to expect. ¹⁸

¹⁸ Victor Anthony, 285.
Ken Conboy, 202.
Ernie Kuhn, 59-60.
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 155, 304 fn 87.

"I understand from newspaper stories Laos is getting, as you say, tough. Does this mean you will be occupied there for a long spell even if peace is declared in Vietnam? You be careful and take no chances however small."

Letter from Home, 12/15/68.

By the eighteenth, as weather and air support improved, Meo units commanded by Colonel Douangtha again moved up the southeastern slope and seized the Site-85 airfield. Over the next few days, friendly elements continued up the karst to capture the radar site, the helipad, and the Agency bunker. They advanced no further and the victory was short lived. As of Friday, despite air strikes, well entrenched enemy located on commanding high ground prevented further gains and pressed the government forces back. ¹⁹

JARINA

Twenty December, the same day as the stalemate on top of the "Rock" occurred, Mike Jarina boarded CASI C-47 Papa Delta Echo for LS-20A. Since Hotel-45 was at Sam Tong, he had to wait for a ride on Air America Helio Courier XW-PEA. Despite the shortened day, Mike and Flight Mechanic Bill Goodwin conducted numerous landings to San Louang (LS-41) and other northern flank sites between Site-20 and Moung Soui.

As part of the transfer of thousands of people from the Pha Thi area to deny the enemy a population base for labor and sustenance, Saturday was a full day (thirty-two landings) moving

¹⁹ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 203.
Tim Castle, 155.
Ernie Kuhn, 64.

refugees and goods from Houei Kha Moun and Houei Ma west to Houei Hin Sa (LS-215).

That night during a daring attack that suggested a diversion, an enemy sapper unit infiltrated Houei Ma, destroyed the supporting howitzer, ammunition, and killed the Meo commanding officer. However, the site held.

Mike's pace changed on the 22nd when he, with Ron Allendorfer as a second pilot, was directed to Luang Prabang for a mission to that Ban "Y" (LS-187) area, where a tenuous government presence was still maintained. Located about seventy nautical miles northeast of Lima-54, the mobile tribal site had significance as an intelligence gathering platform for surveillance of Route-19 and the ongoing construction there. After several local flights, they RTB Luang Prabang.

Another trip north to Ban Pha Thong (LS-169) was scheduled the following day. This site was also close to a segment of Route-19, but located further west from Ban "Y."

Events occurred during the day that reinforced Mike's disdain for FAR troops sloppiness and lack of will to wage war in a logical manner. He and Captain Lloyd Higgins, piloting another ship, were assigned to deliver troops and supplies to a landing zone. As they were loading, he observed two Lao H-34s landing. Curious, he asked the Customer, a former Navy chief, why he did not use the Lao H-34s for this work. They had the tools and spoke the language.

Chief contemptuously stained the ground with tobacco juice and said, *"They belong to the general and can't be used for resupply."*

Mike, equally roiled, replied, *"But that is why USG gave them the ships in the first place."*

Since he had recently experienced a similar, but somewhat more cowardly attempt to avoid a mission at Pakse, Mike was

doubly disgusted with his allies' attempts to avoid unpleasant tasks and acquire financial gain.

Mike and Lloyd delivered troops to the landing zone. Grenades were scattered about in boxes or just lying on the ground. Depending on Customer guidance, this was disappointing just after the loss of the Bell and crew at Site-107.

They were assigned to return that afternoon to find and retrieve the troops and prisoners. While returning, Mike called the Customer, who asked if he had the prisoners.

Mike answered, *"Yes, I have six prisoner pigs."*

On the way back to Udorn Jarina stopped at Mounng Kassy (LS-153) on Route-13 north of Vang Vieng. ²⁰

Christmas at the Casterlin house was fine. Two-and-a-half-year-old Ricky had recovered from his sickness and had a grand time opening Santa's presents. It did get a bit dicey later in the day when Orn brought her children, and Rick bit his cousin Myron during a fit of excitement over a toy.

UPPER MR-2 SLIDING DOWN THE TUBES

There was no holiday break for the enemy. On the Christian holiday, counterattacks commenced on Vang Pao's men, and the Vietnamese 148 Regiment of the dreaded 316th northwest tribal Division began moving west out of Sam Neua to implement the final solution.

Ernie Kuhn, who spent the majority of the three-week operation with Vang Pao during PIG FAT, RON on New Year's Eve at Houei Hin Sa with AID's Public Health Dentist, Frank Becker. Because of the unwinding situation, an estimated 4,000 refugees

²⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Victor Anthony, 285.
Ken Conboy, 203.

were camped at the site and needed to be moved to safer areas. With sites around them under attack, seven in number, it proved a grim night.

Further to the west, close to the border of Houa Phan (Sam Neua) and Luang Prabang Provinces, between eight and ten thousand refugees temporarily resided at Houei Tong Kho (LS-184). Like those at Site-215, they were an accumulation of people stemming from the March and current losses. Since the number there was overwhelming, the situation relatively benign, and assets scarce, a decision was made in Vientiane to temporarily leave them in place. Movement would come later.

With operation PIG FAT stalling and enemy probes continuing at Na Khang, increased defensive measures were considered essential at the site. Air strikes increased in December and, marking a dramatic change to his policy of chemical usage, Ambassador Sullivan approved the use of defoliants. For two days, three USAF UC123 aircraft sprayed chemicals on elephant grass on hills, forests, and valleys around the base perimeter.²¹

Despite achieving neither real nor lasting results in recovering Pha Thi, ever stubborn Vang Pao vowed he would continue his offensive and seek a successful outcome. Following heavy airstrikes on the first two days in January, he renewed efforts to seize the high ground. Actual assaults were slated to begin on the third. However, on that day, the enemy captured the forward base at Houei Ma, stalling the planned offensive.

By the fifth, two fresh regiments from the 316 Division arrived at the mountain to reinforce remnants of the dreaded

²¹ A VCR tape Jim Rhyne sent the Author shows C-123 aircraft spraying. It was some time before I worked at Site-36 again. Although the clandestine spraying was never divulged to us, the toxic chemicals might have taken an eventual toll on the health of both combatants and those of us supporting the area.

148th, a hilltribe regiment, which had suffered serious casualties from friendly air.

Having been on the move and fighting for months (if not years), Vang Pao's men were fatigued and demoralized. Hence, the introduction of fresh enemy troops and the inability to take and maintain a presence on the mountain effectively terminated the PIG FAT operation. Two days later, Vang Pao began withdrawing his men south toward the Na Khang base, a site certain to be the next target. The operation had been costly to both sides in terms of men and materiel, but the Vietnamese won the day, leaving upper Military Region Two largely devoid of friendly people or government forces and paving the way for further inroads south.

Although not a military advisor, in retrospect, Ernie Kuhn postulated that because of a lack of water during the dry season and few supplies available on the mountain, Vang Pao might have simply interdicted critical logistical LOCs, isolated enemy units on Pha Thi, and waited for them to surrender or die. In addition to also interdicting LOCs, methodical Air Force strikes day and night might have taken a greater toll and prevented potential air supply. Shouda-wouda-couda... ²²

The day after Christmas, Mike Jarina, Larry Wilderom, and Bill Goodwin left Udorn in Hotel-39 for a Special Mission out of Luang Prabang. The long mission thrust eighty nautical miles north from Luang Prabang to SJ9947 into Phong Saly Province. Intelligence missions did not normally probe that far, but road construction on Route-48 seven miles east leading to Mounng Sai,

²² Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 203, 208.
Ken Conboy, *Vietnam and Laos*.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 285.
Ernie Kuhn, 64-66.
CHECO.

as well as those to Phong Saly, were likely of special interest to Agency people.

The aircraft involved in the mission paused twenty miles south to retrieve another team that was being rotated back to Luang Prabang.

The crews remained together on Friday after one local trip to Ban Kheng Khan on the north side of the Mekong, two miles east and across the river from the port of Ban Tha Soeng in Sayaboury Province.²³ Another even longer trip was scheduled into Phong Saly Province. The drop point, located on a steep ridge at TJ1696, overlooked the Nam Ou's northern reaches, paralleling Route-191 and feeder trails leading into Phong Saly Town.

Saturday, the final day of Special Missions during the period, the crew returned to the site north of the Mekong River and west of the royal capitol. Another trip was flown to the hills of Phou Dam (LS-256), ten miles north-northwest of Luang Prabang, and south of the Mekong. This was followed by a sixty-five-mile flight north to TJ2909, just west of the old guerrilla site at Ban Tha Thong (LS-169) and Route-19. Consolidating missions, on the way back, the flight stopped to retrieve a team from TH2288, seven miles northwest of Nam Bac and close to LS-193. After an interim stop at Moung Soui, the crew RON at Sam Tong.

No one flew out of Site-20 on the 29th.

Aware that he was to be relieved, Mike started flying early on the 30th. After picking up officers and supplies at Long Tieng, he launched east across Padong Ridge to land at Khang Kho (LS-204).

²³ During the year, a new fourteen-mile road had been completed between Hong Sa north to the port.

INSURGENCY IN THAILAND

In December, the Agency distributed a paper regarding RTG difficulties controlling north Thailand's inhospitable border areas the Author had flown over many times:

"The north Thailand and northwest Lao border area is a locus of subversive insurgency that increasingly plagues the Thai government. Rugged, remote, and densely forested, the area is well suited to covert cross-border movement and is very inhospitable to the RTG's counterinsurgency operations.

Although Sayaboury Province has remained relatively free from PL influence, PL forces have been active in the northwest part of the province west of Hong Sa. They have been active in the northwest part of the province west of Hong Sa. They have also played a role in the support of communist insurgents in the northern Thai provinces where hill people have been the targets of communist propaganda and recruitment for several years. Serious clashes between communist insurgents and Thai security forces have occurred in Chiang Rai and Nan since late 1967.

The rugged mountains and densely foliated forests of the region greatly favor communist operations. In the Thai provinces, insurgent groups are composed mostly of Meo but include other hill people. Their Thai adversaries are lowlanders who lack the insurgents' knowledge of the mountains and lack speed and endurance when travelling in such terrain. The insurgents are able to attack Thai military installations in the valleys, as well as patrols in the mountains, and then withdraw into their mountain redoubts with little fear of apprehension. The dense forest effectively conceals insurgents' movements (including infiltration of agents into northern Thailand from Laos) from air observation. The region is poorly suited to conventional military operations. Airpower and artillery are difficult to apply effectively in the mountainous, densely

forested terrain. All forms of surface movement by ground forces are severely limited.

The town of Chiang Khong across from Ban Houei Sai reported considerable traffic of people and goods across the river with no documents being shown to immigration or customs official on either side. [With the] border porous, infiltration [is] easy. Illegal border crossings are difficult to curtail. The Sayaboury segment of the border is aligned along rugged heavily forested terrain that is impossible to patrol effectively, so illegal crossings are likely to continue. Hundreds of small boats cross the Mekong daily. Thailand plans to increase river patrols, add selected hill tribesmen to existing security forces in the border areas, and the establishment of a buffer zone five kilometers wide along the Thai side of the Mekong (but not along the land boundary with Sayaboury Province).

The Thai government, recognizing the security of the northern frontier region requires the loyalty of the hill people living there, in the past decade has undertaken a program to gain that loyalty. The chief vehicle for the implementation of this program has been the Border Patrol Police [BPP], a paramilitary force of some 700 men that has carried out civic action projects in the north with U.S. advice and assistance. These projects have included the building of roads and landing strips, the construction and operation of elementary schools and medical facilities, and the provision of limited agricultural assistance. In addition to carrying out such projects, the BPP is responsible for border reconnaissance and security. Much of this work has been eroded since early 1967 by communist subversive activity among the hill people.

The movement and logistic support of a conventional military force would be severely hampered throughout the region by the sparse, primitive system of narrow, unsurfaced roads with

*limited capacity to sustain heavy military traffic. Bottlenecks include narrow and low-capacity bridges, sharp curves, steep grades, fords, and ferry crossings with primitive facilities. Vehicles crossing the Mekong between Chiang Khong and Ban Houei Sai are ferried on a raft supported by two pirogues. All but the few surfaced roads are impassable during much of the rainy season, when they become muddy, bridges wash out, fords flood, ferry landing slips submerge, and roads in mountainous terrain become blocked by landslides, rockfalls or fallen trees. Off road dispersal and cross-country movement of vehicles are precluded the year round in most areas by steep slopes and dense forest. Cross-country movement by foot troops would be arduous to those not accustomed to travel in the mountainous terrain. The difficulty in cross-country movement for both vehicular and foot traffic is compounded during wet weather..."*²⁴

At year end, as was the case in Laos, Thailand was experiencing military problems and instability.

Success of the Thai government in eastern Isan in suppressing and combating communist insurgency to relatively low intensity and manageable levels may have stimulated and substantially increased year-end communist terrorist (CT) activity in north central Thailand. It was generally unknown the caliber of leadership, how many individuals were involved, or if they included trained units from Laos, but the recent upsurge in activity marked the most ambitious CT effort since the insurgency began in 1964.

Three months before there was no overt insurrection in the north central area. However, in late November, CTs attacked a

²⁴ CIA Directorate of Intelligence, Geographic Brief on North Thailand and Northwest Laos Border Areas, December 1968, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).

government hill-tribe training facility and were currently harassing police and military units in the Phitsanulok (T-01), Phetchabun (T-601), and Loei (T-17) border regions. A report indicated that during the past two weeks, communists thwarted RTG efforts to evacuate surrounded provincial police in a pair of tribal villages. During the period, a police helicopter was shot down.

Communist activity was creating the negative effect of disrupting the RTGs fledgling village security programs and attempts to gain tribal loyalty. So far, RTG reaction was limited to cursory air strikes and troop reinforcement.

Reverses in November and December were considered to have perpetrated lasting effects on the people' morale and regional security issues. This was exacerbated by rumors of potential attacks that fostered anxiety and apprehension among those civilians living in the area. Moreover, because the insurgents were mostly Meo, a bias was developed against them. ²⁵ ©

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02/01/21, 03/04/21, 06/26/21, 07/16/21, 01/03/22.

²⁵ CIA Weekly Summary, 5-6, 12/22/68,
(foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).

EPILOGUE

Because of a late 1967 switch from the Sikorsky helicopter to the turbine engine Bell and its significant differences, 1968 had been a personally challenging year for the Author. Using on-the-job-training and mountain flying techniques, developed over years of difficult and hazardous flying, I eventually became comfortable flying the machine, and began to enjoy the Bell and exploit its unique properties.

Early in the year, with the advent of the massive enemy TET offensive in South Vietnam and increased enemy manpower and aggressiveness throughout Laos, the complexion and intensity of the conflict took on new meaning, not previously witnessed in Southeast Asia. Abrogating the Royal Lao Government's slight balance of power gained through internal and external air superiority, the enemy spring dry season offensive was unlike any we had experienced in the past. With the Neo Lao Hak Sat's Pathet Lao forces taking a backseat, and relegated to support operations, the North Vietnamese Army initiated and controlled military action. As a result, we lost many important and strategic sites in Military Regions One and Two. These losses took a serious toll on government troops, equipment, and morale.

Much of the enemy push to clear, reclaim, and control important lines of communication could be attributed to United States air power diminution of enemy capability to fully utilize in country logistic routes, and to damage the Rolling Thunder campaign had inflicted on North Vietnam's infrastructure. Assisting this bombing program were electronic navigation TACAN facilities strategically installed on high ground in north and south Laos that allowed air strikes to continue despite adverse weather. Naturally, these sites became prime targets for Dac

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Cong sapper units, and contributed to much of the action during the year. This was particularly the case at Phu Pha Thi (Site-85) in upper Houa Phan Province.

Since the Southeast Asian War was becoming increasingly unpopular in the United States, another political motivation for enemy aggressiveness quite possibly included North Vietnamese leaders' anticipation of peace talks, and ensuing negotiations should USG agree to unilateral terms to cease bombing the North. The communist time-honored ploy of "fighting and talking" would then allow the enemy to push Lao government forces back from occupied territory to the de facto and imaginary demarcation line, which included half of the country and most of the mountainous regions, and was conceived during the 1961 ceasefire and the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos. If instituted, this would allow virtually unrestricted supply routes to all five military regions, and the ability to function with reduced RLG resistance.

The Vietnamese offensives in Sam Neua may also have been a reaction to the gains and successes of General Vang Pao's guerrilla units. Interdiction and harassment by Meo units along routes leading from upper Military Region Two into the Ban Ban Valley and to the Plain of Jars, were also seriously hampering the time table of North Vietnamese leaders' goal of reuniting all of Vietnam under communist rule. Intelligence gathered by crack tribal teams, trained to detect and direct air strikes on nighttime truck convoys and ammunition dumps, were severely impacting enemy logistic movement.

All the Lao government's losses and questionable future for country in 1968 fostered glum feelings among Air America's pilots and Flight Mechanics. However, there was nothing we could do except to continue performing our jobs supporting USG policy in holding the line, and look forward to better results in 1969.

EPILOGUE

True to our expectations, consistent with past years, 1969 would foster even greater military escalation and increased conflict in Laos between antagonists, losses of government sites, territory, men, and a stunning unanticipated mid-year reversal for the RLA on the Plain of Jars.

The Pig Fat operation would fail, and by default, most of upper Military Region Two would fall into enemy hands.

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