Air America in Laos I – humanitarian work
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Part II

First published on 29 May 2006, last updated on 24 August 2015

A) Humanitarian work in Laos from the Tet Offensive to the Cease-fire Agreements: Air America 1968-1973

Air America’s operations for USAID/Laos

While in South Vietnam, the Tet Offensive of late January 1968 meant a complete change in the war, it did not affect Laos very much.1 But if we understand the Tet Offensive as a prelude to an overall more aggressive strategy of North Vietnam, there were indeed some very important changes that affected Laos. First, the war became more conventional, when North Vietnam brought big guns and entire battalions into Laos, resulting in a similar strategy on the pro-western side that, to a certain extent, replaced the old guerilla strategy. Then, beginning in 1969, the traditional pattern of the war in Laos – during the dry season Communist troops would advance to the west, but during the rainy season they would be pushed back to the east by pro-western troops supported by Air America aircraft – no longer worked, as then, the Communist troops continued their attacks during the rainy season.2 On the humanitarian side, all this meant an enormous increase in the number of refugees to be fed and also an increased number of refugee resettlements and of downed aircraft whose crews had to be rescued.

Vientiane’s Wattay Airport, the starting point of Air America’s food-drops
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

Flights for USAID’s Refugee Relief program: food-drops

As to the rice drops, an article published in a 1969 issue of Air America Log describes the situation as follows: “Air-delivering 10-million pounds of rice and related commodities a month – mostly by free-fall airdrop, but some by landed delivery – is no mean accomplishment. Aerial rice deliveries are made seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, weather permitting. Air America does it – and does it consistently – month in, month out; year in, year out.” Then the text continues commenting a photo: “Above, you can see the beginning of the action (except for actually filling the bags with rice). Customer rice has just been trucked into the Air Transport Operations Group (ATOG) warehouse at Air America’s Base, Wattay

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1 Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, p. 157, at: http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/
2 Kirk, Wider war, p.228.
Airport, Vientiane, Laos. Customer’s laborers are hefting the 40 kilo (88 lb.) burlap bags from the truck and are stacking them in neat piles awaiting aerial delivery somewhere in Laos. The rice is triple-bagged to resist the impact of a free fall from a dropping altitude of approximately 800 to 900 feet above terrain. This altitude range was selected because it is high enough to allow the rice bags to lose almost all forward motion (and thus avoid rolling and breaking open upon impact with the ground) and it is also low enough to allow the plane’s pilot to make his drops with reasonable accuracy. Although rice represents by far the greatest proportion of the 10-million pounds of commodities that Air America delivers monthly in Laos, other items also delivered include cornmeal and salt.”

As an example, former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls Houei Thong Kho (LS-184): “at least in 1969, perhaps 20 C-46 drops a month to feed the 12,000 people there, largely refugees, but also some SGU and dependents.”

Drops for a small Laotian village, taken by Dan Gamelin (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

For each month, the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation program of USAID’s Rural Development Division made up a schedule of supplies to be delivered to each location. At Sam Thong (LS-20), Long Tieng (LS-20A), and Muong Cha (LS-113), rice, cornmeal, and salt was landed. The list for May 1969, published on 2 May 69 by USAID’s J. L. Williamson and kindly sent to the author by former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson, distinguished between food that was landed and food that was dropped. For the food that was landed, it gives the following numbers:

a) 100 kilo bags of rice: 100 bags were landed at Long Tieng every day, making a total of 3,000 bags per month; 100 bags were landed each time at Sam Thong on 2, 10, 15, 20, and 15

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4 E-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
May 69; 25 bags were landed each time at Muong Cha on 6, 16, and 26 May 69.

b) 40 kilo bags landed: 120 bags of rice were landed each time at Long Tieng on 5, 10, and 15 May 69, together with a total of 250 bags of corn – all that destined for customer “Mr. Bo”;
80 bags of rice were landed each time at Sam Thong on 10 and 25 May 69, together with 250 bags of corn meal each time; in addition to that, 1,200 bags of rice were delivered to Sam Thong in May 69 for air drops made out of Sam Thong.

c) 44 kilo sacks of salt: 500 sacks were landed at Sam Thong on 11 May, and another 500 sacks on 22 May 69.

d) 80 kilo sacks of salt: 100 sacks were landed at Long Tieng on 11 May, and another 100 sacks on 22 May 69.

The drop schedule for May 1969 contained in the list published on 2 May 69 by USAID’s J. L. Williamson gives no less than 57 Lima Sites and 30 additional drop zones that were regularly supplied that year by dropping 40 kilo bags of rice. The smallest villages – Pha Phai (LS-65), Phu Houei Mouei (LS-67), Tin Bong (LS-90), Muong Aow Neua (LS-227), Phong Tha (LS-229), and Pha Kat (LS-245) – received 60 bags once a month at a date still to be determined. Many villages were supplied only once a month, but received 120 bags of rice, like San Chaw (LS-2), Phu Chia (LS-25), Houei Ki Nin (LS-38), Ban Pak Ha (LS-40), San Louang (LS-41), or Phou Meng Mane (LS-96). The big “customers” were supplied 4 times a month, that is Phu Cum (LS-50) received a total of 480 bags of rice, Pa Doung (LS-5) a total of 1,200 bags of rice, Houei Tong (LS-196) and Thong Miang (LS-266) each a total of 360 bags of rice and 240 bags of corn, Phou Saly (LS-178) and Sam Song Hong (LS-201) each received a total of 480 bags of rice and 240 bags of corn, Bouam Long (LS-32) a total of

(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

1,800 bags of rice and 360 bags of corn, Xieng Dat (LS-26) a total of 2,860 bags of rice. A few locations received drops even 5 times a month, that is Na Luang (LS-66) a total of 600 bags, Phu Dam (LS-256) a total of 960 bags, and Hat Khon (LS-271) even a total of 2,400
bags. And Phou He (LS-255) was supplied on 1, 4, 9, 12, 17, 21, and 24 May, that is even 6 times in May 69 with a total 840 bags of rice and 360 bags of corn. As to the drops made to villages, some of them showed some particularities in the drop list for May 69: Most drops were to be made onto the airstrip, but the drops at Muong Om (LS-22) were to be made in part onto the airstrip and in part into the village on 9 and 18 May, the drop for Pou Khong

USAID drop schedule for May 1969 (p.7), kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson (LS-42) was to be made locally upon call on 12 May, the dates for the 60 bags of rice and the 60 bags of cornmeal to be dropped at Than Sorn Yai (LS-74) were still to be determined. There were 2 drop locations at Muong Moc (LS-46): On 3 and 21 May 69, a total of 240 bags of rice and 120 bags of corn was to be dropped onto the airstrip, and on 6, 16, and 26 May, a total of 360 bags of rice was to be dropped into the school yard; and Chieng Sa Ni (LS-45),
Pha Lang Mou (LS 170), Thong Keum (LS-191), Nan Mo (LS-207), Phon Sai (LS-211), Ban Son (LS-246), and Neo San Luang (LS-252) did not receive any rice drops that month – either because they were “buying rice” or because they had “rice harvest”. As to the drop zones, some of them probably were refugee camps, and many of them probably were military or SGU positions. The number of bags dropped to those drop zones was similar to that dropped to the villages, starting with DZ-005 at coordinates TG8674 and DZ-030 at coordinates UG1300, which were to receive 60 bags each at a date to be determined, and going up to the big “customers”, that is DZ-056 (“Alpha Pad”) at coordinates UH1346, which was supplied 6 times in May 69 with a total of 1,440 bags of rice, and DZ-057 (“Lima Pad”) at coordinates UH1543 and DZ-070 at coordinates TG8587, which each received a total of 2,400 bags of rice that month. Here, too, there were some particularities, as DZ-003 at coordinates UF0279 was supplied from Sam Thong, while DZ-002 and DZ-012 did not receive anything that month because of “rice harvest”. But of course, all of these numbers refer to both Air America and Continental Air Services, as both companies had similar contracts, and the USAID paper quoted here does not indicate what was transported by Air America and what by CASI. In July 1969, Air America even received two more C-46s, XW-PBV and XW-PBW, as “Grant Aircraft” on loan from the Royal Lao Government, to be operated out of Vientiane under the

Grant C-46s XW-PBV and XW-PBW: Implementation order of 20 October 71 (in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 26) and Passenger Insurance, letter of 14 October 71 (in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 3)

provisions contract no. AID-439-342. These aircraft were operated under Implementation Orders and were not allowed to carry non-aircrew American nationals.

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5 All details taken from the list of food to be landed and dropped in May 1969, published on 2 May 69 by USAID’s J. L. Williamson and kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson on 7 January 2006.

6 Flight Operations Circular for 1 July 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B.

7 See Implementation Order of 20 October 71 (in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.26) and letter dated 14 October 71 by Var Green re “Passenger Insurance on Grant C-46s” (in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.3). The first Implementation Order was that running from 1 July 69 to 30 June 70 (see list “Implementation Orders to Contract AID-439-342” dated 23 February 72, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 26).
But C-46s were not the only Air America aircraft that were used on rice drop missions. MacAlan Thompson recalls: “We bought and delivered the food stuffs upcountry, to the main bases of L-25, 54, 20, and 20A, via boat, truck, and plane, for redistribution. USAID did the direct deliveries via CASI and AirAm smaller planes, except for 20A, where SKY made the deliveries (not for pots, pans, and blankets, though).”

Many Air America Porters had fold-up seats and a door in the floor, which could be opened by the pilot by a handle and thru which the cargo could be dropped. In 1972, this handle was relocated from its former location, between the pilot’s seat and the fuselage, where the pilot had to operate it with his left hand, to the center of the aircraft below the sandwich tray, where the pilot could grip it with his right hand. These Porters were used out of regional USAID centers like Ban Houei Sai (L-25), Luang Prabang (L-54), or Sam Thong (LS-20) to drop rice and other commodities to Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs), their dependents, and refugees. MacAlan Thompson recalls: “L-25, Ban Houei Sai, was the main ‘refugee’ site for NW Laos, we did most of the rice drops out of here to the SGU, their dependents, and to refugees, with CASI or Air America Porters, depending just who had the contract at that time. I worked there Sept. ’69-June ’70. L-54, Luang Prabang, same, USAID did the Porter drops of rice and canned meat to the SGU, dependents, and refugees. [...] LS-20, Sam Thong, landed Caribous loads of rice and other goods, food and pots and pans and blankets, etc. for the refugees and dependents. These were redistributed out of 20 by AirAm H-34 and CASI Porters, and occasionally AirAm Helios. Fuel, too.”

“As to animal protein for the refugees, SGU dependents, and SGU, we, USAID/PHD, came up with a canned meat supplement. [...] This started along towards late 1968, I think it was, small quantities. Contracted from Singapore but was really Australian mutton. Later the contracts were shifted to Bangkok and ended up being Thai water buffalo, five contracts at the high point, 25,000 cases per month. Delivery of the canned meat was a real problem as USAID didn’t have the budget for lots of H-34 time. In LP, January 1969, Joe Flipse and I came up with some sort of home made parachute of USAID funded PL-480 cloth sheets, local plastic rope, and a few round rocks. With this we could air drop five cases of

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8 E-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
9 Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14.
11 E-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
meat from a Porter with a pretty good ’chute opening rate. Those cans of meat that were broken could be eaten right away, the good cans put on the shelf.”

Air America’s new rice drop technique introduced in 1970

(*Air America Log*, vol. V, no. 5, p.4)

In 1970, a new rice drop technique was introduced in Laos, used on Air America’s C-46s. “First conceived in 1970 by Jerry Ryder, TM(T) VTE, the new concept was developed into a practical technique by First Officer G. D. (Jerry) MacPherson and has become the standard method of air-dropping rice and other commodities furnished by USAID/L (United States Agency for International Development/Laos). Primary advantages of the new system of rice dropping are:

- Greater safety for the “kickers”;
- Considerable potential monetary saving for the customer;
- Reduces possible damage to aircraft’s left stabilizer;
- Weight saving;
- Speedier ground loading.

The manner in which these manifold advantages were achieved was to develop a three-foot, tiltable, hinged track system at the drop door of the C-46. The hinged track extends 15 inches out of the aircraft’s door and incorporates a pallet stop built into the guide roller channel to retain the pallet in the aircraft instead of dropping it with its rice load, as was done previously. The pallet stop is easily removable should the rice have to be jettisoned any time during the flight. The old track system consisted of four ten-foot sections, one “Y” section, and one curved section, for a total weight of 770 pounds. The new track system is made up of two ten-foot sections, one eight-foot section and one curved section for a total weight of 500 pounds. Saving in ACL (Allowable Cabin Load): 270 pounds. Under the old system, the rice was palletized nine bags per pallet; average C-46 load was 13-14 pallets. With the new 12 E-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

13 MacAlan Thompson adds that “one of the head Filipino guys, Ramon DeMesa, was also involved with Jerry on this project” (e-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).

14 “More ‘logistics’ saving than $$$$, in that I didn’t have to worry about the small pallet contract of local masonite board and having them delivered daily to ATOG. That was sometimes a real hassle, supply of steel bolts, rollers, etc. The tilt track pallet was VERY NICE, only had to provide perhaps one or two hundred a year. A negative of the tilt track system to the people upcountry on the DZ was that they no longer had good hard masonite pallets for local construction use, houses, schools, bunkers, etc. Pop Buell chastised me several times about this, for pushing the tilt track system, I liked it. We also did a semi similar deal for rice dropping from C-123s but I never liked that plane and resisted using it, except for a few test drops” (e-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).
system, the rice is palletized 18 bags per pallet; average aircraft load is 7 pallets. Because ground loading crews have to handle only half as many pieces of cargo, ground loading time is significantly decreased. Prior to the development of the new system, the pallet was dropped with its load; this posed a constant threat of the relatively large-area and light-weight pallet being blown into the C-46’s left horizontal stabilizer. Moreover, since under the new system the pallets are reusable instead of being expendable, the need for new pallets is greatly reduced, thereby offering the customer saving of up to $200,000.00 yearly. And greater safety for the “kickers” stems from the fact that, instead of physically having to push each pallet (or pair of pallets) out of the plane as they did under the old system – and thus exposing themselves to the remote possibility of falling out of the airplane […] – now, from inside the plane, they merely lift the inboard edge of a pallet positioned at the drop door and the bags of rice, or other commodities, simply slide off the pallet and tumble to the DZ (Drop Zone) over which the aircraft is flying.”

In spite of this invention, however, the quantity of rice air-dropped by Air America aircraft in 1970 was below the 10-million pounds a month given for 1969. An article published in the *Air America Log* in early 1971 notes: “Air America has been moving rice in Laos since 1961. In 1970, we moved approximately 46,000,000 pounds of commodities – mostly rice, but also salt, canned beef[16] and other foodstuffs.”

![Loading a C-46 on the Air America ramp in Vientiane](with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

At the same time, the situation around Luang Prabang had become problematic. “By 1970, RLG areas in western Luang Prabang, the Nam Houn Valley and Nam Bang Valley were lost. In November 1969 the fall of the last RLG position on the Mekong between Pak Ou and Pak Tha closed that river for shipping between Luang Prabang and Ban Houie Sai. […] Luang Prabang had to rely upon either Route 13 or the Mekong from Vientiane. Commercial cargo

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16 Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “Later in Vientiane, probably 1970 or so, I came up with the ‘hash’ combination for air drop with the C-46. 32 kg rice and eight (I think) cans of meat. Did quite a few test drops there at Wattay airport with a Porter to come to the right combination of rice-canned meat, and the type of can. This latter was a real problem as the ‘normal’ shaped can, somewhat larger than a beer can, 454 gms / one pound, would usually crack along the side seam when it hit the ground. Working with our Bangkok contracting office, one of the meat packers came up with a flat can, about 5-6 inches diameter and less than 2 inches high. This can worked, very good non-breakage rate when dropped along with the rice” (e-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).
17 (Anonymous), “46-million lb. a year”, in: *Air America Log*, vol. V, no.1, 1971, pp. 4-5. Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson who worked in the Refugee Relief program presumes that those tonnage figures either include more than just food or include what was moved by CASI (e-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).
and rice could not be barged in from Thailand. [...] Thus by early 1970 all of northern Luang Prabang Province was gone, as well as the area west to the Nam Tha (River). Luang Prabang itself was nearly encircled. With a record high of 48,000 people on the food support rolls, land was at a premium. Villages on the Mekong which had always been secure, were swiftly overrun.”

Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “Normally we’d ship rice and fuel up to LP via the Mekong River, however in the dry season, say March-June, the river would get low and the 100 MT capacity river boats could only carry perhaps 40 MT, and even for that they might have to unload and reload to get over and around some spots of rocks in the river. I don’t think we ever dropped rice to LP, but we did do landed load when stocks were critical and the river traffic hadn’t arrived. I do remember this being the case in later 1973. Normally this would be flown up via C-123 as easier to load and unload. However, if the 123s were not available (this might be the case if troop movements, ammo, etc, was needed) we’d use the C-46s.”

In 1971, large parts of MR II fell to the enemy, creating ten thousands of refugees to be fed. “In March 1971 another 8,000 Lao Thung and Meo from Lima Sites 57 and 180 north of Route 7 headed in the direction of Route 13. In addition 2,000 civilians formerly at the old neutralist center of Muong Souie began moving southwest. When that area fell on February 4, general uncertainty brought about by Vietnamese incursions around Long Tieng put 30-40,000 refugees into a confused flight. North of the PDJ Phu Bia fell on June 28, 1971. In December, during the initial days of Hmong new year, the Vietnamese launched massive attacks against the PDJ. In one day the entire Plain was overrun. The refugee population crowded into the ‘crescent’ from Long Tieng south of the PDJ panicked. An estimated 40,000 people evacuated their villages, many not in direct danger of the Vietnamese thrust. However thousands of refugees had been warned by the Vietnamese that if they were caught again they would be killed. This was especially true of the Thai Dam and Lao Neua, many of whom fled as far as the Vientiane Plain. Some 3,400 fled from the Ban Xon area itself to Vientiane.

North of the Plain of Jars only two enclaves survived, Bouam Long (LS 32) and Phu Cum (LS 50). While the courage and tenacity of the Hmong and Lao Thung were equally outstanding at both places Bouam Long has received deservedly more attention. Situated in a small bowl with one open end, Bouam Long is surrounded by hills, each topped by a small, but well dug-in position. For two years Bouam Long was subjected to continuous ground and rocket attacks by the Vietnamese. Scores of civilians, as well as troops, were killed or wounded. In several instances Vietnamese sappers penetrated the airstrip, only to be killed or driven out. The most remarkable thing was that there was never a day when the 4,000 civilians and 500 troops lacked food or supplies. Air America and Continental Airlines crews braved incredible batteries of 12.7 mm anti-aircraft guns to drop 70-80 metric tons of food stuffs per month. Pilots were given extensive briefings in the situation before each flight. On several occasions the A.I.D. refugee relief logistics officer from Vientiane flew north to observe and coordinate rice drops into Bouam Long.”

For Air America, the big change came in July 1971. On 2 June 71, C-46 XW-PFL was shot down near Bouam Long (LS-32), while on a drop mission under the provisions of contract AID-439-342. On 1 July 71, Air America’s Flight Operations Circular notes that 4 out of the 6 C-46s assigned to contract AID-439-342 – N1383N, N9458Z, XW-PEJ, and XW-PGD, that is the bulk of the rice droppers – were to be released from that contract on 15 July 71 and put into storage at Tainan. At that time, 3 of Air America’s C-46s (B-138, B-146, and B-154)

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18 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 179.
19 E-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
20 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 182/3.
were already in inactive storage at Tainan.\textsuperscript{22} The following Flight Operations Circular, that of 15 July 71, gives the precise dates (all in July and August 71), when the four rice droppers were to be put into inactive storage and adds that one of the remaining 2 rice droppers assigned to contract AID-439-342, that is C-46 XW-PBW, was modified to become a 69 seat passenger aircraft.\textsuperscript{23} All this makes clear that July 1971 marked the end of Air America’s rice dropping missions in Laos. This was probably not due to the loss of XW-PFL, as in South Vietnam, Air America continued to use some of their C-46s even until 1975. The reason for this probably was that Air America’s long-time competitor Continental Air Services Inc., who had also operated rice drop missions in Laos all the years,\textsuperscript{24} this time had a lower bid after they had added more C-46s to their fleet,\textsuperscript{25} so that after July 1971, CASI remained the only company to do the job.

**Refugee airlifts for USAID’s RDD**

The more the situation became desperate in Laos, the more it became necessary to resettle the thousands of refugees that the war in Laos had generated. The more aggressive strategy introduced by North Vietnam in early 1968 also affected the refugee situation in Laos. On 10-11 March 1968, Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), the secret ground-directed radar bombing system installed on top of a steep mountain in northern Laos considered to be inexpugnable, was conquered by the North Vietnamese and given up by the Royal Lao Government.\textsuperscript{26} “The following day an A.I.D. refugee operations center at Houie Kha Moun (LS 111) was hit by the Vietnamese. Prior to the attack 4,000 refugees were on the strip awaiting helicopter evacuation under the direction of an American operations officer.\textsuperscript{27} Extremely accurate mortar fire hit the small A.I.D. shack destroying the radio and generator. About half of these refugees were able to walk to RLG-held villages while the remainder were captured. Attempts were made to relocate 15,000 Hmong, Lao Thung, Lao Neua and Tai Dam at Phu Loi near LS 184 but poor security made that plan unfeasible. In March 1968 the U.S. Ambassador approved the evacuation of some 12,000 civilians from Sam Neua to points south of Long Tieng. This first airlift tacitly acknowledged that those people could never return to secure villages in Hua Phan Province. It also implied that the U.S. government would assist in moving refugees from insecure areas to places where they could be safely relocated.”\textsuperscript{28}

In December 1968, the next big refugee airlift occurred: \textsuperscript{29} “In September 1968 an offensive to retake Phu Pha Thi was launched. After heavy Lao-Hmong casualties, the operation was called off at the end of December. Another 10,000 refugees were air-lifted to Phu Lao. These people remained there until January 1970, when they were all evacuated to the Sam Thong-Long Tieng area. In March 1969 Na Khang (LS 36) the center of support for the Houa Phan area was overrun with heavy RLG casualties including the military commander and the

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\textsuperscript{22} Flight Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-71-014 of 1 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B.

\textsuperscript{23} Flight Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-71-015 of 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B.

\textsuperscript{24} E-mail dated 13 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

\textsuperscript{25} Les Strouse in a telephone interview made by MacAlan Thompson, who kindly forwarded that information to the author in his e-mail dated 13 November 2005. Indeed, on 29 June 71, CASI had acquired C-46s XW-PHL (msn 27049), XW-PMH (msn 30252), and XW-PHN (msn 30257) from the Norwegian cargo operator Fred Olsen (Eastwood / Roach, *Piston engine airliner production list*, pp. 177 + 180).

\textsuperscript{26} Castle, *One day too long*, pp. 111-37.

\textsuperscript{27} This was Ernie Kuhn; see Castle, *One day too long*, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{28} Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 177; Air America Captain Julian S. Kanach and his team were commended by Ambassador Sullivan for an emergency airlift of over 8,000 people in Northeastern Laos accomplished between 20 and 25 March 1968; see the document (no. c05266371), published by the CIA at: [http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05266371.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05266371.pdf).

\textsuperscript{29} Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls one from Houei Hin Sa: “One of the larger moves was from the LS-215, Houei Hin Sa, area west of LS-184. This was done before I got up in that area, probably late 1968. Involved AirAm choppers, H-34s & Hueys, and USAF Jollies, several of them” (e-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).
governor. Small enclaves north of Nong Het held out until mid-1970 when they were overrun. A few hundred civilians were evacuated but the refugee program in Houa Phan Province was effectively dead. […] By the end of 1968 the original conceptual relationship between the paramilitary, their dependents, the refugees and local villagers was nearly finished. Long before official air evacuations had been sanctioned, thousands of civilians had managed to flee north Laos into the Sam Thong-Long Tieng area on returning aircraft.

The military campaign on and around the Plain of Jars in 1969 had far reaching effects on the refugee program and introduced a new phase of evacuation and resettlement activity. In April and May of 1969 RLG forces captured Xieng Khouangville and later, in June-August, the entire Plain of Jars (PDJ) area. Approximately 20-25,000 civilians fled or were initially evacuated to safer areas near the PDJ.³⁰ Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “Walking was the more ‘normal’ means of relocation. I was overhead when 36 was hit the least time March 1969, the civilians and dependents walked out to the south and west for a week or more, no air evac there. Later in 1969 I was working LS-32 when the bad guys were getting real close. Decision was made to evac refugees and dependents, did so via CASI and AirAm Porters and H-34s down to LS-57, where they could rest up, then walk on down to LS-108, Moung Soui, and over to LS-26, Xiang Dat, for ‘resettlement’. Another one, May ’69, when we initially got in to L-03, Xieng Ville. The airfield is some distance from town where the civilians were congregated. I had H-34s and Hueys bringing in troops and ammo to the soccer field, they hauled out civilians to LS-05, Padong. Had CASI and AirAm Porters coming in to airfield with troops and ammo, but no people to back haul. So I got a couple of vehicles, my Hmong field assistant, Her Tou, drove one of those Russian jeeps, I drove a Russian truck, attached photo, moving folks out to the airfield (we also had groups walking out to the airfield) to make effective use of the empty airplanes. Later called in a couple of C-

³⁰ “In June 1969 the neutralist enclave of Muong Soui fell and 5,600 civilians were airlifted or walked to Vang Vieng” (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 209). On 2 July 69, the CIA sent a commendation (see http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05266388.pdf) for this heroic action to Air America, saying: “The Military Attaché Vientiane has reported to senior military headquarters throughout the Far East on the evacuation of Muong Soui. His report ends: ‘But no praise can evaluate the aircrews of the unarmed and vulnerable helicopters who time and time again descended into the enemy controlled area at minimum altitude and airspeed… These deeds should not go unnoted to the men of the Air Force helicopter units and their comrades of Air America, Inc.’. Within the bounds of security, I ask that you make known to the Air America personnel concerned my personal admiration and respect for their courage and fortitude. If security precludes my association with this commendation to certain personnel, I ask that you take appropriate action in the name of the Air America Executive Committee.” It was signed by R. E. Cushman, Acting DCI.
46 rice drops to LS-05 for ‘dinner’. ”

There was no clear-cut overall policy regarding these refugees by either the RLG or the Mission. “Because General Vang Pao, Commander of MR II, would not allow the civilians to remain on the fringe areas of the PDJ, all refugees were initially air evacuated a short distance away to Tha Tham Bleung (LS 72). This small STOL strip and surrounding tiny valley could not safely absorb all the incoming refugees. […] Later as the RLG consolidated its hold on the PDJ, new relocation areas were set up on the Plain. […] Approximately 1,000 non-Lao civilians, primarily Chinese and Vietnamese, with some Indians and Khmer were air evacuated to Vientiane where they were taken in by their respective ethnic, social or political societies.”

Refugees waiting for evacuation at Moung Soui in January 1970

(Air America Log, vol. IV, no. 1, 1970, p.1)

The scene was always similar: When a refugee airlift was imminent, hundreds of people, all accompanied by their children and packed with their most important belongings, rushed to the airstrip, and all of them tried to get onto an airplane at the same time. Some scenes of refugee airlifts can be seen at the end of the documentary Flying Men, Flying Machines. These pictures seem to show the evacuation of Phou Sam Soun made by Air America PC-6s in April 1970. So Air America crews had to organize boarding the airplanes in order to avoid that they were overloaded so that they could still take off. Some of the bigger airlifts of this period are well documented by the first three numbers of Air America Log’s 1970 edition, when Air America aircraft flew three massive evacuation airlifts. In January 1970, three Air America C-123Ks and three Caribous evacuated 5,627 refugees in nine days from recently recaptured Moung Soui in North Central Laos under contract to USAID / Laos. A first series of pictures showing Lao refugees carrying all their worldly possessions gather on the edge of Moung Soui airstrip appeared in Air America Log, vol. IV, no.1 (1970), p. 1.

The subsequent issue offered their readers some more pictures of Lao refugees waiting with their backs bending with personal belongings and babies, while more bundles of personal belongings are lying on the ground, and climbing into C-123K “555” and other Air America aircraft. The pictures were accompanied by an article written by Air America’s Vientiane Base Manager James A. Cunningham Jr., saying: “At the request of the United States Agency for International Development / Laos, Air America recently undertook a massive airlift of thousands of indigenous refugees in Northern Laos. AAM pressed into service three C-123Ks

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31 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
32 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 177/8.
– which were configured to carry 50 passengers by installing center-line seats – and three Caribou C-7As configured to carry 32 passengers per flight. With these six aircraft operating regularly seven days a week, Air America evacuated 5,627 refugees in nine days, moving them from the recently recaptured and refurbished airstrip at Moung Soui to a USAID/L-furnished relocation site at Ban Xon, some 37 statute miles south of Moung Soui, which itself is 108 statute miles north of Vientiane, the Administrative Capital of Laos. Flights were operated under the direction of USAID/L personnel at Moung Soui and Vientiane. A major problem during the evacuation was the language barrier, even among the Laos themselves. Many of the refugees were Meo tribespeople from the mountains of Northeast Laos; they even had difficulty in communicating with their fellow Meo from the Moung Soui area. Many of the Laos – and all the Americans present – had problems in communicating with the refugees in any language. Refugee reaction to flying ranged from sheer terror to joy; the latter reaction coming from some of the refugees who had already flown in Air America planes, having been evacuated from their homes before as, over the years, the Communist Pathet Lao kept on encroaching into free Laos. For all intents and purposes, the refugees were leaving Moung Soui with all their worldly possessions in their arms and on their backs. They carried cooking utensils, baskets and bags of all shapes and descriptions, and a few lucky ones were airlifted with their pigs, goats and other small animals. One major adjustment problem for many of the refugees coming from far Northeast Laos is that their progressive moves in advance of the Pathet Lao have brought them from high ground to much lower altitudes where temperature ranges, vegetation, insects, diets and even cultures are radically different from those to which they have been accustomed over the years. Each aircraft used in the airlift made three to four refugee flights daily. The planes would fly to Vientiane for refueling as necessary, and also to pick up loads of drummed fuel for the back-haul to Moung Soui.”

Later in 1970, Air America Log’s no.3 was published as a special issue entirely dedicated to Air America’s refugee airlifts in Laos, and the introductory article gives a more complete picture, adding that the three airlifts evacuated people “mostly of the various Meo tribes from insecure areas of North Central Laos to more secure villages” and that they took place between January and April 1970. “In the first two airlifts, 100 percent of the flight crews involved were Air America’s; in the third airlift, AAM supplied a majority of the airlift with Company STOL-type aircraft. In the first refugee movement, in January, some 5,000 North Lao tribespeople were airlifted from Moung Soui to Ban Xon […]. In the second airlift – the most massive of the movements – 16,720 refugees were whisked from the Plaines des Jarres to Ban Keun and Vientiane. This airlift was accomplished in six days in February. The third evacuation, which occurred in April, involved moving some 3,500 refugees from Phou Sam Soun to Phu Cum in several days; in some cases Phou Sam Soun was under attack while the airlift was being accomplished. There were no casualties to Air America personnel nor damage to Company aircraft engaged in the operation. Air America was commended by the customer for its Quick Reaction Capacity (QRC) during these evacuations. Types of planes used in the various airlifts were: C-130s bailed to USAID, C-123Ks, C-7As, and PC-6Cs.”

This time, the authorities who were responsible for those airlifts were also depicted, that is USAID/Laos (represented here by Mr. Charles Mann, its Director), USAID/Laos’ Rural Development Division (represented here by its Chief, Mr. Phillip Gullion), the Royal Lao Secretary of State for Social Welfare (Mr. H. E. Keo Viphakone), and the Lao Director-

35 “Beginning 4 February and continuing for the next six days, Air America and CASI crews moved more than 16,700 civilians from the Lat Sen and Ban Thang airfields. […] To assist, special permission was granted for USAF C-130 pilots to fly 22 shuttle flights directly to Long Tieng, whereupon they turned over command of their ships to Air America pilots for use in the Plaine des Jarres exodus” (Conboy/Morrison, Shadow war, pp.252 and 259, note 26).
General of Social Welfare, Mr. Houmpheng Prathoumvan.\textsuperscript{37} Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson thinks that the 2 C-130s were officially bailed to USAID and not to Air America to provide a better cover story: “I might speculate […] that since the CIA, the Embassy, and USAID realized that a movement of a LARGE number of people off of the PDJ to Vientiane could not be handled quietly, as things were done upcountry on similar but smaller moves, it was decided that USAID would provide the cover story. The people moved were, after all, civilians, and were to be resettled on the Vientiane Plain by the RLG Ministry of Social Welfare, with USAID support.”\textsuperscript{38}

![An Air America C-130A taken at Vientiane during the refugee airlift in February 1970](image)

\textit{(Air America Log, vol. IV, no. 3, 1970, p. 3)}

Yet, the situation was much more complicated than documented by \textit{Air America Log}, the Company journal intended for a larger public, because during the same period, not only Sam Thong (LS-20) and its USAID facilities there were under attack and had to be evacuated, but also the “secret city” of Long Tieng (LS-20A) with its CIA base and General Vang Pao’s headquarters. So the report “regarding the organized refugee airlift of the last few months”, sent by Vientiane’s Base Manager James A. Cunningham to Washington on 8 June 1970, is much more detailed: “It is difficult, if not impossible, to factually cover the precise figures for movement of personnel and material for which Air America was responsible during the critical period of the evacuation of the Plaine des Jarres in February and the subsequent evacuation of LS20 and LS20A in the middle of March. Both operations required minimum planning and maximum execution because of the time limit imposed by unfriendly forces. Any accurate statistics on the total number of refugees moved by Air America fixed wing assets is only approximate and limited to those flights which were specifically launched to carry only refugees, troops or material. A great many refugees and their belongings were carried on a space available basis by all fixed wing aircraft of the VTE [= Vientiane] fleet operating into and out of the PDJ [= Plaine des Jarres] and Sam Thong/Long Tieng areas.

\textsuperscript{37} Photo in: \textit{Air America Log}, vol. IV, no. 3, 1970, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{38} E-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
In the PDJ evacuation the critical period for which records do exist began 5 February and ended 10 February. Two C130 aircraft in this period flew a total of 65 sorties into and out of LS275 [= Ban Thang] and LS276 [= Lat Sen], the principal marshalling points for refugees as directed by USAID. Ten thousand refugees were carried out in the C130s alone. On each flight roughly 150 passengers were carried plus their personal effects, which were estimated to amount to approximately 12,000 to 15,000 pounds per trip. In the same period of time the C123K aircraft flew 38 sorties and hauled out 2,350 refugees plus 121,000 pounds of cargo. From 5 February to 10 February, 15 scheduled C7A sorties were flown to the PDJ and carried out 350 passengers and 28,500 pounds of cargo. As noted earlier, any aircraft operating in the PDJ area picked up as many refugees and baggage as could be handled within ACL limits. Neither these passengers nor their baggage are included in any of the above figures.

In the month of March the critical period was between 17 and 20 March and again between 1 and 3 April. It was then that the enemy moved in on LS20 and LS20A, requiring the evacuation of refugees and the importation of troops along with the backhaul of critical USAID and -713 Customer material, much of which was of a highly classified nature. During this period the C130 aircraft flew a total of 16 sorties, five of which were for the insertion of 751 troops to LS20A and the backhaul of 183,000 pounds of cargo. During this same time the
C123K aircraft were evacuating LS20, into which they flew a total of 18 sorties to take out 1,855 refugees and 65,000 pounds of cargo. The C7As flew 24 sorties in mid-March into LS20 and carried out 750 passengers and 23,000 pounds of cargo. At the same time, the C123s, operating out of LS20A into LS 272 (= Ban Xon), the new USAID refugee center southwest of LS20A, flew 21 sorties carrying 320 passengers and 75,500 pounds of cargo. The C7As operating in the same area flew 14 sorties with 66 passengers and 16,500 pounds of cargo.

A smaller evacuation took place between 21 and 25 February from L03 [= Xieng Khouang Ville] on the PDJ to LS113 [= Moung Cha], when three C7As were committed for a total of 16 sorties carrying 330 refugee and military personnel and 9,000 pounds of cargo.

In addition to the evacuation of refugees in large aircraft in considerable numbers over a relatively short period of time, Air America Porters have played an important though less spectacular role recently in supporting the refugee relocation effort. For example, in the 30 day period between 4 April and 4 May, the Porters flew 25 sorties and moved 233 refugees from LS63 (Moung Nham) to LS22 (Moung Oum), one of the trickier airstrips in Laos. In the period between 6 April and 24 May, Air America Porters flew 34 sorties carrying 300 refugees from LS50 (Ban Na Tai) to Long Tieng (LS20A). In most cases where refugees are moved by air, it is the old people, infirm and aged, and the very young who are airlifted out in the face of an advancing enemy force.

Air America personnel at all levels in Vientiane were deeply involved in the support of these critical evacuation flights. Supervisory personnel were pressed into service as air controllers on the PDJ and at the points where refugees and their supplies were being offloaded. Medical and fire brigade personnel worked long hours assisting in the movement of the wounded, injured and aged refugee personnel, primarily in the Vientiane area. Flight crews worked tirelessly from dawn to dusk without relief and often without time for meals in order to make maximum use of the aircraft at our disposal. Air America traffic personnel were dispatched to LS20A to assist in expediting the turn-around of aircraft carrying in critical materials and exfiltrating customer cargo and customer personnel. In Vientiane the entire traffic complement turned out to assist the metropolitan police and the Army in the off-loading and relocation of refugees from the aircraft as they arrived. In short, it was a maximum effort for all concerned with highly gratifying results.39

The background for these large refugee airlifts was that by January 1970, the military situation had deteriorated on the Plain to the extent that the refugees could not adequately be protected and that on 20 March 1970, Sam Thong, the center of all Refugee Relief activities in MR II, fell to the enemy. "Prior to that work had begun on a fall-back strip near an old Lao village, Ban Xon. A large airstrip and support facilities, such as warehouses, offices, and a small hospital were constructed. The A.I.D. support center for what was left of the old program was then conducted out of Ban Xon. The complete disintegration of the original concept of the paramilitary civilian relationship was ended when three important decisions were made. The first was to attack and attempt to hold the Plain of Jars; the second was to relocate the civilian population found there; and the third was to integrate Government’s village paramilitary (ADC’s) into the more structured Special Guerilla Units (SGU’s). The important features of the 1969 PDJ campaign which affected the refugee program were first of all, that a large scale military operation was undertaken to foil future enemy advances southward and to hold territory. This was a clear divergence from the past when the civilians had been an integral part of the overall plan. Secondly, the requirement to relocate such large numbers of civilians was relatively new."40

In September 1970, a change took place. Since the beginning, USAID’s Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Project had been operated as a branch of the Rural Development Division (RDD) headed by the Assistant Director for Rural Development (AD/RD). The Refugee Project field staffs were responsible directly to the AD/RD and not to the local Area Coordinator (AC). In September 1970, the RDD was split into two assistant directorships – the Assistant Director for Field Operations (AD/FO) and the Assistant Director for Refugee Affairs (AD/RA), and the AD/RA himself was on top of four separate branches:

1) Refugee Relief Branch (RRB), which provided emergency relief to refugees as they were initially displaced, carried out requirements for refugee censuses; determined commodity requirements, including medical supplies, coordinated logistics requirements, and monitored refugee supplies.

2) Refugee Affairs Administrative Branch (RAA) organized, monitored and served as a central repository of all information relating to refugee affairs, including evaluation of conditions of refugee groups, problems, progress, and potential for phase-out of assistance.

3) The Refugee Relocation Branch (RRL) planned, monitored, backstopped, and acted as liaison with other Mission elements to assure implementation of steps designated as second and third priorities.

4) The Food for Peace Branch (FFP) programmed and monitored the use of PL-480 commodities.\(^{41}\)

Although there were more changes in 1970, the most important point in this reorganization was that prior to 1970 the program was primarily focused on emergency relief and organization of basic infrastructure in remote villages, while the phase beginning with 1970 was directed mainly toward relocation of selected groups of refugees in areas where they might become self-sufficient in foodstuffs; and there were integrated projects providing land, housing, schools etc. This second phase ended in December 1974, when the Lao Government, in conjunction with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, began to canvass the refugees for eventual return to their original villages.\(^{42}\)

In the southern part of Laos, the situation was a little bit different. Of course, permanent fighting produced thousands of refugees, but they fled walking or were trucked elsewhere. In December 1970, 1,200 from Thateng and Houei Kong fled to Paksong and later to Pakse. In March 1971, continued attacks along Route 9 in the Muong Phalane-Dong Hene area produced 2,243 refugees. Seven thousand civilians were trucked into Pakse from Saravane, and 2,500 refugees fled Muong Phalane in mid-March 1971. In late April 71, 4,000 refugees from Muong Phalane and 2,800 refugees from Dong Hene were displaced. After RLG troops had recaptured these areas, some of the refugees returned, but when the Vietnamese were again in Saravane, Muong Phalane, Thateng and Paksong by late 1971, the civilian population fled these areas once more, mostly to settle in the Khong Sedone area. When that area was taken by the Vietnamese in May 1972, 7,300 refugees fled from that area and later settled near Pakse. But here like in central Laos, where several thousand refugees fled when the key towns of Nam Thorne and Kengkok fell in late October 1972,\(^{43}\) people simply fled walking or were evacuated by trucks. And that was also true for parts of MR II.\(^{44}\)

Refugee relocation of “Phase 2” was begun in the late sixties, and many of the relocation areas were in the south of Laos. Indeed, “refugee relief and resettlement was the largest program in MR IV during the 1971-75 period. [But] refugee population figures reflected only people receiving direct food support from A.I.D. via the RLG Social Welfare (SW) Service.

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\(^{41}\) Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 173.

\(^{42}\) Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 173.

\(^{43}\) Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 180/1.

\(^{44}\) Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 182.
Once a refugee reached self-sufficiency status, even temporarily, he was dropped from the reporting rolls. In early 1973 the relief rolls in MR IV reached their highest level, 52,000. [...] Following the 1974 harvest, there were no refugees receiving food support in MR IV."\(^{45}\)

Houie Nam Phak, some 25 kilometers south of Pakse was opened in April 1969. Houses and physical infrastructure such as schools, dispensaries and offices as well as a dam for an irrigation system were built, but when the village was attacked in March 71, several thousand dollars of property and equipment were destroyed. Part of that project were also several relocation villages in the Paksane area, but their end came in November 72, when the inhabitants fled to Paksane. Two other relocation areas were opened in early 1970, the smaller one near Seno,\(^{46}\) and the bigger one in the Vientiane Plain. The latter consisted of 27, later 58 villages. Here, heavy duty equipment was used to clear land for rice fields; an extensive system of roads was constructed and wells were drilled in the villages. Several new relocation areas were opened in 1971/2, Thasano in the Savannakhet area for 11,500 refugees, Hin Heup on the Nam Lik River for people who had fled from the Plain of Jars, Long Nam Khan between Xieng Ngeun and Muong Nane for refugees of the Luang Prabang area, and Phu Ba Chiang in the Pakse area. From 1969 to 1975, construction in the South included 4 roads (82 kilometers), 5 wooden bridges, 4 fish ponds, and 6 water storage dams.\(^{47}\) In most of these cases, Air America and CASI probably helped transporting to the sites construction material and heavy equipment. For several reasons, other projects did not lead to what was to be a permanent relocation of refugees like those at Thakhek, Houie Nam Ngam, and even Ban Xon, and in December 1974, the U.S. Mission at Vientiane classified all those relocation sites as phased out, because at that time, under the umbrella of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, all refugees were invited to return to their homes.\(^{48}\)

**Air America flights for USAID’s Public Health Development project**

In the late sixties, a public discussion arose in Laos about family planning, but only in the early seventies, official Lao politics became interested in that field, and with the help of the Maternal Child Health and Family Planning (MCH/FP) programs of USAID’s Public Health Development project, some new MCH centers were built or at least some existing hospitals extended: At Ban Houei Sai, construction was begun in late 1969, and the new MCH center was opened in March 72; at Vientiane, construction of a new section of the Mahosot Hospital was begun in early 71, and the center was dedicated in September 73; and 2 rural clinics at Phone Sim and Savannakhet in south central Laos were renovated in 1971, with other clinics to follow.\(^{49}\) Although it cannot be proved by documents like the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules, it seems to be logical to assume that Air America also participated in this extension of the Laotian hospital and clinic system, that is by carrying planning personnel and then by hauling construction material.

Nevertheless, the overall network of rural hospitals, health stations, and dispensaries built up during the early sixties by USAID’s Public Health Development project was slowly reduced in the 1968-73 period, as “the military-political situation in Laos was characterized by a gradual but steady loss of territory controlled by the Royal Lao Government to the Pathet Lao forces. In MR I, village dispensaries in the regions around Nam Tha and Nam Bac were withdrawn and shifted with the refugee movements to areas close to the Mekong River north of Ban Houei Sai and to areas near Luang Prabang. In MR II the loss of the contested area of


\(^{46}\) “In 1969, because of the influx of refugees from the Muong Phine area, the Region obtained its first heavy equipment to assist in the development of the Seno Relocation Project” (Ramsey *et al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 229).


Sam Neua, the Plain of Jars, and essentially all of the area north-westerly and southeast of it restricted the RLG operational area to a small southwest segment approximately 85 by 40 kilometers. The loss of Sam Thong in 1970 and with it the loss of the main support hospital there necessitated the relocation of the makeshift hospital base at Long Tieng and Ban Xon. A crude temporary hospital of some 200 beds was improvised at Ban Xon from a pre-existing A.I.D. Public Works camp and this served as the base for Mission medical operations in MR II until the termination of the project. In MR III the RLG maintained control of an area along the Mekong which was only about one-third the width of the country in the South. The areas around Thakhek were unstable and tenuous. The hospital at Kengkok (operated by OB [= Operation Brotherhood]) and the surrounding network of dispensaries between there and Savannakhet remained in operation except for a brief period when Kengkok was lost. In MR IV the hospitals established at Attopeu, Saravane and Pak Song were all lost. The newest hospital established at Khong Sedone was severely damaged by enemy attacks and operations there were discontinued in 1972. The provincial hospital at Pakse was expanded and Pakse became the base for operations. The shift of refugees from the overrun areas of Attopeu, Pak Song, Saravane and the Bolovens Plateau required the establishment of refugee villages in areas north of Pakse. Dispensaries were established in these relocation areas where operations continued until the cease-fire. In MR V the hospital at Vang Vieng gained increased importance in support of casualties and refugees when Sam Thong fell in 1970 and Long Tieng was under siege. Once the improved hospital was established at Ban Xon, the activity at Vang Vieng returned to normal. During the enemy’s drive on the Plain of Jars and into Xieng Khouang Province, many tribal people were evacuated to Vientiane and later located in resettlement villages adjacent to route 13 between Vientiane and Vang Vieng. A smaller group was relocated southeast of Vientiane. This shifting of war refugees required the establishment of new dispensaries to serve these people. Thus at the time of the cease-fire in 1973 the project was directly or indirectly operating seven hospitals, the temporary facility at Ban Xon under the Village Health Activity and six others under the OB contract, located at Ban Houei Sai, Sayaboury, Vang Vieng, Vientiane, Kengkok and Pakse. There was a network of about 200 village dispensaries approximately half of which were located in MR II. All this meant that the number of flights by which Air America and CASI aircraft had to support the activities of USAID’s Public Health Development project became smaller over the years, and although these activities were among those that were to be transferred to the Royal Laotian Government in 1974, this plan did not materialize due to the political evolution in Laos.

Air America flights for USAID’s anti-narcotics program
Not only since the movie of 1990 entitled Air America, the Company faced false allegations of having been involved in the drug trade. As early as August 1964, this allegation came up, whereupon in a 5-page letter of September 64, Air America’s Regional Security Chief (RSC/SEA) D. J. Godar, proved that these allegations could only be false. The letter

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50 Later, the Ban Xon hospital resembled the old Sam Thong facility in completeness: “The A.I.D. Health program in MR II was the largest of any Region in Laos. The center of the program was the 200 bed hospital at Ban Xon. This hospital was originally located in Sam Thong but military action in the area forced its evacuation. The hospital was jointly administered and staffed by Lao civilian and military as well as A.I.D. personnel. It was a complete health center with inpatient and outpatient services. A new surgical wing was added in 1973. Services offered were x-ray, laboratory, maternal / child health, dental and sick call. […] The hospital at Ban Xon was a temporary wooden structure with the exception of the surgical wing” (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 216/7).
51 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 162/3. “With the occupation of Khong Sedone by the NVA in 1972, the Operation Brotherhood hospital was abandoned, and the OB personnel fled to Pakse where they set up a surgical wing at the provincial hospital” (p. 247).
52 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 164-68.
 begins: “According to a recent allegation, of unknown reliability, Air America is currently picking up opium at Ban Houei Sai, Muong Sing and Luang Prabang using C-123s and Caribous. It is delivered (a) to Saigon, (b) dropped in the Gulf of Siam, and (c) dropped along the Thai-Burma border. Pilots ‘Dick’ and ‘Dutch’ are allegedly involved in the operation. – It is noted that we do not have any C-123 or Caribou pilots known by ‘Dick’ (Richard) or ‘Dutch’. This could refer to Bird & Sons pilots; however they operate neither C-123s or Caribous. Air America (AAM) does not operate out of Muong Sing as it has been in enemy hands for approximately two years.”

53 Listing the Air America flights that landed at Ban Houei Sai and Luang Prabang in August 64, Godar continues saying that “smuggling in the manner set out in the allegation would be difficult and in some cases impossible”. He then gives the following reasons: “(a) Customer control: Customer personnel (U.S. Government personnel) watch aircraft movements closely, not only at Vientiane and Udorn but at various Laos sites. They frequently ride the aircraft on an impromptu basis. The customers are well aware of the narcotics problem in this area (some have worked directly in curbing it) and thus have directed their personnel to be constantly alert for its occurrence. […] (b) AAM Control: AAM employs security guards, investigators, etc. whose function is to prevent illegal activities. Cargo moved on international flights is manifested and closely monitored by Supply and Traffic personnel. Except for a few exceptions, flights are subject to local customs. […] (c) Flight Watch: The Flight Watch is a communications system designed to keep the location of our aircraft known at all times, primarily to assist in rescue efforts, but also valuable in checking for flight padding. Pilots are required to call in before landings, after takeoffs and generally every one half hour. […] It would, therefore, be impossible for aircraft operating in and around Laos to divert from their normally scheduled runs in the manner described by the allegation. (d) Radar: Thai and U.S. controlled radar is regarded as effective within Thailand and along the borders. Our aircraft are required to make their position known and obtain clearance or risk being intercepted and shot down. Flight violations are analyzed and reported in detail. […] (e) Fuel: Fuel loads are carefully controlled on the basis of actually scheduled flights by both AAM and the Customer; any major deviation would create absurd log gas figures. (f) Crew Assignment: Crew assignments are made less than 24 hours in advance, with the usual last minute changes due to customer requirements, weather, maintenance, illness, etc. On the larger aircraft, like the C-123s and Caribous, no unauthorized drops could be made without the collusion of the American pilot, co-pilot and generally an American Air Freight Specialist. Not even considering the unlikelyhood of finding three Americans of the above categories agreeing to enter in such a venture, it would require uncommonly good luck that they ended up on the same aircraft, the desired route, with a reliable source established and prepared to make prompt delivery and without customer personnel around or about.”

54 Godar than adds that Air America did not have scheduled flights to Saigon, that “it would not be possible for one of our Vientiane or Udorn based aircraft to slip down to the Gulf without being detected” and that, as to alleged drops along the Thai-Burma border, “it seems unreasonable that narcotics would be ‘dropped’ at a primary source point.”

55 From the letter by J. D. Godar, it is evident that these allegations were false, as such a drug smuggling would be impossible under Air America conditions. So it is up to everybody’s guess what was the origin of these allegations – perhaps a confusion with another air carrier or (which is more likely because no other company flew C-123s and Caribous in Laos) an attempt to discredit Air America, i.e. to have the company banned from Laos.

53 D. J. Godar, undated letter no. RSC/SEA-64/172 of Sept.64, attachment to letter no. RSC/SEA-64/202 of 21 Oct.64 to Air America’s General Manager Laos in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8.

54 D. J. Godar, undated letter no. RSC/SEA-64/172 of Sept.64, attachment to letter no. RSC/SEA-64/202 of 21 Oct.64 to Air America’s General Manager Laos in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8.

55 D. J. Godar, undated letter no. RSC/SEA-64/172 of Sept.64, attachment to letter no. RSC/SEA-64/202 of 21 Oct.64 to Air America’s General Manager Laos in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8.
In order to understand that drug trafficking as described in the allegation was technically impossible under Air America conditions, it is also helpful to have a look at the Distribution list of Air America’s Daily Flight Schedules in 1964. All of these people knew when exactly an Air America flight left Vientiane for a certain destination – far too many for hiding any drug trafficking.

Distribution list, Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 30 October 64
It had been published only on 29 October 64, i.e. the day before

So, the detailed answer given by Air America’s Regional Security Chief J. D. Godar illustrates that drug trafficking as described in the allegation was technically impossible under
Air America conditions. Air America pilot William Andresevic confirms this for the years 1961-64: “Air America and the CIA had a strict policy against carrying opium. A few times, Meo would show up with a tarry ball of opium and try to board the airplane. The opium had a distinctive odor and was easy to detect. The individual would not be allowed to board with the opium. Andresevic does not know of a single incident during his four years in Laos when an Air America pilot hauled opium. ‘None of the guys who worked for me ever hauled anything.’ It would have been almost impossible to keep such traffic secret: there always was someone around during loading and offloading. […] On the other hand, the Lao government was involved with opium. Andresevic observed a heavily guarded Air Lao C-47 at Ban Houei Sai. It was common knowledge that the airplane flew opium to Vientiane, then dropped it in the Gulf of Siam to be picked up by boats.”

Thomas Ahern describes all measures taken by the CIA “to keep narcotics off from CIA-controlled aircraft”. As early as 1961, the CIA “prohibited allowing the [Hmong] tribesmen to carry opium onto any US-chartered aircraft. Only large packages were inspected, and it was understood that small quantities, destined for local consumption, might well move between upcountry sites. But the prohibition on commercial trafficking was unequivocal, and Vang Pao’s case officers made clear to him that any Hmong involvement in the opium traffic risked ending the Agency’s support of the resistance.”

“From 1964 to 1968, the [CIA] station [at Vientiane] was led by Douglas Blaufarb and then by Ted Shackley. […] Blaufarb never received any credible allegation of drug trafficking by either Agency or Air America/Bird & Sons personnel.”

“By mid-1968, when Larry Devlin was preparing to replace Shackley, the first allegations of CIA participation in narcotics trafficking had already appeared. As Devlin recalled it, Rolling Stone magazine had just accused the Agency of financing its Laotian operations with proceeds from heroin trafficking. Upon his departure, new DDP Tom Karamessines told him that many mistakes could be forgiven, but failure to prevent any Agency involvement in the traffic would cost him his job. Devlin wound up with nine people from the Office of Security, most of them assigned to keep narcotics off CIA-controlled aircraft. […] Field case officers were under instruction to be on the alert for commercial-scale movement between or from upcountry sites, but most physical searches were on aircraft leaving Laos. […] Vang Pao strongly discouraged the use of opium by the able-bodied, and any smoker would be ostracized. Even a clan chief would incur the penalty of being denied any real command responsibility.”

The result of an investigation was that in 1968, the CIA “could see, not only no systematic commerce, but no suggestion whatever of malfeasance by either CIA officers or American aircrews.”

At that time, “case officers were required […] to enforce the prohibition on opium aboard Air America and CASI planes. […] Vientiane station [blank] regarded FAR, from Gen. Ouane Rathikoun on down, as ‘up to its ears’ in the opium trade.” This is confirmed by what Roger Warner reports from interviews he had conducted with Tony Poe and from other sources. “Earlier in his career Ouane had received the opium concession for Luang Prabang Province from the king, who traditionally controlled and taxed the opium business there. When General Ouane became commander in chief in 1965, he sought to expand his share in the drug trade. […] [In 1966], Ouane got more control over aircraft. He used royalist planes to transport his products, and eventually royalist helicopters to haul fifty-five-gallon drums of

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56 Interview with William Andresevic conducted by Prof. William Leary at Beaverton, OR on 19 June 87, written summary, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2.
58 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.536.
59 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.538.
60 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.539.
61 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.540.
ether to a string of thatched-roof heroin refineries along the Mekong River.” To understand this, it has to be recalled that until September 1971, drugs weren’t illegal in Laos. What changed everything, was the War in Vietnam, where the half-million American troops presented a huge potential market.

Then, “in July 1967, a caravan of armed men and about three hundred mules carrying sixteen or more tons of opium crossed the Mekong River from Burma into Laos. Its leader, who stayed behind in Burma, was Shan Si-foo, a young man destined for greatness in his trade. The caravan’s armed guard skirmished with a group of rival opium traders from the Chinese Kuomintang.” The caravan than fled to a lumber mill, which was owned by General Ouane. On 30 July 1967, Ouane ordered RLAF T-28s to bomb both armies, while the mules broke free and ran around. In that way, Ouane, “irritated with his suppliers for fighting, […] had seized the sixteen tons of opium for himself.” At some point after that “Opium War”, as it was dubbed by newspapers, Nam Yu-stationed CIA man Tony Poe was asked by his superiors to report about the drug trade. “Poe had hazy, drunken memories of chemists sent into Burma by the Taiwanese government – ‘they were in it for the intel, not the money’ – to help the Kuomintang set up heroin labs near the China-Burma border. Poe’s own tribal trailwatch teams radioed positions of caravans far off in the boon-docks, he said, ‘to get the timing down.’ For the Thai route he spoke of flaming T’s in the waters of the Gulf of Siam, marking the drop zones for heroin in canisters, wrapped in Styrofoam for the freighters to pick up.” All this sounds like the real story hidden behind the false allegations against Air America quoted earlier: As it seems, the aircraft involved in that drug trade in the mid-1960ies were RLAF C-47s and helicopters. Indeed, on 21 March 68, the crew of an RLAF C-47 was arrested in Saigon after landing with a load of gold and opium. This abuse prompted Ambassador Sullivan to withhold delivery of five more C-47s for the RLAF that were already in the pipeline.

RLAF C-47s stored at Udorn in October 1973 (courtesy Ward Reimer) and RLAF UH-34D “4638” at Vientiane during the Mekong flood of 1971 (courtesy of Dan Gamelin)

At that time, i.e. by 1967, Air America itself had already hired a security force, among whose duties were: “– Prevent pilferage and the overall protection of Company property. –

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62 Warner, Back fire, p.255.
64 Warner, Back fire, p.256.
65 Warner, Back fire, p.256.
66 Warner, Back fire, p.257.
67 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.365.
Deny access to Air America facilities, property or planes to unauthorized persons. – Be alert for any and all illegal actions. Among them, smuggling such items as gold or opium on to Company property or aboard Company aircraft. – Detect hazardous conditions which might lead to injury to Company personnel or to damage to Company property – such as fire hazards. […] – Provide a 24-hour mobile patrol throughout Air America’s base to accomplish all the above objectives.”\(^{68}\) Later, well-trained dogs were stationed at Vientiane and Udorn to detect narcotics.\(^{69}\)

At Udorn in late February 73, “a narcotics inspection group consisting of 15 personnel perform detailed inspection, using trained dogs, of aircraft and personnel entering and leaving the facility. […] Within our Security Department we have the capability of assisting in the control of illicit traffic in narcotics by means of our Security Inspection Service consisting of 3 U.S. national supervisors and 12 specially trained Thai inspectors plus a German Shepard dog also specially trained for this purpose.”\(^{70}\)

Already in 1968, the CIA and Air America were involved in destroying drugs. A telex of 16 September 68, from CIA Station Vientiane to CIA Headquarters in Washington, discussed about how to destroy the 475 pounds of opium that had been seized: “1. Vientiane has considered two methods of disposal of seized opium: A. Burning B. Dumping in river. 2. Both the above plans were discussed with Mr. Jack Green, U.S. Narcotics Bureau. As regards burning, Green stated we would probably intoxicate all of Vientiane should we attempt destroy 475 lbs. of opium by local burning. This matter is further complicated by lack of secure area to accomplish such burning. A further risk ensues from the local smugglers discovering this opium in [erased] hands before destruction is completed. 3. Dumping in the river did not envisage bulk dumping. Our plan is to cut the opium blocks into 4X4X4 cubes, load it into a Caribou and dump it over approximately 50 miles of the Mekong down river from Vientiane in sparsely inhabited area. The Mekong now averages one-half mile width, 40-60 feet depth and flows at about 15-20 mph. We feel these cubes would be completely dissolved or eroded and that little or no chance of salvage of any quantities exists. 4. Advise”.\(^{71}\)

On 17 September 68, CIA Headquarters replied that they had not suggested to burn the entire shipment at one time, but only very small quantities “over whatever period of time

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\(^{69}\) See the photo in *Air America Log*, vol. XXVII, no. 1, March 2010, p. 9.

\(^{70}\) C. J. Abadie Jr. (VP Udorn), Memo of 9 March 73, in: UTD/Leary/B45F3.

An Air America Caribou destroyed the opium seized in September 1968

(CIA document no. 1818029/196862)

necessary to accomplish. […] Narcotics Rep advised that if above not possible due to local conditions, he would defer to judgement of Mr. Green re matter of disposing in river via aircraft. […] While destruction by burning believed more desirable, proceed with air drop disposal if Mr. Green concurs. In any event, witnesses and written certification still needed.”

A later telex confirms that – with a certain delay due to the Mekong flow rate – the drugs had been dropped into the Mekong.

Around 1969, Air America began to take an active role in fighting drug trafficking. “During the first year of the Nixon administration, [blank, that is an unknown CIA case officer] got a detailed report on the location of a heroin refinery near the Burmese border. […] Jim Glerum [blank] approved a reconnaissance mission on the condition that the helicopter

would withdraw if it took any fire. [Blank, i.e. the CIA case officer] and a squad of irregulars – perhaps Yao, perhaps Lu, as the Shan were known on the Laotian side of the border with Burma – climbed aboard the helicopter and headed north. The huts alleged to house the refinery looked deserted, and the helicopter settled in for a landing in a nearby clearing. A few startled traffickers, probably including Chinese chemists, emerged from the huts and dashed into the surrounding jungle. As predicted, the huts sheltered chemicals and equipment for heroin production. The squad loaded on the helicopter as much apparatus as could be carried, and destroyed the rest. [A little bit later, a] cable reached [blank, i.e. the CIA] expressing President Nixon’s admiration for the raid. […] This episode marked the emergence of the narcotics traffic as a collection priority, and intensified [blank] efforts to keep the Agency and its transport contractors clean. Beginning in 1970, or perhaps late 1969, at least one and sometimes two men from the Office of Security were stationed with the project and charged primarily with drug interdiction.”

“An episode similar to the raid out of Nam Yu took place a little later at Na Khang. [Blank, i.e. the CIA case officer] remembered that fellow case officer [blank] had spotted a suspicious package being stowed on a Laotian air force T-28. This sparked a helicopter reconnaissance that spotted an anomalous building out in the jungle, and the party descended for a look. Finding a level spot, they landed nearby and headed for the building. Its occupants had obviously departed in haste, for heroin was cooking as they entered. From a safe distance, [blank] and company fired M-79 grenades into the building until one hit the container of ether used in the refining process, and the lab went up in a fireball. [Blank] took photos that, he said later, appeared on American television.”

Jess C. Hagerman reports a similar raid that took place in 1971: “In 1971, Hagerman was involved in a drug raid in Northern Thailand. He had just arrived at Ban Houei Sai [in Laos] when some Customers showed up who had flown over a village in a Porter and were talking about signs of a possible heroin manufacturing site. Hagerman said, ‘We ought to go raid it.’ Shortly thereafter, he heard that orders had come down from the White House to conduct such a raid. He flew local military people to a LZ close to the village. When they entered the village, they found a first class heroin operation, including a 10 KW diesel generator, lab, chemicals, etc. There were no opposition or activity. Hagerman hauled out some of the chemicals, powdered debris and machinery. A large store of chemicals in drums was blown up with a grenade launcher.”

One of the main tasks of this Chiang Mai-based PC-6 was working for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), i.e. searching for and helping to destroy drug plantations. Probably already since 1970 or 1971, the Chiang Mai-based PC-6 was used in anti-narcotic and reconnaissance operations – for example in August 73, N3612R was used in this type of anti-narcotic operations. “Bob Dawson, who flew a Pilatus Porter out of Chiang Mai and patrolled the Thai and Burmese borders of the Golden Triangle, had to carry agents from the Thai Border Patrol (subsidized and organized by American forces), the CIA, and DEA in a search for Shan opium caravans and refineries. ‘Most of my time there was spent on

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74 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.541.
75 Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.541/2.
77 Interview given to the author by Air America’s Les Strouse, Bangkok, 28 February 2014.
drug enforcement, and so was most of the CIA agents’ in my area. In fact, the CIA had many more agents than the DEA working in drug enforcement. There were a lot of raids carried out by the DEA and we would go in with dogs. We started with aerial reconnaissance, searching for caravans of refineries. You’d look for white, powdery residue on the ground, a source of water, a supply of firewood, and two or three small sheds or a warehouse building. We found several and we would raid them and destroy them […]. The DEA even had native agents traveling with the Shan opium caravans. ‘We’d take off three times a day – once early in the morning, once in the afternoon, and then at night.’ Don Carlson, who flew a Helio Courier, said. ‘There would be somebody with a radio in the back of the plane and he’d talk to this fellow on the ground. He was a Thai and it took an awful lot of guts for him to ride along with those bandits, because if they’d found out about him he was dead. He’d have to sneak away from the caravan each time to make radio contact. We tracked the caravan across the Burmese border and all the way down to Thailand and decided they were heading for this particular town. As they got close, the Thai Border Patrol put a big group of people in there with airplanes and choppers and raided the caravan.’”

Since the early seventies, USAID’s “Agriculture” division received a new job – to seek and develop acceptable cash crop substitutes for opium for the hill tribes of Laos, after in September 1971, the Royal Lao Government had enacted legislation prohibiting the commercial production and marketing of opium and its derivates. Since Laos did not have an anti-narcotics law for many years, there was no substantive basis for the enforcement like a special police, customs etc., so the US provided help by a training program. Personnel, commodity and participant training levels reached their peak in Fiscal Year 1973 with the complement of 8 US Customs advisors under an agreement with USAID, 5 USAID Public Safety Narcotics advisors, and other specialists working in the detoxification programs as well as contract personnel who were responsible for the inspection of all US Mission aircraft to see that no illicit narcotics were being transported on them. These efforts probably

79 Robbins, Air America, pp. 251/2.
80 A valuable cash crop (opium base) and independent lifestyle had allowed the Hmong to live successfully outside the sway of the Lao Lum-controlled central government (Castle, At war, p. 6).
81 Previously, the Hmong produced opium for their own use and as a cash crop (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 23+129+208).
82 The National Detoxification Center run by the Lao Ministry of Public Health with USAID assistance was located in 2 rented villas on the edge of Vientiane. Another center was at Wat Tham Ka Bok, a Buddhist temple located 300 miles south and west of Vientiane (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 145/6+149).
83 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 129-33.
explain some flights that Air America made for USAID’s Customs Assistance Division (CAD), Public Safety Division (PSD), and Security Inspection Service (SIS). For example, on 19 August 72, Porter N355F flew for the CAD from Vientiane to Sayaboury (L-23) and Ban Houei Sai (L-25) “as directed”. On 30 August 72, Volpar N9157Z flew Vientiane - Ban Houei Sai - Vientiane for CAD. On 28 August 72, Volpar N9664C flew for USAID’s PSD from Vientiane via Udorn to Chiang Mai (T-11) and back, and to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) and back to Vientiane on 5 September 72. And on 18 August 72, Air America C-123K “556” flew to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) and Sayaboury (L-23) on flight “SIS-06” – to mention just a few examples. Apparently, these flights carried personnel who worked for the CAD, PSD, and SIS programs, and some of them were probably directly involved in anti-narcotics missions. Indeed, USAID’s anti-narcotics effort was especially strong in Laos’s Military Region I.

Finally, a high elevation experiment station was constructed at Phou Pha Deng near Ban Houei Sai to investigate the possibilities of potential replacements – at least between March 1973, when the Phou Pha Deng Upland Crop Introduction Center was opened, and December 1974, when political unrest forced its closure. The village of Phou Pha Deng “was initially accessible only by helicopter or by a four-hour walk from the Mekong River. In November, 1974, a dry season jeep trail was finished linking Phou Pha Deng to Ban Houei Sai.” Another location involved in that program was Xieng Ngeun near Luang Prabang, where a training center was constructed to encourage hill tribe farmers to experiment with new crops and small animals that might possibly replace opium.

In 1972, Alfred McCoy’s book The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia came out that contained several allegations of Air America complicity in the traffic, and McCoy had to testify before a Senate subcommittee. “In an effort to correct false statements made in that testimony, the Company issued the following press release on June 2”, which was reprinted in the Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Directors of Air America Inc. of 20 June 1972 and is reproduced here:

84 NARCOTICS CONTROL PROGRAM […] Enforcement The enforcement effort had four components. The U.S. Customs Service provided advice, training and commodity assistance to the Lao Customs Service. The U.S. provided similar assistance to the Lao National (civilian) Police, and to the Military Police. The DEA similarly worked with the Groupe Spécial d’Investigation (GSI), which was a special investigative organization, composed of officers on loan from the National Police, Customs and Military Police, established specifically for the purpose of narcotics enforcement and attached directly to the Office of the Prime Minister. […] The Lao civilian and military police, Customs Service and Groupe Spécial d’Investigation (DEA’s counterpart) between 1971 and 1974 did make significant seizures of illicit narcotics in Laos” (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp.129+131).

85 Explanations of the codes given by MacAlan Thompson in the e-mail he kindly sent to the author on 12 Nov. 2005 “The Security Inspection Service is operated on behalf of the U.S. Mission to ensure that no opium products are carried aboard charter aircraft in contravention to Lao Law. The SIS is […] trained by U.S. Customs Agents. They are assigned on a temporary, rotating basis to 7 major airfields in Laos. A specially trained opium and heroin sniffing dog is used as well as conventional inspection techniques. […] There is little that goes on which escapes their notice, and reports of suspicious activities are made immediately to other agencies involved in narcotics suppression” (Cunningham, Air America Capability Laos, p.24, in: UTD/CIA/B31F9). One example: Before C-123K “524” departed Luang Prabang for Ban Houei Sai on 7 March 73, “the Company Security Inspection Service (SIS) personnel at L-54” observed the unloading and loading of the aircraft (Accident report for the C-123 accident of 7 March 73, in: UTD/CIA/B62F2).

86 Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 18, 19, 28, and 30 August and of 5 September 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1FF.

87 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 206.

88 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 132, 134, and 135 (quotation). For some time, a Bell Jet Ranger was used for transportation to Phou Pha Deng (p. 138).
Air America’s Press release of 2 June 72 against false allegations (reproduced in the Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors of Air America Inc. of 20 June 72, p.4, in: UTD/CIA/B4F2)

"Mr. Alfred W. McCoy today told the Senate Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee: 'In northern Laos, Air America aircraft and helicopters chartered by the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency and USAID have been transporting opium harvested by the agency's tribal mercenaries on a regular basis.'

'This statement is utterly and absolutely false. Air America and USAID have cooperated in a security program which effectively prevents the carriage of drugs on any of the airline's equipment. This program is constantly being reviewed to make sure that drug smugglers cannot misuse the company's facilities. There is an intensive program of inspection of both passengers and cargo carried out in close collaboration with local and U. S. authorities. At up-country sites, inspectors inspect all baggage of passengers and crew members departing from their stations. All cargo placed aboard up-country sites is inspected by members of the inspection service. All baggage of persons departing Vientiane on Air America, Continental Air Service and Lao Air Development are inspected. Where boarding passengers refuse to submit to inspection or are found to have contraband in their possession, they are denied the right to board the aircraft and their names are turned over to local Lao authorities. Through these and related measures attempts by individuals to carry opium on company airplanes have been detected and prevented. These small time smugglers and users are the greatest threat and the security inspection service has constituted an effective deterrent."

"Through its many years in the Far East, Air America and its employees have been well aware of the dangers of drug use and the drug traffic. It has been the policy of the company and its many loyal employees to do everything in their power to oppose any traffic in drugs. To this end there has been close cooperation between the company and U. S. and local authorities concerned with the drug problem."

"If Mr. McCoy or any other individual can bring any proof that any Air America employee has been connected in any matter with the drug traffic, appropriate disciplinary action will be taken and the matter referred to the proper authorities."

The same year, the “Church Committee” of the U.S. Senate and the CIA launched investigations about drug trafficking by CIA air proprietaries, whose results are summarized in the William Leary papers at UTD. As the CIA Inspector General (IG) reports in September 1972, “the [Church] Committee investigated this area to determine whether there is any evidence to substantiate these charges. On the basis of its examination, the Committee had concluded the CIA air proprietaries did not participate in illicit drug trafficking.”

89 “CIA launched full-scale inquiry in 1972. IG interviewed ‘a score of officers at CIA headquarters who had served in Asia and were familiar with the problems related to drug trafficking.’ IG

then dispatched investigators to Southeast Asia. Between August 24 and September 10, the group visited Hong Kong and eleven Agency facilities in Southeast Asia, interviewing more than 100 representatives of CIA, State, AID, Bureau of Narcotics, US Customs Service, Army, and Air America. IG’s report concluded that there was ‘no evidence that the Agency, or any senior officer of the Agency, has ever sanctioned or supported drug trafficking as a matter of policy. Also, we found not the slightest suspicion, much less evidence, that any Agency officer, staff or contract, has ever been involved in the drug business. With respect to Air America, we found that it has always forbidden, as a matter of policy, the transportation of contraband goods aboard its aircraft. We believe that its Security Inspection Service, which is used by the cooperating air transport company as well, is now serving as an added deterrent to drug traffickers.’ […] Re Air America: AAM regulations contained injunction against smuggling as early as 1957 (later included opium). […] Opium did get onboard Air America aircraft on occasion, but this usually happened in chaotic circumstances where no inspection was possible. ‘While it is true that narcotics have been found aboard some of their aircraft, in almost every case the small quantity involved could only have been for the personal use of the possessor.’ IG: ‘Given the strict anti-contraband regulations under which these two airlines have been operating for years, it is highly unlikely that any pilot would knowingly have permitted narcotics or any other contraband aboard his aircraft.’ […] IG: ‘In recent testimony to Agency officers in Vientiane, Laotian officials who had been involved in the drug business stated that there was no need for drug traffickers to use Air America facilities because they had their own.’ […] Another factor making Air America less desirable was the lack of pre-arranged, regular flight schedules. ‘Ordinarily, the pilot did not know until he reported for duty which airplane he would be flying or what his flight schedule would be for the day.’

On 1 February 1992, Prof. William M. Leary of the University of Georgia held a lecture at the University of Texas at Dallas that was called “Air America: Myth and Reality”. In this lecture, he also touched the issue of drug trade, which had been a central theme in the 1990 movie called Air America that was based on the book Air America published by Christopher Robbins in 1979. Here are Prof. Leary’s comments: “In his interviews with Air America pilots, however, Robbins finds little confirmation for this main theme. He quotes six pilots in a chapter entitled ‘Opium’. Three people recount instances in which Air America participated in drug raids, or kept drugs off its airplanes. Two others make ambivalent comments. ‘We know we handled a lot of dope’, copilot James W. Parrish recalled, ‘although we didn’t do it intentionally.’ Robert L. Wofford – incorrectly identified as William Wofford – agrees: ‘A lot of dope was carried without our knowledge… [but] we did not actively participate in the transportation of drugs. Definitely not.’ In other words, Parrish and Wofford, who flew fixed-wing transports out of Vientiane, carried thousands of refugees during numerous evacuations and no doubt some of these individuals brought onboard small amounts of opium. […] As it happens, I recently spoke to Mike Barksdale. Barksdale told me that he never flew a cargo of opium and he does not know anyone who did. Any opium carried on Air America aircraft would be small amounts in the personal possession of refugees and soldiers. It often was too hectic to check individual possessions, so it is likely that these small amounts found their way onto the aircraft. However, to the best of his knowledge, Air America was not involved in the drug trade."

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Then, Prof. Leary concluded: “Did Air America ever carry opium? Of course. Did Air America helicopters gather the opium harvest of 1970 and 1971 – or any other harvest – and fly it to Long Tieng? in other words, was Air America involved in the drug trade? No. Was there a heroin factory at Long Tieng? No. As Joseph Westermeyer – who spent the years 1965 to 1975 in Laos as a physician, public health worker, and researcher – has written in *Poppies, Pipes, and People* (the best book on the subject): ‘American-owned airlines never knowingly transported opium in or out of Laos, nor did their American pilots ever profit from its transport. Yet undoubtedly every plane in Laos carried opium at some time, unknown to the pilot and his superiors – just as had virtually every pedicab, every Mekong River sampan, and every missionary jeep between China and the Gulf of Siam.’”

In his letter dated 19 February 93, former CIA man Roger McCarthy sent the following comments to Prof. William Leary: “Politics of Heroin (1972) – I reviewed the book for the Agency and noted that there was little of fact in it, except for the names of some of the locations given. It was [...] full of unsubstantiated allegations and downright lies. For example: a. There was no marketable, if any at all, poppy grown in the Long Tieng area. The poppy was grown considerably to the west in the general tri-border area of Laos, Thailand, and Burma known as the ‘Golden Triangle’. The market was (and is) in and through Thailand, not in Long Tieng or Vientiane, Laos. I agree that there is little doubt that small quantities carried by refugees and/or Lao soldiers were transported via Air America among various points in Laos, for as with beetle nut and the cocoa leaf in other areas, such was a way of life for decades long before the U.S. came onto the scene. b. There was no refinery in the Long Tieng area. There were far too many Americans there for that to have happened even had Vang Pao wanted to do so. [...] c. An opium refinery in western Laos was spotted by a CIA officer in 1972 and, from the rear of an Air America chopper, he destroyed it using incendiary hand grenades and other weapons. [...] d. Hundreds and hundreds of refugees and Lao military, both regular and irregular, as well as irregular Thai forces, were transported by Air America aircraft… as were pigs, chickens, personal belongings, pots, pans, blankets, etc. [...] There were no Air America flights devoted to carrying narcotics of any kind. Such a flight or flights could not have been kept quiet.”

In 2007, Jim Quigley, who worked for Air America from 1965 to 1974, published a very detailed review of McCoy’s book. In Quigley’s review, we read: “Those of us who have lived in Asia for extended periods of time are aware that Asians, to be polite, often tell a visiting Caucasian what they think he wants to hear. [...] After approximately sixteen days in Laos, Mr. McCoy wrote: By now I am certain that the CIA’s Air America was transporting opium for its Hmong hill tribe allies. 13. Mr. McCoy provides no corroboration or factual data to support this unfounded allegation. [...] It appears from his own statements that Mr. McCoy was convinced of the CIA’s involvement in drug trade before he left the United States. He travelled to Southeast Asia to find evidence that supported this predisposition; thus reversing the accepted scholarly practice of first gathering data, analyzing the data, and then forming a conclusion. Mr. McCoy reached the conclusion first and then sought data that would support his predetermined supposition. [...] In the final analysis the corroboration of Mr. McCoy’s allegation that Air America participated in the drug trade in Laos comes down to the contention if two Royal Lao Army generals and a five day visit to one village, a visit in which the author did not observe Air America transporting drugs. [...] Mr. McCoy makes some stunning charges in the 2003 book: [...] he compares the Central Intelligence Agency with

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the Gestapo […] Mr. McCoy’s virulent antipathy towards the Central Intelligence Agency borders on the irrational. As a consequence his books, which begin as a serious history, devolve into a polemic against the CIA. […] The allegations cited in these books that Air America knowingly engaged in drug trafficking are false. […] Those of us who were employed by Air America in Asia know what we did and we take pride in those accomplishments. We also know what we did not do.”

One question remains: Why, in spite of all these investigations, do the obviously false allegations of Air America running drugs for the CIA still reappear from time to time, as, for example on the movie Air America of 1990 that people who really worked for Air America consider to be just silly? The best answer seems to have been given by Joseph Westermeyer in his book Poppies, Pipes, and People: Opium and Its Use in Laos of 1982: “Sentiment against the war in Vietnam linked American presence and opium commerce. Sensationalism and faulty logic characterized reports. Several American writers made brief visits to Laos, obtained second- and third-hand reports, then reached the conclusion that the real evil in Southeast Asia was ‘American governmental support of opium production and trade.’ Some writers were academics without training in field research or experience in Laos. Their writings include ‘a scattering of facts, a good deal of false information, considerable innuendo, and some very faulty logic.’ The popularity of their works was ‘a sign of the times.’ Careful work by reputable researchers was denounced as ‘as mere effluvia by the Central Intelligence Agency.’ ‘It was a time when trash was glorified as enlightenment and excellent work having humanitarian import was denounced as treason.” Sometimes it seems that even today, 40 years after the end of the Vietnam war, times have not changed that much.

Search and Rescue (SAR) missions 1968-73

The increase in military activities that can be observed in Laos from 1968 onwards and especially in the early 1970ies, i.e. the transition from a “secret” war mainly based on guerrilla strategies to a more conventional war using large military and paramilitary units and big guns, did not only mean that Air America had to transport more troops, more “hard rice” and more big guns than before, it also meant that more Company aircraft were shot at or even shot down. A list of Air America aircraft that received ground fire in Laos and in South Vietnam between 3 December 1971 and 9 April 72 has no less than 18 pages and thus well illustrates the increasing danger that Air America met in Laos. Only 2 out of the 27 incidents reported on page 1 of that document and covering the two weeks between 3 and 17 December 71 happened in South Vietnam, the remaining 25 incidents happened in Laos.

99 Preserved at UTD/CIA/B51F12.
But not only the number of Air America aircraft that received ground fire in Laos increased dramatically in the early seventies, the aircraft that crashed did as well, as did the number of Air America crews who lost their lives. As a consequence, a radio message (XOXO) was sent to the Chief Pilots on 25 April 1972, to be distributed to all flight crew members. That message starts with a list of all the dangers inherent to flying in Laos at that time, then points out that only the judgment of the individual crewmember can determine if a mission would be successful or a failure: “Your evaluation of the total situation including the condition of the aircraft and its equipment, your personal physical and mental state, and the relative urgency of the mission in addition to the factors cited above culminates in a decision as to whether or not the mission should be attempted under the circumstances.”

The text then continues saying that sometimes it may be better to “refuse missions which require such maximum performance except under life and death circumstances”, and ends with “great respect to the memories of the […] crewmembers who have been lost or missing since 1 January 1971”.

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100 XOXO of 25 April 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2.
## Groundfire Reports - Dec 71 - 9 April 72

<table>
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<tr>
<th>REPORTING LOCATION</th>
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List “Groundfire Reports - December 71 to 9 April 72”, page 1
(in: UTD/CIA/B51F12)

34
Warning sent to all crewmembers – XOXO of 25 April 1972, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2

Indeed, some of the most dramatic accidents and also some of the most dramatic Search and Rescue missions ever flown by Air America occurred in the late sixties and in the early seventies.

Not all of them, however, were the result of enemy activities – some of those accidents were also due to bad weather. For example C-123K “555” crashed on 27 August 72 into a large ridge line north of Ban Nammeui, when it encountered poor weather conditions in the Nammeui valley consisting of low ragged clouds and poor visibility. But the enemy could be everywhere: Some aircraft were shot down by ground fire, as was XW-PFF: “On the morning of 17 January 1970, Bell 205, XW-PFF, was scheduled to work for the 713 Customer at LS-20A. The Captain was directed by the Customer to proceed to L-22 and he departed LS-20A at 0745L. The enroute flight to L-22 was uneventful as was the subsequent shuttle flight of thirty five minutes conducted from L-22. The Captain was then directed to proceed to Echo pad, UG 0659, with one passenger (Customer) and 400 pounds of cargo.

101 Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B61F8.
When approximately one mile southwest of Echo pad small arms fire was heard and the aircraft received several hits which resulted in engine flame-out. A successful autorotation was made into an open area at coordinates UG 0470. Under very adverse conditions, the crew and passenger of XW-PFF were evacuated to L-22 by [Air America UH-34D] H-59. XW-PFF was subsequently destroyed by unfriendly forces. There were no injuries to the crew or the passenger.  

Other aircraft were destroyed by landmines hidden on the landing strip, as it happened to Porter N195X on 5 April 72. “Air America, Inc. Pilatus Porter PC-6C, N195X, piloted by Captain (PIC) Mathew P. Daddio, landed at Ting Bong (LS-90), Laos, on 5 April 1972. During the following take off phase, the right landing gear apparently contacted a land mine prior to lift off, detonating it and seriously damaging the aircraft. The aircraft was on a scheduled flight from Ban Xon (LS-272), Laos, to LS-90 and return, operating under the provisions of AID Contract 439-713. There were six passengers aboard at the time of the accident. Minor injuries were suffered by the PIC, while two of the passengers received more serious injuries. The burning aircraft was abandoned by PIC and passengers as it rolled over the side of the landing area into a small creek where it burned. The engine propeller and nacelle were later recovered intact, but substantially damaged.”

A particularly treacherous way to attack an Air America aircraft was an ambush, when enemy forces were hidden close to a landing site, just waiting for an aircraft to come in, as it happened to UH-34D H-71 on 17 February 71: “During the afternoon of 17 February 1971, UH-34D, H71 was scheduled to work out of L-54 (Luang Prabang), Laos. The aircraft was piloted by Captain Robert P. Caron and co-captained by Frederic F. Frahm. Flight mechanic duties were performed by [name blackened]. One passenger, an interpreter, was also aboard the aircraft. Captain Caron was directed by the customer to proceed to a landing zone, grid coordinates TJ 5827. He departed L-54 at 0710Z (1410L) accompanied by UH-34Ds, H73 and H64. His trip to the landing zone was uneventful. After arriving at the landing zone, Captain Caron instructed his crew and the one passenger on board to search the high grass on and around the landing zone for any hidden personnel. He made one circle over the landing zone and noted four personnel, in military uniform, standing in tall grass in the middle of the zone with their hands in the air. This was a pre-arranged signal. Captain Caron, after his final turn, brought his aircraft almost to a hover and observed one man dive to the ground. Immediately after, automatic weapons fire erupted from all sides of the aircraft. The aircraft sustained several hits and the engine failed. An emergency engine-out landing was executed with rotor inertia and up collective used to cushion the landing. The aircraft landed intact in an upright position at about 1530. The crew members and passenger exited rapidly and became separated in tall grass. After approximately two hours all personnel were rescued and returned to Udorn, Thailand. The Co-Captain, F. F. Frahm, was wounded in the forehead by metal fragments and the Flight Mechanic [name blackened] received a bullet wound in the upper left chest and a wound on the right knee. The Captain, R. P. Caron, received minor cuts and bruises. Recovery of the aircraft was precluded because of hostile action in the area.”

Sometimes, even friendlies fired at Air America aircraft: Most of the time, the short hop between Long Tieng and Sam Thong had been considered to be a safe flight, because the

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102 Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/Hickler/B24F2. The crews of UH-34D H-59 and Porter N358F, which also participated in the rescue mission, were subsequently commended by the CIA: “Hqs wishes to specifically commend pilots L. M. Prulhiere and E. G. Steale, flight mechanic R. A. Ramos and Air America Captain Les Bays for their courageous action resulting in the successful rescue of the downed crew and passenger of an Air America helicopter on 17 January. Despite the fact that the crew of H-59 and the Porter 58-F received heavy ground fire and without regard to their personal safety, they displayed a dedication to duty and a coolness under fire which is most certainly in the highest traditions of any service of the U.S. Government. Please convey Hqs admiration and deep gratitude for their heroic actions.” (see the document at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05266383.pdf of the CIA).

103 Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/Anthony/F4.

104 Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B60F19.
mountains lying between the two points were held by friendly troops. Then, on 19 August 1969, Air America Porter N196X was shot at and subsequently crashed killing all on board: “At approximately 1655L on 19 August 1969, PC-6C, N196X, owned and operated by Air America Inc., and operating under the provisions of AID 439-713 contract, departed Long Tieng (LS-20A) for Sam Thong (LS-20), Laos. The aircraft was piloted by Captain R. S. Davis and there were 12 passengers aboard. Five minutes later, during an enroute climb, the aircraft was observed to perform an erratic maneuver for the nature of the flight involved and crashed into a hillside. All aboard were fatally injured and the aircraft was destroyed by impact and fire. It was determined that the probable cause of this accident was the fatal wounding of the pilot by a bullet fired from a source outside the aircraft resulting in the loss of control.”105 The Memorial file adds: “reportedly shot down by Meo”106

**SAR missions flown for Company aircraft**

One of the most dramatic Search and Rescue missions flown by Air America aircraft in the early seventies was that for C-123K “293”. In the morning of 27 December 1971, C-123K “293” left Udorn for Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69) on a flight for Peppergrinder, carrying “12,892 pounds of mixed ordnance including 75mm shells, 81mm rounds, 222 caliber small arms ammunition and white phosphorus smoke rounds”.107 The “aircraft probably disappeared at about 0900L but UTH [= Udorn] became highly concerned 1100-1200L and VTE [= Vientiane] (the prime control agency) did not instigate notification procedures until 1400L.”108 The main reason for this delay of several hours in starting a Search and Rescue mission seems to have been a false radio report stating that “293” had landed at LS-69 and was now enroute back to Udorn. As the first XOXO (radio message) about that accident states: “Flight watch shows departure from LS69 at 270320Z [that is 10.20 hours local time] for T08.”109 The reason why “293” disappeared was never determined, but “the aircraft probably strayed from course and, over exceedingly hostile country, was hit by enemy fire and rapidly destroyed.”110 What happened to the crew of “293”, that is to Pilot in Command George L. Ritter, co-pilot Roy F. Townley and kickers Edward J. Weissenback and Khamphanh Saysongkham,111 is unknown. According to that XOXO, “SAR initiated 270615Z”, that is at 13.15 hours local time, adding that “AAM aircraft involved were C46 XWPBU [probably XW-PBV, as there was no XW-PBU], VTB’s N9542Z, [N]9671C, PC6’s N359F, N195X. N9542Z took battle damage approximately 1000Z [that is at 5 pm] at coordinates QC4013. 9671C escorted aircraft to UTH. N9671C returned to SAR approximately 1230Z [that is at 7.30 pm]. 71C ended SAR for M27 [= December 27th] at 1633Z [that is at 11.33 pm]. […] Will continue SAR M28 using C123K 554545, VTB N9157Z, PC6 N365F”.112 But in the evening of 28 December, another XOXO reported “SAR efforts M28 had negative results. Will continue SAR [using Helio] XWPCD”113, and similar reports were sent in the evening of 29, 30, and 31 December 71.114 At the end, the Search and

105 Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/Dreifus/B1F10.
106 Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3; Robbins, *Air America*, p. 125, says the same thing.
108 P. R. O’Brien (Director of Safety), Letter to the President dated 18 January 72 (DSAFE-72-19), in: UTD/CIA/B29F2.
111 Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3; XOXO dated 25 April 72, in: UTD/Luckett/B1F3.
114 “SAR efforts M29 had negative results. Weather precluded full day’s search. Will continue SAR M30 utilizing DHC6 N5662, H395 XWPEA” (XOXO of 29 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2). “SAR efforts M30 proved negative. Weather precluded full day’s search. Will continue SAR M31 using VTB N9671C” (XOXO of 30 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2). “Weather today was good but no results on SAR. On A01
Rescue mission remained unsuccessful: “With a few breaks due to weather and one false lead from a native claiming to have seen an aircraft, 115 the SAR continued through 5 January 1972. All efforts to find traces of 293 were unsuccessful. Due to the extreme hostility of the area, several AAM, Inc. aircraft received battle damage while on the SAR. Due to the proximity of the hostile Route 46, the SAR was rather constricted in nature. The final effort consisted of dropping leaflets offering rewards for information and/or the aircrew. The SAR, although late in starting, was as thorough as terrain, the weather and the enemy would permit. Further air search was deemed fruitless after 5 January 1972.”116 Yet, in spite of the official end of the Search and Rescue efforts, Air America pilots continued to look for their lost colleagues, as did PIC R. A. Main and co-pilot James H. Rhyne in their Volpar N9671C on 15 January 72, when they dropped leaflets at 13,000 to 14,000 feet near the Chinese Road in Laos in an effort to find Capt. Ritter and his crew missing in C-123K “293”. During that flight, Capt. Rhyne was hit by a large caliber round and seriously injured, suffering from multiple wounds, while he was sitting in the back seat throwing out the reward leaflets; the PIC, Capt. R. A. Main, immediately flew him the 150 miles to Udorn. During that flight, MAFS R. J. Herald, who had minor injuries to his face, “applied a tourniquet to Jim’s leg, I believe with his belt, which most probably saved his life”.117 Frank Bonansinga escorted them back to Udorn.118 At Udorn the aircraft made an uneventful high speed landing, and Capt. Rhyne was immediately brought to the local USAF hospital and taken to surgery, but a part of his right leg below the knee had to be amputated; N9671C was later repaired.119

Another SAR mission of that period, that was particularly dramatic, was the one that was set up after the loss of C-123K “648” on 6 December 1972. “On 6 December 1972, C123K 54648 was on a scheduled mission from Pakse (L-11), Laos to drop miscellaneous cargo to two forward areas in the LS-180 area. After successfully completing the drop at the first site, and while approaching the second drop zone, the aircraft received several rounds of hostile ground fire. Control of the aircraft was subsequently lost and all crewmembers (Capt. N. G. Hansen, F/O W. C. Crothers, AFDs [names blackened]120 parachuted to safety and were taken to L-11 by various company helicopters. The aircraft crashed and was consumed in the ensuing fire.”121 Although all crewmembers arrived on the ground with only minor injuries, it took no less than 4 Air America helicopters to bring them back to Pakse. The first helicopter to arrive at the crash site was UH-34D H-52, piloted by Captain R. C. Thierault.122 H-52 picked up First Officer Crothers and one of the kickers on the ground and used the cable hoist for Captain Hansen. In picking up the Captain, the tail rotor of H-52 contacted nearby trees. So H-52 was flown to Toong Set (LS-449), where a precautionary landing was intended. Due to vibrations, however, possibly caused by the damaged tail rotor, the helicopter was forced to set down prematurely near LS-449 in a mine field. Another UH-34D, H-53, piloted by H. J. Thompson, flew to the site where H-52 had landed and picked up the crew of H-52 and their

[^115]: The XOXO of 4 January 72 (in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2) reports: “Presently interrogating indigenous witness who claims to have seen a stricken aircraft in vicinity of SAR efforts. Will proceed depending on validity of information.”
[^118]: E-mail dated 20 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.
[^119]: XOXOs of 15 and 16 Jan. 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; UTD/Leary/B1 for 15 January 72; Accident summary, in: UTD/Hickler/B24F2; additional information kindly supplied by G. C. Odgers in his e-mail dated 22 October 2003 to Dr. E. Carlson who forwarded it to the author.
[^120]: The kickers were S. Sompop and V. Boonma (XOXO of 6 Dec. 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2).
[^121]: Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B61F15.
passengers. “At this time I was three quarters of the way back to L-11 and headed back to pick up the crew and pax of H-52. I landed at the down site with 275 lbs of fuel and made it several miles before I landed at a friendly position with 50 lbs of fuel remaining.”123 This was some 25 minutes out of the LS-449 area enroute to Pakse (L-11). S-58T XW-PHE returned these crewmembers to L-11, while in the meantime, UH-34D H-81 had picked up the second kicker and returned him, too, to Pakse.124

**SAR missions flown for the US military and for the Royal Lao Air Force**

Little is known about SAR missions flown by Air America crews to pick up USAF personnel downed in Laos during that period. The reason seems to be given by Ben Van Etten in his article: “Normally the military took care of their own SAR’s, but Air America made many rescues simply because we were in the area. Some times the Air Force was its own worst enemy because by the time birds were scrambled, briefed, cover provided, and authentication of the downed pilot (as if the enemy would stage a fake crash) were made, he’d probably be captured. On two other occasions I’d picked up a downed crew, moved them to a safe area, and finally the military would make their pick up.”125 This “separatist” attitude is confirmed by the mission Van Etten describes: On 18 March 72, the USAF airborne controller for search and rescue asked for “any Air America helicopter in the Savannakhet area that might be available to help rescue a downed pilot”. That day, Van Etten flew UH-34D H-70 in the vicinity of the downed OV-10, but when the Air America pilot asked for the precise coordinates of that OV-10, “Sandy One”, a USAF A1E that flew cover refused to pass them, because USAF CH-53s were to do the job. But when the same “Sandy One” was hit by enemy fire and had crashed, Van Etten’s H-70 was allowed to rescue the downed pilot of that A1E – no more word about the downed OV-10.

However, the extracts from ABCCC – Cricket & Hillsboro – that were published by the Ravens at [http://www.ravens.org/abccc.htm](http://www.ravens.org/abccc.htm) list several of those rescue missions:

“In April four USAF aircraft went down in the day Barrel Roll area. Four crewmen were recovered but three are MIA. Falcon 75 went down on 22 April and both men were picked up the next day. Raven 50, with Raven in the back seat, went down on 24 April; both pilots are MIA. In May three aircraft were downed and all five pilots were rescued by Air America. [1970]”

“Air America stated that LS-33 and all surrounding friendly positions were overrun. An unknown number of refugees were captured by the enemy. Rainbow was proceeding south. Apparently he abandoned his outpost last night. Cricket never established radio contact. Watts reported intermittent contact throughout the day. Tiger 01 was hit in the LS-32 area by 12.7mm gun fire and both crewmembers ejected. The crew was picked up by Air America helicopters 76 Hotel and 96 Whiskey. Both men were in good condition. Air America 96 Whiskey was hit by small arms fire and one of its crewmembers was hit in the shoulder. Raven 22 was the on-scene SAR commander. A RLAFT-28 reported that he spotted supplies in the open and ‘live’ trucks parked next to ‘dead’ trucks in an attempt at camouflage. He also spotted fresh trails in and out of the area and he requested additional ordinance at first light on the 8th. [7 May 1970]”

“… Weather was excellent on 16 January. Wildcat reported TIC. Raven 51, flying an O-1, had an engine failure due to complete loss of oil at 0145Z. Raven made for an open field and made a successful emergency landing at UF833500. He was picked up at 0230Z by an Air America helicopter. [1971]”

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124 Accident report of this accident in: UTD/CIA/B61F15.
“… Weather in the Barrel Roll was workable for visual flights most of the day on 8 February. Raven 25 was forced to bail out of his aircraft in the middle of a strike mission. He was rescued 24 minutes later by Air America helicopter 96W. [1971]”

“… Two trucks were destroyed on 20 March. The Ravens directed 37 strike sorties in support of ground forces. Raven 27 received battle damage and he was forced to put the aircraft down at LS-72. He was picked up by an Air America helicopter at 0945Z. [1971]”

“… As Moonbeam assumed station Raven 42 was requesting ordinance for two enemy tanks at XB217798. At 1055Z Raven 42 was shot down by a 12.7 mm gun and crash landed at 050/25/82. Raven 44 and four Navy flights provided excellent support. At 1137Z Raven 42 and his back-seaters were picked up by Air America helicopter Hotel 88. [11 June 1971]”

“… Raven 52 had engine failure. Raven was picked up at UG545575 by Air America at 0358Z. [29 January 1972]”

“… On 31 January Lulu had a ground assault. Crowbar, Wild Bill and Spotlight had attacks by fire. Raven 11 was downed at TH0302 southeast of L-54. He was recovered by Air America at 1035Z. [1972]”

“… On 24 March Raven 41 declared an emergency at 0958Z. Bulldog gave his general position at WB9778 on the east side of the mountain. Both crewmembers were picked up by H45 (Air America). Raven 41 had engine failure. [24 March 1972]”

“… On 31 March the SAR for Spectre 22 was concluded at 0230Z. All fifteen crewmembers were picked up. The Jolly Greens picked up thirteen and Air America picked up the other two. There were no serious injuries reported. [1972]”

However, the commendations Air America received at that time do speak for themselves. On 28 December 70, the US Dept. of the Air Force thanked Air America pilots Capt. K. E. Wood and W. R. Hutchinson for rescuing the crew of a USAF aircraft call-sign “Laredo 14 which had ejected over Barrel Roll” on 19 December 70.127 On 27 September 71, the Air Attaché to the US Embassy at Vientiane thanked the crew of Air America UH-34D H-89 (Don Henthorn, R. D. Decosta, and P. V. Lorenzo) for rescuing RLAF pilot Sourisack Savong shot down on the Plain of Jars on 20 September 71.128 On 22 January 72, Major General D. R. Searles of the Dept. of the Air Force wrote: “I wish to convey my personal appreciation and commendation to two of your helicopter crews for their exceptional aerial skill in the rescue of the crew members of an RF-4C, Bullwhip 26, on 20 January 1972. The efforts of Messrs. Lee Andrews, Nicki Filippi and Ron Anderson in AA Helicopter XWPFH, and John Fonberg, William Phillips and Bob Noble in AA Helicopter 8513F, were truly outstanding. In spite of a known 37MM high threat area and small arms fire, these crew members disregarded their own personal safety to perform a heroic recovery. The quick response to the distress call and actual recovery in near record time were unquestionably instrumental in saving the lives of the USAF RF-4C crew members.”129 Already on 21 January 72, General Lavelle had thanked Air America by telex,130 and on 10 February 72, the CIA noted that this was “an example of correspondence relatively frequently received by the Company, and especially these months, for help in Laos.”131

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126 From the extracts from ABCCC – Cricket & Hillsboro – that were published by the Ravens at http://www.ravens.org/ (Section: “Articles”).
Commendation of 12 February 71

Another Commendation refers to the pick-up of the crew of a downed USAF aircraft made on 2 September 1971 by two Air America helicopters. The location is not given, but at that time, Air America’s Bell 205s and UH-34s operated only in Laos.
Commendation of 8 September 1971
*(Air America Log, vol. VI, no. 2, 1972, p. 8)*

One more Commendation published here refers to an unsuccessful, but very courageous attempt made by the crews of 7 Air America helicopters on 7 November 1972 to pick up a downed Forward Air Controller and to a successful Search and Rescue mission flown on 9 November 1972, when Air America Bell 205 XW-PFJ crewed by Captain J. D. Fonburg, First Officer R. R. Zappardino, and Flight Mechanic T. W. Yourglich rescued a downed Lao pilot. All of these Commendations – together with many others not referring to Search and Rescue missions flown in Laos to pick up US and allied military personnel – were once published in the *Air America Log*, evidently in order to encourage others to follow those examples.
Commendation of 13 November 1972
(Air America Log, vol. VII, no. 1, 1973, p. 4)

Med-evac
Med-evac or Medical evacuation flights were frequent missions assigned to Air America’s helicopters, and those flights were always very dangerous, because most of the time, the landing pad was still under hostile fire. This is underlined by the commendation from the CIA
that the crew of Bell 204B N1196W received on 7 March 72 thru the hands of Air America’s Vice President Clarence Abadie: “Dear Mr. Abadie, Capt. Herb Baker, First Officer A. R. Tafoya and Flight Mechanic G. M. Burch, the flight crew of Bell helicopter 96W on 23 Feb 72, deserve special commendation for their outstanding performance and dedication. This crew successfully medevac’ed several wounded men from an upcountry site despite the fact it was completely dark by the time they arrived at the pickup site. Although there were more injured than could be carried in one load, this crew volunteered to return for the remainder of the wounded and were only prevented from attempting this mission due to loss of security at the friendly position. Their willingness to respond caught the attention of the men who work daily with these outstanding airmen and sparked this expression of appreciation and recognition. Please convey our deepest gratitude to Capt. Baker and his crew for their gallantry and our respect for their professionalism.”

A very dramatic med-evac mission that has to be mentioned here was the rescue of the survivors of Phou Pha Thi in March 1968. In the evening of 10 March 68, the secret TACAN-TSQ-site on top Phou Pha Thi (LS-85) was attacked. Shortly after midnight in the first hours of 11 March 68, North Vietnamese ground troops definitely overran the site, killing a dozen US technicians and airmen and forcing it to close, and the next morning, several Air America helicopters and aircraft and some USAF H-3s evacuated the site. Especially noteworthy is the heroism of Air America Captain Ken Wood and his Flight Mechanic L. M. “Rusty” Irons who, in the early morning of 11 March, hovered on the perpendicular western edge of the mountain in an Air America Bell 205 and in this way saved the lives of several of the men that had served on top of Phou Pha Thi mountain. With the ridge too tight to land on, Wood fought to stabilize in a hover as the Bell 205 twisted in the updraft off the karst wall. Irons then secured a rescue hoist out of the side door and lowered a wedge-shaped jungle penetrator. The cable swung wide in the rotor wash, crossing close to the ledge where some survivors had hidden, four of whom were finally pulled into the helicopter before the aircraft was shot at by Communist fighters who were still on the mountain. Wood’s Bell 205 then brought the survivors to Na Khang (LS-36). After a USAF HH-53 had picked up some 30 Hmong guerrillas from the helipad located below the mountain top, Air America Captain Phil Goddard landed there, picked up some Hmong guerrillas plus 3 boxes full of CIA files, landed at Na Khang, and came back to Phou Pha Thi, where, acting on information provided by one of the passengers of the first flight, he hovered over the radar site and winched to safety another survivor. After the fall of Phou Pha Thi, Air America and USAF aircraft buzzed the radar site for several days, trying to photograph the bodies of the missing technicians. On 22 March 68, a US air-to-air missile destroyed the remains of the site. From November 68 to January 69, Vang Pao in vain tried to retake Phou Pha Thi (operation Pigfat).

During the battle on the western slope of Phou Katon mountain in Military Region 3, for several days in early November 70, it was impossible to fly out 39 wounded. Because of heavy antiaircraft artillery, support from T-28s was too dangerous: “At daybreak on 5 November, the battle was stalemated. A fourth attempt to exfiltrate the wounded was called off due to mortar fire. For the next try, F-4s laid a wreath of bombs around the landing zone;


133 See Castle, At war, pp.94-97; Robbins, Ravens, pp.42-45; Castle, One day too long, pp.124-37; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.194-96; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.294.

134 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.194-96; Castle, One day too long, pp.128-32.

135 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.202-05. Apparently, the loss of Air America Bell 205 XW-PFI at Houei Ma (LS-107) on 7 December 68 happened during operation Pigfat (for details, see the Bell 205 file of my The Aircraft of Air America; see also Conboy / Morrison, p.205, note 63). Also at Houei Ma, on 26 and 27 December 68, Vang Pao used loud speakers attached to an Air America Helio to discourage the North Vietnamese by a psychological warfare tape – in vain (Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.203).
then A-1Es and RLAF Eagles timed a set of strikes to coincide with the moment Air America H-34s were to touch ground. The bombing runs went off as planned, and the choppers finally managed to lift out the casualties.”

A dramatic report is preserved of the accident that occurred to UH-34D H-85 on 12 June 1972: “On 12 June 1972, Air America, Inc. helicopters UH-34D, H-85 and H-86 were scheduled to medical evacuate 12 wounded personnel from UTM Grid Coordinates PB-5383. After a briefing by Customer personnel at LS-69A (Ban Xieng Lom), Laos, Captain J. E. Rausch, Jr., PIC of H-85 and Captain T. A. Richie, PIC of H-86 conducted a reconnaissance flight of the pick-up area in Air America, Inc. PC-6C, N360F. This reconnaissance flight was conducted apparently without incident and on the return to LS-69A another briefing was held. During this briefing H-85 was scheduled as the pick-up aircraft and H-86 was assigned as Search and Rescue aircraft. According to flight log records H-85 took off from LS-274 at 0805Z and picked up 8 wounded personnel at PB-5383 and transported them to LS-177 (Ban Moung), Laos as briefed. At 0835Z H-85 again took off to pick up the remaining 4 wounded at PB-5383 however the plan was changed while the aircraft was enroute and H-85 was diverted to PB-5190 to pick up 2 seriously wounded and 4 deceased personnel. The previous day 11 June 1972 Captain Rausch and crew landed at coordinates PB-5190 without incident however before proceeding to the new landing zone, Captain Rausch checked on the landing zone tactical situation from the Customer who was riding in N360F which was near the pick-up coordinates. After receiving word that the pick-up zone was reported normal, H-85 commenced the approach. As the aircraft was touching down on the HLZ, ground fire was heard and an immediate takeoff with a departure turn to the left was executed. During the liftoff the SIC, [Second in Command, name blackened] reported he heard continuous ground fire and after traversing an undetermined distance the SIC reported he heard plexiglass break on the right side of the cockpit and saw Captain Rausch’s neck bend down. At this time [name blackened] stated he immediately took the controls and observed that Captain Rausch’s shoulder harness was not locked. Fearing that the PIC might slump over and restrict the cyclic control, [name blackened] reported he reached across the center instrument pedestal and locked the initial reel lock on Captain Rausch’s shoulder harness and also pushed the cyclic control forward to gain airspeed and commenced turning left and right for he could still hear small arms fire and felt H-85 was still being shot at. During this time Flight Mechanic [name blackened] thought both pilots had been hit and attempted to get on the controls. Once he was aware that the SIC was not hit he released the controls and suggested the SIC transmit a “May Day” distress call which the SIC complied with. The initial reported intent of [name blackened] was to land at LS-147 which was the closest landing zone but enroute he decided to land at LS-177 because he had previously dropped wounded personnel there and was aware of the security situation. Upon landing at LS-177 Captain Rausch was pronounced dead by Company personnel and Flight Mechanic S. G. Sickler from H-86 and other personnel transported Captain Rausch’s body from H-85 and loaded it aboard PC-6C, N360F for further transport to LS-274. On arrival at LS-274 Captain Rausch was examined and pronounced dead by a Customer Doctor and it was revealed that a small caliber bullet entered the external corner of the right eye and exited out the left side of the neck. Death was considered to have been immediate. Examination of H-85 revealed one small caliber bullet hole entered the right front windshield near the pilot mirror attaching post and no other aircraft damage was sustained by the aircraft. After personnel were examined at LS-274 Captain Rausch’s body and [names blackened] were transported to T-08 (Udorn), Thailand. On arrival Captain Rausch’s body was again examined and the official death certificate was prepared at the Air America, Inc., Medical Clinic by [name blackened] (see attached documents). **Conclusion:** Fatal injury to the PIC and minor aircraft damage as a direct result of hostile gun fire at a

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136 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.272.
position where hostile forces were highly suspected.”

Sometimes, Med-Evac missions flown into a combat zone were made by 3 UH-34s – 2 aircraft to pick up the wounded, while the third helicopter would remain high and become the SAR aircraft in case one of the others was shot down. On 18 March 1972, Ben Van Etten and his UH-34D H-70 were the first of 3 UH-34Ds to land at a location, where Lao troops had been wounded by enemy fire, and while they were still loading litters and walking wounded, the helicopter was shot at. Only at the very last moment, the CIA case officer who had examined the terrain at the beginning could jump onto the helicopter already taking off. “There was also a wounded soldier hanging on to the wheel strut! The back of his shirt was covered with blood and as we gained airspeed and altitude, I expected to watch his body drop hundreds of feet into the jungle. Too bad. Suddenly, the muscular arm of my flight mechanic, Jim Nakamoto, reached out the aircraft cargo door, grabbed the soldier’s shirt, and yanked him inside! Another life saved, as we heard later, because the soldier survived from his wounds.”

Sometimes, Med-Evac missions were combined with resupply missions: The crew of an Air America helicopter could receive the order to deliver troops or supplies to a forward position, and when fighting started, the crew would evacuate the wounded. Such a combination of resupply and Med-Evac flight happened to 4 Air America UH-34Ds on 19 October 72. “On 19 October 1972, Air America, Inc. UH-34D, H62 crewed by Captain (PIC) B. Com-Intra, Second-in-Command (SIC) S. Swangpunt and Flight Mechanic (FM) S. Sittisongkram, was assigned to work in the Pakse (L-11) area for the -0002 Customer. H62 and other involved UH-34D aircraft worked in and around the L-11 area for most of the morning and early afternoon uneventfully performing routine internal/external cargo and passenger lifts for the Customer. In the afternoon, the Customer at L-11 briefed the aircrews of four UH-34D aircraft, including H62, to conduct a troop transport from Phou Lat Seua (referred to as either LS-418 or PS-18), Laos to Saravane (L-44), Laos. This was to be the fourth troop lift of the day into the L-44 area. The first lift was uneventful. On the second lift, six helicopters (not AAM operated) had received battle damages and on the third lift, two (not AAM operated) helicopters had been hit at low level south of the runway at L-44. The Customers, however, felt that the area south and southwest of the runway at L-44 (the HLZ) was now neutralized and should probably offer the safest approach. There were supposedly eight hundred friendly forces in and around the HLZ at the programmed time of arrival of the four UH-34Ds.

The PIC of H59, as senior AAM Captain on the scene, planned the actual flight into L-44. It was to be a three helicopter transport to the HLZ consisting of, in order, H 59, H 52 and H 62 with the empty H 89 remaining high to act as a SAR (Search and Rescue) aircraft if required. Two covering aircraft (“Hobos”) and a FAC (Forward Air Controller – “Raven”) were in the area providing cover. The general plan was for each aircraft to drop the passengers and pick up wounded for evacuation. H59 made the first landing coming in at tree top level directly along the runway at 060°. The PIC received the proper ground signal, landed, dropped the passengers, picked up nine wounded troops and executed a 180° turn proceeding basically out the reciprocal route. There were incoming mortars at the time but no problems were encountered. The second aircraft, H52, proceeded along the same path and brought out several (seven or eight) passengers. A mortar attack occurred as H52 was on the ground and it was later found that one main rotor blade had been damaged. The third aircraft, H62, landed the same way, dropped the passengers, picked up seven passengers and departed along the

137 Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B61F5.
139 The names of all crewmembers are blackened in the accident report of this accident preserved at UTD/CIA/B61F12, but have been added from the XOXO of this accident preserved at UTD/Hickler/B27F2.
southern side of the runway. He completed about three quarters of a turn to the southwest when hit by numerous small arms (probably 12.7 mm) fire. H62 immediately lost power and, on fire, was autorotated into a marshy area just south of the western end of the runway. The PIC of H62 called that his aircraft was hit and going down which alerted the SAR aircraft, H89. The PIC of H89 landed beside H62, also started to take fire, but picked up the three crew members and five of the seven passengers from H62. This PIC felt he could not carry all the load and called for further assistance with H59 responding. H59 also took fire seriously wounding the SIC and fatally wounding two passengers. H89 took all but two from H62, who reportedly were fatalities, and departed the area.

In summation, four passengers were fatalities. The UH-34Ds, H52, H59 and H89 received minor shrapnel/bullet strikes but were successfully flown from the scene, and one UH-34D, H62, was destroyed on the site by fire. Three Air America, Inc. aircrew members received minor and serious wounds from which they were recovering.”

Flying services for other USAID programs

But there were many other USAID activities in Laos Air America was involved with even during the early seventies. “The largest development project in Laos, the Nam Ngum hydroelectric power dam and transmission system, completed in 1971, was 50 percent funded with U. S. assistance funds. This dam and the 30 MW generating capacity it provided initially were sufficient to provide all power needs of Vientiane city and some surrounding areas as well as to earn foreign exchange from power exports to Thailand.”

When the Nam Tan irrigation dam in Sayaboury province was inaugurated in 1971, Air America Caribou “171” – sporting the Erawan on that occasion – transported their Royal Lao Majesties, King Sri Savang Vatthana and Queen Khampoui to Nam Tan, while 2 Air America C-123Ks brought in high-ranking Lao Government officials, members of the Vientiane Diplomatic Corps, and newsmen. In MR IV a similar project was accomplished with French and German assistance: “the electrification of Pakse. This entailed construction of the Selabam Dam on the Sedone River north of Pakse by the French, construction by the French of the generating plant at the dam site, and installation of the distribution system by the Germans.”

Air America Caribou “171” sporting the Erawan    Air America at Nam Tan in 1971
(Air America Log, vol. V, 1971: photos no. 6, p.9, and no. 5, p.1)

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140 Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B61F12.
141 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 6; see also ib., p. 328.
142 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 250.
A.I.D. established MR II as a ‘High Priority’ area for economic and support programs. [...] In order to improve agriculture in the area, experiments with various types of crops were conducted, fruit trees were planted in several areas, and a fish hatchery and forestry station were constructed. With the increase in roads, it became possible to market crops from remote areas. Four ‘farm service centers’ were constructed for the sale of seeds, fertilizer, rice, animal feed, and other farming and household needs.”143 But also “fish culture was an important activity. A.I.D. assisted with the construction of a fish hatchery station in Nam Moh (LS 207).”144

At least in 1972, Air America operated up to 3 flights almost daily between Vientiane and Udorn for USAID’s ASB-050, mostly using Air America C-123Ks. This type of service was sometimes called a “Kangaroo” flight. 145 The name “Kangaroo” flights seems to have been unofficial all the time; in the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules preserved at the Air America Archives, it appears only in 1973, and then for different types of flight, always apparently meaning “just short hops”: On 19 June 73, Volpar N9664C flew Vientiane-Udorn-Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Udorn-Vientiane-Long Tieng-Luang Prabang-Vientiane-Udorn-Vientiane, and the same day, Caribou “430” flew Udorn-Vientiane-as directed-Vientiane-Udorn; both flights were for ASB-044, and both of them are marked “K’roo”, that is “Kangaroo”. The last legs that C-123K “556” flew on 23 August 73, after making a lot of drops all over the day, were from Vientiane to drop zones, to Udorn and back to Vientiane for ASB-044, and that flight is also called a “Kangaroo” flight on the Flight Schedule.146 As to the regular flights between Vientiane and Udorn, on 24 May 72, Caribou “392” shuttled between the two airports all day long for the Requirements Office.147 But the most spectacular service of this kind were the almost daily C-123Ks 1972 flights that shuttled all day long between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050 – as did C-123K “374” on 15 August 72 – on 19 August 72 C-123K “545” did the same job for the same customer, on 28 August 72 it was “636”, on 31 August 72 “648”, and so on.148 Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson thinks that they were related to the critical situation at Long Tieng at that period: “when things got bad at 20A many of the SKY guys began RONing in Udorn or Vientiane and went back up in the morning to work. If they were in Udorn, they probably shuttled up to Vientiane then on from there. Now and then I’d catch a ride on a CASI Twin Otter Vientiane to 20A to check the rice situation there, and upcountry for the C-46 DZs. Come back mid-day or evening. A ‘side issue’ of the move was that it did remove a population base from the PDJ that the PL used for food, porters, etc.”149

On the contract side, a change occurred in July 1972. Until 30 June 72, contract AID-439-342 had been renewed several times, but on 1 July 1972, it merged with USAID contract AID-439-713 and USAF contract F04606-71C-0002. For Fiscal Year 1973, that is effective 1 July 72, the consolidated requirements of the three original customers were “contracted for by the Air Force under a follow-on to Contract 0002”, 150 and the new contract was still called

143 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 210. They were located at Long Tieng, Ban Xon, Moung Cha, and Nam Moh. “These centers provided a wide variety of farm, and household supplies, including fertilizer, seeds, insecticide, rope, dishes and cloth. The centers also purchased produce from the farmers with excess supplies at a fair market price” (ib., p. 212). Chicken farms and pig farms were also built (ib., pp.212/3).
144 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 217.
145 E-mail dated 12 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
146 Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 19 June 73 and 23 August 73, both in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.
149 E-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
150 Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Co. Ltd. of 13 June 1972, p. 2 (quotation), in: UTD/CIA/B9F7.
F04606-71-C-0002. Already between November 1965 and April 1966, USAID contract AID-439-713 mentioned above seems to have replaced contract no. 59-069 that Air Asia/Air America had had with the “Consolidated Electric Equipment Company” (CEECO), believed to stand for the CIA’s Far East Division. As, like the one with CEECO, contract AID-439-713 seems to have covered predominantly the CIA’s Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) program, it is not treated here, but in the file dealing with Air America’s contribution to military aid to Laos.

This integration of CIA missions into USAID schedules also becomes evident by studying the Daily Flight Schedules of Vientiane, the next one available being that of 24 May 72. At that time, the political situation had worsened. With Long Tieng under daily attack and the airfield unusable, Ban Xon (LS-272) had been designated as the temporary frontline area for troop redeployment, resupply, and as a search and rescue base. Air America UH-34Ds and Bell 205s carried in wounded and dead bodies, while Air America Twin Otters and Caribous as well as CASI aircraft picked up supplies which were to be dropped to friendly troops. In the meantime, CASI Twin Otters like XW-PHF flew cover for the men still remaining at Long Tieng. This situation continued until March 72. Then, in almost a month of bitter fighting, Vang Pao’s troops moved some two miles back up the ridge; and it took another two months, that is until June 72, until Long Tieng base was re-secured and the airstrip operational again. Of the 35 Air America flights that left Vientiane on 24 May 72, only 10 were overtly military: C-123Ks “524” and “648” hauled “hard rice” from Udorn as directed by Peppergrinder, Caribou “392” shuttled between Udorn and Vientiane for the Requirements Office, and Twin Otter N389EX flew for the Requirements Office that day, as directed by Ban Xon. Some smaller Air America aircraft also flew for the Requirements Office that day: Volpar N9664C flew from Udorn to Vientiane, then to Bangkok (T-09), Hua Hin (T-10) and back to Udorn, probably some sort of courier. All the others worked for the Requirements Office out of some other locations that day: Porter N184L and UH-34D H-90 out of Ban Xon (LS-272), Helio XW-PEA and UH-34D H-88 out of Chinaimo (LS-279), apparently supporting the Royal Lao military based there, and Helio XW-PGM out of Ritaville (LS-53). Only four flights out of Vientiane that day were clearly civilian: C-123K “576” hauled aviation fuel first to Long Tieng (LS-20A) and then to Luang Prabang (L-54) for ASB-035, Porters N357F and N360F both flew to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) – N357F for USAID’s Public Works Division, and N360F for USAID’s ASB-039 –, and Volpar N9157Z flew to Savannakhet (L-39), on to Pakse (L-11), and then back to Vientiane for an unknown USAID ASB. Another 6 aircraft had missions that day whose nature cannot be determined: C-123K “545” departed Pakse (L-11) and Saigon (V-01), while C-123K “556” remained at Udorn as back up for “545”; C-46 XW-PBW shuttled to Luang Prabang (L-54) and C-46 XW-PBV to Savannakhet (L-39), possibly hauling rice, and 2 Helios flew for unidentified customers that day: XW-PGA to Vang Vieng (L-16) and Phong Hong (LS-133) and XW-PI to Nam Lik (LS-356) and Ban Na Then (LS-249). All of the remaining 15 aircraft flew for USAID

151 “In FY72 DOD and State Department agencies negotiated contracts with Air America for flying services in Southeast Asia. The specific contracts involved were USAF Contract F04604-71-C-0002 and US Agency for International Development (USAID) Contracts 439-342 and 439-713. After extensive DOD/State Department discussions, agreement was reached to consolidate, effective 1 July 1972, all flying services under USAF procurement cognizance. Hq USAF directed Sacramento Air Material Area (SMAMA), current procurement office for the F04604-71-C-0002 contract, to be responsible for the contract consolidation project.” (Introductory Summary, p. 2, to Modification F04606-71-C-0002-P00054 of June 1972, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F6).

152 The list “Revised status of aircraft” as of 1 November 65 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1) still mentions aircraft assigned to the CEECO contract, while in the list “Revised status of aircraft” as of 8 April 1966 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1) no aircraft are assigned to the CEECO contract any longer, but most of the former CEECO aircraft are now assigned to contract AID-439-713.

153 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp. 277-87; e-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
customer ASB-044 on 24 May 72, but the nature of those aircraft makes believe that at least some of those flights were linked to CIA programs: C-123Ks “374” and “386”, both fitted with center line seats, flew from Udorn - Ban Xon (LS-272) – Udorn, then back to Ban Xon as directed, and back from Ban Xon to Udorn; C-130E “786” shuttled between Pakse (L-11) and Seno (L-46) all day with center line seats installed, before returning to Udorn in the evening – all this looks like movements of troops. Even the remaining 2 Twin Otters – Air America’s fixed wing aircraft for special operations – flew for ASB-044 that day: N5662 to Udorn, then to Long Tieng (LS-20A), and then on to Ban Xon (LS-272) as directed, and N774M first to unspecified drop zones and then to Ban Xon (LS-272) as directed; in the evening, both aircraft returned to Vientiane. Finally, no less then 5 Porters flew as directed by ASB-044 that day, but out of different landing strips: N359F out of Long Tieng (LS-20A), N365F out of Bouam Long (LS-32), N366F out of Ban Xon (LS-272), N392R out of Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69), and N194X out of Nam Lieu (LS-118A). Five helicopters were also operated for ASB-044 on 24 May 72, either as directed out of Long Tieng (S-58T XW-PH and Bell 205 XW-PFH) or as directed out of Ban Xon (S-58Ts XW-PHC and XW-PHE as well as Bell 204B N8513F). Most of these aircraft were assigned to contract AID-439-713, the successor to Air America’s contract with CEECO. So apparently, ASB-044 was related to the CIA, probably standing for the SGU program and all sort of military aid to the Hmong.

PC-6C N366F in the early seventies with what looks like ammunition boxes in the background, taken by Parker
(former photo no. 1-WL1-28-5-PB51, now preserved at UTD/Leary/B75F12)

Vientiane’s Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72 gives a similar picture: That day 9 aircraft flew for Peppergrinder or the Requirements Office, 4 aircraft were operated on civilian flights, and 5 aircraft operated missions whose nature is unspecified. Once again, most of the aircraft – a total of 19 – were used for ASB-044, most of them as directed out of

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154 All details were taken from the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 24 May 72, at: UTD/Severson/B1F7.
156 C-123Ks “545” and “617” hauled aviation fuel for ASB-035, Volpar N9157Z made a VIP flight to Pakse (L-11) for AD-150, and Porter N357F flew to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) for USAID’s ASB-039 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).
157 C-123K “576” came in from Saigon, Commander “2714” flew to Paksane (L-35) and back, and Porter N357F was used on training flights. C-46s XW-PBV and XW-PBW flew from Vientiane to Ban Na Then (LS-249), Pakse (L-11), Savannakhet (L-39), and back each time, but with center line seats installed; they may have been used on a refugee airlift or to carry troops (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).
Ban Xon (LS-272) or Long Tieng (LS-20A). These are 3 C-123Ks (“524”, “617”, and “671”) with center line seats installed, Twin Otters N774M and N5662, 5 Porters working out of other air strips (N359F, N366F, N184L, N392R, and N194X), Caribou “401” working out of Pakse (L-11) as directed, 2 helicopters working out of Long Tieng as directed (S-58T XW-PHC and Bell 204B N8513F), and 6 helicopters working out of Ban Xon as directed (S-58T's XW-PHA and -PHD, Bell 205s XW-PFG and -PFJ, and Bell 204Bs N8512F and N1196W).\(^{158}\) Once again, flights for ABS-044 involved aircraft that are known to have been used for special projects such as the Twin Otter and the S-58T; so probably many of the missions flown for ABS-044 were related to some CIA programs.

With the introduction of the new combined contract on 1 July 1972, Vientiane’s Daily Flight Schedules received a new outward appearance, and sometimes CASI’s flights were also indicated. In this way, it becomes clear that by now many of the purely civilian flights formerly operated by both Air America and CASI, were operated by Continental Air Services Inc. only in the meantime. On 31 August 72, for example, the flights for USAID’s ASB-034, that is rice and other refugee relief supplies, were all operated by CASI aircraft that also performed the “Milk Run South” and flights for upcountry USAID customers (ASB-038).\(^{159}\) That same day, only 6 out of 45 Air America aircraft listed in Vientiane’s Daily Flight Schedule were operated for civilian customers: C-123K “556” shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, C-123K “648” shuttled aviation fuel to Long Tieng for ASB-035, C-46 XW-PBW flew rice and other refugee relief supplies for ASB-034, and C-123K “524” as well as Porter N360F flew out of Ban Houei Sai (L-25) as directed by customer ASB-039; finally, UH-34D H-44 was assigned to an unspecified USAID customer that day for operations as directed out of Ban Xon (LS-272). With the exception of 2 flights coming in from Thailand and 3 others whose missions are unspecified,\(^{160}\) all the other Air America aircraft touching Vientiane’s Wattay airport that day were either operated for military customers, that is for Peppergrinder (C-123Ks “386” and “545”, plus one flight by “636”) or for the Requirements Office (10 aircraft),\(^{161}\) or for ASB-044, which is believed to cover CIA programs like the Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) program and to include many paramilitary operations. Indeed, on 31 August 72, ASB-044 operations involved no less than 23 Air America aircraft, that is 4 C-123Ks,\(^{162}\) one Volpar,\(^{163}\) 4 Caribous,\(^{164}\) 1 Twin Otter,\(^{165}\) 3 Porters,\(^{166}\) 4 UH-34Ds, 4 Bell

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\(^{159}\) On 31 August 72, CASI used C-46s N1447, N9760Z, XW-TDG, and XW-PHL for ASB-034 (rice and other refugee relief supplies), while CASI C-46 XW-PHIM flew the “Milk Run South” to Savannakhet (L-39) and Pakse (L-11), and C-46 XW-PHN came in from Bangkok (T-09) on a flight for ASB-037. The same day some CASI Porters flew out of Ban Xon as directed by several USAID customers, that is XW-PCI and XW-PFE for ASB-038, and XW-PFW for ASB-043; Porter XW-PDI operated out of Luang Prabang (L-54) for ASB-045. Still the same day, only three of CASI’s aircraft flew for paramilitary (Porter XW-P EO out of Pakse as directed by ASB-044) and military (Porter XW-PH and Baron N5700K for the Requirements Office) customers (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).


\(^{162}\) That day, C-123Ks “617”, “576” (with center line seats installed), and some flights of “636” were operated out of Long Tieng as directed by customer ASB-044, and C-123K “374” worked out of Vang Vieng (L-16) as directed by ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

\(^{163}\) That day, Volpar N9157Z flew Vientiane-Udom-Savannakhet-Nam Phong (T-712)-Udom-Vientiane for ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7). This was probably a courier flight, as there was a training camp at Nam Phong (T-712). In 1972. Thai Unity forces and the Hmong forces of Groupement Mobile 30 were trained there (Conboy /Morrison, Shadow war, pp. 328 and 334, note 11).
204B, 1 S-58T, and 1 Hughes 500 – all helicopters being operated out of Long Tieng (LS-20A) that had been secured for flight operations by then. The period between August and November 1972 is quite well documented by the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules preserved at the Air America Archives, but the picture given by those documents is more or less the same during the whole period: Aviation fuel continued to be hauled by Air America C-123s or Fuel drums being transported in an Air America Caribou (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

Caribous for ASB-035, but most other civilian flights were made by CASI aircraft, while Air America concentrated on military customers (Peppergrinder and Requirements Office) and even more than that on ASB-044, believed to be the CIA’s Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) program. Quite often, one or two C-130Es are also mentioned in those Daily Flight Schedules,

164 That day, Caribous “401” and “389” worked out of Vang Vieng (L-16), “392” out of Pakse (L-11), and “430” out of Ban Houei Sai (L-25) – all as directed by ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).
165 That day, Twin Otter N774M worked out of Vang Vieng (L-16), as directed by ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).
166 That day, 3 Air America Porters flew as directed by ASB-044: N355F worked out of Bouam Long (LS-32), N357F out of Nam Lieu (LS-118A), and N367F out of Long Tieng (LS-20A) (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).
167 These helicopters were: UH-34Ds H-52, H-63, H-80, and H-91; Bell 204Bs N1196W, N8512F, N8513F, and N8535F; S-58T XW-PHD; and Hughes 500 N354X (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).
168 All in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.
mostly operating out of Udorn for Peppergrinder or for ASB-044, however. One or two purely humanitarian flights per day were still flown by Air America during those final days of the official war in Laos—and sometimes even the C-130Es were used to haul aviation fuel—which, but most of Air America’s activities had shifted to military and paramilitary operations.

169 As former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls, the February 1970 airlift was the only time when the C-130 was used for refugee movements, “but I did use it now and then to haul rice to Long Tieng, and possibly Luang Prabang. The way it worked was that I’d have a requirement to fly rice, usually 100 kg bags, and about the only places that needed this were 20A, and occasionally LP. AirAm operation folks would decide how the haul would be done. For 20A, would normally be C-123, but I do remember a few times that the C-130 was used, this probably in 1971 or ’72” (e-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson). The Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 1972 preserved in UTD/Severson/B1F7 note the following C-130E flights for ASB-044: 24 May: “786” shuttled between Seno (L-46) and Pakse (L-11) with centerline seats installed, so troop movements; 2 August: “787” flew Udorn - Long Tieng (LS-20A) – Udorn; 15 Aug.: “786” shuttled between Udorn and Long Tieng; 18 Aug.: “786” shuttled between Pakse (L-11) and Kong Ka Boa (LS-235) with centerline seats installed, so troops; 19 Aug.: “218” from Udorn to Nham Phong (T-712) and Phitsanulok (T-01), then as directed with centerline seats installed, so troops; 30 Aug.: “405” shuttled between Seno (L-46) and Luang Prabang (L-54); 3 Sept.: “786” Udorn-Nam Xieng Lom (LS-69)-Udorn with centerline seats installed, so troops; 12 Sept.: “218” flew Udorn-Seno-Ban Xieng Lom-Udorn-Seno-Ban Xieng Lom-Udorn with centerline seats installed, so troops; 5 Oct.: “787” and “405” shuttled Phitsanulok (T-01)-Pakse (L-11), both with centerline seats installed, so troop movements; 7 Oct.: “787” flew out of Udorn as directed by ASB-044; 21 Oct.: “218” shuttled Udorn-Nam Phong-Pakse and Udorn-Luang Prabang, and “786” shuttled Udorn-Nam Phong-Pakse, Udorn-Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A), and Udorn-Luang Prabang, both with centerline seats installed, so troops; 11 Nov.: “786” shuttled Udorn-Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A) with centerline seats installed, so troops; 17 Nov.: “218” shuttled Udorn-Long Tieng-Seno-Udorn, and “786” made 2 trips Udorn-Pakse-Nong Saeng (T-338)-Udorn. Evidently, in most of the cases, the C-130E flights for ASB-044 were movements of troops.

170 On 15 August 72, C-123K “386” shuttled rice and other refugee relief supplies to Long Tieng for ASB-034, and Porter N360F flew for USAID’s Agriculture Division in the morning, but for the Requirements Office in the afternoon. On 17 August 72, Porter N194X flew Ban Houei Sai (L-25)-Vientiane for ASB-039. On 18 August 72, Porter N366F flew for ASB-039, and Porter N392R made a flight to LS-53, L-54, and LS-133, whose costs were shared by USAID’s Education program and by the Requirements Office (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 15, 17, and 18 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7). These are typical examples that show to what extent USAID’s humanitarian programs had been reduced by that time.
B) Humanitarian work in Laos after the Cease-fire Agreements of 1973

After the Cease-fire Agreements of February 1973, Air America’s activities in Laos were reduced to a minimum, while many of their flying requirements for 1973 were turned over to Continental Air Services Inc. Indeed, it seems that since Air America’s rice drop flights were left to CASI in July 71, many people thought that CASI was most responsible for humanitarian aid in Laos, while Air America brought in most of the military supplies. Indirectly, this is confirmed by a letter dated 23 March 73, in which James Cunningham, in the meantime Air America’s Vice President Laos, explains the current situation to the Company’s Managing Director Paul Velte: “At about 3:30 yesterday afternoon, Bill Leonard came in to ‘informally’ advise me that a decision had been made in the Embassy to ‘reduce Air America’s profile in Laos’ through the machinery of rather rapidly turning over to CASI almost all that remains of our flying requirements for FY 73 [= Fiscal Year 1973]. There is no forecast for FY 74 at the present time which I can reliably report. Apparently the political sphere locally decided that of the two alternatives offered by Air America and CASI, the latter was the least potentially offensive to the Prime Minister and the Pathet Lao.”\(^\text{171}\) This was a purely political decision that had little to do with reality, because CASI had done the same things as Air America.\(^\text{172}\) The following day, James Cunningham sent another letter to Paul Velte, whose message was even more clear-cut: “The Ambassador has personally made the decision to play down Air America’s role in Laos with CASI being pushed to the front as the chosen instrument for much of the U.S. Mission air support requirement.”\(^\text{173}\)

Although both letters underline that at the time of writing, no reliable forecast could be made for FY 74, both of them also indicate minimum requirements by aircraft type for the following months: So the 2 Grant C-46s (XW-PBV and ’PBW) were to be retained by Air America until the 4th quarter of 1973, as they were marked with the Lao National Insignia and did not contribute to Air America’s profile. The U-4 already painted in RLAF colors was to be turned over to the RLAF at the end of May 73. A decreasing number of C-123s was to be used in a training program for RLAF pilots between 16 April and 30 September 73, with some of the aircraft remaining in service even after that date. The fate of the C-7As was still uncertain in late March 73. Four Volpars were to remain in service in Laos, 2 out of Vientiane – including one for the USAID Director – and 2 out of Udorn primarily for use by AB-1. Two C-130Es were to be used even in May and June 73, especially to withdraw the Thai irregular troops and all their equipment still operating in Laos at that time. Three Twin Otters were to remain in service with Air America, but for use out of Udorn, together with some 7 UH-34s and 2 CH-47s. The number of PC-6s Porters to be used out of Vientiane was calculated to go down from 6 or 7 in April 73 to zero in June 73.\(^\text{174}\)

\(^{172}\) Former CASI pilot Lee Gossett points out: “I found it very interesting where the Embassy considered CASI to be the AID carrier and Air America was considered to be the Military carrier. Actually, this was in print form only. CASI did exactly the same missions as Air America and most of our STOL work was for the Agency, up country. CASI had the sole Agency contract for the STOL work out of Pakse in the South, which included night drops along the trail most nights. We operated 4 Porters out of Pakse. At LS-20A, the big Agency base North of Vientiane, we flew extensively for the Agency. CASI was the first to fly the Twin Otters in Laos under Agency contract. CASI had 3 operating up country before Air America brought over their first one. As you know, Air America lost one of their Twin Otters in a fatal crash not far from LS-20A. The pilot, Ben Coleman was a good friend of mine. CASI had the sole Agency contract out of L-54, Luang Prabang and we operated between 2 and 3 Porters there for the sole purpose of supplying rice and hard rice to the troops up North” (e-mail dated 28 June 2006, kindly sent to the author by Lee Gossett).
Immediately after the Cease-Fire Agreements, a lot of business as usual was done. On 3 March 73, for example, Connie Seigrist flew C-130E “787” from Vientiane to Pakse (L-11) on what apparently was a flight for USAID, transporting things like engines and outboard motors, batteries, 3 washing machines, household furniture, a generator, and a motorcycle.

Cargo manifest for C-130E “787” flight Vientiane-Pakse on 3 March 73 (in: UTD/Leary/B89F13)
On 7 March 73, to give another example, C-123K “524” carried rice from Ban Houei Sai to Luang Prabang, before it was loaded with 40 empty cargo pallets for the return trip to Ban Houei Sai, and on 30 March 73, Bell 204B N1196W carried “452 pounds of consumable cargo” to “HU” helipad north of Long Tieng. When C-123K “524” disappeared enroute from Luang Prabang (L-54) to Ban Houei Sai (L-25), Laos on 7 March 73, a Search and Rescue (SAR) operation was carried out that lasted several days and involved more than 40 Air America aircraft. But in spite of all those intense SAR efforts, the crew, comprising Pilot in Command James H. Ackley, First Officer Clarence N. Driver, and Air Freight Dispatchers Chudchai Chewcherngsuk, and Keneko Narissack, was never found. Then, on 14 March 73, the wreckage was discovered by Air America’s PC-6 N366F and Hughes 500 N354X at coordinates QB 2398. The radio messages (XOXOs) of 14 March 73 report: “Due to ground fire, both SAR aircraft departed the scene [...] Due to area insecurity and political situation, access to site not fore-seeable in immediate future. [...] Debrief of pilots of N366F and N354X indicates wreckage confined to 400 foot area at QB 2398 and destroyed by impact and fire. No apparent survivors and no parachutes sighted in area.” Probably, the aircraft, which carried 40 empty cargo pallets, was shot down over the Chinese highway, although thunderstorms, rain and strong southwest winds were reported in the area at the time of the accident. Air America also operated med-evac flights after the Cease-Fire Agreements, even at darkness. During such a med-evac mission, S-58T XW-PHD suffered an engine failure in the Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) area at coordinates TG 8528 on 3 October 73: “Aircraft was attempting Medevac at approximately 2200L to a landing zone at 6,000 feet. On final approach, which was relatively flat and was being conducted with reference to lights on the LZ, aircraft started to settle. PIC increased collective pitch but settling accelerated, wave off was then attempted to the right. Flying speed was not regained and aircraft crashed in an upright position in brush and trees approximately ½ mile from, and 1,000 feet lower than the LZ.” Finally, until the very last moment, Air America helicopters carried aviation fuel to upcountry positions.

But already in 1973, Air America’s activities in Laos started to slow down. How fast business in Laos grew smaller and smaller after the Cease-Fire Agreements of February 1973, is best shown by the Company’s Daily Flight Schedules of Vientiane and Udorn: The Vientiane Flight Schedule for 5 May 73 still lists 28 Air America flights touching the Laotian capital that day: Nine of them were purely military: Air America C-130E “404” and C-123K “636” transported arms and ammunition for the Royal Lao military as directed by Peppergrinder, C-123Ks “386”, “545”, and “576” were used to train RLAF pilots, and 4 aircraft (Porter N359F, UH-34Ds H-80 and H-89, as well as Hughes N353X) flew for the Requirements Office. No less than 13 aircraft, so once more the majority of Air America’s

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175 Accident reports for the accidents of 7 March 73 (C-123K “524”) and 30 March 73 (Bell 204B N1197W), both in: UTD/CIA/B62F2.
176 SAR missions were flown by PC-6s N365F and N367F on 7 March; C-7A “392” and “430”, DHC-6s N6868 and N389EX and Volpar N9542Z on 8 March; C-7A, DHC-6, Volpar and Hughes 500 on 9 March; C-7A “430”, DHC-6 N6868, Porters N360F and N366F, Hughes N353X and N354X and Volpar N3728G on 10 March; C-7A “430”, DHC-6s N6868 and N389EX, Porters N360F and N366F, and Hughes N353X and N354X on 11 March; C-7As “392” and “762”, DHC-6 N6868, Porters N365F, N366F, and N392R, Hughes N353X and N354X and Volpar N9542Z on 12 March; C-7As “392” and “762”, DHC-6s N6868 and N389EX, Porters N365F and N366F, and Hughes N353X and N354X on 13 March; C-7As “392” and “762”, DHC-6 N6868, Porters N365F, N366F, and N392R, Hughes N353X and N354X and Volpar N9542Z on 13 March; C-7As “392” and “762”, DHC-6s N6868 and N389EX, Porters N365F and N366F, and Volpar N9542Z on 13 March; Porter N365F and Hughes 500 N354X on 14 March 73 (see the XOXOs of these dates in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12).
177 XOXOs of 7 to 14 March 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12; quotation taken from the XOXOs of 14 March 73; Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3.
178 XOXO of 3 October 73, in: UTD/CIA/B50F5.
179 When UH-34D H-45 crash-landed at coordinates TG 6233 on 18 April 74, it had “departed LS-20A with 5 Lao passengers, 500 pounds of cargo, and 500 pounds of fuel for Tango Pad” (XOXO of 18 April 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F14).
aircraft operating into Laos that day, that is C-123Ks “556”, “617”, and “671”, Twin Otters N389EX and N6868, 5 Porters (N355F, N360F, N365F, N184L, and N194X), Bell 205s XW-PFG and -PFJ, and UH-34D H-54, were used for ASB-044. This code probably stood for the CIA’s SGU program, when it was used for flights prior to the cease-fire. But after February 1973, one of the CIA’s tasks – especially in MR 2 – was to bolster integrating Vang Pao and his Hmong into the life and economy of post-war Laos. So, in their relations with the Hmong, the CIA then concentrated on things like agricultural development in the Long Tieng area.  
This may also explain some of the flights Air America made for ASB-044. The same day, that

Air America C-130E “404”, probably taken at Udorn in the early seventies  (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

is on 5 May 73, Porter N367F flew out of Udorn for an unknown customer, and only 5 Air America aircraft operating in Laos that day were used for apparently civilian flights: C-54 B-1016 came in from Saigon, C-123K “546” shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, C-123K “577” shuttled aviation fuel for ASB-035, Porter N392R came in from Ban Houei Sai (L-25) for ASB-039, and Porter N5302F worked out of Ban Xon (LS-272) for USAID’s Public Works Division.  
One month later, on 18 June 73, we have a similar picture: Eleven Air America aircraft were used to support the Royal Lao military: C-123Ks “546”, “576”, and “577” were used to train RLAF pilots, some flights of C-123K “617” carried arms and ammunition as directed by Peppergrinder, and Caribou “389”, Volpar N9664C as well as 5 Porters (N184L, N5302F, N5304F, plus – code-shared – N367F and N392R) and UH-34Ds H-54 and H-91 were operated for the Requirements Office. Once again, ASB-044 believed to stand for CIA programs, was Air America’s biggest customer that day: C-130Es “404” and “405” as well as C-123Ks “617” and “671” evidently carried back the Thai irregular troops mentioned above, as they shuttled between unknown locations in Laos and T-712, that is Nam Phong (the C-130s) and T-338, that is Nong Saeng (the C-123s). Caribou “762” plus Twin Otters N389EX, N774M, and N6868 were also operated for ASB-044, but out of Long Tieng, as were Porters N359F, N365F and – code-shared – N367F, while Porter N366F flew for ASB-044 out of Ban Houei Sai (L-25). No customer is given for C-46s XW-PBV operated that day out of Udorn

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and XW-PBW, which flew Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Savannakhet-Vientiane on 18 June 73, while C-123K “636” was used on a “Kangaroo” flight that day on the route Udorn-Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Ban Xong Lom-Ban Houei Sai-Ban Xong Lom-Luang Prabang-Vientiane-Udorn, also for an unknown customer. Only 4 Air America aircraft had civilian customers that day: Caribou “392” shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, Porter N355F flew to Ban Houei Sai for ASB-039, Porter N194X operated out of Ban Xon (LS-272) for USAID’s Public Works Division, and Porter N392R flew Vientiane-Hin Heup (LS-365)-Vientiane for USAID’s Federal Highway Administration, before it was turned over to ASB-044.\textsuperscript{182}

On 23 August 73, only 20 Air America aircraft appear on the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule. Six out of 7 C-123Ks were operated for the Royal Lao Air Force: “617”, “671”, and “576” were used out of Vientiane for training RLAF pilots, while “386”, “577” and “636” made regular flights for the RLAF. Volpar N9664C made a number of drops for the Requirements Office, and Porter N359F flew to Pakse for the same customer. The number of flights made for ASB-044, believed to stand for CIA programs, had been largely reduced by then, and some of the flights were even code-shared with other customers. So after only one flight to Long Tieng and back for ASB-044, C-130E “786” shuttled and dropped aviation fuel for ASB-035 all day long, while C-123K “556” also dropped aviation fuel for ASB-035 and other supplies for ASB-044 during the whole day. Only 3 more aircraft are listed as operating for ASB-044 on 23 August 73: Twin Otter N389EX out of Pakse and Porter N5302F out of Long Tieng, while Porter N359F made a flight to Pakse that was code-shared with the Requirements Office. Two of the Twin Otters (N774M and N6868) departed Udorn in the evening of 23 August 73 “as directed”; the customer for whom those flights were operated is unknown, but it is believed that these were intelligence gathering flights. The remaining flights were civilian: Caribou “389” shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, Volpar N9671C made a courier flight to Bangkok, and Caribous “430” and “762” were used for training.\textsuperscript{183} The 2 Grant C-46s made drops that day: XW-PBV dropped aviation fuel for ASB-035, and XW-PBW made drops for an unknown customer, possibly to refugees. For “at the time of the cease-fire, there were approximately 135,000 refugees on the food support rolls. Most were located in the Long Tieng, Ban Xon, Moung Cha crescent area. […] Secondly, the land had never been surveyed to determine its production potential. To overcome the latter deficiency, aerial photography and interpretation were undertaken. […] One of the first priorities in the post-cease-fire period was to complete a road network which would obviate the need for costly air transportation of construction materials, medicines, and refugee relief commodities. To make the area accessible from Vientiane, an all weather road was completed from Houei Pamon on Route 13 to the A.I.D. depot at Ban Xon. This eliminated the necessity of flying all the A.I.D. commodities from Vientiane to the warehouse in Ban Xon.”\textsuperscript{184}

Already on 30 September 73, Air America’s Vientiane Base lost its independence. That day, the positions of Vice President, Laos Division (James A. Cunningham Jr) and Assistant to the Vice President, Laos Division (Gerald D. Macpherson) were eliminated, and Vientiane Base fell under the control of the Vice President – Northern Thailand Division (Clarence J. Abadie), while continuing affairs of Air America Vientiane were then administered by Luther E. Martin, former Vientiane Director, Ground Support.\textsuperscript{185} On 28 September 73, James Cunningham sent a farewell telex to the CEO at Washington and, as a copy, to all Air America stations still existing at that time, thanking everybody for their cooperation and for

\textsuperscript{183} Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 23 August 73, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.
\textsuperscript{184} Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{185} Telex dated 28 September 73, VP-LD to CEO, re termination of Laos Division, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B. The telex sent by VP-LD was signed as “MBS”, which probably stands for Mission Base Staff.
supporting Air America operations in Laos for so many years. This telex from VP-LD was signed as “MBS”, which probably stood for “Mission Base Staff.” Apparently, this was the “address to the nation” made by the last manager of Air America’s Vientiane Base, James A. Cunningham that VP-NTD Clarence J. Abadie remembered in his telex of 3 June 74.186

Telex dated 28 September 73, VP-LD to CEO, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B

In November 73, only 5 Air America aircraft were still based at Vientiane: C-123Ks “576”, “617”, and “671” used to train RLAF pilots and the 2 Grant C-46s XW-PBV and XW-PBW used for drops. By 1 December 73, no Air America aircraft was based at Vientiane any longer, as the last 3 C-123Ks had been turned over to the Royal Lao Air Force and the 2 C-46s to Royal Air Lao.187 However, Air America continued to fly into Laos out of its Thai base of Udorn, and in December 73, no less than 34 aircraft were assigned to contract F04606-71-C-0002 for operations out of Udorn, most of them evidently into Laos, with more aircraft unassigned. Probably only one Volpar plus some of the 4 C-7As, 3 Porters, and 7 UH-34Ds were used for USAID, which – as will be recalled – was one of the contractors of contract no.

186 Telex of 3 June 74 in: UTD/CIA/B31F10.
187 Flight Operations Circulars nos. DOC-C-73-015 of 1 November 73 and DOC-C-73-016 of 1 December 73, both in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
In April 74, Air America operated only 22 aircraft out of Udorn, and in May 74 this number was further reduced to 14 aircraft. Only one Volpar plus some of the C-7As and UH-34Ds may have been used by USAID in 1974. This continuous reduction of flying services into Laos was accompanied by a steady process of phasing out all ground activities in Laos. On 11 April 1974, Air America’s President reported to the Executive Committee of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Co Ltd the following initial phase-out plan for ground operations in Laos:

“A. 8 April 1974

(1) Commence turnover of all communications/navaids sites as proposed in schedule of ground services contracts, FY75. All actions to be completed on or before 10 May.

(2) Commence inventory and/or turnover to USAID, the base power plant. Retain AAM personnel for familiarization training of USAID personnel or excess those that can be picked up by USAID. All actions to be completed 20 April.

B. 1 May 1974

(1) Turn over base security services to TAPS and excess personnel as appropriate. All actions to be completed prior to 10 May.

(2) Turn over all traffic and cargo functions to designated contractor(s) as appropriate. Excess all personnel for separation and/or transfer. Complete all actions by 10 May.

(3) Turn over flight operations and flight watch activities to designated contractor(s). Retain a suitable Company representative until all flight operations by AAM are completed.

(4) Cease operations of main dining room, retaining a capability for soup and sandwiches until 15 May. Close local mess as soon as conditions permit, but not later than 15 May.

(5) Cease upcountry POL operations and retain only those personnel necessary to transfer equipment and supplies as directed. Complete entire turnover prior to 10 May.

(6) Cease operation of aircraft maintenance activities at Vientiane and at LS20A. Utilize TDY [= temporary duty] personnel from UTH [= Udorn] to perform services required until termination of flying contract.

(7) Cease all facility maintenance activities.

(8) Terminate all teletype traffic to VTE [= Vientiane]. Subsequent traffic to be routed to UTH for referral by phone or pouch.

C) 10 May 1974

(1) Close medical clinic.

(2) Cease all but limited operations of GTD [= Ground Transportation Department].

D. 15 May 1974

(1) Cease all training activities.

(2) Cease operation of fire brigade.

(3) Cease all GTD operations.

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188 In December 73, more aircraft than needed were assigned to Udorn. The 34 Air America aircraft actually operated out of Udorn into Laos under the provisions of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 were 2 out of 5 C-130Es, 4 C-7As, 3 Twin Otters, 4 Volpars, 3 out of 8 Porters, 3 out of 6 Chinooks, 3 out of 5 S-58Ts, 3 Bell 205s, 2 Bell 204Bs, and 7 out of 18 UH-34Ds (Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-73-016 of 1 December 73, both in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).

189 In April 74, again more aircraft than needed were assigned to Udorn. The 22 Air America aircraft actually operated out of Udorn into Laos under the provisions of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 were 1 out of 5 C-130Es, 3 out of 4 C-7As, 3 Twin Otters, 3 out of 4 Volpars, 2 out of 6 Chinooks, 2 out of 5 S-58Ts, 3 Bell 205s, and 5 out of 17 UH-34Ds (Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-004 of 1 April 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).

190 In May 74, again more aircraft than needed were assigned to Udorn. The 14 Air America aircraft actually operated out of Udorn into Laos under the provisions of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 were 1 out of 5 C-130Es, 1 out of 4 C-7As, 1 out of 3 Twin Otters, 3 Volpars, 1 out of 6 Chinooks, 3 out of 5 S-58Ts, and 4 out of 17 UH-34Ds (Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-005 of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).
The President further reported that regarding Laos connected flying a target of 51 days from “D Day” (5 April 1974) had been established for cessation of such flying and efforts were underway to reduce this to 45 days.”

“D Day” was the day when the new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) was to be established that was to have several communist ministries. So, by mid-May 74, all Air America operations at Vientiane were phased out, and on 3 June 74, the last Air America aircraft – C-7A “389”, piloted by Captain F. F. Walker and Captain M. W. Shaver – crossed the border from Laos into Thailand at TE5878 at 1113Z en route from Vientiane to Udorn.

During the last days at Udorn, much time was spent with establishing an inventory in order to sell the base. Except for an occasional VIP flight, most Air America flights departing Udorn were ferry flights – mostly to Saigon, but also to Bangkok. This is well illustrated by the Udorn Daily Flight Schedule for 23 June 74 depicted below. That day, only Volpar N3728G made a revenue flight, a VIP flight to Bangkok. Apart from Porter N367F that remained at Udorn as a back up aircraft, all other Air America aircraft listed in that schedule

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191 Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Company Limited of 11 April 1974, in: UTD/CIA/B10F1.
were ferried elsewhere: Volpar N9671C to Bangkok (T-09), and Porters N359F, N360F and N5302F as well as Bell 205s XW-PFH and XW-PFJ to Saigon (V-01) via Bangkok (T-09) and Phnom Penh (C-01).

Udorn Daily Flight Schedule for 23 June 74
(in: UTD/Spencer/B1F2)
At Udorn, operations were phased out on 30 June 74, when contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 expired. The last flight schedule “was dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny”, as was noted on the schedule by W. R. Leonard (C/ASB/USAID), C. J. Abadie Jr. (VP-NTD), E. W. Knight (DO-NTD), and W. F. Palmer (MGS-NTD). And the last Air America flight out of Udorn was Beech Volpar N3728G, which, piloted by Jim Rhyne, left Udorn at 1000L for the ferry flight to Saigon.

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**Udorn Daily Flight Schedule for 30 June 74, in: UTD/Abadie/B1F6**

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193 Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Company Limited of 9 July 1974, in: UTD/CIA/B10F2.

After the end of Air America’s operations in Laos, USAID / Laos did not survive for a long time. On 5 April 1974, the new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) was established, with 4 of the most influential ministries for the political Right (“Vientiane-side”), 4 for the political Left (Lao Patriotic Front: LPF), 2 for appointees considered Neutrals. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was accepted politically by both sides as a Neutralist. In June and July 74, the US Ambassador and the A.I.D. director asked the LPF Foreign Minister and the LPF Minister of Economy and Plan if the new Lao Government wanted any changes in the US economic assistance program. As in the late summer and fall of 1974, both Ministers asked for more leadership and management responsibilities, the A.I.D. mission began to arrange for the transfer to the PGNU of large elements of or total projects it had been funding. At the same time, Lao students began to ask for more political influence and power, possibly just imitating similar student movements that had shaken Thailand in 1973. Then, in the fall of 1974, other groups began to organize in Laos for political and economic purposes, and on Christmas Eve of 1974, a “rebel” group attacked Ban Houei Sai and took over the military command of the city. The American A.I.D. employees in Ban Houei Sai were held as hostages for six days before they were evacuated to Vientiane. “Two new elements were involved in this […] Ban Houei Sai incident: (1) armed Lao student leaders, who were the spokesmen and most powerful element, and (2) Pathet Lao forces who occupied all villages and surrounding areas of Ban Houei Sai. It soon became evident that the students were receiving instructions and support from the LPF. The method of takeover in Ban Houei Sai became a prototype for similar operations throughout the Vientiane-side zone of Laos, culminating in late August 1975 with a formal declaration by the LPF that all of Laos had been ‘liberated.’ […] Through the use of demonstrations (usually spearheaded by students) the LPF managed to force out the principal Vientiane-side Ministers and Military Commanders, as well as the Vientiane-side leadership in all provinces of Laos and to harass A.I.D. operations and employees to the extent that all American and TCN [= ‘third-country nationals’] employees were obliged to depart first the provincial posts and eventually Vientiane. […] An agreement was finally signed on May 27, 1975 between the PGNU and the American Charge d’Affaires that the A.I.D. Mission would be terminated no later than June 30, 1975. Termination was completed on June 26, 1975.”

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195 Ramsey et al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 9-10.