

# ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE: HELIO U-10 SUPER COURIERS

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An unknown Helio Courier in Royal Lao Air Force colors, taken by Benjamin F. Coleman in late 1969 or early 1970  
(photo used here with kind permission from Leigh Coleman Hotujec)

It is well known that Air America flew a number of Helio Couriers in Laos since 1959. For the Helio could land at places where most other aircraft had difficulties to land, and after dozens of short and tricky mountaintop landing sites (“Lima Sites,” at that time still called “Victor Sites”) had been carved out of the terrain with primitive methods, the Helio became one of Air America’s work horses in Laos. The missions flown by Air America’s Helios ranged from communication to flying around CIA case officers or ARMA<sup>1</sup> people, recruiting soldiers for the Hmong army, transporting medical doctors and medicine, dropping small supplies, inserting and picking up spies and agents in enemy territory, and so on. For details, see my file at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/Leeker/aircraft/index.html> documenting the aircraft used by Air America.

As to the Royal Lao Air Force, most people would say that they did not have any Helio Couriers. But the RLAF had 3 of them between late 1969 and mid-1970. Peter Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972*, notes: “Considerable message traffic was [...] generated by DCH-AF<sup>2</sup> in an attempt to fill an AIRA<sup>3</sup> Vientiane identified requirement for three U-10 aircraft for Project 404 operational use. Due to the non-availability of O-1/U-17 aircraft, DCH-AF proposed in early December 1969 to accept the three U-10s as interim substitutes at no cost to be added to the MASF<sup>4</sup> Laos aircraft UE<sup>5</sup>. CSAF<sup>6</sup> approved the proposal, but later advised that action had been taken to deliver four O-1 aircraft to MAP Laos. DEPCH<sup>7</sup> now faced the problem of whether to retain the U-10s or not, since the arrival of the O-1s early in 1970 would bring the authorized O-1/U-17 UE programmed to its limit (including the three U-10s) with no additional O-1/U-17s programmed prior to FY 1/1972” (p.75). The 3 Helios were retained and transferred to the Royal Thai Air Force in 1970. As Liebchen (*MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972*, p.95) notes: “The three U-

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<sup>1</sup> ARMA means “US Army Attaché at the American Embassy at Vientiane, Laos”.

<sup>2</sup> DCH-AF means “Deputy Chief, Air Force, within DEPCHIEF”.

<sup>3</sup> AIRA means “US Air Attaché at the American Embassy at Vientiane, Laos”.

<sup>4</sup> MASF means “Military Assistance Service Funded”.

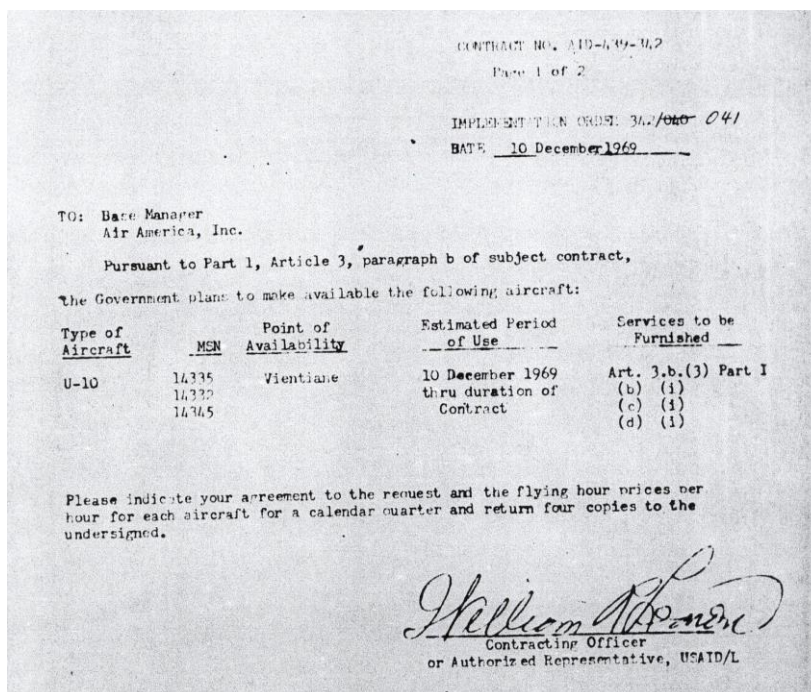
<sup>5</sup> UE means “Unit Equipment”.

<sup>6</sup> CASF means “Chief of Staff, USAF”.

<sup>7</sup> DEPCH stands for DEPCHIEF, meaning “Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand”.

10 aircraft used by MASF Laos as interim substitutes for O-1/U-17 aircraft were transferred to MAP Thailand, and all MASF Laos UH-34G helicopters were converted to 'D' models by June 1970.”

The same three Helios had also been offered to Air America as an addition to Contract no. 439-342 that Air America had with USAID. For, Implementation Order no. 342/041 dated 10 December 69 lists 3 more Helios that were planned to be made available to Air America for operations under contract no. 439-342: 14335, 14332, and 14345.



USAID Implementation Order no. 342/01 dated 10 December 69  
(in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.29)

The USAF Aircraft Assignment Records for 1969 (AVH-13) list the following:

Helio U-10D 66-14332 56 SOP Wing, Nakhon Phanom to TL MAP on 69348 (14 Dec.69)  
 Helio U-10D 66-14335 56 SOP Wing, Nakhon Phanom to TL MAP on 69348 (14 Dec.69)  
 Helio U-10D 66-14345 56 SOP Wing, Nakhon Phanom to TL MAP on 69348 (14 Dec.69)

There is no trace of these aircraft in the USAF Assignment Records for 1970, 1971, and 1972, or in Air America’s Flight Operation Circulars or Daily Flight Schedules of that period. As the photo above proves, they flew with the Royal Lao Air Force and were probably used by Forward Air Controllers (*Ravens*) or for training. According to Steve Darke,<sup>8</sup> these three Helios went to RThaiAF during the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 1970. Two of them still exist, 66-14332 preserved at Vajiravudh Scout Camp, Si Racha, Thailand, and 66-14345 with ‘Tango Squadron’, Chiang Mai.

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Darke, e-mail dated July 2012 kindly sent to the author.