January - June 1964

[Udorn report: 12,505 flying hours during 1964; 135 average per aircraft per month; H-13 lost in July, H-19 lost in August.]

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[Air America underwent a major expansion in 1964. According to Larry Ropka, Air America and other proprietaries were not handled by the Agency’s Air Branch. Doole and Houston ran the proprietaries. The Agency forced expansion on Air America in 1964. With Rousselot gone, Doole was reluctant to turn down business. "George Doole had only one talent: he was a bookkeeper." "All he ever saw was the pennies." He was inflexible.

[Terry Burke, March 13, 1992: In 1964, Burke was assigned to Long Tieng to replace Vint Lawrence, who had gone home on leave. He was aware of Vint’s close ties to Vang Pao and was told not to try to fill the role. Bill Lair came to Long Tieng more often during this period and dealt with Vang Pao. Lair was "the brains behind the whole thing." He worked at understand the Thai. He dealt well with problems, thinking through ramifications and presenting clear alternatives. Landry was more operation-oriented and more brusque. Lawrence cared deeply about the Hmong and wanted them to become economically independent. Tony Po was sometimes difficult to deal with (he drank a lot). Vang Pao seemed to be preoccupied with political problems during this time. Burke recalls when they Hmong captured the first NVA prisoner during a fire fight north of Sam Thong. Tony nearly beat him to death before Burke pulled him off. Initially, Burke and Po handled air ops out of Long Tieng. A Hmong boy did a lot of the routine work. As the workload increased, the Agency sent up a young officer, Jack Cahill, to take over.]
Burke soon learned that there were two types of pilots. One group took their job very seriously and could relied upon. This included Jordan, Kanach, Casterlin, Elder, Rhyne, and Conner ("a real pro"). The second group had a more "cowboy" approach to the job and would sometime show up hung over.

Burke was shot down with Bill Cook in late 1963 or early 1964. They were delivering ammo to TIC in the Sam Neua area. They loaded up one wounded, then Cook (despite Burke's warning) flew over the enemy position. The helicopter was hit; an overhead cable exploded as Burke was returning fire with his BAR. Cook made a nice autorotation into a streambed in a ravine between the two forces. Then Cook and Burke carried the wounded soldier up the mountains toward the friendly position. The helicopter later was recovered.

January 1964

James L. Mullen arrives VTE. Bill Solin also had been hired to establish what become the FIC. Mullen was ex-USMC combat intelligence officer; Solin had background in Army intelligence. They had been given no parameters for the job except to establish a system to protect the pilots by identifying unfriendly areas and to get them out if shot down. The operations people at VTE (Tom Krohn and Larry Joseph) were helpful. They expected some resistance from the pilots, who might be reluctant to trust their lives to the advice of two young ex-1st Lts, so they scheduled a meeting with all pilots during their first week in Laos. It was held at the pilots' hostel (Grey House). The explained the function of the FIC and handled questions. They were cued better than they had expected; within a few months, even the doubters were cooperating. Pilots would report in the morning for briefings, and they would stop by to be debriefed at the end of the day. Mullen and Solin kept an updated situation map, prepared site books, and tried to improve the signal system for airdrops and landing. They also brief Udorn crews, except for the "chosen few" who worked directly for the Customers. The attache's office also provided information. Capt. Cherry, USAF intelligence officer at Udorn, was especially helpful. Some information came from the Customers but realtions were never as good as they should have been.

Frank Daly was the main Customer representative when Mullen arrived. He was unsympathetic toward the FIC and provided little information. Not only did he prefer to brief the pilots himself, but he also discouraged them from cooperating with the FIC. Station Manager Frank Stitt also left a good deal to be desired. Mullen has a clear recollection of being called in by Stitt at one point and told that the FIC was only a "paperwork panacea" to pacify
the pilots. Chief Pilot Fred Walker and Little Bird CP Bill Andresevic, on the other hand, were very supportive. The customer situation improved in the spring when Earle Jones replaced Daly, but customer cooperation always had problems. Jones provided more information as time passed, but never gave his full support. For example, Jones did not permit Solin to attend debriefings of downed military pilots. Jones's deputy was an ex-AAM kicker who was not too popular.

FIC became involved in SAR, especially in the beginning when the military did not have helicopter rescue capability. The customer would provide information on ground assets in the area; attaché office would provide air support. USAF had jet aircraft only in the beginning; Navy ADs were much more effective for rescrap. On several occasions, AAM helicopter pilots would not go in without AD support, especially after several helicopters were shot down during rescue attempts (Zeitler, for example).

FIC did briefing for T-28 program. AAM participation would supposed to be very hush-hush, but the first armed T-28s arrived in Vientiane in broad daylight and the pilots walked into the FIC for briefing. The first group of T-28 pilots were superb; they were mostly Small Bird pilots with fighter experience. They knew the terrain well. When used to hit targets, attaché office provided most targets but customer also provided targets.

Mullen left Laos in December 1965.


Solin was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, educated in local schools, and graduated from Harvard (major in government) in 1959. With a two-year ROTC commitment to fulfill, he went into the Army and was trained as a photo interpreter. After being extended for a third year by the Berlin crisis, he entered Harvard Law School in the fall of 1962. He quickly decided that the law was not for him and he left school before the end of the first year. "Somewhat adrift," he answered an advertisement in the New York Times for people with an intelligence background to call a listed number. He ended up in Washington for an interview with Air America/Pacific Corporation. The people he spoke with were vague about the job, indicating that he would be involved in briefing pilots, but they wanted him to leave immediately.

Solin arrived in Taipei in early December 1963. Sent to Vientiane, the details of the job remained vague. Jim Mullen joined him shortly thereafter. They found that briefings for pilots were being done "in a half-baked fashion" by Sandy Sandoval. Sandoval had been grounded by a head injury and had been given the task to maintaining a map.
that showed the location of enemy forces. Previously, the customer had delivered impromptu briefings for pilots. However, there was no formal medium to exchange or disseminate information.

"Full of enthusiasm," Solin and Mullen received a cool reception from the pilots. The Customers, especially Frank Daly, were especially apprehensive. Daly was barely civil. Solin and Mullen worked out of a makeshift quonset hut at the end of the airstrip while an operations building was under construction. They made slow progress at first, as they attempted to win the confidence of the pilots. There only briefing tool was a bad map. Pilots were at first not required to debrief. Also, it was apparent that the pilots quickly stopped depending on maps.

Solin cultivated a variety of sources. He obtained some good maps from the French. Relations with Colonel Tyrrell was excellent from the beginning (Captain Lou Batson and Major Don Mccullogh worked for Tyrrell). Within a couple of months, most pilots were cooperating. However, there was continued problems with the Customer.

The turning point in relations with the Customer came when Solin showed up for Klusmann's debriefing. Earl Jones was especially upset. There are was a problem when FIC was drawn into targeting T-28 strikes. A pivotal incident came when the Customer intercepted a radio transmission about targeting. T. C. Walker was placed over FIC. Solin and Mullen was sent to Saigon a short while later.

Marius Burke, Jr., arrives Udorn early in 1964. He had been hired in October [31] 1963 and had spent several months processing in Taipei. There was not much happening when he arrived in Udorn. There was only about 10 hours a month of flying per pilot, and there had not been any hiring for nearly a year. Burke was not well received, as the pilots could not understand why he had been hired; they did not appreciate the presence of another pilots to share in the limited flying time. There were about 10-12 pilots at Udorn, all highly proficient. (This later would cause problems. The original group of pilots routinely handled loads over 1000 to 1500 pounds over maximum gross. When the program expanded, the newer and less experienced pilots were under pressure to perform up to the standards of the older pilots. This resulted in a number of accidents.) Abadie was director of operations, and James L. Coble was chief pilot. Coble left about six months later, after talking a number of pilots (including Burke, Knight, Munsell, and Zeitler) into investing in a concrete block plant that had great potential but that went bust.
The first months were a learning experience, both with regard to aircraft operations and political conditions. He recalls two incidents that might well have ended in disaster. The first came when he was carrying a heavy load into a mountain pad at high altitude. As he approached the pad, he realized that he wasn’t going to make it. He bounced off the slope, dropped the collective and got RPM back, kicked the rudder and peeled off down the side of the mountain. Burke learned from this incident, and he never again got short of airspeed. But he had been lucky.

A second incident took place during the time that the Neutralists were in the process of changing sides. Tony Po asked Burke to deliver supplies to a pad north of the PDJ. He flew up the right valley but it was the smokey season and he could not locate the pad. After awhile, he spotted an airstrip at Ban Pha Ka (LS-40). He landed to get directions. The soldiers were friendly, and one offered to show him the way. With the soldier in the left seat, Burke found the pad, dropped the cargo, then returned the soldier to LS-40 with his thanks. During a debriefing with Po, he mentioned how "nice and friendly" that people at LS-40 had been. Po was taken aback. "But they’re not the good guys," he exclaimed. Burke had learned another valuable lesson.

After six months after he arrived, Wayne Knight replaced Coble as chief pilot. Burke, who had known Knight at Pensacola, became assistant chief pilot a short time later (Hitchman had wanted the job. He quit and went to work for Bird & Son, flying Porters, but returned about a year later.) Knight and Burke got along well. They had a common background, and they tended to see things the same way. Knight as a low-key, easy-going individual. Knight and Burke did the crew scheduling, customer coordination, and other aspects of helicopter operations. They had little input about selection of equipment or personnel.

Burke remained assistant chief pilot for three years. This was a good time. The Meos were doing well and everyone was optimistic. The pilots took enormous satisfaction in their job. They worked hard and felt good about it. They wanted to do the best job they could for people like Tony Po. "It was almost like being on a high." There was a close working relationship with the customer. Burke went into the training department in 1967. In 1969, he took a leave to absence to return to the US and complete his college degree. He did not return until 1971.

January 2, 1964

Almanac: Report by Major General Victor H. Krulak, special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities for the JCS, sent to President Johnson. It outlines an elaborate series of clandestine operations against North Vietnam. Known as Oplan 34A. Will go into effect on February 1. Three-pronged attack. "The first
involves a mixture of operations such as flights by U-2 spy planes over North Vietnam, kidnapping North Vietnamese for intelligence gathering, parachuting sabotage and psychological warfare teams into North Vietnam, commando raids to blow up rail and highway bridges, and bombarding North Vietnamese coastal installations." Second element involves bombing raids by T-28s in Laos against North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces. "Although bearing Laotian Air Force markings, the 25-40 US-supplied planes are mostly manned by Thai and Air America pilots." Photographic intelligence for bombing raids will be gathered by USAF and USN aircraft codenamed YANKEE TEAM. Third element of plan consists of USN destroyer patrols in Gulf of Tonkin, both as show and force to collect intelligence of North Vietnamese coastal defenses and warning radar. This is codenamed DE SOTO.

January 8, 1964
Casterlin to parents: "The war still rolls on in endless confusion. It's a panic, but I am getting my first real taste of war with the shelling and evacuation of wounded." Meo are "the only people that I have had contact with who are worth anything."

January 30, 1964
Casterlin to parents: Our chief pilot [V. A. Black] is quitting. [Black resigned effective 1 March 64 and was replaced by Coble, who resigned effective 1 September 64]

February 1964

David started flying as a crop duster during the summer while he was a college student in the early 1950s. He later became a pilot for Trans Texas Airlines but was furloughed after 9 months. He then took a job as a pipeline patrol pilot for the Trunkline Gas Company, which involved low level work, looking for encroachments, leaks, etc. He heard about Air America from a friend who had served in the Special Forces. He sent in an inquiry. He was hired almost immediately by Red Dawson, as there was a need for Helio pilots.

Hired on 25 November 1965, in February 1966 David was asked to join the defoliant program in southern Thailand. Apparently, Fred Walker was going through the files of new pilots, looking for people with spraying experience. William Tedder [hired 13 August 1963; separated 13 January 1964] was the first pilot assigned to the project, and he wanted to get out. David knew Tedder, an ex-crop duster
from Mississippi and had once bought an airplane from him. Tedder warned David against the program, advising him that the Twin-Beech that was rigged with spraying booms, would not fly on one engine. Walker, however, told David (who had not completed his three-month probationary period) to take the assignment or lose his job. David immediately contacted Bill Andresevic to see if Bill could get him out of the program. Bill got out of his sickbed (he was ill with dengue fever) and sent a cable to Taipei that David had been checked out in the Helio (although his checkout had not been completed). As Helio pilots were in short supply, Walker had to let him go. Andresevic saved his job.

The Twin-Beech was staged out of Hua Hin in southern Thailand. There were three scientists involved (probably from MIT). They were trying to develop an effective defoliant, which later was known as Agent Orange.

J. D. Herceg [hired 21 September 1962], who volunteered for the project, replaced Tedder in Hua Hin. He remained there for some time. When David visited the area in 1964, Herceg was still flying spray missions in the Twin Beech. David heard that Herceg later died with multiple cancer.

Telephone interview with Fred Walker, July 24, 1991:

The project began in December 1963. The first pilot assigned to the Twin Beech was Bill Tedder. There was a problem with single-engine performance, and Fred ran some tests with Tedder. On one of the tests, the airplane almost went down. Fred determined that the airplane would stay in the air on one engine but only with a minimum fuel load. Therefore, the airplane was flown with weight restrictions.

February 1964

Rhine returns from India and meets with Tom Boyd and Lair in Udorn. Bird & Son had a program to train Thai pilots in the Helio and Dornier. Bird wanted Air America to do the Helio training, and Rhine was given the job. It was supposed to last for 30 days, but it extended for some time. He trained the Thais in short field work, then set up a program in Laos using Thai pilots. They later flew Porters and C-47s. Only one C-47 was lost in the program (making an airdrop).

The Helio was not easy to fly. "It took a different kind of guy to fly it." You had to force the airplane to go where you wanted it to go. Rhine eventually had 5,000 hours in the Helio. Lee Mullen convinced Pop Buell to keep the Helio for his contract (safety), and Mullen and Luke Peters stayed with the airplane throughout the 1960s.
February 16, 1964

Casterlin to parents: "The war has again taken a turn for the worse. The baddies have brought more professionals into the fight and have taken back many positions that we fought so hard to gain."

February 26, 1964

State Department to VTE [DDRS 1982/2737]: Guerrilla units in Laos now number 23,000. Considerable be given to increasing their number by 5,000.

February 27, 1964

CIA estimates that NVA now deploying four battalions (1200 men) to counter Hmong guerrilla activity.

Castle, "Alliance in a Secret War": "In 1963 and 1964, Vang Pao and his CIA advisors continued to emphasize harassment of communist supply lines, particularly along Route Seven from North Vietnam. The Vietnamese, determined to suppress these raids, began sending large numbers of men to protect the roadway. According to a CIA cable, date 27 February 1964, the Vietnamese deployed an estimated four battalions (twelve hundred men) from the Plain of Jars to the Nong Het area to counter Hmong guerrilla operations. The Hmong forces in the area avoided contact with the numerically superior enemy. On 25 February, the Vietnamese attacked Phou Khe, a seven thousand-foot high Hmong stronghold located southwest of the Plain of Jar, with massive artillery and mortar barrage. In a battle lasting fifteen hours the communists were able to capture the base and disperse the Hmong defenders. Vang Pao is quoted as saying that the enemy was intent on "eliminating possible Meo threats to the security of Route 7 from the south."" pp. 72-73

[February-June 1964]

Col. Robert L. F. Tyrrell transferred from Saigon to VTE at request of Amb. Unger as air attache, replacing LTC Rigney. At first, the situation was quiet. "It was considered a very lazy and peaceful place to be at the time." However, this soon changed. In April, an Air Commando team under Major Drexel "Barney" B. Cochran arrived. Tyrrell credits Cochran with making a major contribution to stopping an enemy offensive on the PDJ that began just before the start of the rainy season in May. Lao pilots flew T-28s. Cochran himself flew one mission. The decision was made to train Air America personnel with a background in T-28 equipment to fly in support of SAR. The pilots involved in this activity "did a fantastic job." They knew the country like the back of their hand. Unger put an end to Waterpump flying out of a fear of publicity. RLAF pilots lacked proficiency at the time.
When Klusmann was shot down on June 6, Tyrrell asked Unger to permit US aircraft to fly cover for the rescue helicopters. He finally agreed to use Air America pilots, but this came too late for the rescue effort. In general, Tyrrell admired Unger's wisdom. {He also admired Sullivan, who had a amazing memory of details.)

March 3, 1964
PIC to ATOG Mgr, VTE: The past month has been marked by "refinements in routine and further procedural innovation." One central deficiency is "an insufficiently clear understanding, both within the company and - more significantly - with the customer, as to the role of the briefing center, its responsibilities and powers." {Good treatment of problems

March 5, 1964
McNamara approves assignment of Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, to Udorn: WATERPUMP.

USAF Plans and Policies: PACAF in December 1963 proposed deployment of USAF special air warfare unit to Thailand to train Thai and Lao pilots. During January and February 1964, US ambassadors in Bangkok and Vietiane held discussions with governments on Thailand and Laos. Following their approval, DOD and State approved. On March 5, JCS directs USAF to send SAW unit to Udorn for six months. LeMay instructs HQ TAC to dispatch Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing with four T-28s and 41 personnel.

[6 F-100s deployed to Takhli in March; 18 F-100s following Gulf of Tonkin in August.]

March 7, 1964
Casterlin to parents: Last month I moved all the heavy guns out of our positions near the PDJ (LS19 - Pho Ke) to LS-05. The guns were broken down to pieces of 2000+ pounds. LS-19 elevation 6200 feet. "I had to work at almost no fuel and throw everything I could out of the machine." Our forces are in retreat. "Very soon we will be back where we were when I first go over here." AAM down to 19 helicopter pilots. It is the smokey season now and I can hardly see across the street in the mornings.

March 10, 1964
New York Times story, dateline VTE: Air America soon to stop operating in Laos, with Seaboard World Services (affiliatite of Seaboard World Airlines) to take over work. Air America spokesman announced today: "We will be shortly entering into a phase-out or our operations in Laos. We have long looked for an opportunity to concentrate our managerial efforts on the remainder of our business complex,
and the Royal Lao Government, having located a suitable successor, makes it possible for us to accelerate this long-desired change." Spokesman said that change over would probably take 90 to 120 days after the arrival of Seaboard's representative. Air America was under charter to MAAG. When MAAG activity stopped in October 1962, Souvanna Phouma asked US for continuation of aid. Agreement signed one week later. Air America has been primarily concerned with airdrops of supplies to refugees. Work has been vigorously opposed by Pathet Lao. Relief should be responsibility of three-party government. Also, Air America activities are "cover" for support of anti-PL forces. Three Air America airplanes have been shot down since November 1962. C-46 shot down in September 1963 near Tchepone while dropping rice. Souvanna said that Seaboard would be under contract to Laotian government and would not be used to transport military equipment.

John H. Mahoney, senior VP for Seaboard, confirmed yesterday that his company had made proposals to Laotian government. George Doole said in telephone interview "that his company would perform other services in Laos after Seaboard took over."

**Washington Daily News, March 23, 1964, byline Richard Starnes**, lengthy article about Air America going out of business. "Air America is a mysterious charter operation that has been performing various humanitarian services in and around Laos for the past decade. The Pathet Lao have long insisted that Air America was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Central Intelligence Agency, a charge that most resident journalists in Laos credited. Spooks or not, some day somebody should write the story of the Air America pilots, a hell-for-leather bunch of free-booters the like of which has not been seen since birdmen stopped wearing goggles and silk scarves." "I should guess that the end of Air America's flying operation in Laos will be a grievous blow to the girls at the White Rose."

Unger to SecState, 3 Nov 64, notes that contract concluded with SWS in March. [see November 3, 1964]

Glerum: Basically, had Seaboard taken over, only the name would have been changed.

**March 16, 1964**

PL/NVA attack across PDJ. Phouma seeks US assistance in April. On May 18, ordinance released to permit Lao T-28 to strike targets. Also, 4 WATERPUMP T-28s turned over to Laotians. On May 20, 10 more T-28s (from South Vietnam) made available to Laotians. By the end of June, they have 33 T-28s. As there were not enough pilots to fly this many
aircraft, the government of Thailand provided pilots from
the RTAF.

March 25 1964
Casterlin to parents: Voice of America announced that
Seaboard Airways would be taking over Air America. There
was an earlier rumor that Slick [Knight: He never heard
this rumor it was always Seaboard] would taken over and
change the name only. "The smoke and haze is terrible and
is much worse than the rainy season."

April 1964
North Vietnam deploys construction battalions to
develop road network into South Vietnam.

April 1, 1964
Detachment 6 of 1st Air Commando Wing arrives Udorn to
train RLAf and act as FACs - WATERPUMP

McShane: McShane was Cochran’s operations officer.
There were four USAF instructors training twelve Thai
pilots. The Thais had T-28 experience but needed practice
with ordnance. McShane also reported once or twice a week
to Bill Lair, who had a little shack between the runway and
taxiway at Udorn. At first progress with the Thais was
slow, but they rapidly improved. After training, McShane
briefed them on targets and tactics ("Never make a second
pass.") He is not sure that they paid much attention, but
only two planes were lost: one pilot was KIA during an
attack on a bridge, and one recon T-28 was shot down.
McShane never flew a mission with the Thais but Cochran did
(which Tyrell found out about). McShane feels that the
program was a success.

(Letter): McShane and Cochran alternated weekly
between VTE and Udorn. "The pilots were very attentive to
my morning briefings. Based on maps and experience I would
show them the safest routes, altitudes, and other tactics in
and out of the target area. When I returned after checking
the flight line I often found the designated leader/s
drawing a straight line to the target. . . . Due to poor
planning, which I was not involved in, we lost one of the
best tigers [on July 14]." McShane was with WATERPUMP from
mid-March to mid-August.

Re Joe Potter: "Joe’s desire to be a good, hot fighter
pilot was negated by his lack of judgment. Instances -
wanted to ‘rat race’ at the wrong time and place. Both of
us were checked out as landing strip clearance pilots. Joe
would land regardless. He crashed, or damaged five planes,
primarily due to poor judgment, as opposed to lack of
skills. He was certainly ‘aggressive,’ no doubt about it!
And I still loved him." McShane and Potter were close friends at Air Training Command at Enid, Oklahoma. "When we found out there was an opportunity to get out of ATC we broke every record in the book getting to HQ to volunteer for the 1st Air Commando Group in Florida."

Cochran: Cochran returned from a six-month tour with FARMGATE on 23 December 1961. He had been head of the T-28 program and had flown more than 100 combat support missions. Shortly after arriving at Hurlburt, he heard rumors about a detachment for Thailand. In February, Aderholt told Cochran to pick our his best instructors for a training program in Thailand. There were 38 people involved, mostly enlisted technicians, and six pilots, most with Vietnam experience. Bill McShane, who had served with Cochran in Vietnam, was operations officer. Also, Joe Potter. They were known as Red Rider and Little Beaver (and used these a radio call signs). They departed Hurlburt on March 9. Four T-28s were flown out in C-130s, while the people were carried in a KC-135. The T-28s were assembled at Bien Hoa and flown to Udorn. WATERPUMP at first was totally dependent on Air America for support. The first operations office was in a Thai snack bar located under a tree.

General Thau Ma brought in a group of about 12 Lao pilots with T-6 experience. Cochran located a local artillery range which he used as a gunnery range. Shortly after training began, about 16 T-28s with Vietnamese markings were flown in by PACAF pilots that had been trained by the Air Commandos. Most of these aircraft were photo recon models. After training was completed, Lao markings were painted on the aircraft and they were turned over to General Ma. He then left for Savannakhet.

A second group of pilots then showed up. These were Thai flying sergeants who were to be trained to fly in Laos as mercenaries. They had flown T-28s but had no weather and little gunnery experience. Ambassador Unger also wanted a group of Air America pilots trained. This was done quickly, as they were first-rate pilots. Cochran worked closely with Pat Landry, who commanded Border Post 33 (BP 33).

The Thai ended up staging through VTE, operating out of an old rice warehouse. Unger did not want them to stay in Laos overnight. They flew in first thing in the morning. While the planes were being armed with bombs and .50 caliber ammo, Cochran or one his officers would brief them on the mission. They often flew three sorties during the day, before returning to Udorn at sundown. They were excellent pilots, although not very good in weather. Also, their gunnery was poor. As a group, they were not overly aggressive, although there were some notable exceptions.

Many missions were flown in support of Vang Pao. The channel for these missions was from Vang Pao to his adopted son Vang Chew (a kicker for Air America) to the Air America
intelligence section, to the Air Attache's office (who would approve missions), to WATERPUMP, who would brief the pilots on targets and tactics. Vang Chew would fly in the back seat of a T-28 to identify targets.

Cochran recalls an excellent mission against a truck park on route 1 just inside Laos. The North Vietnamese complained that it was across the border, but this was not true.

Cochran got along well with Colonel Tyrrell. Earl Jones, however, "was terrible." Shortly after operations with the Thais began, one pilot told him that the pilots had been called into BP-33 and told by Jones to hit a certain target across the border in North Vietnam no matter what they were briefed on the next day by Cochran. Cochran quickly put an end to this.

April 3, 1964
William J. Solin, FIC, to ATOG Mgr reports "heartening progress" during the past month - cooperative spirit.

April 7, 1964
Casterlin to parents: USAF Special Forces has taken over part of our facilities. Lots of activity is taking place.


April 17-23, 1964
Almanac: "In a crisis that will have far-reaching consequences for the US role in Southeast Asia, Souvanna Phouma goes to the Plain of Jars ... to confer with leaders of opposing factions in an effort to demilitarize and neutralize Laos. The talks fail, however, and Souvanna returns to Vietniane and announced his intention to resign. On the 19th several generals attempt a coup, but with the support of the US ambassador, Souvanna regains control of a coalition government. The United States supports Souvanna as the only hope for some kind of moderate and stable government, but the Communist Pathet Lao now reject this coalition and go on the offensive."

April 19, 1964
CIA Intelligence Information Cable: Firing has died down in VTE. Neutralists are under arrest. Airport is closed. Reports indicate that rightist forces under General Phoumi have decided to round up Neutralist forces in VTE.
Tensions were high following collapse of PDJ talks on April 18. "If General Phoumi inspired this move, it is indeed unprecedented in the long history of Lao stupidity." [DDRS 1968/22]

April 21, 1964
CIA SITREP: Situation in VTE calm on surface. Roadblocks have been removed; Air America and Bird have resumed flying. Cabinet ministers have agreed to the resignation of Souvanna Phouma and the cabinet of national union. Souvanna went to Luang Prabang this afternoon to present his resignation to the king. The king is expected to ask him to form a new government. Pathet Lao will be asked to participate. The government will be pledged to adher to the Geneva Accords. [DDRS 1988/30]

April 22, 1964
CIA, Office of Current Intelligence, "Background of the 19 April Rightist Coup in Laos": Coup appears to have been only "marginally successful." It lacked the support of key rightist elements and was opposed by the US. "On one count, however, it must be scored a success: the current coalition seems finished and it is problematical whether it will be possible to preserve the tripartite formula." Conditions prompting coup have been festering since the coalition was formed in June 1962. Leaders of conservative faction have doubted Souvanna’s ability to resist Pathet Lao encroachments. Their fears increased with the Chinese stepped up road building activity in northern Laos in late 1962. [DDRS 1988/34]

May 1964
Pathet Lao capture PDJ. Kong Le seeks support from the Royal government. Loose alliance forms between Royalists and Neutralists. [Souvanna announced on May 2 an alliance between Neutralists and rightists. Pathet Lao respond by launching offensive that driving Kong Le’s forces off the PDJ by mid-May.]

USN History: "U.S. leaders pressed for an aerial reconnaissance effort over Laos as a means of sending Hanoi a message of American resolve."
Also, there was a need for accurate intelligence. (p. 378)

Interview with Douglas S. Blaufarb, March 24, 1993: Blaufarb replaced Charles Whitehurst as chief on station in Vientiane in May 1964 (Whitehurst had replaced Jorgenson in 1962). He had been selected by Colby, chief of PE, for the assignment. Colby felt that the military aspects of the situation was in good hands (Lair). The COS did not need a military background. He had to deal with the political aspects of the Laotian situation and satisfy the ambassador. Blaufarb trusted Lair to submit to him anything that
constituted a new departure, but he did not become involved in routine operations or tactics. (Lair had great rapport with the Thais, and the Thais were crucial to keeping down American numbers.)

Blaufarb had been a Harvard classmate of Ambassador Unger. Unger was walking in a political minefield: one misstep could cost him his career. As a result, he was extremely cautious. He held constant meetings that usually lasted several hours. He was not a warm personality. Sullivan, in contrast, was more informal. (Sullivan, however, quickly made it clear that he was the boss.)

May 4, 1964

Almanac: In secret testimony before House Armed Services committee, Asst Secy of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William Bundy says the US must drive Communists out of South Vietnam even if it means "attacking countries to the north."

May 5, 1964

NSC, Memo for William Bundy, discusses State/Defense differences on crossborder operations into Laos. Unger approves of small patrols with no US advisers, resupplied by unmarked aircraft. They would operate in the area between Route 9 and the 17th parallel (Tchepone). He disapproves of recon in two other areas deeper in Laos. He also opposes low level aerial recon. Evidence of US involvement would encourage those forces attempting to overthrow Souvanna. Defense if prepared to defer to Unger on this matter. [DDRS 1977/298B]

May 16-17, 1964

Almanac: Pathet Lao drive Neutralists off PDJ on May 16, marking end of efforts at coalition government. When word reaches Washington, President Johnson orders troop alert on Okinawa and order Seventh Fleet to prepare for possible military action. Resolution prepared for Congress asking it to declare that independence and integrity of Laos are vital to US interests [never sent].

May 17, 1964

CIA Intelligence Information Cable: Colonel Law, US military attache, and CIA observer made flight to PDJ in the morning in an effort to determine the situation there. "Confusion reigns on the PDJ." Kong Le has left his command post at Muong Phanh in charge of a major and relocated to Ban Khong. B/Gen Vang Pao "talked Kong Le out of pulling out the of the PDJ completely." Vang Pao said that if Kong Le was pushed west of Ban Khong he could move into the hills with the Meo. [DDRS 1988/1931]
Unger to Dept. of State: In discussions with Souvanna, he has agreed to the use of T-28s, armed with 500 pound bombs, for strike mission. With regard to US-piloted T-28s, Unger told Souvanna that they could be promptly converted to be indistinguishable from Lao T-28s and flown "with considerable effectiveness" against the PL/NVA in the present situation. "I said I had been assured this could be done without American involvement becoming known." Souvanna also agreed to this. [DDRS 1968/847]

May 17, 1964


USAF Plans and Policies: On May 18, JCS directs CINCPAC to use USAF and USN aircraft for medium and low level recon mission over PDJ area. RF-101s from Tan Son Nhut fly first mission on May 19; Seventh Fleet RF-8As and RA-3Bs begin recon flights on May 21.

"U.S. Yankee Team missions, begun originally on a temporary basis, were extended by the JCS on 25 May for an indefinite time period. These flights had a fourfold mission: to provide intelligence for friendly Laotian forces including assessment of RLAF bombings, determine the extent of Communist infiltration and aid to the Viet Cong, encourage allies, and demonstrate U.S. resolve to check communism in Southeast Asia."

Almanac: US initiates low-level recon flights over southern Laos on the 19th and over northern Laos on the 21st. Also, US releases bomb fuses and additional T-28s to Laotian Air Force.

May 20, 1964

CIA Intelligence Information Cable: In a conversation with Vang Pao today, Kong Le said that he plans to move his troops to Ban Na which will become his new base of operations. He planned to move by air some 1-3000 refugees to Sam Thong, where they will be airlifted to VTE.

May 20, 1964

Casterlin to parents: The workload has increased twofold. All helicopter pilots likely will put in 70 hours during the month. Things have changed fast since the first of the month. I have spent a lot of time hauling Neutralist refugees.
May 20, 1964

Unger to Dept. of State: Unger sends flash message requesting authority to use civilian piloted T-28s not only for roadcutting operation "but in broader framework." They are immediately available; their ability is great than other possible alternatives; and they would be more responsive to guidance from aerial reconnaissance. The requirement is "urgent." Souvanna has approved. "We hope RLG will agree to issue papers to these pilots and adjust personnel record to 'terminate' employment with Air American or Bird so that pilots would have status of civilian technicians hired individually by RLG." To slow down exposure of their activities, aircraft would overnight a Udorn, then operate during the day from VTE where combat loading and pilot briefing would take place.

Two hours later, State sent a flash reply: "You have authority use US civilian pilots for T-28’s. Procedures you propose seem satisfactory." [DDRS 1988/856 & 857]

[There is a partial transcript of a Telex conference between Unger and Washington that predates the above. Washington says that it is not prepared to authorize the use of US military personnel to fly T-28s in combat; however, it agrees to turn over four T-28 to the Lao to let them be flown by US civilian pilots available to Unger. DDRS 1988/686]

May 21, 1964

Unger to Dept. of State: Kong Le is at Ban Na reorganizing his units. He occupies hill positions in vicinity of Ban Na and the lower rim of the PDJ. He has requested and Unger has agreed to the use of aircraft to evacuate civilian refugees and soldiers’ families from Ban Na. An air evacuation of 500 civilians from Muong Kheung to VTE started this evening. Kong Le’s relations with Meo "continue good."

Unger goes on to describe the day’s air activity: Four aircraft in the first RLAF mission flown on May 21 hit troops northwest of Ban Pha (UG 1724). The planes went in low and a ground observer reported "excellent results." Three aircraft in a second mission hit troop positions north of Muong Huong (UF 6774).

Meo report that May 20 air strike on Ban Pha "caused many casualties." [DDRS 1989/681]

May 22-23, 1964

Almanac: Thailand mobilizes border provinces against Pathet Lao incursions and agrees to use of bases by USAF for recon, SAR, and strikes against PL. By the end of the year, 75 US aircraft will be based in Thailand to assist in operations against PL.
May 22, 1964

Eckholdt: The T-28 program began on May 22. Eckholdt flew on May 22 at Udorn with Joe Potter, getting checked out, and on May 23 with Bill McShane. They practiced bombing, strafing, and napalm drops. He was chosen to lead the group, which included Tom Jenny, Joe Hazen, John Wiren, Don Romes, and Rick Byrne, and he selected the call sign of EAGLE. Although the original concept of the program was for rescape (Air American helicopters had been hit while involved in supply and rescue missions, and there was a need for such a strike force), it moved at once into strike operations. The first strike mission was flown on May 26, directly from Udorn. The pilots had spent the previous night in a schoolhouse near Udorn and were all keyed up for the mission. 500-pound bombs with contact fuses had been flown in from the Philippines. All six pilots participated in this first mission. Each plane carried two 500-pound and two 260-pound (fragmentation) bombs. The flew ex-Navy T-28s, which had a more powerful engine than the USAF model and a three-bladed propeller. The other five planes had 100 rounds for each of their .50 caliber machine guns (one in each wing), except Eckholdt, whose plane had two 500 round pods. The target was a bridge (Ban Ken Bridge) on the outskirts of Ban Ban, on an important road that ran from North Vietnam, through the PDJ, to Moung Souei, and (eventually) Luang Prabang. [The bridge was a 50-yard span across the Nam Mat River on Route 7, about ten miles from Ban Ban, a cluster of some 100 shacks on stilts. It was a key supply line from North Vietnam. See January 1965 for USAF attack on bridge.] They expected heavy opposition, so there planned to make only one pass and salvo their bombs. However, because of the suprise factor, there was no opposition during the early morning attack. They missed the bridge, but cratered the nearby road. Brogersma was in a Porter north of the target to observe results and call in a rescue helicopter if necessary. [Crafts was in the area in a helicopter for rescue.] The T-28s returned to VTE after the mission. It was impossible to disguise the origins of the pilots. Eckholdt later heard the USAF had lost two airplanes when they subsequently attacked the bridge.

Other strike missions followed. They flew over the PDJ looking for a convoy of trucks and tanks. He recalls an attack on a pickup truck loaded with fuel drums north of Xieng Khuang.

June 6, 1964: Klusmann, "Cork Tip 2", was part of the two plane recce mission when hit north of Ban Ban. He turned south and ejected over Xieng Khuang Ville. The T-28s went out on a search mission but failed to locate him. The search continued on June 7 and the T-28s shot up an area near a village. A second Navy pilot was shot down in the same area on June 8, but he ejected further south than Klusmann and was picked up on June 9.
Hazen: Earl Jones, the customer at VTE was a former USMC major who Hazen had known at Quantico. Jones asked him if he and some other pilots would be interested in a T-28 program. The response from the pilots was overwhelming, and the problem became one of selection. It ended up with five Marines (Hazen, Romes, Wiren, Jenny, Byrne) and Eckholdt. Other joined later (Crafts, Blalock, McShane, Potter). The program continued after Hazen left Southeast Asia in 1966.

The group was checked out by the USAF Detachment at Udorn on May 22, 1964. They flew missions against targets on the PDJ on May 25 and 26. Bridges were especially critical in Laos. Hazen went on to fly two strike missions in August 1965, two in January 1966, two in February 1966, and two in March 1966.

He recalls one attack on a convoy heading east out of Xieng Khouang Ville. They had intelligence that the convoy would be leaving. Hazen, Jenny, Wiren, and Bryne (?) made the attack. They took out the first and last trucks "and that was it." There was a story shortly thereafter in the Bangkok Post about the great victory for the Lao Air Force.

During one strafing mission over the PDJ, a round came through one side of the canopy and out the other, behind Hazen's head. He felt the shock wave and reached back to feel for blood. They wore baseball caps on missions as helmets were not available.

There was a problem with payment for the missions. The pilots wanted an equitable pay scale. Walker responded by "waving the flag." They eventually settled for $80 an hour, delivered by the customer in an envelope.

Hazen led the mission to cover Zeitler's rescue on August 18, 1964. He was upcountry in a Helio when recalled to VTE (they would check in hourly on HF). He was briefed late in the day. Due to the nature of the terrain, napalm was loaded. Ambassador Unger personally talked to Hazen. He was not to use the napalm "unless absolutely necessary" and then only against military targets. Unger finally agreed to the launch after the necessary assurances. The T-28 ended up not dropping the napalm but they did hose the ridges with .50 caliber when Connor went in to pick up Zeitler. Despite bad burns, Zeitler managed to get out the body of his Filipino flight mechanic. Fred Walker and Jam Voyles coordinated the rescue in a Caribou.

Jenny: Earl Jones, ex-USMC, was in charge at VTE. He had no concept of how to attack a target. He would describe how it had been done by F4Us during World War II. Jenny recalls that Romes did not fly the first mission against the bridge at Ban Ban. On the next mission, they hit some trucks but Hazen took a round through the cockpit, and Jenny took eight rounds in the fuselage. The first group was disbanded over a pay dispute. Jenny recalls that the recall sign for rescue missions was DRORPRICK.
A second group of T-28 pilots was formed later in 1964. Eckholdt recommended Jenny as chief pilot. Jim Rhyne, a good pilot, was his assistant. Jenny had a number of confrontations with Rhyne, who he considered reckless. On at least three occasions, he nearly ran his other flight members out of gas for no good reason.

The pay figures for the pilots and paid them in green dollars. By this time there was a fixed pay scale: (1) standby, (2) mission, and (3) mission with ammo expended. There were a lot of missions. Most were only nominally SAR. Often, Lair or Landry would be in a Twin-Beech. The target would be identified, helicopters would report incoming fire, and the T-28s would attack. They often would get secondary explosions.

The T-28s received mainly small arms fire. Once, with Wiren, he was attacking trucks between Ban Ban and the border with North Vietnam when he saw large orange baseballs coming at the aircraft. Wiren called out 37mm fire.

Only two planes and no pilots were lost. Jenny attributes both plane losses to mechanical failures: Nolan made a forced landing due to a leaking fuel tank; Potter fired a rocket that ignited but did not launch, and he had to bail out.

A number of pilots came through the program. Jenny recalls Blalock, Romes, Crafts, Potter, McShane, Rich, Durizzi, Burke, Abrams, Tom Gullett, and Tom Crews.

Lou Batson, a USAF captain with the attaché’s office in VTS, had to approve missions. He knew nothing about T-28s and was worse than useless. It was Batson who visited USAF bases and carriers and spread the rumor that Air America pilots were getting $5,000 for each rescue. [Casterlin wrote to his parents at this time that the rumored figure was $1500.]

Jenny left SE Asia in January 1966.

Byrne: Richard W. Byrne first heard about the T-28 program from Larry Joseph on May 21. Things happened pretty quickly thereafter. The same night that he expressed interest in flying T-28s, he was sent to Udorn with Jenny, Wiren, Hazen, and Eckholdt [Romes?]. He met Barney Cochran that night. Training began the next day, May 23, and continued through May 24. Bill McShane and Joe Potter did the training. (Both later resigned from the USAF and joined Air America. This was a career mistake. Aderholt managed to get Potter back into the USAF but not McShane.) It was a pretty quick checkout, with several flight each day for the three days. The Air Commandos designated Eckholdt as flight leader. This was a good choice, as he was "one of the most competent peope I’ve ever bumped into in an airplane."

On May 24, he and the other pilots were called to a meeting by Bill Lair in an office that he had never seen before. Pat Landry and Dutch Brongersma were there. It was
impressive: a modern building, studded with antennas. Inside, there were remarkable wall displays: blown up maps and large aerial recon photos of targets. It was obvious that this was not a "Mickey Mouse" operation. It was very professional. Lair wanted them to knock out a bridge at Ban Bao, an important transit point. They were briefed on the target. Opposition was unknown but could be very heavy. They were instructed to make one pass, salvo their bombs, and get out.

They staged out of VTE the next morning [Eckholdt says direct from Udorn.] They left all identification behind, carrying only a document in French that identified the bearer as an "aviation specialist." The pilot had signed an undated resignation from Air America, which was placed in the files. They were issued .45s and an M-1 carbine. There were no helmets, so they wore baseball caps. There were no E & E instructions. Dutch circled out of range as the six "Lao" T-28s attacked the bridge. Byrne was "tail end Charlie." They salvaged their bombs, missing the bridge (they were all out of practice). The mission went smoothly and there was no ground fire.

Two missions were flown on May 26 against targets on the PDJ. There was supposed to be a mission on May 27 but it was cancelled when a newspaper reporter at VTE got wind of what was happening [it was hard to hide]. (The June 26 issue of Time, with Kong Le on the cover, referred to T-28s being flown by "U.S. civilian soldiers of fortune.")

Byrne flew SAR missions on June 6, 7, and 8. A problem came up about the pay for these missions, which had not been decided. Their was a confrontation with Walker. Walker said that the group could easily be replaced and named the replacements. Byrne was scornful, as he felt that they lacked experience in these type of missions. Eckholdt spoke for the pilots. In any event, the pilots decided not to fly anymore missions until the issue had been decided. Byrne was off on August 18 and had had a beer when Jim Mullen contacted him with news that Zeitler had been shot down. The only available T-28 pilots were Byrne, Wiren, and Hazen, and he wanted Byrne to get out to the airport. Byrne's initial reaction was "the hell with it." The pilots had said they were not going to fly until the pay issue was settled. Caught by surprise, "I wasn't thinking straight." Mullen became angry: "You asshole, that's your friend out there." This shocked Byrne into realizing what he was doing. "Jim put it very clear perspective." Chagrined, he promised to be right out. He felt badly about his initial attitude as he drove out to the airport.

There was lots of excitement at the airport. Ambassador Unger was there (unusual) and asked to talk to him. The airplanes had been loaded with napalm, and Unger made him promise not to use it unless absolutely necessary. He wanted the napalm brought back if not used.
11/10/96

My recollection of the event is that the NAPALM had been loaded for another mission and that there was no time to off load it and get to ZEITLER with any daylight remaining. I really did not want to haul the stuff unless we were going to use it because it was a heavy load and the T-28 was not that maneuverable with the tanks on. J.W.H.
When the three T-28s arrived in the area, Byrne could see the burned out place on the hillside. The burning helicopter had tumbled down the hillside. USAF F-105s were in the area. The T-28s circled, looking for fire from the ground, but Byrne could not see any. When Jack Connor came in for the pickup, the T-28s strafed the area. Connor did a magnificent job: "I can still see that helicopter coming in." He came in from the west, hovered over the hillside for what seemed a long time. He heard Connor exclaim over the radio: "Christ, he doesn't have any clothes on." He then pulled Zeitler up.

Byrne felt great about the day, which had gotten off to such a bad start. He was so excited that he did a victory roll on the way back despite the napalm tanks. "This was my most exciting day in Laos."

The pilots eventually were paid for the missions (by Dave Hickler), but the original group did not fly T-28s any more [Byrne is wrong about this. Hazen and others did.] Byrne recalls that he once became angry when an Air Force general referred to Air America pilots as mercenaries. "Looking back on it, maybe he was right." At the time, however, "We didn’t regard ourselves as mercenaries."

Romes: Romes was in BKK on R & R when he heard about the T-28 program. He immediately went to Udorn and talked to Earl Jones. Five pilots had been in training for two days and were ready to go on a mission. Jones said that it was too late for Romes to join the program, but he did agree to let Romes fly a photo recon T-28 to support the program. Within a short time, the photo-recon deal was cancelled; however, Jones then permitted Romes to join the regular program. He flew T-28 until 1968/69, when the program just petered out.

Wiren (October 29, 1990): Wirn recalls the mission on which Hazen took a bullet through his canopy. This was the first strike mission against targets on the PDJ. They departed Udorn at dark for VTE, which USAF ordinance people loaded the planes. They took off from VTE at dawn, a flight of five. They passed to the west of the PDJ, then climbed to the north in a loose trail formation. They flew down a valley, looking for targets of opportunity. The saw soldiers taking tarps off guns. A bus crashed into a derelict tank in panic. All five aircraft took hits, including Hazen.

May 29, 1964

General Moore, 2nd Air Division, asks PACAF for authority to employ USAF aircraft and crews for SAR in the
Articles

It Takes Five to Tango - Wiren
01/03/2002 9:00 PM

By: John Wiren

Not much has been said or written about the Tango Program. Perhaps because it is not a well-known subject, and relatively few pilots were involved. The Tango Program was an offshoot of Project 404 implemented by now retired General Harry (Heine) Aderholt. It consisted of a group of air commandos from Hurlburt AFB Florida that were assigned to Udorn Thailand for the purpose training the locals Thai, Lao, and Meo to fly the T-28 code named (Water Pump).

Early in May of 1964 I was instructed to go see the station manager. I immediately wondered what I had done wrong this time but, when I found out that four other of my cohorts were likewise summoned, I was somewhat relieved. With the station manager was a customer type (CIA). We were ushered into the office, and it was immediately evident that this was a closed-door meeting.

We were asked in the most strictest of confidence whether we would be interested in flying the T-28 (Trojan) for interdiction of roads, air to ground combat and SAR. To the man, we eagerly accepted the offer. It was our chance to retaliate after being shot at for several years in unarmed aircraft.

The reason for our selection was that we all (Rick Byrne, Ed Eckholdt, Joe Hazen, Tom Jenny and myself, John Wiren, (and later Don Romes) had prior experience in the T-28 and close air support training. With the exception of Eckholdt, we were all Marines. Ed was Air Force, but had flown the F-5 I.

On acceptance, we were asked to resign from Air America, Inc. our
personal records were sanitized in the event we were shot down and captured. We would then be classified as mercenaries for the Royal Laoian Air force to protect the U.S. government from violating the Geneva Accord Agreement.

The rational for this I program was that there was evidence of a big enemy build-up massing to come down highway 47 from North Vietnam to gain as much territory as possible before the monsoon season. The road needed to be cut and the bridges destroyed to halt the advance, but the Laotians just did not have the experience at that time to do the job.

Because of the urgency of the situation our training commenced shortly after our agreement. We went to Udorn for several days of intense recurrent training with the air commandos, several of whom (Joe Potter & Bill MacShane) later joined Air America. We now had been formed into what was called the "A" Team (A for American) long before Mr. Tand, George Peppard.

Because of the time lapse and compressed activities, the chronological order of the following events became jumbled and hazy but after conferring with the participants, a consensus and time line has been established.

On our first mission, we departed Udorn at "zero dark thirty" to Vientiane. Air Force personnel had been placed there ostensibly as civilian technicians to the Lao government. Point in fact, they were really ordnance specialists there to load and hook us up. We were now armed and ready for action, and off we went on our first mission to destroy a bridge on hwy. N7 east of the PDJ and Ban Ban. We were carrying 500 lb. bombs, rockets, and 50-cal. ammo. We made our dive runs from east to west targeting the bridge. We didn't get the bridge, but we must have scared the hell out of it. We did, however, crater the road. Tom Jenny didn't get a release on his bomb so he had to make an additional run. By now we woke up the bad guys, and the AA was flying thick and heavy.

Later the same day we returned to the same area and caught a truck convoy of 10 coming down the road from Vietnam. I believe Joe Hazen got the first one and I got the last one, trapping the rest in between. From then on, it was a turkey shoot. General Vang Pao later expressed his complete elation for the fact that he was now getting aerial support.

The very next morning at the crack of dawn, we launch again for an assault mission on the PDJ. I think it was primarily a psychological effort against the enemy to let them know we were around, and had the capability to hit them at home base. As we came around the west edge of the PDJ, a voice came up on our radio frequency and said "go get cm guys". I never knew for sure who said that, but suspect it could have been Pop Buell or Tony Poe. As we skirted the north side of the PDJ we
slipped down a pass at very low level letting us out on the plain itself it was a complete surprise attack for targets of opportunity. Tom Jenny selected an armored vehicle and got into a shoot-out with it. As a result he sustained 8 holes across the leading edge of his wings. Joe Hazen and Rick Byrne went after a flat bed truck with 55gal. drums of fuel. Joe took a bullet hole in his canopy less then a foot behind his head and his voice went up at least one octave. I never got to discuss this business with Ed Eckholdt, as he passed away before I had the chance. I spotted a jinney bus shock-full of the enemy hanging on as it traveled east down the dusty road took aim at it and pulled the trigger, but was so low and close that the bullets converged beyond them (300 yards). My pass was from north to south and I quickly turned out to the left to come around for another go at them. As I started my run again, I noticed that soldiers were running up a hill right next to me taking the tarps off the AA. By now the jinney was going full out and the driver was intent on keeping watch on me. His eyes were as large as the proverbial saucers accompanied with a look of terror on his face. The road forked and in the middle was an abandoned derelict Russian tank. The driver was so intent on me that he plowed full speed into the tank making human Frisbees out of the occupants. Scratch one jinney bus! My adrenaline must have been pumping 200% since I continued to make passes even after I had expended all ammo.

Some years later I had the occasion to have a drink with Dick Crafts who was then a pilot with Eastern Airlines out of New York. We reminisced about Air America days, and he asked me if I recalled that day on the PDJ. He revealed that he was with a customer type in a chopper back up on a hill to the northwest, watching the whole event, standing by for pick-up in the event we got shot down. He said he had never seen so many tracer bullets flying that were directed at us, as we did our thing. Knowing that between each tracer there were several other projectiles. He said he would probably have faked a bad magneto check should one of us go down.

We returned to Vientiane and for some unknown reason, General Ma, commander of the Laotian air force wanted us to leave the aircraft there instead of going on to Udorn. Joe Hazen said to tell the general to go get his own holes. After landing back at Udorn later that evening it was found by the maintenance crew that all five of our aircraft had taken hits.

Over the next several years we were involved in many more missions, all of them different, all of them exciting; e.g., rescuing Billy Zeitler from his downed Hotel 19, plucking a downed military pilot out of North Vietnam. As the US Military became more involved in Laos our mission was reduced to mostly SAR. New pilots came into the Tango Program as some of the original group were transferred north to Japan or elsewhere.
All said and done, we were very fortunate in not losing any pilots and only two aircraft. I was just a bit player in the scheme of things but was pleased and honored to be part of this group. We sure had one hell of a run.
THE PRICE OF FREEDOM
By Chuck Khussmann

The Air War in Southeast Asia began in May of 1964. The U.S. Government had been requested to provide a show of support to the Royal Laoian Government. No one had flown over North Vietnam, and the air war in the south was still in the early stages of getting underway. The request of the Laoian Government would provide the catalyst which would lead to the most intensive air war ever conducted by anyone. The beginnings were relatively minor on a worldwide scale, but the events were very real for the few involved in carrying out the missions.

Abroad the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk, the cruise was coming to an end. The ship had deployed in Sept. 1963 and was soon due to head home. While cruising off of Okinawa, she received orders to proceed to a geographic point about 100 miles east of Danang off the coast of South Vietnam. This point was to be designated "Yankee Station." In route, there was considerable discussion regarding how the show of support for Laos was to be implemented. The options being considered ranged from an air group fly over of a large number of aircraft, commonly referred to as a "group goose," to a fly over of six to eight fighters and bombers, and finally with a fly over of two unarmed reconnaissance aircraft. Fortunately for a number of pilots, the last option was selected.

There was little coordination between those at the operating level. The Navy knew that the Air Force and the Marines were operating at various locations in South Vietnam. We had been briefed that there was an organization called Air America operating in Laos delivering food and supplies to the friendly civilian and military forces. We knew approximately where the good guys and bad guys were supposed to be, but very little detail was known. We had been told that Air America had only VHF radios so another type aircraft would have to relay if we needed to talk to them. Plans for Search and Rescue, or SAR, were very limited. The ship would launch helicopters toward where the plane went down, but it might take two days to get there if the area was in Northern Laos.

This was not any great concern, because we were flying the RF-8 Crusader which was a very reliable aircraft and surely no one would actually shoot us. Even if they did, we were protected by a sixteenth of an inch of aluminum which made up the aircraft skin. We were safe in the cockpit. That's just the way pilots look at things. Nothing is going to happen to me, I'm invincible. That concept was to undergo some serious challenges over the next few weeks.

The decision was made to show the flag by sending two unarmed reconnaissance aircraft over Laos. The target area was the Plain of Jars in Northern Laos and the road leading there from Northern Vietnam. The first mission was flown by LCDR Ben Cloud, the reconnaissance officer in charge, and myself flying two RF-8 Crusaders. It was approximately 500 miles from the carrier to the target area and was within range of the aircraft and would provide about 20 minutes at low altitude to get some good photo coverage. No in-flight refueling was planned. The flight went well and we were flying over the Plain of Jars separately to improve coverage, but still within sight of each other. Ben then called out that he thought we were being shot at. I had seen nothing yet but noticed some white puffs around the aircraft, then some red streaks coming up from the ground. About that time, several red lights came on and I noticed fuel pouring from the left wing. Ben told me when to turn to avoid the AAA as it started to rack up my tail. There were a number of these breaks to get away from the area of intense AAA, and, by the time I was clear of the area, the left wing was on fire at the wing tip area.

We decided that it was time to head home and scramble for altitude in the hopes that the fire would go out. We got to 40,000 feet and after about 20 minutes the fire did go out. On the way back to the ship, I saw pieces of aircraft flying off the wing, but Ben said not to worry. After all, it wasn't his plane. The flight back to the ship was a bit tense. I had lost considerable fuel from the hits in the wing and was trying to figure if I had enough gas to make it back to the ship. We saw some contrails heading toward us from the West and called for some fighter cover from the ship. The contrails turned out to be some USAF aircraft who were checking us out because they didn't know about us either. Weather was great and I started an idle descent from 42,000 feet toward the ship. Emergency lowering of the landing gear and raising the wing worked OK and I recovered on a straight in with about 600 pounds of fuel. Almost enough for one more pass if needed, but I wouldn't want to try it. Once on deck, I saw that the left wing fold was a mass of melted aluminum and the top of the left aileron was burned away. There were holes all over the aircraft; but, it would live to fly again about 18 months later.

The recce missions would continue both day and night for the next several weeks. Plans from the ship and Seventh Fleet to provide armed escorts were denied. It was just the recce flights. Obviously we changed the tactics a little. The first mission we were at 3500 feet and 350 knots while over the target area. After that we flew at 500 feet and 550 to 600 knots during daylight missions. The flying was more difficult but we took fewer hits. Nothing else changed with regard to the rules of the game. No escorts, fly the same route nearly every day, no coordination with other services, and no good SAR plans. This continued until early June. The Constellation had arrived at Yankee Station and was prepared to take over. We had been deployed for more than eight months and were due to rotate back home. We had only one more mission remaining on the 6th of June and then we were on our way.

For the mission on the 6th, I was to fly lead and LT Jerry Kuechmann was going to be my wing man. Ben was to launch as an airborne spare and, if we both were OK, he was going to land on the Constellation to brief their pilots. The launch was normal and Jerry and I proceeded toward the target with some A-4 tankers so we could top off just before entering Laos. The refueling went like clockwork and we headed toward the PDI. The weather turned a bit sour and we encountered some thunderstorms and a solid cloud deck below us. Any navigation aids were far behind us at Danang, so we were navigating strictly from the map. We let down along the Mekong and picked a heading for the PDI. We were at treetop level and just below the cloud deck but the visibility was pretty good. We were just about to abort and head for home when the clouds...
Freedom Story Continued:

l sniffed a bit and we could see the PDJ. We headed in toward our assigned targets in the valley and then proceeded along Route 7 past Khanh Khay and toward the last target which was the bridge near Ban Ban.

Passing Khanh Khay the AAA got more intense, just as it always did, and I picked up some hits in the wing. I was losing fuel and called Jerry to pull up and that we were getting out of there. During the pull up, I took a good solid hit on the fuselage. This was the first time, out of four times being hit, that I could actually feel the hit. I sort of knew that it must be more serious than the others. It was. The plane was going like a scalded ape, but I was losing my flight controls. The F-8 has a fully powered system and the only thing going between the stick and the actuator is hydraulic fluid and I was losing great quantities of it in a hurry. After less than two minutes the control system froze and it was time to get out and walk. I called Jerry and said adios and pulled the curtain. The punch out seemed wild but Jerry later said that it was just like in the movies; one turn, drogue chute, seat separation, and then main chute.

After the chute opened, I took a body inventory and all the parts seemed to be properly attached, so I looked around. I saw the plane hit in a ball of fire. That was tough because it was our best aircraft. Next I thought about the face curtain in my hand and thought what a nice momento it would make of the event, so I clipped it on my torso harness. All the while there was a lot of shooting on the ground. It dawned on me that there was only one target to shoot at, and that was me! I could hear bullets whizzing by but none seemed too close. I guess it was about this time that I realized that I was about to fall into really deep yogurt. There was little I could do for the moment except continue my ride down. What anyone sees in jumping out of perfectly good airplanes is beyond me. It's like hanging in a jock strap. Boredom ceased when I got within about 100 feet of the ground. It came up in a big hurry. There was one tree in the clearing and I was going right for it. I crunched into the top of the tree and then the chute pulled me out; I crashed through the branches and landed off balance with one leg out to the side. My right hip, knee, and feet were badly wrenched and I could hardly stand. I did manage to wedge my foot in a bush and pulled until something popped and some of the pain subsided. I surveyed the situation and gathered my survival gear and made ready to get away from the site as soon as possible.

My wingman, Jerry Kuechman, remained overhead for a short while until he had to head back to the ship due to low fuel. It got very quiet then. I started heading up the hill, but the grass was high and I was leaving a significant trail. I couldn't walk well at all so Ihalf crawled and walked. Soon I heard another aircraft and spotted a Helo Courier overhead. I had no voice radio, just a beeper which I assumed was working. I set off a smoke to let him know exactly where I was. This was probably not a great idea because of the bad guys in the area, but I didn't think of that at the time. In a few minutes, the sun came out and I signaled the plane with my mirror which he spotted immediately and responded with a wing rock and revving his engine. Great! Now at least, someone knew I was alive.

The Helo was soon joined by a C-123 and a Caribou. It was a good probability that these planes were from Air America. Jerry later confirmed that after the first Mayday call, Air America responded with, "where are you and what do you need?" Aviators, like seamen, are quick to respond when one of their clan is in trouble. The aircraft remained overhead for a couple of hours, but still no sign of the ground troops. Finally, I heard the sound of helicopters in the distance and thought that I would be out of there in no time. I confirmed my position with the mirror and crawled up a small hill to a clearing on the ridge line. Soon the H-34's approached and the first one, flown by Tom Mohr, started his approach. About a quarter mile out, the hills erupted with intense ground fire. It seemed like it was coming from everywhere. Tom pulled up and struggled to make it away from the area. I later heard that his co-pilot was hit in the head and the helicopter had more than eighty hits. This was kind of discouraging to both Tom and to me, but very quickly the Caribou made a low pass for ground fire suppression with people shooting from every port and chucking hand grenades out during the flyover. This was particularly exciting since one of the grenades went off about 15 to 20 feet from me. Again the ground fire was very heavy. In spite of this, Bill Cook in the second helicopter started to make an approach. As he got near, it was clear to see that there was no chance for a pickup and that a further attempt would result in more people in the same boat as me or possibly worse. I waved off the second H-34. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time, and there were never any regrets. There was also not a doubt in my mind that these guys had pulled out all the stops and made every possible effort to rescue me. It was a great effort but it just wasn't in the cards that day.

Within a short time, I could see the Pathet Lao troops closing in on all sides. They were all heavily armed with automatic weapons like BAR's and Kalishnikov's. I had my trusty 38 with five tracer bullets. Not great odds! Needless to say I became their guest for awhile. My hands were tied behind me and then tied to a nose around my neck. I was thoroughly searched and then we headed off to a nearby camp or small village. They quickly saw that I couldn't walk well and they untied my hands and made a crude crutch to assist me. They let me sit the pace and seemed quite patient. Upon reaching the village, about night fall, I was again searched and offered some food. Rice, some cooked greens, and a small can of "stewed pork". It was about the size of a small tuna fish can and was almost entirely pork fat. Sort of like eating raw bacon. Not great, but it was possibly nourishing. From this moment on, I was constantly guarded and usually by more than one guard.

The next morning, I was taken to a nearby cave and kept there for the day. During the day, there was a bombing raid on the village by several F-105's. When I was let out, there wasn't much sign of damage and no one seemed too concerned about the raid. In late afternoon we hit the trail to the next camp. This went on for three days until we reached the village of Xing Khoog. There I was given a bucket of water to clean up a bit and spent the night in one of the infamous tiger cages. The following day, I was loaded into a truck and we headed toward PDJ. We had hardly started when the sky was filled with USAF F-100's with bombs and rockets. We hid under a farm house with the guards looking very apprehensive and me quietly cheering on the Air Force. After the raid, it was back into the truck and we drove for several hours until well past dark. We were on the PDJ for awhile and then went back into the mountains past Khanh Khay along Route 7 to a small village. The next day I was displayed to the 57mm AAA crew who were given credit for shooting me down. I was also on display for any and all who cared to come by. Since that time, I have never felt comfortable in a zoo. Being caged and on display is not a comfortable feeling.
Freedom Story Continued:

That night I was taken to a high ranking civilian who I think was Prince Souphanouvong. There was also an officer in uniform, he was the first person to speak English and acted as the interpreter. He was to become my interrogator and indoctrinator for the next couple of months. His name was given as Captain Boum Khiam, and he claimed to be a Lao, but I believe he was North Vietnamese. Nothing much came of that meeting and I never saw the civilian again.

My next move was back toward Khang Khay along Route 7 to a small group of huts. I was placed in a room at one end of a small hut. There were no windows, a dirt floor, walls of mud plastered over woven bamboo, and a thatched roof. Furnishings consisted of a few boards between some logs for a bed, a mosquito net, grass mat, blanket, a metal table and chair, a cup and a candle. The guards stayed in the other two thirds of the building and did their cooking and sleeping in that section. It was the same group of soldiers that had captured me and were to remain with me throughout my stay.

The daily routine was much the same every day. I was escorted to the latrine nearby and then down to a stream to wash and brush my teeth. Then back to the room. A morning meal was brought about nine or ten and usually consisted of a small bowl of rice, some soup, and some boiled greens. The evening meal was the same. Occasionally the guards would share some of their food. The most common thing was a fiery sauce made with fish, salt, and roasted peppers. Not bad, but a little bit went a long way. Sometimes they would have a raiding party on the nearby caves and catch a bunch of rats and cook them into a stew, or sometimes catch a stray dog for a meal. They usually shared a bit of these "special meals". It was OK if you just got your mind over to steak instead of what it really was. In that situation, you have to eat whatever you can get your hands on or you won't survive. As it was, I went from 175 pounds to 125 pounds during the three months I was to be there.

The interrogator came nearly every evening for about an hour. He was more interested in talking about politics than in seeking military information. He was well informed about the military aspects and said that they knew what they needed to know. I saw that he had a copy of a book similar to Jane's All The World's Aircraft and a fairly recent copy of the CINCPACFLEET organization manual, a classified document. With that publication, he had the lists of ships, which squadrons were aboard, and who was in command of each unit. He also mentioned that he knew that our ship, the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk, had passed through the Bushi Channel north of the Philippines on a particular night in May while enroute to Vietnam -- he was correct on the date! This all seemed a bit incongruous to be sitting in a mud walled hut deep in the jungle with a kerosene lantern and listening to him talk about world politics and military history. His primary effort, I later determined, was to get something for publicity purposes, and political influence.

He frequently mentioned that the radio had announced that I had been killed in the crash and that no one knew that I was alive. He said that I could write letters early on, but later said that he couldn't deliver them for one reason or another. He suggested that I make a radio broadcast "just to let everyone know that I was alive and being treated well". I replied with reference to a well known phrase about the probability of frigid temperatures in Hades. He never asked again. He did continue to push me to write a letter to the Prince requesting my release.

My physical condition during captivity was about what could have been expected. After about four days, I was constantly bothered by diarrhea. Sometimes it was not so bad and other times it was severe, but it was always there. I had one serious bout with fever and was down and out. For about two weeks I didn't seem to care about anything and recollection of what took place was difficult. I was always coughing because the guards always had a fire going in the section of the hut and the smoke would come to my section and linger. It was smoky for the entire two months I was in solitary.

I had been a prisoner for about five or six weeks when I came down with the fever and it really had me out of it for awhile. The evening sessions continued but I can't recall too much about what went on. After considerable coercion, I wrote a brief note asking to be released. It seemed like the only way I could just get him to leave me alone. Apparently it was not satisfactory, because he continued to push the issue and proceeded to dictate a letter which would be appropriate. I was in a pretty sour state both physically and mentally and wrote the letter that he told me to write. It was hard to keep track of things, I knew that things were not right, but couldn't keep everything in perspective. They'd give me some shots and some pills which were supposed to help the fever, but there is no telling what was in them.

About a week after that, the fever broke and I began to feel better. One evening, the interrogator came to the hut and proceeded to read the letter that "I had written to the Prince". When he did that, and I was more alert and attentive, it was like a bucket of cold water being thrown in my face. I realized that I had done something that I should not have done, and from that moment I was determined to escape or die trying. I had tried once, about a month earlier, to escape by digging my way under the wall. I discovered that they had driven bamboo stakes into a trench around my room to a depth of about three feet and that foiled that attempt. This session with Captain Boum Khiam was to be his last visit, although I didn't know it at the time.

A few days later I was moved to a prison compound about a half mile away. Enroute, we passed a two story wood frame building with many antennas on the roof. I recognized the building and had even taken photographs of it on an earlier mission, so I knew exactly where I was. The new location was in a building which was part of a group and isolated from the road and the main portions of Phatthi Lao Headquarters. It was a long building divided into three rooms. I was placed in the small center room by myself. It was about the same size as the previous one but here I had access out of doors since there was a three foot gap between the building and the first barbed wire fence which went from the ground to the building caves. There was another similar fence about five feet beyond the first and the area between was filled with concertina barbed wire. There was only one way out and that was through the gate by the guard's lean to.

The following day I was joined by about thirty-five Lao prisoners who divided themselves between the two end rooms. I had picked up a few words of Lao but communication with my new neighbors was difficult. One of them had worked in Vientiane and had an English/Lao dictionary so we were on our way toward understanding each other, although with great difficulty. About a week after they arrived, one of them approached me about possibly trying to escape. I didn't know this fellow at all so was somewhat apprehensive. I pretended not to know
Freedom Story Continued:

where we were and proceeded to draw me a map in some detail. The map was very good and accurate so I began to have some trust in him. Over a period of several weeks, we discussed the escape and where we should go once we got out. While doing this, we proceed to work on the barbed wire where it was nailed into the posts. After working on each nail where it went through the wire, the nail hole was enlarged and the nail would slip easily out of the hole. We worked on the interior strips until we had a fairly large section of wire that could be pushed out and raised to get through the inner fence.

We were occasionally allowed to wash our clothes in a nearby stream and we usually hung them on the outer fence to dry. When we did that, we managed to work on the nails of the outer fence. We could be very slow and deliberate about exactly how we hung our clothes, to the frustration of the guards. Eventually, we thought that we were ready to give it a try. There were six Laotians who intended to go with me. That seemed to be a large group, but not out of the question. The one I had planned this with, was Boun Mi, and he and I planned to stay together after we got out. After a false start one evening, we were ready to go on a rainy dark night. About nine, the guard had gone to his shelter to get out of the rain. I had changed into the dark trousers and shirt that they had given me to wear. I slipped around to the back of the building where we had loosened the wire. Someone was keeping the guard busy, talking and Boun Mi gave me the signal to go.

I pushed out the wire and crawled under the loosened section. That part worked as advertised and I was out of the compound. We had about two hundred feet to go to get to some cover of trees and bushes. I got to the cover and a small stream and Boun Mi was right behind me. Two others quickly joined us and we wondered about the other two. One of our group said he would wait for the others and join us later. We never saw him again nor did we ever figure what happened to the two others who had planned to go. The three of us worked our way around some Russian built tanks used by the Pathet Lao and got to an area where we had to cross a wide clearing in order to get to the woods and the mountains. We dashed across the clearing and made it to the woods where we followed a well worn trail for several miles.

We stopped for a bit to wait for the others, but we were anxious to move on. After about twenty minutes, I insisted that we go on, we couldn't afford to slow our travel. The key to success was to get as much distance between us and the camp before they discovered that we were gone. After some argument, they agreed and we continued on over a small mountain ridge to a small valley. We had to cross a road and wanted to do so before it got very light. We got across just as it was breaking day and made it to cover on the far side. Later that morning, the third man in our group was going to try to get some food from a farm house at the upper end of the valley. After he left us and started to the farm, I got a very uneasy feeling and told Boun Mi that we needed to move to where we could watch him and see what was going on. It was a good thing, because about ten minutes after entering the house, he emerged with his hands tied and a rifle at his back. He had walked into a guerrilla outpost. The group holding him was met by a group of soldiers coming up the road who talked with them briefly, and then took off after us.

We had a few hours of excitement with the group chasing us. There was some rifle fire in our direction, but I don't think they ever actually saw us. We managed to double back on our course and lose them eventually. We decided that this time that we would not chance approaching anyone unless we were positively sure that they were friendly. The remainder of our trek was just pure drudgery; going up over one mountain and down the next. The terrain was very rugged and steep so it was fairly slow going. We did manage to eat some bamboo shoots, corn stalks and sweet potatoes from abandoned stubb and burn farms, and some wild berries and fruit. Water was not a problem since this was still in the rainy season.

One of the worst pests that bothered us was leaches. They seemed to be everywhere. We tried to use animal trails where possible to make travel easier and go faster, but the leaches were particularly bad there. We stopped occasionally to remove them just to keep from losing too much blood. They always go back to the same spots though, so some places were getting pretty bad. We kept going, however, because our motivation remained high even though our capabilities were lagging. After three and a half days, we were crossing a high mountain and heard voices. After closing carefully on the voices, Boun Mi indicated that they were friendly forces for sure. I wasn't so sure and was all for trying to go on farther. He indicated that he was so sure, that he would go in by himself and I could watch from a safe point. I agreed to that, and he approached the small hut where the voices were coming from. Two men came out with guns and met him. They talked for a few minutes and they shook his hand and lowered their guns. Boun Mi turned and waved and I decided that it was O.K. We had reached the outpost of the village that we were heading for, Baum Long, or better known as Site 32 to Air America. They sent a man down to the village, where they had a teletype, to notify the authorities of what was happening. We rested for a bit and then headed down the trail for two kilometers to Baum Long.

We had a warm welcome and were given food and treatment for the many cuts and scratches that we had along with the leaks. It was late afternoon when we arrived and after about an hour, we heard the sound of an airplane. The villagers hurried us toward the landing site on the ridge line and I saw the Pilatus Porter land. As I was hobbling up the ridge I heard an American voice calling my name. It was a very emotional moment for this was truly the sound of freedom at last. Terry Burke greeted me as a long lost brother and helped me up to the aircraft where I met Dr. Jiggs Weldon and the pilot Lloyd Zimmerman. After a few pictures, it was into the aircraft and off to Udorn. It was hard to believe, but my prayers had been answered and I was finally on my way to true freedom. We learned about two months later that the two men who escaped with us but were recaptured, had both been executed. This brought home to us that the price of freedom is never free.

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Dear Bill,

Sandra forwarded your note to me. I had obtained your E-mail earlier and eventually pickup through the AAM assn. I wrote the article and did receive an note from Australia who was in charge of helicopter operations at the time, and from Dr. J Long. Jigs informed me that Boun Mi was alive and living in the US. I had been informed if you like. do you have any ideas on trying to find him? Any Lao organ.

The comment about the early SAR efforts was right on. That was the first Cook who flew the second H-34. Tom Moher flew the first H-34 but he was killed i who was flying the Helio Courier that first spotted me. Still haven't determined picked me up was flown by Lloyd Zimmerman and Jigs Weldon and Terry Burke were o piece together a lot of what went on because I am in the beginning stages of writ history of AAM.

If you have any ideas on locating Boun Mi, I would appreciate it. My Lake Dr., Pensacola Fl, 32507, phone is (850) 492-5806. I would be glad to help.

Most sincerely,  Chuck Klussmann
"... put me through to the Commander-in-Chief"

By Commander Glenn Tierney, U.S. Navy (Retired)

When Admiral Harry Felt, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, asked Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to "put me through to the Commander-in-Chief" to authorize a rescue, he chose his words carefully. He "asked"—but would not have been refused—and he referred to President Lyndon B. Johnson as the "Commander-in-Chief"—not "the President."

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon in Hawaii on 3 June 1964. My family and I had spent a day at the beach, we were working Saturdays, and it meant a lot. I was the Assistant Current Air Operations (Navy, 3316) on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CinCPac), then Admiral Harry D. Felt. For those who haven’t served on a major staff, my four-digit designation put me well down on the totem pole. As one of the few Navy pilots on the staff with any recent fleet experience, however, I wound up in the middle of things when the air war in Southeast Asia expanded.

Vietnam was relatively quiet. We knew that North Vietnam was funneling men and matériel through the Plaine des Jalmes (PDI) area in northern Laos into South Vietnam over what came to be known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but we knew neither the magnitude of the operation nor the strength of the Pathet Lao, the Laotian Communist enclaves of the North Vietnamese.

After many months of indecision, on 23 May 1964 the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) finally authorized the Navy to conduct low-altitude photographic reconnaissance flights over the Plaine des Jalmes.

Within days, Photographic Squadron (VP)+63 pilots began flying missions from the USS Kitty Hawk (CVA-63), which was operating from Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. Along with the authorization came orders that the RF-8 Crusader photo planes were to operate without armed escorts—even though the practice had been standard operating procedure since World War II. The normal escort in this case would have been an F-8 fighter armed with 20-mm cannon and 5-inch Zuni rockets.

The major potential problems with the flights were their frequency and times-over-target (TOTs), which were specified by the Secretary of Defense. For these
brigadier general who was the duty flag officer. He confirmed the order. When I literally demanded to know who had issued such an order, he said he was not sure. I respectfully suggested that he find out as soon as possible and we would be calling him back, also ASAP. As I dropped the secure phone, I called my immediate boss, Marine Brigadier General George Bowman, our J3 Operations officer, but he was not at home.

To hell with this, I said to myself, and I called Admiral Felt on his private line at his quarters in Makalapa, just down the hill: I was bypassing at least three other senior flag officers. The line was not secure, so I told him briefly that we had a serious problem in the PDI. He knew what that meant: “Do you want me to come up?” I said. “Yes sir, it is critical.” “I’m on the way,” he replied.

Less than ten minutes later, the JCS brigadier general was telling the Admiral that the order came from the Secretary of Defense himself. (Before he called the JCS, Admiral Felt had instructed me to check a second secure phone and admonished me: “You listen: you do not speak.” “Aye aye, sir,” I answered. I had not used that term in many years, but it seemed appropriate under the circumstances.)

Admiral Felt spoke quietly: “General, get me the Secretary of Defense on this line immediately.” The general made the mistake of hemming and hawing and even mentioned the lateness of the hour (around 1:00 A.M. in Washington, D.C.). Admiral Felt quietly repeated his order—word for word. This time he got the message.

Several minutes later, sounding very wide awake, and almost jovial, Robert McNamara came on the line and asked Admiral Felt the reason for the call. Admiral Felt was never one to mince words. “Mr. Secretary, I have been told that you are aware that we just had a Navy photo pilot shot down in the Plaine des Jarres and that an order had been issued by your office that there was to be no ‘round-eye’ effort to rescue the pilot, is that correct?”

“That is correct, Admiral,” McNamara answered. At this point Admiral Felt interrupted him: “May I ask by whose authority this order was issued?”

“The recommendation came from State,” McNamara replied, “and the Secretary of State and I discussed it and agreed that it was the course of action. Typical McNamara thought. At this point being mea...”
and agreed that this is the best course of action."

Typical McNamara answer, I thought. At this point, in addition to being mad, my mind was assembling all the reasons why the decision was wrong. Admiral Felt turned slightly to look at me. I’m sure he could read my mind. I thought I could read his, but I was wrong. He was way ahead of both of us, as usual. He spoke again, very quietly but in a short clipped tone that I had never heard him use before.

"Mister Secretary, that is not a decision that can be made by the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense. The decision to rescue this pilot or not to rescue him can be made only by the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces, and I am asking you to put me through to the Commander-in-Chief—now, Sir."

I almost dropped the telephone. After a few seconds, McNamara started almost mumbling; he didn’t argue the point, or refuse the request, but he made a big point that it was very late and that the President had just retired after a long evening. Again I am thinking—"You idiot, should we let the pilot be captured and/or killed so that the President can sleep?"

Again, Admiral Felt quietly repeated his previous statement word for word, just as he had done with the general. Again, it worked. McNamara, without another word on the subject, said, "All right, I will ring the President." Within 30 seconds President Johnson came on the line. The time lapse was important to me and I’m sure to Admiral Felt, because it meant that McNamara did not take the time to discuss it with the President or shortstop the action. President Johnson also seemed rather wide awake and almost jovial:

"Good morning, Admiral Felt, what can I do for you?"

"Mr. President, we just had a Navy photo pilot shot down over the Plain des Jarres in northern Laos, but the Navy and Air America rescue effort has been called off by the Secretary of Defense as recommended by the Secretary of State. I just spoke to the Secretary of Defense and told him that this is a critical military decision that cannot be made by the Secretary of Defense or the Secretary of State, but one that can be made only by the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces, and I am asking your permission to go in and rescue this pilot."

Without hesitation, President Johnson came back, "Well, I’ll be damned. Of course, go in and get him—and let me know how it comes out."

"I thank you, Mr. President, and I will do that." That ended the momentous conversation.

It was beyond my comprehension that a single individual—Robert McNamara—should so callously attempt to overturn a centuries-old tradition that we do not abandon our comrades. It took a naval officer with the moral courage of Harry Felt to straighten things out.

The unfortunate Navy photo pilot was Lieutenant Charles Klusmann, now a retired captain living in Pensacola, Florida. It still is unclear whether the Air America pilots did not receive the "no round-eye rescue" order when it was issued, or chose to ignore it, or sent in helos after learning of the order's rescission. The latter seems more likely, and would account for the delay of several hours before they arrived on scene. It is a most point now, but it certainly was not then.

One very interesting aspect of Klusmann's near rescue by Air America helos is his statement that three Air America "aircraft remained overhead for a couple of hours, but still no sign of ground troops"—after which two Air America helos arrived for his pickup. Unfortunately, heavy ground fire drove off the lead aircraft; the copilot was wounded and the helicopter took 80 hits. Klusmann waved off the second helo because it, too, was flying into an ambush. And so he was captured.

The important aspect of the rescue is that the Kitty Hawk's ResCAP never did show up; they had been recalled. In all probability, they would have neutralized the area by the time the helos arrived and the Air America crews would have been able to make the pickup, which we had done many times in Korea, and were to do many times later in Vietnam. Instead, Lieutenant Klusmann had the distinction of being the very first casualty of the air war in Southeast Asia.

Epilogue: After his near rescue, Captain Klusmann endured three months of starvation and disease before making his final escape—a remarkable saga in itself. At the time of the rescue of Captain Scott O'Grady, U.S. Air Force, in Bosnia not long ago, and again during the recent rescue of the F-117 pilot downed over Yugoslavia, I could not help but wonder what would have been their reaction, or that of the American public, had the present Secretary of Defense or anyone else tried to block their rescues.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The quotes represent the author's recollection of what was said.

Commander Tierney served in numerous fighter and test squadrons, carriers, and staffs. He was the chief test pilot on the Sidewinder guided missile at China Lake.
event a Yankee Team plane went down. Air America SAR forces, he stated, were not adequate for the task. (He had received no supply by the time Klusmann was shot down.) Anderson, "USAF Search and Research in Southeast Asia," p. 30.

June 3, 1964
Increase unfriendly activity in May has demonstrated the need for the FIC.

June 6, 1964

Embassy, VTE, to White House, September 2, 1964, reporting initial debriefing of Klusmann: Lt. Charles F. Klusmann shot down near Ban Ban at approx. 1200 hours local time on Saturday, June 6. He was at 3,000 feet above ground at 500 knots when hit by .50 caliber through fuel cell of right wing. He broke right and immediately took a direct hit from 37mm in aft section of fuselage. Aircraft began to roll, out of control, and Klusmann ejected. He landed in a wooded area, suffering a slight injury to his leg. He attempted to signal rescue aircraft with his mirror. "Klusmann is most complimentary of the attempts made by Air America aircraft to rescue him immediately after his being shot down and reports that these aircraft made every effort to secure him despite intense fire directed against them." Klusmann was captured approx. 1400 hours. [DDRS 1989/2343]

Tilford: A few minutes afternoon, a RLAF and Air America C-123 heard Mayday from Corktip 920, a USN RF-8A (Klusmann). Corktip 32 [Knight believes that callsign was Nicotine, not Corktip] reported that his wingman had gone down south of Ban Ban. The AAM C-123 and a Helio headed for the area. They located the pilot in about an hour. About 1500 two AAM H-34s approached for pickup but were driven off by gunfire [Tilford incorrectly says that 2 crew members were critically wounded].

Anderson, "USAF SAR in SEA" - The AAM Caribou on scene requested fighter support. After "some discussion," T-28s were scrambled from VTE. CINCPAC approved the use of USAF aircraft, and F-105s were scrambled from Takhli. However, CINCPAC later countermanded this order, leaving the SAR mission to Air America/RLAF. The Klusmann emergency "had thrown everyone into confusion." pp. 31-32.
Jenny: Jenny was in the area in a Helio when Klusmann went down. He heard the Mayday and headed for the area. When he arrived, he spotted a parachute laid out on a grassy knoll, then smoke, then a signal mirror ("textbook"). Jenny called for a helicopter. Tom Moher was close by but Bill Cook (supercautious) persuaded Moher to wait for assistance. The rescue "armada" did not show up for about an hour, by which time Klusmann had been captured.

Casterlin: Although he was not there when Klusmann was shot down, he heard the story of Moher and William T. Cook [hired 17 March 1962; terminated 28 August 1964]. Mike Marshall also confirmed this. Moher and Cook took their time getting to site, with Cook being known as extremely cautious. Jenny could see the pilot on the ground but the helicopters did not arrive until the afternoon. Moher went down on a light signal but received heavy fire. His Thai observer in the left seat was wounded in the head [he later recovered]. Moher said that he could see Klusmann. Cook claimed that he never saw him. Klusmann later said that he had already been taken prisoner by that time and they were using him as a decoy.

Knight 25 Sep 91: "Casterlin is correct. Both H-34’s very slow to get to site. Both pilots overly cautious attitude in other ops as well."

Knight 9 August 92: General Moore was having lunch at the AAM Club with Ben Moore when word came in that a Navy aircraft had been shot down. Knight interrupted the lunch with the information. General Moore was surprised. He used AAM radio to launch F-100s from Thakli; also, T-28s from Waterpump/Udorn. The two closest AAM helicopters were flown by Moher and Cook. This was really a "bad pair" for the SAR job. Moher was "a nervous pilot," and Knight did not trust Cook. They took a long time to get to the area. It was frustrating. General Moore was very disappointed with AAM's response.

Terry Burke, March 2, 1992: Burke was working out of 20A when word came in that "someone" had been shot down. He got in a Helio and went to LS-88 where he hooked up with two helicopters. One of the problems was the limited information available. Burke initially believed that an Air America aircraft had been shot down. When they were staging for the rescue, by chance the local Thai PARU commander of a village near Klusmann's location was available to fly with Moher. Burke, who had up-to-date information on enemy positions in the area, led the choppers toward the site. Not until they reached the area did they learn that a Navy pilot had gone down. Burke saw Klusmann waving (he later learned the Klusmann was trying to wave off the helicopters because of
Burke suggested to Moher that he make a fast pass over the area and have his flight mechanic take a good look. As he was making the pass, the enemy opened fire. A round came through the windscreen and hit the PARU in the forehead. The PARU slumped against the controls, causing Moher to yell that he was going down. However, the PARU recovered sufficiently to lean back, lock his harness, and give Moher a thumbs up. Moher then made a second pass. The aircraft was hit again, and black smoke could be seen (the radio had been hit). As Moher limped away, a C-123 flying overhead was yelling on the radio that he could see Klusmann and that there was no one else around. He said that he would make the position. As his kicker dropped a smoke grenade, the enemy opened up, putting a football size hole in the floor of the 123. This quieted the 123 pilot. By this time, Klusmann had disappeared.

Elder, 15 Sep 91: "I was working Site 58 at the time of the incident. It was all screwed up because it was not broadcast that there was an emergency but only for helicopters to proceed to LS-88 for a briefing. I had heard some conversation on the radio but didn't know it was urgent. I had Doc Weldon and Pop Buell onboard when they called and headed for Site 88 (next to Site 32). About ten minutes out Tom Moher called that his guide riding in the left seat was shot in the head and had fallen on the controls [cyclic] and he was heading for Site 88. I called and told him (Bill Cook was with him) that I had the doctor with me. Bill had circled once and said he was going back for another attempt to pick up the downed pilot. Tom landed at Site 88 and I landed within a minute behind him. They were taking the man out of the left seat as I came in. He was unconscious and bleeding from his head wound. Doc Weldon was there by the time they got the wounded man (Thai PARU) out of Tom's aircraft. I took off to go with Bill but by that time Bill was on his way back. The guide recovered and returned to work at air ops at site 20A. He had a 5 inch scar from between his eyes to his hairline.

I noticed a lot of finger pointing in [your] outline as to who was at fault for the delay. It was screwed up because no one briefed the helicopter pilots on any assets available (cover) or what was going on. I never knew a pilot was even down until I was almost to Site 88 and Tom called. I encore Klusmann's statement. I think Casterlin should not have made the statement that Bill Cook was 'extremely cautious.' Going back alone after being shot up doesn't indicate that to me." [But note Knight's comment.]

Klusmann (Naval Historical Research Center): Born 7 September 1933. Enlisted USN February 1952; flight training 1954; wings July 1955. Hit during photo recon mission over PDJ on 21 May 1964 but able to return to
carrier. Shot down on June 6 about 10 miles south of Ban
Ban.

Klusmann launched shortly before 11 a.m. with wingman
Lt. J. S. Kuechmann. Briefed to cover area along Route 7
from PDJ to Ban Ban. Known as "lead alley" to pilots of
 carriers. Made run at 1500 feet/550 kts. He was five miles
past Khang Khay when hit. He climbed to 10,000 feet then
ejected. He landed on top of a 20 foot tree on the edge of
a small clearing, injuring his right leg, arm, and hip. It
was difficult to walk, so he began to crawl up the side of a
hill, heading south. One hour later, he saw a C-123 and
signalled with smoke, getting no response. About 20 minutes
after this, the sun came out and he was able to use his
mirror; the C-123 rocked its wings. About 15 minutes later,
a light plane joined the C-123. About this time, the enemy
opened fire on the two aircraft. "The hills were just full
of them." About a half hour later, he heard two helicopters
approach. They made three passes, drawing heavy fire on
each pass. Klusmann tried to wave off the helicopters on
the third pass, but don't know if they saw him. There was
no chance of them to land. "I have nothing but the highest
praise for the crews . . . for even attempting a pick up
under these extremely hazardous conditions." He was
captured a few minutes after this. He escaped in late
August and reached friendly lines in early September.

June 7, 1964

Commander Doyle W. Lynn, executive officer of Fighter
Squadron 31, shot down in afternoon on mission over PDJ.
Major rescue effort. Location pinpointed on June 8. H-34
rescue helicopter sent. Cable six-feet too short. Aircraft
nearly crashed. After 17 hours on ground, Lynn picked up in
nearby clearing.

Retaliatory strikes on antiaircraft positions
authorized.

Tilford: Old Nick 110, a F-8D (Lynn) hit around 1400
while escorting FR-8A. [Navy: Lynn was flying F-8D, off
Kitty Hawk, when shot down in a wooded area about 35 miles
south of Xieng Khouang.] Lynn's position reported
incorrectly and initial search failed to locate him.
However, an Air American Caribou heard his homing beacon and
located him, but it was too dark for pickup. The Caribou
returned the next morning (cloudy), picked up the homer, and
directed H-34 to the pickup.

Anderson, "USAF SAR in SEA" - Lynn was shot down on a
second strafing pass on a gun position. He was located by
beeper (there had been an error of 20 miles on the initial
fix). He was picked up early the next morning by AAM pilot
Estes in an operation that pointed to the limits of the
H-34. Lynn was located in a wooded area at an elevation of
4,800 feet. The H-34 had trouble hovering at that altitude; also, the cable proved 15 feet too short in the 120-foot high forest. p. 33.

Lynn, was killed on 27 May 1965 during a mission over Vinh Railroad yards, North Vietnam, leading a flight on four on an anti-aircraft suppression attack.

Cochran: Admiral McCain wanted American pilots for the SAR. Cochran went out with three Air America pilots in T-28s and searched around Site 22. On their return, Cochran dropped two 500-pound bombs on a 37mm gun south of the Xieng Khoung Ville. Unger was not too happy with Cochran's participation in the mission. [See Eckholdt logbook]

June 8/9, 1964
On June 8, following loss of two Navy aircraft, JCS sends 8 F-100s from Clark to DaNang to support Yankee Team Recon missions over Laos. Supported by SAC KC-135s, F-100s make first jet strikes of war on June 9 against antiaircraft sites and selected military targets in Laos.

June 10-11, 1964
Almanac: "Embarrassed by the disclosure of US participation in air actions in Laos, Souvanna Phouma threatens to resign if the flights don't stop." Unger persuades Souvanna to change his mind. After a temporary suspension, US announced on June 11 that recon flights will continued 'as necessary.' "This translates into describing all US air operations in Laos during the coming years as 'reconnaissance flights.' On the 11th, Thai pilots in planes with Laotian Air Force markings bomb the Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay, destroying the Chinese mission and killing one civilian."

June 15, 1964
Meeting at Udorn: MGEN Joseph H. Moore, commander, 2nd Air Division; COL Jack Catlin, deputy commander; LTCOL Robert Tyrrell; and Air America representatives. They developed procedures for SAR. AAM assumed responsibility for rescue coverage on PDJ during Yankee Team missions.

Anderson, "USAF SAR in SEA" - The need for better coordination and communications led to the meeting at Udorn. Tyrrell emphatic that a single agency operating through an on-scene commander should be designated to control SARs. Ben Moore pointed out that AAM had the potential for the SAR mission; however, it was not staffed or equipped for a 24-hour SAR mission. Also, AAM communications equipment needed upgrading. p. 34
Casterlin: There was a general pilots meeting the next day, at which time the pilots were informed that they were responsible for SAR.

Knight, 8/9/92: Knight was present at this meeting. Abadie still was in Taipei at the time. AAM never gave its pilots a choice re SAR. They were expected to do the job. The major problem was that the SAR mission required a lot of standby time. The pilots, who were paid by the flying hour, did not like this. Morale was pretty low in the beginning. There were a number of nasty trips across the border into North Vietnam in which aircraft were hit.

June 15, 1964

Unger to Secretary of State: In response to suggestions that MAAG be reactivated in Laos: "As will be recalled, experience in '61-62 with MAAG was not a happy one. MAAG and White Star teams did a highly commendable job under difficult circumstances, but their experience demonstrated that it is almost impossible to put any real spine into FAR. Result was that U.S. prestige was tarnished since one FAR disaster after another inevitably tended rub off onto U.S. advisers. As stated many times before, do not believe we could ever make fighting force out of FAR such as to withstand determined Viet Minh-backed PL drive. This being case, we should regard FAR as no more than tripwire."

[DDRS 1989/2109]

June 16, 1964

JCS directs recon missions be conducted at altitudes about 10,000 feet unless absolutely necessary to obtain low level intelligence. Only 2 USAF and no Navy aircraft shot down to end of 1964.

June 18, 1964

CONUSMAV to CINCPAC: Unger has stated that helicopter capability in Laos is inadequate for SAR if air operations continue at present level. CINCPAC has proposed to station USMC helicopters at Udorn, but facilities there are not capable of accommodating USMC operational and support personnel. CONUSMAV recommends that four additional helicopters be provided to Air America for SAR. Air America proposes to place two helicopters on alert (when required by air operations) at LS-15 (Ban Wa), southwest of the P DJ, and two at LS-89 (Ban Vieng), northeast of the P DJ. [DDRS 1989/692] {Knight: Also, LS92}

Elder to WML, 15 Sep 91: "We started standing by at Site 15 for SAR because the Air America radio station 'delta' was there and provided communications. The assignment was a bitter pill for the helicopter pilots because we had to stay up country extra days without any
extra pay nor anything offered to anyone for flying extra hazardous missions. The only mission I had during that time was to pickup a T-28 that bailed out southeast of Phou Bia. We did not standby at site 89." Re Zeitler’s comments about the dispute with McMahon about the pilots’ request to be paid for standby and to use two helicopters for SAR: "This dispute went on for a long time. McMahon was filling in for Ben Moore and was not on our wavelength. Also, he was a real jerk.

From the Kluemann incident to Hotel 19 was 70 days that the only thing about SAR’s was that we would do it. No fighter cover, T-28’s or a second helicopter and no money too. The total support was verbage. Is there any doubt in your mind that if there was some kind of support available I would have asked for it instead of loading up with guns to cover Billy??"

June 26, 1964

Time magazine carried feature story on Laos, with picture of Kong Le on cover. Notes that RLAf ordered into action for first time by Souvanna during current crisis. However, only 12 RLAf pilots. "The other planes were reportedly piloted by U.S. civilian soldiers of fortune and by U.S.-trained Thai aviators." They flew 36 sorties in one week, hitting Communist posts and wiping out a truck convoy on the fringe of the Plain of Jars that "left tanks, trucks and Pathet Lao Leader Prince Souphanouvong smoldering."

June 26, 1964

CIA, Office of Current Intelligence. "Effectiveness of T-28 Strikes in Laos" - Following the outbreak of fighting on the PDJ 16-17 May, US authorized the release of bombs to the Laotian Air Force and increased from six to twenty-four the number of T-28s under Laotian command (16 configures for strike missions, eight for recon). Since May 17, there have been over 450 sorties flown (average of 12 per day), mostly against targets on the PDJ. Also, strikes at enemy positions near Attapeu, Vang Vieng regions, and along Route 7 east of the PDJ. "Lao and Thai pilots have manned most of the flights; however, on 25-26 May five US civilian pilots flew several missions."

"We doubt that the T-28 strikes have had more than a harassing effect on the Pathet Lao." Personnel, trucks, and gun emplacements have been hit; also severe damage to buildings. However, air operations have not been coordinated with ground action. The PL have reacted with greater dispersal. There is no evidence that movement of supplies along Route 7 has been seriously hampered. One T-28 has been damaged, but none has been shot down. However, as ground fire has been increasing, losses can be expected. [DDRS 1976/226A]
June - December 1964

Late June/July 1964

USAF Plans and Policies: "By late June and July Lao-Thai-Yankee Team reconnaissance, interdiction, and airlift operations had been a major factor in stabilizing the military situation in Laos. The defense of Muang Soni, vital area near the Plaines des Jarres, was bolstered and later an "Operation Triangle" further improved the position of non-Communist forces. Clearly the rapid USAF training of inexperienced Lao and Thai pilots had 'paid off' and LeMay commended highly the work of Detachment 6. In addition to providing valuable information on Communist activity in Laos and infiltration into South Vietnam, Yankee Team and Water Pump missions had raised Laoist morale."

In July, LeMay proposed and JCS endorsed proposal to delegate more responsible to CINCPAC for air activity in Laos: faster mission approval, relax rules of engagement, night strikes of convoys on Route 7, more direct participation by US and Thai pilots. McNamara declined. "High administration policy required the approval of each mission and as available air resources seemed sufficient, there would be no deeper U.S. involvement for the time being in Laos."

July 1964

Almanac: "Both sides are now engaged in a barely-secret war in violation of the Geneva Accords. The Ho Chi Minh Trail is being turned into a modern route to carry the tons of weapons, ammunition, food and other necessities for the Vietcong and the increasing numbers of North Vietnamese regular troops infiltrating into South Vietnam. Engineer battalions using modern Soviet and Chinese machinery are building roads and bridges capable of handling heavy trucks and a whole network of support facilities are also being built - antiaircraft defenses, underground barracks, workshops, warehouses, fuel depots and hospitals. Meanwhile, the various clandestine activities called for by Oplan 34A are well underway. The Royal Laoian Air Force, strengthened by more T-28s, and US planes from Yankee Team are now conducting regular missions in Laos. The DeSoto Mission is operating off North Vietnam's coast, and Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp, Jr., American commander in the Pacific, ordered the Seventh Fleet to deploy the aircraft carrier Ticonderoga and its ancillary force, at the entrance of the Tonkin Gulf; the destroyer Maddox is order over from Japan to engage in DeSoto electronic 'easdropping.' And in Laos this month, US military advisers assist the Laoist army in a ground operation to clear the junction of the road from the Plain of Jars with the road between Vientiane and Luang
Prabang; this Operations Triangle (or Three Arrows) involves US Army advisers with Laotian regiments also US ground controllers for strikes by US airplanes.

July 1964

Operation Triangle: three-pronged FAR/Neutralist offensive against crossroads town of Sala Phou Khoun. After two weeks of fighting, Pathet Lao forced routed along highway between VTE and Luang Prabang. Tactical air used: RLAF and Thai volunteers in T-28s. Regimental-sized FAR unit airlifted for first time during rainy season. This sets precedent for wet season offensive.


On June 23, the RLG asked for "extensive" US support for a military operation in the areas north of VTE and west of the PDJ. In subsequent exchanges with Unger, "it is clear that our response to this request involves very serious issues affecting our relationship to Souvanna Phouma, possible Communist reactions to the proposed operation, and indeed the whole trend of our military actions in Laos." The operation is a three-pronged attack designed to secure control of Route 13 (between VTE and LPB) and that part of Route 7 which runs from Route 13 east to present position of Neutralist forces at Muong Soi. Initial troop movement will begin on July 1 with the operation commencing around July 7/8. There are 10 government battalions involved. The opposition is estimated at 3 PL battalions.

US participation requested involves (1) extensive US recon in the area; (2) extensive US-piloted airlift using aircraft currently within Laos (plus 3 additional C-123s and 3 Caribous with Air America markings; and (3) US-piloted T-28s in combat operations. (2) and (3) would mean greater US involvement that ever before. "The operation would open US involvement beyond anything we have hitherto done and laying the US open to charge of direct violation of Article 4 of the Geneva Accords in the sense that the pilots in both cases would be performing military operations."

Unger believes that the operation has a reasonable chance of success.

The Neutralists at Muong Soi number approximately 3,300. They have little artillery and could not withstand a determined Communist attack. The defeat of these forces "would have extremely serious consequences in military and above all political terms."

Souvanna Phouma has joined with Neutralist and FAR generals in planning the operation; indeed, he had "prodded them into the present plan." He and they believe that the May defeats were about all they could take and must be countered by offensive action. Unger believes that our
failure to support the operation would make it very difficult to maintain the confidence of Souvanna and his generals "in our ultimate willingness to take strong action to defend Laos and with it Southeast Asia."

Cable from VTE, July 2, 164 [DDRS 1981/210C]:
Operation Triangle should begin on July 8. Six Thai 105mm howitzers will be airlifted from Korat to Muong Soi by Air America on July 4. An effort is being made to remove all Thai markings from the guns. Seventeen T-28 have been added, bringing the force to 41 airplanes. Ten Thai pilots will arrive Udorn on July 2, with five to ten more to follow. Air America airlift has been augmented by three C-123s and three Caribou.

[Interview with Major Donald Randle: Waterpump began in the early spring of 1964 to train RLAF pilots at Udorn. Around May, Thai pilots became involved. They were given a quick checkout at Udorn, they operated from Udorn, staged through VTE and made airstrikes in northern Laos, returning to Udorn at night. RLAF moved to Savannakhet.

Randle arrived in Udorn in July. Bill Thomas had just replaced Barney Cochran. Randle remained went to VTE for eight weeks as "liaison officer" for the Thai pilots. He welcomed them when they showed up in the morning, then dispatched them on airstrikes. This involved 4 to 8 planes daily. They would arrive unarmed. Air America brought in ammo from Pepper Grinder (Udorn) in C-123s. The T-28s usually carried a Lao observer in the back seat. They usually flew in flights of three. Vang Pao’s stepson, Vang Chieu, often flew as an observer. He was good at pointed out targets. The observer acted as FACs.

Randle was then assigned to Savannakhet in October 1964 for Flaming Arrow: attacks on Ho Chi Minh Trail. 12 T-28s were used for airstrikes during a two-week period, then "it just sort of petered out."

Re CIA people in VTE: "First of all, they were easily detected. You knew exactly who they were the first day you were there. Everybody pointed it out and said that guy is CIA." Earl Jones and Lyle Brown "were typically snotty." They were not happy to have military personnel messing with their war. Relations with them tended to be cool.

They were few Thai losses when Randle was there. One pilot ran out of gas after getting lost. There was little in the way of battle damage. The Thai pilots did not show much aggressiveness. If the T-28 had a pod that kept the shells, they always would expend all their ammo and keep the sell the brass. If the pod ejected shells, they usually brought the rounds back.

Air America pilots flew SAR in Lao-marked T-28s.
Cochran: Cochran believes that Triangle was "an amazing success." One the first day of the offensive, Joe Potter flew in an Aero Commander that had been given to the king of Laos by Eisenhower and acted as a forward air controller. He contacted Paddy Doyle on the ground; Doyle was with the main force at the junction of routes 1 and 7. Doyle had made an arrow out of plywood which he pointed toward the enemy. Potter directed the T-28s by reference to the arrow.

July 3, 1964
FIC to Mgr ATOG: Normal activity was brought to a standstill in June by the Communist downing of two U.S. Navy aircraft south of the PDJ. Upon completion of search activities, USAF and Customer at L08 asked for assistance in setting up a SAR plan.

July 7-8-9, 1964
Early on the morning of 7 July 1964, Marshall was flying between LS-36 and LS-58, northeast of PDJ, with five Meo soldiers (two in uniform; one older man and two boys in black pajamas) who had been recuperating from wounds at the Sam Thong hospital and were being returned to duty. He also was carrying 2-3 large bales of black cloth which were destined for a village as a gift from Vang Pao. About 10 kilometers from LS-36, he ran into bad weather and was forced to land in elephant grass on the finger of a small hill overlooking a high valley. The weather got worse during the day, so they had to spend the night. Everyone slept in the helicopter. Marshall was not apprehensive, as he was between two friendly bases. No one even gave a thought to putting out a guard. [Knight, 25 Sep 91: "Marshall should have been apprehensive. He was in well known bad guy country." Elder, 15 Sep 91: Marshall was due north of LS-36, not between 36 and 58, and he was in a known enemy area.]

Before dawn the next morning, Marshall attempted to start the engine but it would not fire. He had started the engine several times during the night and pumped fuel from the rear to front tanks, but there now was inadequate fuel in the front tanks to start the engine. They had to drain fuel by hand from the rear and transfer it to the front. By the time this was completed, it was dawn. Marshall started the engine just as heavy firing broke out. When one round shattered the plexiglass in the cockpit, he cut the engine and dove out through the right side. However, his leg was caught underneath the seat, and he found himself hanging out of the window. He managed to pull himself back into the cockpit, released his leg, then fell to the ground. At first, he hid behind one of the large bales of cloth which protected him from the firing. He then crawled back toward the tail. At this point, he saw flight mechanic Cristolgo
in a nearby open area; he had been hit in the left shoulder (the bullet had clipped a lung). Cristolgo was looking back toward the aircraft. He disappeared within seconds. (Cristolgo later said that he thought that Marshall had been killed.)

Marshall crawled into the high elephant grass just as the helicopter exploded. He went part of the way down the hill, then hid in a clump of bamboo. He could hear shouting and firing that lasted 2-3 hours; then there was silence. After noon, the clouds began to break up. Around 2 p.m. he heard a helicopter. He later learned that it was Sam Jordan. Sam and Terry Burke (from 20A) had picked up Colonel Tong as L5-58 and began the search for Marshall. When Jordan headed in one direction, Tong pointed in another direction that turned out to be correct. When Jordan asked him how he knew where to go, Tong pointed to the Buddha that he wore around his neck.

Marshall left his hiding place and ran up the hill to the burned helicopter. He climbed on the engine and began waving his T-Shirt. Flight mechanic Lucky Mondello (Elder: it was Blackie Mondello) saw it the reported to Jordan: "I see Captain Marshall's ghost." He thought that the "ghost" was waving goodbye. Jordan circled Marshall, then left! As it turned out, he was too heavy to land. He returned, made some gestures, then landed in a clearing at the bottom of the hill. Marshall took off running downhill. He found a trail that led straight down, and ran as fast as he could, fearful that the helicopter would leave without him. He broke out into a clearing to find Mondello pointing a .30 calibre machine gun at him. He threw himself into the helicopter, totally exhausted. Meanwhile, Tong and Burke had gone up the hill by a different trail to retrieve him. Jordan took off and found Tong and Burke by the burned helicopter. By this time, he had burned off enough fuel to land and pick them up. Before returning to L5-58, they decided to shoot up the village from which the soldiers had come and which was now firing on the helicopter. All Marshall wanted to do was to get back to a friendly base.

Cristolgo was picked up the next day, July 9. They also picked up the five soldiers, one of whom had been wounded. Marshall later learned that Colonel Tong had lost his Buddha during the search. Marshall meant to replace it, but never did so.

[Billy Zeiter, telephone interview, January 27, 1992: Zeiter was in the radio room in Vietiane on the second day of the search. At one point, the ambassador personally ordered Kanach to abandon the search for Cristolgo. Kanach refused. At short time later, Cristolgo was discovered and
picked up by Sam Jordan. Terry Burke: He and Kanach agreed the "radio trouble" prevented them from understanding the recall message.]

[Sam Jordan to WML, Nov. 5, 1991: "I was never directed by Col. Tong on where to go. I knew the area well. I tried to visualize the extent of the area Mike might have gone down in and drew a large rectangle on my map of the search area and on each pass would make the rectangle smaller. It was on the second pass of this rectangle that I spotted the wreckage on the side of a mountain slope of the helicopter Mike had been flying in. I elected not to land on the steep slope, as there was an excellent open area to the west down the slope about 30 yards away. When Mike came aboard bleeding from cuts with the tall elephant grass (and in a totally tattered uniform), he told us the area was crawling with enemy who had been shooting at us. I was aware of some scattered ground fire, but wasn't sure of the location. Since Terry Burke and Col. Tong had gone up to the crash site, it was now urgent to pick them up at once, so I took off and made a very hazardous cross slope landing to pick them up, landing on the hill just below the site." On the way out, they shot at some enemy troops who were just outside the village, firing at the helicopter. The next day, Jordan spotted Cristologo in a deep valley about 50 yards downslope from where he had gone to get water from a mountain spring.]

Terry Burke, March 2, 1992: Burke spotted the burnt wreckage of the helicopter. Only the tail pylon with in one piece, and he could read the tail number. They made an initial pass and thought that there might have been gunfire from the adjacent village. On a second pass, they definitely took fire from defensive positions around the village. Burke returned fire with a BAR. The aircraft then set down in tall elephant grass downslope from the wreckage. Burke and Tong made slow progress through the grass. One person had to fall forward while the other walked over him and fell forward in turn. It took about 30-45 minutes to reach the wreckage. Burke found Marshall's helmet in the burnt helicopter and feared the worst. About this time, Jordan came overhead and motioned them to board the helicopter. As Jordan hovered above them, Burke boosted Tong up, then grabbed the floor and began to chin himself up when he saw Marshall's face. He was so surprised that he lost his grip and fell to the ground. He then had to repeat the process to get into the helicopter.

July 14, 1964

110' x 20' bridge across Nam Mat on Route 7 attacked by Thai-piloted T-28s. Bridge heavily defended by 37mm and 57mm guns. One T-28 shot down and pilot killed; one
aircraft damaged. [Same bridge that had been attacked by Air America pilots in May.]

Cochran: Cochran had planned this mission. He had good pictures that had been taken by Thai photo recon T-28s. They revealed 37mm and 57mm gun positions. Cochran asked 13th Air Force for delay fuses, which they supplied. One flight of four T-28s would dive bomb the bridge to get the guns pointed upward. Then another flight of four would come in low and drop their 500-pound bombs with delay fuses at a low angle on the supports under the bridge. One of the most aggressive Thai pilots, Sgt. Ardham, was leading the low flight. On the attack, Ardham did not like his alignment, so he pulled up right over the bridge and made a second pass. He was hit in the prop spinner, crashed, and was killed. The delay bombs never went off.

July 31, 1964
USAIRA, VTE, to JCS: Route 7 was effectively cut by RLAF T-28s on July 18 when they knocked out three of five spans of a 40 x 12 foot wooden bridge across the Nam Mat River. The most lucrative target, however, has not been hit. This 110 x 20 foot bridge across the Nam Mat at UG6066 (on Route 7) is defended by 35 37/57mm antiaircraft guns. A mission was flown against it on July 14, resulting in one T-28 shot down and one damaged. [DDRS 1988/683]

August 1-2, 1964
Thai-piloted T-28s bomb and strafe North Vietnamese villages near Laotian border. Souvanna denies attack on August 7 as part of policy to deny any aspect of the covert operation. [Additional strikes on October 16, 17, and 28 — although strikes on 16 and 17 in "disputed territory" on border. [Pentagon Papers, November 7, 1964]

August 1964
Squadron of F-105s newly arrived at Korat used for SAR in Laos. Also, F-100s at Takhli increased from 6 to 18 following Gulf of Tonkin. F-105s replaced F-100s in November.

August 1, 1964
State to Unger: Unger authorized to use napalm at his discretion after he discusses it with Souvanna. [DDRS 1989/811]

August 2-5, 1964
August 4, 1964

FIC to ATOG Mgr: Pathet Lao ambush of H-13 early last month revealed the need for FIC to have freer access to all customer information.

August 7, 1964

State to Unger: US objective in Laos is "to stabilize the situation again, if possible within the framework of the 1962 Geneva settlement."

August 8, 1964

Hickler notes little action in war.

August 14, 1964

USAIRA, VTE, to 2nd Air Division, SGN: 25 T-28 sorties were flown on August 14 in support of SAR at UG 025528, where an RT-28 is believed to have crashed. Four flights of four jet aircraft expended ordinance in support of SAR. Pilot has not been located. Search to continue on August 15. [DDRS 1988/684]

Frank W. McCallister: McCallister assigned to VTE as operations officer for WATERPUMP in August 1964. Thai pilot in RT-28 Guppy lost on western end of PDJ. Colonel Tyrrell had McCallister fly in right seat of Air America transport to direct air strikes by several flights of F-105s. "As far as I know these were the first air strikes called in to support a rescue in Laos. Incidentally in this case all we accomplished was to get several thuds shot up pretty badly partly due to poor tactics on their disc."

Cochran: There was a big fight going on east of Muong Soi on the edge of the PDJ. The Pathet Lao had 37mm guns in caves on the top of a mountain that they would roll out in the late afternoon. Cochran developed a plan to deal with them. A high level flight would go over the position in the afternoon and attract the attention of the guns, while a RT-28 would come in a low level and take pictures that would be used to identify the caves. The RT-28 pilot was Prasap, "a great bear of a man," who was the best of the recon pilots. The problem with the plan was that Prasap was shot down and killed. The decision was made to destroy Prasap's aircraft. Cochran flew into Korat to brief the F-105 commander. He was not interested and made the point that tactics for F-105s differed greatly from tactics used by Cochran's "Maytag Messerschmitts." The next morning, Cochran observed the attack from a Helio. These were the first F-105s ever committed to combat. "They looked like that were on the dive bombing range at Nellis." Remaining on track during the attack, #2 and #4 took major battle damage.
The Loss of Hotel 19

Early in the morning of August 18, 1964, a T-28, flown by the Thai assistant base commander at Udorn, was shot down during a mission over the southeastern corner of the PDJ, five miles NNE of Ban Peung (LS-95). Dick Elder was sent to the Pha Phai (LS-21) area on a search mission. He located the crash site at about the 4000-foot level and had the pilot in sight; however, he had just taken on a load of fuel and was too heavy to land and make a pickup. Billy Zeitler, who was working in the Pha Phai (LS-65) area in Hotel 19, heard Elder on the radio and offered to help. Gary Malberg in Caribou 392 was overhead the crash site in Caribou 392. As Malberg was drawing fire, Elder went back to Ban Beung and borrowed a .30 caliber machine gun in order to give Zeitler some cover fire.

Zeitler arrived in the area, made three passes over the crash site, then went in to land as Elder provided cover. There was an open field about 50 yards from the downed pilot, and Elder had recommended that Zeitler land in the clearing and have the pilot come to him. While Elder's attention was directed toward the area of ground fire to the north, Zeitler was shot down as he neared the ground. Malberg saw Hotel 19 roll over and become engulfed in flames. He saw one person jump free and possibly another, although he was not sure about the second person.

Zeitler, who had been shot in the foot, managed to get out of the helicopter and was going to the cabin to help the flight mechanic when the aircraft blew up. He suffered flash burns on his hands and arms. Flight Mechanic "Pappy" Pascual, who had been a guerrilla in the Philippines during World War II, died in the burning aircraft.

By this time a major rescue operation was in the works. Three Air America T-28 pilots - Rick Byrne, Joe Hazen, and John Wiren - had been alerted for a possible rescue mission. Byrne was off that day and had had a beer when Jim Mullen of FAC called him and told him to come out to the airport for a possible T-28 mission because Zeitler had been shot down. As the T-28 pilots were involved in a pay dispute over missions and had threatened not to fly until the issue was settled, his initial reaction was "the hell with it." Caught by surprise, "I wasn't thinking straight." Mullen became angry: "You asshole, that's your friend out there." This shocked Byrne into realizing what he was doing. "Jim put it in very clear perspective." Chagrined, he promised to be right out. He felt badly about his initial attitude as he drove out to the airport.
As the T-28 pilots began to assemble, Gary Malaberg returned to Vientiane and flew to the Air America OD shack. There were about ten people there, following radio transmissions, including Ambassador Unger, Colonel Tyrrell, Dave Hickler, Larry Joseph, and Bill Solin. As Hickler recalled the scene:
"Malaberg was visibly shaken up and full of spirit. He was extremely emotionally involved and wanted to 'get them' now - at all costs. He made an excellent presentation to the Ambassador by drawing diagrams of terrain, position of the H-19, where ground fire was coming from, what the problems were and his recommendations that only Napalm would do the job. Bullets and rockets alone in this heavily jungled area would not drive out the intruders who were no doubt surely at this movement creeping up on our American pilot from H-19."

"The Ambassador listened attentively to Malaberg, asked the proper questions, and was the center of a quiet but earnest crowd of about ten very concerned individuals. Finally, after a quiet moment of reflection, he said, 'OK, let's go. Napalm, if it must be but no, repeat no villages.'"

Unger then went out to personally brief the T-28 pilots. He made Byrne promise not to use napalm unless absolutely necessary, and he wanted the napalm brought back if not used. Hazen recalls that Unger stressed that napalm was not to be used "unless absolutely necessary," and then only against military targets.

Unger then sent a "flash" message to the Department of State that he had just authorized the use of napalm in the rescue operation. He regretted that the need for an immediate decision prevented him from obtain prior authorization. [He explained to Washington the next day: "Situation at time I authorized use American pilots in my judgment did not permit of even brief delay entailed in exchange of flash messages."] If an American T-28 pilot is shot down during the operation, he recommends that the story be put out that he was a member of the helicopter SAR crew.

The T-28s started out about 1600 hours for the 40 minute flight to the Ban Peung area. A Caribou, piloted by Fred Walker, had already been sent ahead to act as Victor Control and coordinate the rescue effort.

While all this was happening, Zeitler was attempting to hide out on the ground. On two occasions, searchers came close to his hiding place and he was forced to club one to death and strangle the other.
The rescue force finally arrived in the area. F-100s from Clark - eight F-100s had deployed from Clark in early June to support Yankee Team missions - had showed up and attacked gun positions in the area. The T-28s circled the area but did not receive any ground fire. As Jack Connor came in to make the pickup, the T-28s hosed down the ridges. Byrne: "I can still see that helicopter coming in." Connor came in from the west and hovered over the hillside for what seemed a long time. Byrne heard Connor exclaim over the radio: "Christ, he doesn't have any clothes on." Connor then made the pickup. "He did a magnificent job."

[It is unclear as to whether the flight mechanic's body was recovered; also, the fate of the T-28 pilot is unclear.]

Connor took Zeitler to Long Tieng, where a Helio picked him up and flew him to Udorn. From there, a TenTwo carried him to the hospital at Korat.

Byrne felt great about a day that had gotten off to such a bad start. He was so excited that he did a victory roll on the way back, forgetting about the napalm tanks that were still attached. "This was my most exciting day in Laos." Ambassador Unger also was pleased about the napalm. The T-28 pilots, he informed Washington, "exercised excellent discretion and judgement."

On August 20, Unger cabled the State Department that recent events have pointed up the inadequacy of current guidelines for SAR. "Specifically believe I require advance authorization to use Air America pilot in T-28 SAR operations if they are to have reasonable chance of success." SAR, he explains, is one of the most critical factors in maintaining the morale of the hard pressed Air America and Bird & Son pilots. He predicts a sharp reduction in effectiveness of all air operations if the pilots are not persuaded that all reasonable measures will be taken to rescue them if forced down. The time factor and proper coordination of rescue aircraft are critical factors in the rapid rescue of pilots. "Chances of rescue decline sharply after the first hour and steadily thereafter." When the situation permits, he will of course seek specific advance authorization from Washington. However, Unger asked for discretionary authority to use Air America T-28s and napalm (if necessary) for SAR "when I consider this indispensable to success of operation."

Washington replied on August 26 that State Department agrees with his assessment of the importance of SAR and the critical role of Air America pilot. Washington grants discretionary authority to use T-28s for SAR "when you consider this indispensable to success of operation." Unger
is to seek advance authorization from Washington whenever the situation permits.
You will, in due course, receive a full and official detailed report of the chain of events that took place from our staff via my office. It might be of interest for you to know of my personal and unofficial knowledge of the events that took place.

I first became aware of the "problem" at about 121400L after returning to the airfield from town. I was advised that we had "problems." H-19 was down, shot down as a result of trying to pick up a T-28 crewman who had been shot down. Caribou 392 flown by Gary Malmberg was at the scene flying cover and reporting action/location/and search for signs of survivors. Malmberg had actually witnessed the approach to the pick up, the hover of H-19, and the roll as it fell off down the slope of the hill, filled with bullets and the immediate fire that engulfed and destroyed H-19. Malmberg saw one man jump free of the burning machine and he "thought" he saw one other person but he was not sure.

We were in the radio room of our Operations shack receiving reports from the scene from other planes, as well as Malmberg, that had been directed to the area by our staff.

The Air Attache was at the control point — our OD radio room — as well as other concerned individuals. Ambassador Langer soon arrived with his staff. He was first briefed by Col. Tyrrell, Air Attaché, and his designated air rescue chief and coordinator. The Ambassador then came to our OD radio room for further briefings and info from our FIG and OD staff. This was done quickly and capably by our Senior Operations Manager, Larry Joseph, and our designated FIG Chief, Bill Solin.

By the time this briefing had been completed, Malmberg had returned to VIE from the scene of the crash which was definitely located about five miles from Site 95 on a heading of 020 degrees. He was brought immediately into the presence of the Ambassador who asked for full details of what had taken place. Malmberg was visibly shaken up and full of spirit. He was extremely emotionally involved and wanted to "get them" now — at all costs. He made an excellent presentation to the Ambassador by drawing diagrams of terrain, position of the H-19, where ground fire was coming from, what the problems were and his recommendations that only Napalm would do the job. Bullets and rockets alone in this heavily jungled area would not drive out the intruders who were no doubt surely at this moment creeping up on our American pilot from H-19.
Prior to the arrival of the Ambassador, elements within our staff and others at the airport had initiated orders to line up and stand by our special pilots for T-28 duty. Word had been received prior to the Ambassador's arrival that "no friends" from across the river could be used - only Air America pilots in this case but only after his go-ahead after his first-hand appraisal of the situation after our briefing at our CO check.

The Ambassador listened attentively to Halberg, asked the proper questions, and was the center of a quiet but earnest crowd of about ten very concerned individuals, including myself. Finally, after a quiet moment of reflection, he said, "OK, let's go." "Napalm, if it must be but no, repeat, no villages or houses are to be hit." "Jungles and troop positions, but no villages." Later the Ambassador individually briefed each pilot that "no napalm to be used on villages - troop and gun positions only." Our three special pilots were ready, eager, willing to go - they only wanted the approval to go. And so they did. Off in their T-28's they went. These were our pros, our "last resorts," our guys with skill, courage, and devotion to a cause. Laugh, if you wish, but these young men are real men and a credit to our Company and our Country. I was really proud to be a part of this fine group.

The time was now about 1600L and "our" three T-28s were in the air en route. Flying time was about 40 minutes to Site 95 in the T-28. We could only wait.

In the meantime, we had directed another helicopter to stand by at 95 for our T-28 effort. We had sent Fred Walker off in a Caribou to fly high over and see what he could see pending further decisions on rescue efforts. Fred was able to contact us in VHF via a relay aircraft. His observations were helpful as were others in the area.

The radio suddenly blared forth from one of the high cover aircraft, "Bandits, Bandits in the area." This was a new and sinister development. Our Tom Krohn immediately asked, "What kind are they?" "How in the hell would I know," "OK, have you called the cowboys." "Well, yes, they are on the way." Everyone was stunned. People went out on the run to inform other people. It was not until four minutes later that we were advised by the same pilot that his report was in error and to cancel the alarm. Needless to say, there was a noticeable collective sigh of relief from everyone. But the H-49 pilot was still down and yet to be picked up.

Tom Krohn was especially good on the radio in directing the search and controlling the aircraft in the area. Larry Joseph, our Senior OH, was a pillar of strength and wisdom with his knowledge of planes, crews, locations, sites, availability, etc. T. C. Wallwork, Assistant Station Manager, was continually on the scene, keeping in full contact with all parties and coordinating as
required and as necessary. T. C.'s practical experience, as well as his flying background, made him a welcome addition to the Air America executive team in this rescue effort.

To depress and go back for a moment, for the sake of a point, consider this: Ambassador Unger listened to all the points and arguments for going full steam ahead - nothing was said in favor of caution - of holding off - of waiting for further information, or waiting for words of guidance from Washington. The Ambassador, after hearing all the arguments for sending out the T-28s with U.S. pilots, said simply, "OK, let 'em go."

Now this may sound easy, simple and logical on the basis of my report, but consider his problem. He had specific orders not to send out those U.S. pilots. He was instructed to secure Washington approval prior to authorizing this sort of military. Yet, on the basis of the reports of our pilots, our people, our recommendations, he said, "OK, let 'em go." I found out the following day that he had been severely criticized by his bosses in Washington over his arbitrary assumption of unauthorized authority. Frankly, I have a new found admiration for this man who has one hell of a difficult job with little thanks from anyone. I assure you that he will have my unqualified 100 per cent support.

I spoke of the above as a result of a private personal conversation right after he had given the go-ahead. He told me of his problems and of how he was cut on the line and without proper authorization for his actions. He was well aware of our pilots' concern for a fellow pilot and the natural human desire to save a buddy. But he also expressed on his duties and obligations to his superiors, the USA agreement to abide by the Geneva accord, and his responsibilities to the entire American people. His words would have been worthy of quoting in a future history book of the war in Southeast Asia. Of course, the crew of the last T-28 was of great concern.

We had coffee and waited for the action. It came. Our T-28 pilot did their job, our Helot moved in and picked up our Helot 19 pilot and took him to alternate where he was picked up by a Helo and taken to 106 and to where we dispatched a 10-ton truck to take him to Korat. Our information at this writing is that he has a bullet hole through his foot or ankle and has burns covering 25 per cent of his body and that he is suffering from shock.

From about 1300L onward there had been assisting friendly aircraft on the scene. They had worked well and honestly in trying to aid our cause. Their help is appreciated and I wish that you, through one means or another, would convey our most sincere thanks and appreciation for a job well done. Goodness only knows how many people were involved, but they were loyal and sincere.

We learned of a late, last, strike that was to come off at the site at about 1300L. I was in the Gö shack and shook it is!) following the complete operations over the UHF set installed in our office. (Incidentally - a number of aircraft operating in this area MESS, repeat, MESS, be equipped with UHF sets. This is absolutely necessary for us to keep in contact with our
required and as necessary. T. G.'s practical experience, as well as his flying background, made him a welcome addition to the Air America executive team in this rescue effort.

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Now this may sound easy, simple and logical on the basis of my report, but consider his problem. He had specific orders not to send out these AM pilots! He was instructed to secure Washington approval prior to authorizing this sort of military action. Yet, on the basis of the reports of our pilots, our people, our recommendations, he said, "OK, let 'em go." I found out the following day that he had been severely criticized by his bosses in Washington over his arbitrary assumption of unauthorized authority. Frankly, I have a new found admiration for this man who has done a difficult job with little thanks from anyone. I assure you that he will have my unqualified 100 per cent support.

I speak of the above as a result of a private personal conversation right after he had given the go-ahead. He told me of his problems and of how he was out on the limb and without proper authorization for his actions. He was very aware of our pilots' concern for a fellow pilot and the natural human desire to save a buddy. But he also expended on his duties and obligations to his bosses, the USA agreement to abide by the Geneva accord and his responsibility to the entire American people. His words would have been worthy of quoting in a future history book of the war in Southeast Asia. Of course, the crew of the last T-28 was of great concern.

We had coffee and waited for the action. It came. Our T-28 pilots did their job, our Hotel moved in and picked up our Hotel 19 pilot and took him to alternate where he was picked up by a Halio and taken to Tan Son and to where we dispatched a T-28 to take him to Korat. Our information at this writing is that he has a bullet hole through his foot or ankle and has burns covering 25 per cent of his body and that he is suffering from shock.

From about 1200L onward there had been assisting friendly aircraft on the scene. They had worked well and honestly in trying to aid our cause. Their help is appreciated and I wish that you, through one means or another, would convey our most sincere thanks and appreciation for a job well done. Goodness only knows how many people were involved, but they were loyal and sincere.

We learned of a late, last, strike that was to come off at the site at about 1200L. I was in the CO shack (and shack it is) following the complete operations over the USF set installed in our office. (Incidentally—a number of our aircraft operating in this area MFR, report, MFR, be equipped with USF sets. This is absolutely necessary for us to keep in contact with our
friendly friends from over the sea and from over the land. Our present communications capability is severely limited and dangerous. This problem is easily solved by an expenditure of money — the cheapest thing we have these days!) It was fast getting dark and we could easily hear these pilots talking from plane to plane of the four plane strike element. They had small difficulty in locating the target area and they kept talking of this "ridge" or "this valley" or just "ahead on the ridge line." "OK, I got it." "I'm on the run." "Follow me, I'll get this slide — you see?" All in short, clipped sentences, unemotional voices doing a professional job on a business-like basis. There was no hysteria — just a businesslike, airplane-like talk between a group of dedicated pros. We could hear them clearly as they went about their business of shooting down and shelling into enemy positions and as it businesslike started, it businesslike finished. We knew it was finished by the pilots' "let's go home" chatter to each other. "OK, I'm out of ammo." "I'm getting low on fuel." "We got all the areas blasted." Etc., Etc. By quotes may not be exact but they will suffice to convey the meaning. Everyone by the radio is glad that the mission is over and no one hurt. Planes are now enroute home and relay planes and tankers are on the air relaying messages and tanker giving headings for a hook-up. Everything for about five minutes seems fine — OK, but then we hear of one pilot saying that "I only have 1200 pounds of fuel remaining — I am losing fuel — this could be serious!" Oh boy, that is an understatement. He has been hit, he has holes, he is in danger. The pilot asks for a wing man to take a close look to see if he can see anything. The wing man reports visual loss of fuel and one rocket that is hung up. It is now definite and positive — trouble on the wing. We know that now we have problems of the very nature we fear — the Ambassador fears — everyone fears and the 100 pilot who no doubt fear the most. Action is immediate in our shack. People rush to call the Ambassador and others to inform others of this latest development which could be a real gummy, sticky ball of goo.

War is alerted to prepare for rescue by our people. The air waves are now full of rescue information to meet "Cony's," the tanker plane keeps giving headings, distances. The pilot of 32 is calm sounding. He has prepared and trained for this moment many times in the past. Others likewise are using their skill acquired in countless hours of training and dry run practice. It all pays off now, all so obviously by the unseen voices on the radio who are saying, "steer 220, now 210 is the heading." "you are 40 nautical miles out (from the tanker)." "30 miles — steer 200 degrees," "you are on the 200 radial." The responses are, "am at one one hundred (11,000 feet)," "now descending," "now 600 pounds fuel remaining," "now 600 pounds and at 2000 feet." This is a real dream unfolding in real life. I have listened to countless radio mystery and suspense programs in the past but nothing can compare to this place of action. Everyone is now silent in the radio room, everyone leans forward to try to catch every word and static crackle of the WH speaker hanging so innocently on the wall. The faces of the men are tense — most of them are pilots who can feel and understand every voice inflection and word spoken at this new life and death moment.

"Can't make Cony's." "Now 2500 and am getting cut." There is silence for a moment and then another plane calls 32 several times. There is no reply. He relays this information to Cony. Suddenly, "I just saw the explosion where
the plane hit." "No, I cannot see if he got out." Instructions are immediate, "Plane - orbit the site, Plane - tie up for fuel - we don't want to lose anyone for lack of fuel." Precise location of crash has been determined and it is relayed as "C20 radial from Bloom and 20 miles out." Oh, they have him located all right - no questions and the big relief from so many, many people is that he is across the river! He no longer "was" in Laos, he "was on a night training flight when he experienced engine trouble, etc., etc." The worry now is for rescue. Bloom has not been sleeping. They have CIG copter out, running, and into the dark night in record time. CIG copter is used as that is the only ready available machine. The radio now blares out new positions, voices, instructions. Soon there are reports of seeing lights, hearing radio bearing signals, and quickly the copter is overhead and the fallen angel has been picked up and is enroute to Bloom - apparently in good, uninjured condition. There is much shouting, joking, and pounding of backs in the radio room. People are happy. It's been a long, long afternoon. People now head for the Company restaurant for coffee and not a few now release the pressures and tensions by partaking of the good gin and whiskey. It is the happy ending to what could have been a mess, a mess, a mess, a mess.

The day's drama is over for us at VDF and this singular incident is one that is no greater or lesser than those of the past. We have "won" again. "Lucked out again" is another well used term by many. But everyone knows that it will come again and that it may be the next time.

D. H. Hickler
August 18, 1964  
H-19 lost (see Hickler detailed report of Aug. 22). Three T-28s with Air America pilots provide cover. Fred Walker coordinated in Caribou. Zeitler pickup up by Conner with bullet hole in foot or ankle and burns over 25 percent of body. F/M Cornelio Pascual killed by gunfire onboard H-19.

Tilford: Communist gunners brought down at T-28 while engaged in close air support of Neutralists in northwest [southeast] corner of Puj. Wingman notified Air Support Operations Center at Udorn; they in turn contacted AAM/VTE. A UH-34 headed for the area; also four USAF F-100s scrambled from Takhi for cover. Communists shot down helicopter. Also, one of F-100s hit while strafing gun position. Six T-28 escorted second UH-34, which picked up badly burned pilot and body of Filipino flight mechanic.

[Ken Convoy to WMD, 12 Feb 91: Pilot was Flying Sergeant Tirat; Lt. Col. Iriyapong Tavashi, base commander at Udorn, was in back seat. Neither body ever recovered.]

Casterlin: (including conversation with Elder) - Enemy gunners brought down a T-28 that was flown by the well regarded Thai base commander at Udorn. Elder was sent to the LS-21 area on a search mission. He located the downed aircraft near route 42 north of LS21/95 area at 4000’ elevation. He had the pilot in sight but he was too heavy to land for the pickup. Zeitler, who was working in the LS-65 area, heard Elder on the radio and offered to help. As the Air America Caribou (Victor Control) was drawing fire, Elder went to LS-95 and picked up a .30 caliber machine gun to give Zeitler some cover. Zeitler arrived in the area, made three passes, and then went in to land as Elder tried to give cover. There was an open rice field about 50 yards from the downed pilot, and Elder recommended that Zeitler land in the clearing and let the pilot come to him. While Elder’s attention was directed toward the north, Zeitler was shot down. Elder returned to Site 95 and told the base commander to sed troops to the area. You could see the smoke from Zeitler’s burning aircraft on the horizon. About 16 USAF jets arrived and hit the area. While they suppressed ground fire, Connor came in and picked up Zeitler. [Hazen says that Connor also recovered Pascual’s body.]

Zeitler later said that he had been hit in the foot. He got out of the aircraft and was going to the cabin to help the flight mechanic when the aircraft blew up. He was knocked back and suffered flash burns on the hands and arms. "Pappy" Pascual, the F/M, had been in guerrilla forces in the Philippines during World War II. Zeitler hid out for several hours while awaiting rescue. On two occasions, he
had to kill people who came too close. He clubbed one and strangled the other.

Walker, Oct. 3, 1990: "I left Vientiane in Caribou #443 ... along with "Big Andy" Anderson and Jack Fogarty as a kicker. My flight time for the mission was 3 hours and 38 minutes and, as it was about 45 minutes each way, that would put me over the area of the rescue for about two hours. Up around Phu Bia, it looked as if we couldn’t get through but, after ducking around some severe thunderstorms on an easterly tack, we managed to. Don’t recall how long I was on the scene but some time after I arrived overhead, I received a call on VHF, I believe, thusly - 'This is Cowboy White with 3.' Then he asked my position and I gave it to him. Then he asked me to hold my microphone button down several times - he had a VHF DF capability - and, shortly, announced that he was overhead at 15,000 feet and had me in sight. Then he made the offer 'You tell us what to hit and we'll hit 'em.' I did and they made some runs on the area. The aircraft were F-100s which were referred to by the fighter jocks as 'lead sleds.' My notes identify the T-28 pilot as the Chief of Staff. And Billy was picked up at 1720 local by H-20. Have a note that Billy was rescued in 2 hours after going down then I have another note that the whole operation took 6 hours. Probably the 2 hour figures is correct as I think that the reds would have caught him before 6 hours had elapsed."

Elder: "I spotted the parachute and the pilot had climbed on top of the jungle where we tried to make a rescue hoist pickup. I think the activity of the Caribou and Billy and I all circling drew the enemy to us. It’s a little difficult to explain what a running pickup is. Basically, the helicopter requires the most power to hover because the blade is flying in the disturbed air of the preceding blade. Any forward speed require less power. Billy Z. could fly at about 20 knots and no hover, so the crew chief let out the hoist cable about 60 feet and would throw the hoist to the downed pilot as Billy flew past at 20 knots. After three attempts, he relayed that he wasn’t going to be able to get him out by that technique, so that was when I suggested he land in a small clearing and have the pilot go to him. About the time Billy was coming to a hover in the clearing we started receiving heavy ground fire. Both of the machine guns I was carrying started to return the fire and then I saw that H-19 was in flames. I climbed up and flew to LS-95, landed and asked the local commander to send troops to the site of the burning helicopter. It was easy to see from the site as it was a thousand feet higher than the surrounding terrain. I then took off and returned to the site to look for survivors. Within a few minutes a large thunderstorm moved into the area and I was forced to leave."
I returned with Jack Connors when he and Stan Wilson picked up Billy. I heard later that the downed [Thai] pilot did not survive, that he was killed rather than surrender.

Interview with William A. Zeitler, Sarasota, Florida, November 18, 1990

There were several things on Zeitler’s mind before the Hotel 19 incident. The helicopter pilots believed that Tom Moger had flown into a trap on 6 June 1964, and they were apprehensive about this. Also, Zeitler had been in the radio room at VTE during the search for Marshall and Cristologo on 7/8 July. Marshall had gotten lost ("Mike was always getting lost.") and had been forced to land. They were attacked the next day. Sam Jordan pulled out Marshall. Cristologo evaded for another day. Kanach was looking for him when Unger told the radio operator to cancel the search. Kanach refused to leave. Also, the pilots were involved in a dispute with McMahon at Udorn over rescue missions. They wanted to be paid for standby for the long waits at Ban Na, and they wanted two helicopters used for SAR for safety.

On the morning of August 18, Zeitler was making his first flight of the day out of Long Tieng with a load of meat for troops that were fighting east of Phou Bia when he heard that Elder was going in for a pickup. Zeitler volunteered to help. When he reached the area, Elder was on the ground at LS-95 with his rotors going. Elder said on the radio that he had been too heavy to hover for a pickup and was trying to lighten the helicopter. Zeitler told Elder that he had half tanks and would attempt the pickup. Elder took off to lead him in. The area of the pickup was tree and bamboo-covered that looked flat at first but in fact was in a cup-shaped depression. Zeitler could see the two pilots on the ground. He hovered over them and could see their smiling faces as one pilot held up the other as flight mechanic Pappy Pascual lowered the hook. Zeitler, who had not known that the pilots were Thai, was wondering if he was being set up, like Moher. There was firing, but it was going over his head. About this time, Elder flew directly over Zeitler, and Elder’s downwash started to push Zeitler’s helicopter down into the trees. Although the hoist was almost to the pilots, he had to break off. He was afraid that the hoist would get caught in the trees but it came free.

Zeitler asked Elder if he was armed. When Elder said that he was, Zeitler asked him to try and keep the fire down as he went in for another try. This time, Zeitler backed in. Just as the hoist went down, he was hit. "It felt like a mule hit me." He was hit in the back and the knee, and took a bullet through his left foot. The controls went
stiff, and the tail of the aircraft dropped. It hit the
ground tail first, then rolled on its side with the cargo
door up. Zeitler was stunned. "Everything went from
technicolor to greys and black and white." For a moment, he
had a detached feeling. "I saw myself in the cockpit and
heard myself screaming."

Zeitler had been wearing a World War II USAF flak
jacket that had been given to him by a friend. He reached
down and grabbed the cloth handle that spit the jacket and
tried to get out. But he remained strapped in. With this
realization, "I came back into myself." In his panic, he
had been beating on the glass windshield, which took the
skin off his knuckles. As smoke began to come into the
cockpit, he broke out through the plexiglass in the ceiling.
At this point, he took his first breath since the crash (he
had been told by a friend to hold his breath in the event of
a crash lest he inhale the flames). With the breath, the
world again became technicolor, although he had lost the
sight in his right eye.

Out of the aircraft, Zeitler yelled for "Pappy." Not
hearing a reply, he crawled back to the cargo opening and
began to pull himself in when the aircraft blew up. Zeitler
was blown quite a way up the hill, suffering burns to his
arms and legs and losing his shirt and pants. In a panic,
crawled/walked around the bowl in an effort to get away
from the aircraft until he became tired, then went straight
down to the bottom of the depression. As it turned out, he
still was close to the aircraft.

There was a small stream, about three-feet wide at the
bottom of the bowl. About this time it began to rain; the
rain hitting the burned area of his arm caused intense pain.
He laid down next to the stream and covered his body with
large green leaves that looked like banana leaves. After a
little while, he heard someone coming up the streambed. He
took a breath and thought about how he could give up
without being shot. While these thoughts were going through
his mind, a soldier stepped over a limb and put his foot on
Zeitler's chest. "That's when I took him down into the
water and drowned him." He took the soldier's rifle and lay
back down. After this, there was silence for a long time.
As he lay there, he was afraid that Unger would call off the
search for him.

Zeitler had been shot down about 8 a.m. About 4 p.m.,
the sky opened up, which was unusual during the monsoon
season. Things began to happen quickly. He could hear
people moving around. T-28s came in first and hit the area,
then jet aircraft. He heard a Caribou, then a helicopter
(Sam Jordan) that made a pass over the area but did not see
him. Zeitler stuffed the remains of his tee-shirt into the wound in his foot until his blood turned the shirt red. He began waving this and promptly was seen. He heard a second helicopter (Connor) about the same time he became certain that there was someone a short distance away, up the hill. He thought the helicopter might be heading into a trap. At this point, a flight of F-105s hit the ridge with 40mm gatling guns. This caused the enemy soldier above him to roll down the hill, landing at Zeitler’s feet. Zeitler beat him to death with the rifle. Connor then came in and picked him up. He remembers going up on the hoist past the door and becoming alarmed. Stan Wilson then hauled him in. He became tangled in the ammunition belts of a .30 caliber machine gun that Connor was carrying. He was taken to Sam Thong, then flown to Udorn in a Pioneer. While he was on the ramp, Billy Pearson arrived with a F-100 pilot who had bailed out near Nong Khai. Ben Moore and Charlie Weitz were there. Everyone was crying.

At first, Zeitler did not tell anyone that he had killed two men on the ground. He was tortured by the idea that he might have killed the two Thai pilots. However, the fact that one of the men had a rifle provided some comfort. He started flying again in October 1964. When he RONed at Long Tieng, he kept thinking about the Thais and could not sleep. In the morning, he would start throwing up. He was OK once he got into the aircraft. He finally told Abadie about what had happened on the ground and asked to be transferred to the fixed wing program. Zeitler later heard that Terry Burke had led a party that retrieved Pascual’s body and had found two dead NVA soldiers.

Zeitler was never debriefed on this incident. While visiting Taipei, George Doole asked questions about weapons carried by helicopters. Connor had an automatic weapon; Zeitler had a Thompson submachine gun and BAR onboard. He told Doole that he would not have been able to use a weapon on the ground due to the presence of the enemy. This statement later was misinterpreted.

Elder to WML, 15 Sep 91, after reading the above account: "Basically, the story Billy Z. told was true. I was attempting to pick the pilot up when Billy called and asked what I was up to. A Caribou was making passes and had received a couple of hits. While Billy was enroute to help I went to Site 95 and loaded a LMG in the door, and took out the two windows on the left side where we put two BAR’s. We went back and Billy made a couple of passes but couldn’t hover either. I saw a clearing nearby and suggested Billy hover there and the pilot could go to him. As he was on approach we started receiving ground fire from the north, and all the guns I had onboard started returning the fire."
I made a turn and the next thing I saw was H-19 in a ball of flame. My thought was that both guys were killed. I returned to Site 95 and told the area commander to organize some troops to go to H-19. The smoke could be seen from the site. The site was a thousand feet above the area of H-19. I returned to the downed helicopter and was looking for any sign of the crew. It was only a short time before a thunderstorm moved in from the south and drove me out of the area. I returned with Connor and Jordon to ferry troops from Site 21 to 95 when Billy was sighted and picked up. I never did see any T-28's. I saw about 16 105's (4 flights) putting in all kinds of ordinance.

From the Klusmann incident to H-19 was 70 days that the only thing about SAR's was that we would do it. No fighter cover, T-28's or a second helicopte and no money too. The total support was verbage. Is there any doubt in your mind that if there was some kind of support available I would have asked for it instead of loading up with guns to cover Billy??

Knight: Knight debriefed Zeitler in the Korat hospital. Zeitler said that he had lain under leaves while enemy soldiers probed the crash site. They did not discover him. Knight still (1991) finds Zeiter's account of the incident hard to believe: "I don't believe his. I was a close friend of Zeitler & he said nothing of it at debrief or other times."

Unger to State: Flash message - He has just authorized two Air America pilots in T-28s to use napalm in rescue effort of T-28 crew member downed early this morning and survivors of an AAM helicopter shot down during a rescue attempt. Incident at US 5123. Napalm is needed against portion of ridge with heavy ground cover from which fire is being received. He regrets that the need for an immediate decision prevented him from obtaining prior authorization. If an American T-28 pilot is shot down and captured, he recommends that we say that he was a member of the helicopter SAR crew. [DDRS 1989/822] [Unger explains on the 19th: "Situation at time I authorized use American pilots in my judgment did not permit of even brief delay entailed in exchange of flash messages."

Rusk to Unger, August 18, 8:12 P.M.: EYES ONLY FOR THE AMBASSADOR FROM THE SECRETARY. Regarding your 314, I fully understand your desire to maximize chances of successful rescue. But use of American pilots in T-28's or other combat role in Laos involves considerations on which highest level responsibility in Washington must be engaged. Turnaround of flash messages can be accomplished quickly and you should proceed on the basis that existing instructions about use of American pilots remain in effect. The very
nature of unexpected emergencies makes it difficult to develop further refinement of criteria regarding American pilots but if you wish to make any suggestions I would be glad to receive them. On a very personal basis I will tell you that your request in this particular rescue effort would almost certainly have been approved but you should be very clear that this does not mean that your instructions have been changed.

State Department Report, November 7, 1964 [Pentagon Papers]: "Hanoi claims to have shot down a T-28 over DVR territory on August 18 and to have captured the Thai pilot flying the plane. Although the information the North Vietnamese have used in connection with this case seems to be accurate, it is not clear the pilot is alive and can be presented to the ICC. The possibility cannot be excluded, however, nor that other Thai pilots might be captured by the PL."

August 19, 1964
State to Unger: "Yesterday's loss of two T-28's and AA helicopter together with serious political and military risks involved in rescue operations, raises anew question of utility and risk factors involved in present pattern of T-28 strikes in PDJ and adjoining areas. On the other hand no question but that T-28's proving a decisive factor in Operation Triangle success to date, in at least momentarily discouraging and weakening PL/VM in area and in raising morale and determination of RLG forces." Continuation of T-28 operations "supplies Souvanna with strong lever in forthcoming tripartite negotiations." State says that it would welcome Unger's suggestions on how T-28s could be used in the weeks ahead to maintain the above advantages and at the same time minimize calls upon US planes and personnel. [DDRS 1989/823]

August 20, 1964
Unger to State: Recent events have pointed up inadequacy of current guidelines for SAR. "Specifically believe I require advance authorization to use Air America pilots in T-28 SAR operations if they are to have reasonable chance of success." SAR is one of the most critical factors in maintaining the morale of the hard pressed Air America and Bird pilots. He predicts a sharp reduction in effectiveness of all air operations if the pilots are not persuaded that all reasonable measures will be taken to rescue them if shot down. Time factor and proper coordination of rescue aircraft are critical factors in the rapid rescue of pilots. "Chances of rescue decline sharply after first hour and steadily thereafter." Unger asks for discretionary authority to use Air America T-28s for SAR "when I consider this indispensable to success of
operation." When the situation permits, he will of course seek specific authorizations from Washington.

In the recent SAR operation, Air America pilots were persuaded that napalm was needed to suppress hostile fire from an area that was thickly covered with brush. Unger authorized it use. As it happened, jet aircraft that later arrived on the scene made its use unnecessary. T-28 pilots "exercised excellent discretion and judgement." Unger also wanted discretionary authority to allow the use of napalm in SARs. [DDRS 1989/3404]

[Anderson, "USAF SAR in SEA," states that Unger withdrew authority to use AAM pilots in T-28s after a "sensitive situation" developed in the rescue of the Thai pilots. Henceforth, fighter support would be provided by Thai-based Water Pump/RLAF aircraft and USN A-1s. Later, USAF F-100s and F-105s were used. p. 35]

Unger to State (Aug. 20): Unger saw Souvanna yesterday and explained why he was holding up the transfer of Air America to SWS. This was "because of necessity avoiding any impairment efficiency airlift operation during Operation Triangle and other recent military activities." Unger notes that he had called for "further sixty day suspension of any action on transfer" in light of continuing uncertainty of the situation in Laos. At the end of this period, the US either would carry thru promptly on the transfer or keep Air America in place. Souvanna concurred. If the coming discussions in Paris should lead to a significant return to the tripartite arrangement, then the transfer should take place. If not, the reasons for the transfer would not longer be pertinent and the idea should be dropped. [DDRS 1989/3304]

August 24, 1964
Albert Sandoval killed; Helio B-849, Pakse; crashed on take off.

Casterlin: Sandoval had had a head injury and had been grounded for about six month. Pilots heard that on take-off, the aircraft pitched up, stalled, and crashed. Talk was that Sandoval might have blacked out from the previous injury.

August 26, 1964
Rusk to Unger: "We agree with your assessment of importance SAR operations that Air America pilots can play critically important role, and SAR efforts should not discriminate between rescuing Americans, Thais and Lao. You are hereby granted as requested discretionary authority to AA pilots in T-28s for SAR operations when you consider this
indispensable rpt indispensable to success of operation and
with understanding that you will seek advance Washington
authorization wherever situation permits." [DDRS 1989/3406]

August 27, 1964
Hickler notes: Hickler learned at 0915 that Wiren had
-crashed near Ban Houei Sai in Helioc 839 at 0845. "When will
this end? This is third one . . . " Four Yao passenger.
Eckholdt brought injured to VTE in Caribou, arriving Air
123rd. "It is hot. Our people bring stretchers. Unload.
Injured are in a lot worse condition than expected. All
seem to have broken legs and arms. Some have real serious
head injuries. John Wiren has real nasty looking cut
between eyes and on to nose. He is dirty and bloody and
looks bad to me. However, he speaks and seems OK. His leg
is hurt." Eckholdt said that engine quit on takeoff at 50
feet about 50 feet off end of runway.

August 27, 1964
Feature article on Air America in Laos in New York
Times by Jack Langguth, datelined Vientiane, August 23:
When Air America helicopter shot down [Zeitler], the
incident against drew "unwelcome publicity to an enterprise
that is shadowy and vague, even by Laotian standards." Air
America on its face is commercial airline chartered to US
government to supply remote outposts; "It has long been
suspected, however, that Air America was not merely hired by
the Government but is, in fact, the United States Government
operating under a commercial cover." Formal denials "have
seldom been persuasive." US trying to avoid appearance of
violating Geneva Accords; however, Pathet Lao accuse Air
America of supplying arms to Neutralist and have suggested
that pilots are employed by the CIA. US announced earlier
this year that Air America was leaving Laos and would be
replaced by Seaboard World Airways, but transfer has been
delayed by the death in an airplane crash to the Seaboard
executive who was handling the change-over. Transfer would
not affect air operations as Air America pilots would be
asked to stay on. Air America's annual budget of $10
million is the largest single amount of US funds spent in
Laos and represents one-sixth of total Laos aid money. The
average Air America pilots is in his late 30's or early
40's, is married, and has a family in living in Bangkok.
[sic: nearly all the families were in Udorn by this time.] One
Air America executive says that pay is good but there are
other factors. "Our guys are usually given to
understatement, and they'd never say so, but they can feel
out here that they're making some contribution."

August 28, 1964
Almanac: Souvanna has been in Paris through most of
August trying to rebuild coalition government. US advisors
encourage him to make demands that draw out negotiations. US convinced that negotiated ceasefire will not lead to a true end of the threat of a Communist takeover. Souvanna breaks off conference with Souphanouvong on grounds that latter's demands are too extreme. By the end of September, negotiations in Paris break down completely.

September 1, 1964
Coble resigns as CP/RW Udorn as of September 1 and is replaced by Wayne Knight. [According to John Forburg, Coble departed after "he hit some pilot who did not see things as he did." Knight says that he hit F/M Joe Marlin.]

September 10-17, 1964

Crafts: Crafts had flown an H-34 as rescue helicopter for the first T-28 mission in May. He recognized the voices on the radio. The next day, he wrote to Fred Walker and told him about his T-28 experience (120 hours). He begged to join the program. Al Rich, a civilian without fighter experience and zero time on T-28s also wanted in. When Walker had trouble with the original group over money, he brought new people into the program, included Crafts, Rich, Jack Blalock (ex-USAf who served as flight leader), John Wiren (ex-USMC and also flight leader), and Leslie Lyons (ex-USMC). Crafts flew practice missions with Blalock. They began flying missions in November. [November 21, and 22; December 26, 28, 29.]

The T-28s were B and C models. Most had Lao marking but some were unmarked (no difference in mission). Thais had flown the aircraft until secret gun cameras had revealed that some pilots had been reporting false encounters. They preferred pods with 350 rounds of .50 caliber that caught the brass, which was then sold, to the pods of 100 that spilled the brass over the side. Lao pilots also flew the aircraft. USAF Air Commando pilots did the training for Lao/Thai/AAM pilots. When a code word was broadcast, qualified pilots flew into VTE as soon as possible and were briefed by the customer. They tried to fly all eight aircraft but sometimes flew only four. Pilots received $80 for climbing into the cockpit and $50 an hour for a mission, plus another $50 an hour if ordinance was expended (ordinance was always expended). Pilots were paid in green dollars. [See January 12, 1965 for missions Craft flew in that year.]

September 10, 1964
Almanac: President Johnson authorizes series of measures "to assist morale in SVN and show the Communists we still mean business." Most involved covert actions, including resumption of DeSota patrols and South Vietnamese
coastal raids. Souvanna asked to allow South Vietnamese to make air and ground operations into southeastern Laos, bother with air strikes by Laotian planes and US armed aerial reconnaissance.

September 11, 1964
US ambassadors to Thailand and Laos meet with Ambassador Taylor in Saigon and decide the SVN Air Force must not participate in intensified air raids suggested by Johnson memo of September 10. However, T-28s based in Laos and Yankee Team aircraft will continue clandestine operations.

Memo from DCM, VTE, to Douglas Blaufarb (copy to Hickler), says that on 9 September Col Tyrell sent word that Bird & Son aircraft used to mark targets with smoke grenades for T-28s in Ta Vieng area. Mission was highly successful. Blaufarb launched investigation. Evidence at hand implicating Capt. D. W. Randle, Mullens, and Solin in incident. Randle note: 'Request future use of your aircraft for target spotting and control. Coordinate through FIC L08.' Other notes sent by FIC to Site 98 directly link Randle, Mullens, and Solin with incident took place on September 8. Bird & Son Porter piloted by Lloyd Zimmerman. Zimmerman says that he had radio request from VTE Operations to direct T-28s to targets. "In conclusion it has been established that the plan to utilize Bird and Sons or Air America aircraft to mark enemy target locations was devised and implemented by Mr. Solin, Mr. Mullens, and Captain Randle." We have notified Tyrell of Randle's involvement; expect Hickler to take disciplinary action against Solen and Mullens.

Terry Burke, March 13, 1992:
The NVA were openly running trucks down Route 4 and Burke wanted to harrass them. He worked with Bob Zimmerman, a Bird Porter pilot. They began by dropping large rocks on the trucks. Next. Zimmerman welded pipes together as a chute that would fit in the drop door, which Burke filled with grenades with the pins pulled. When they went off too close to the plane, he experimented with masking tape. The most effective weapon was a .30 caliber machine gun mounted out the back window. Zimmerman would fly almost level with the trucks, and Burke would blast away. Results were excellent. One day, however, the NVA pulled the tarp off a truck and opened up with a .50 caliber machine gun. This stopped the strafing runs. Finally, Zimmerman traded Springfield rifles (that were being replaced by M-1s and Carbines for the Hmong) to Waterpump personnel for 100-pound frag and white phosphorous bombs, which were dropped out of the Porter. The end came with T-28s were attacking an enemy position on a ridgeline south of the PDJ. Zimmerman was
acint as a FAC. The T-28s were unable to hit the position. Zimmerman came back to 20A to refuel, and he and Burke decided to use of the larger WP bombs. They dropped in directly on the enemy position, which went up in a cloud of white smoke. Unknown to them, the air attache and other officials were observing the attack. Burke later claimed that they had dropped on a case of "smoke grenades," but this ended the Porter bombing program.

September 12, 1964

AFS Howland D. Baker floated out of cabin of C-123 after drop at Ban Na. Not wearing parachute. [Burke: This happened over 20A. He watched Baker float out of the airplane. He landed about a 100 yards from Burke, with blood oozing out of his pores.]

September 16, 1964

Hickler to Grundy: Have been kept busy since arrival on August 7. "We have worked out elaborate plans for search and rescue operations. We are in better shape than we ever have been before in the past. Excellent arrangements have been made, plans have been worked out, and we as well as others are in a position to react in rapid order if required. . . . The FIC has presented its problems. Our two Operations Specialists . . . have been doing an excellent job; however, they have got a little bit carried away by their interest in the program. It has been necessary to tighten the reins and hold them back. There was really quite a hassle here the other day regarding their activities and everyone was jumping up and down from all quarters. Fortunately (hopefully!), I managed to soothe everyone concerned and everybody is all happy again, at least for the time being."

September 18, 1964

State memo for McGeorge Bundy, "Laos Situation" - In view of deadlock in Paris talks, Souvanna is planning to break off discussion on September 21 and return to Laos. [DDRS 1990/1357]

October 1964

General Phoumi Nosavan in Washington to lobby for increased aid. There are indications that Washington beginning to think about larger role for Hmong, from harassment to more direct military action.

October 2, 1964

Memo from T.C. Walker to FIC: Visits to AOC facility should be discontinued except for emergencies. Information given to AOC "should be of a non-target recommendation nature."
October 6, 1964

Cable, State and Defense to Embassy, VTE: "You are authorized to urge the RLG to begin air attacks against Viet Cong infiltration routes and facilities in the Laos Panhandle by RLAF T-28 aircraft as soon as possible. Such strikes should be spread out over a period of several weeks, and targets should be limited to those deemed suitable for attack by T-28s... excluding Mu Gia pass and any target which Lao will not hit without U.S. air cover or fire support since decision this matter not yet made."

"FYI: Highest levels have not authorized YANKEE TEAM strikes at this time against Route 7 targets. Since we wish to avoid the impression that we are taking first step in escalation, we inclined defer decision on Route 6 strikes until we have strong evidence Hanoi's proportion for new attack in PDJ, some of which might come from RLAF operation over the Route. You may inform RLG, however, that U.S. will fly additional RECCE over Route 7 to keep current on use being made of the route by the PL and to identify Route 7 targets and air defenses. The subject of possible decision to conduct strikes on Route 7 being given study in Washington."

"Cross border ground operations not repeat not authorized at this time."

October 6, 1964

Hickler to Grundy: "We have a request from Earl Jones to remove the manufacturers serial number plates from the Lao registered Helios that are operating under this [069] contract. This has been recommended by them in view of the fact that there are no more Helios available and should any of the ones on the scene crash in the near future, replacements are not available. With the manufacturers serial number plate in safe keeping, however, Tainan facilities could turn out a new airplane in short order and the presence of the serial number would allow a new Helio to be put rapidly into service. I would appreciate your thoughts or instructions in this matter."

Grundy to Hickler, October 10: "I have your note on Helio data plates. I shall have to take up with Excom who haven't looked too smilingly on our constructing the whole machine at Tainan altho we can do and we think its as good a way to employ ourselves as any - Excom thinks it costs too much and is too 'far out.' Will advise further."

October 9, 1964

Hickler to Grundy: "Latest word here says that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma no longer particularly cares whether Air America stays or goes or whether SWS comes or goes. Apparently this in not a highly political issue any longer. I assume you have been informed of this fact.
The situation at the moment appears to be that it is in the hands of the Ambassador who will decide whether Air America is to stay or SWS to come in. Mr. Blaufarb’s office feels that Air America should remain as is and there is no point to have SWS come in.

It is entirely possible that the Ambassador in order to save face will insist on SWS take over either in actuality or in name only. We are supplying Mr. Blaufarb with as many reasons as we can possibly think of on the inadvisability of making any change which we hope he will present to the Ambassador.

October 14, 1964

Almanac: US authorized Yankee Team aircraft to fly cover missions for Laotian Air Force T-28s that are bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail. US jets are to protect T-28s against attacks for NVA MiGs.

October 25, 1964

Casterlin to parents: "This rescue thing is the one thing I don’t like about this job. The areas they send you in are just too hot. Now they say we will be provided with air cover but that isn’t always a sure thing."

October 28, 1964

Almanac: T-28s, pilots by Thais, bomb and strafe North Vietnamese villages in Mugia Pass area.

November 1964

William Sullivan replaces Unger. He will remain until April 1969.

Stevenson: "The secret war in Laos was William Sullivan’s war." He ran an efficient, closely controlled country team. Asst. Secy of State William Bundy: "There wasn’t a bag of rice dropped in Laos that he didn’t know about." Sullivan tried to impose two conditions on operations in Laos: (1) actions should be carried out in relative secrecy to avoid embarrassing Souvanna or the Russians, and (2) there would be no regular US ground combat troops. He was generally successful (the extent of the war was not revealed until 1969-70). There were really four wars, administratively distinct and only partially coordinated: FAR generally limited to fighting around major towns; Meo; air war in northern Laos; air war in southern Laos. Ground war seasonal, with Pathet Lao making greatest gains in dry season (November-April) and anti-Communists forces active during rainy season. Each year, the country team would estimate the level of forces of the dry season offensive and allocate resources. These estimates were fairly accurate until 1968. Bulk of fighting done by Vang Pao’s forces. His army grew from 5,000 in 1961 to 40,000
(with 15,000 full time fighters) in 1969. "CIA personnel played the key operational role in Laos and were subject only to control by the Ambassador." They advised the Clandestine Army, helped decide targeting for air war, and controlled intelligence from the enemy zone. Over time, CIA power grew and influence of military attaches declined.

Sullivan, who prevailed over CIA in most disputes, accepted CIA involvement as an alternative to US ground troops.

November 3, 1964

AmEmbassy VTE to Sec State [DDRS 90/3322]: Called on Souvanna and found him "in subdued mood suffering from cold." Says he sees no signs of give on part of Pathet Lao "nor any prospect of useful negotiations." "I told Souvanna we had come to conclusions it best continue [ ] operation and put aside any thought of switch to SWS. I noted this would probably require SWS terminate contract concluded with RLG last March. Souvanna concurred in this judgement and said we should do whatever we thought best and avoid anything which would enganger interest of either company."

November 5, 1964

Solin, PIC, to Mgr ATOG: Only two reported incidents of hostile fire on America and Bird aircraft since early August. This compared to 50 incidents in the preceding seven months.

November 7, 1964

State Department report on actions taken after Tonkin [Pentagon Papers]: Little accomplished on Oplan 34-A following Tonkin Gulf incident in August; also September and October. Report notes that there are now 27 T-28s Laos, of which 22 are in operation. Unger wants inventory built up to 40 (pilot capability). T-28s involved in general harassing activities against PL in Xiang Khouang and Sam Neua provinces, plus interdiction of Route 7; tactical support for Operation Anniversary Victory No. 2 (FAR/Meo clearing operation up Route 4 and north of Tha Thom); tactical support for Operation Victorious Arrow (FAR clearing operation in southern Laos); Ho Chi Minh Trail interdiction. US participation in SAR operations for downed T-28s is authorized.

Earlier in year, eight-man recon teams were parachuted into Laos as part of Operation Leaping Lena. All teams were located by enemy and only four survivors returned to RVN. No effective cross border ops can be implemented prior to January 1965 at earliest.

"Consideration being given to improving Hardnose (including greater Thai involvement) and getting Hardnose to operate more effectively in the corridor infiltration areas.

No change in status of Kha."
November 12, 1964
Air America's first Porter arrives in BKK.

Byrne: On the evening of October 20, after coming back from a day upcountry with the Helio, French Walker informed Byrne that he was to leave the next day for Switzerland. He spent a week in the Porter facility outside Zurich, going to ground school and shooting a couple of landings. He left Zurich on November 4 in a French-engined turbine Porter, N185X. There were three fifty-gallon jet fuel tanks installed in the cabin. Byrne was a heavy smoker and continued to light up during the long flight, but he was careful not to drop the cigarette. His route (with overnight stops) went from Zurich to Naples, Athens, Beirut, Damascus, Bahrain, Kanachi, New Delhi, Calcutta, and Bangkok. He arrived on his birthday.

The Porter was in some ways "a glass airplane" and had to be landed carefully. But it was easy to control, had good visibility, could land short, and could carry twice the load of the Helio. It had drop doors, operated by a handle in the cockpit. The engine operated at 98 percent power most of the time. The airplane responded well to changes of the pitch angle of the prop. Unlike a jet, it carried RPM so there was no lag in response. Byrne did not have any problem with the engine, although Air America later went over the the American-manufactured Garrett.

The airplane flew mostly in Thailand for six months on a USAID contract. In April 1965, Byrne checked out Hazen, Staricha, Strouse, LaTurner, Crafts, Severson, Zilm, Richardson, Zimmerman, and Farthing. He checked out Burl King in May and Burt Foote in June.

Edward Staricha, n.d., AAM Archives: N-185-X was the first Porter to arrive. The second Porter, N-9444, did not arrive until September 1965. It was assigned to the Laos operation. Staricha claims credit for proving "the outstanding performance of this type of aircraft." He performed "all training and checkouts of all other pilots for Air America, in Laos." He later became chief pilot of Porter program.

[Background on Porter from Lee Krueger: The first Porter showed up in VTE in late 1962 with Bird & Son. It had a number of advantages: Larger payload than Helio, drop doors, increased passenger capacity, and excellent STOL performance with its high horsepower piston engine and large area high lift wing. However, the aircraft had a light weight/thin skin airframe that was easily damaged ("The Reynolds Wrap Special"). It also had a severe aerodynamic problem: in a flap down, STOL configuration, the tail would stall out before the wing. This problem resulted in the Bird Porter flopping into a machine gun emplacement at the]
end of the VTE runway, hitting the ground in a 45 degree, nose-up angle. Fire devoured the aircraft in minutes; the pilot suffered severe burns. Krueger left AAM and went with Bird in February 1963. He was sent to Switzerland, where he worked with Pilatus Flugzeug Werks on modifications to a new turbine-powered Porter that Bird was buying. He suggested installation of horizontal stabilizer spill plates and other modifications. Dave Fowler and Krueger ferried the aircraft to Laos, where it was plagued with mechanical and structural problems. Krueger soon quit.

In the fall of 1964, Fairchild began to manufacture Porters under license. They hired Krueger as a consultant. He remembers making a presentation to Doole, who was impressed. Air America eventually bought the Fairchild-built Porter with the Garrett engine. (CAS used the Pratt & Whitney engine.) He recalls that Aderholt, who was a personal friend of Bollinger, was the leading Helio advocate. However, the Porter was far superior.

Hazen: Hazen flew Porters briefly. His first flight was in N185X on November 5. The French engine had a fine mesh filter which would clog and cause the engine to fail. This problem was solved when Air America went to the Garrett engine (after Hazen left). The Porter could carry twice the load of the Helio but it lacked the Helio’s tubular construction and could be dangerous in a crash.

November 16, 1964
Estes makes forced landing in jungle. He injures his eye running away from PL.

November 18, 1964
F-100 Yankee Team aircraft shot down over Laos.

Tilford: This marked "the first large-scale search and rescue effort of the Indochina war." Ball 03, one to two F-100s escorting Yankee Team recon aircraft, shot down while trading fire with enemy air/aircraft gun position. Ball 03's wingman called DROPKICK to Air America Operations Center in Vientiane at 11.27 a.m. (DROPKICK used instead of MAYDAY to confuse any listening enemy troops.) 03 went down just south of Ban Senphan in central Laos near border with North Vietnam. Air America C-123 diverted to area to coordinate rescue effort until USAF HU-16 arrived (Tacky 44). Tacky called in Navy A-1Es to join and search and suppress fire if encountered; two ARS HH-43s at NKP alerted (Pansy 88 and 89). Duel between A-1Es and enemy antiaircraft positions. A-1E pilot spotted what appeared to be burning aircraft and two HH-43s took off. Chopper pilots could not locate aircraft and returned to NKP (first Air Rescue Service sorties into Laos). Tacky 44 worked with 13 F-105s, 8
F-100s, 6 Navy A-1Es, 2 HH-43s, and 2 AAM H-34s during search for downed pilot.

Search continued the next morning. Tacky 45 sighted parachute and wreckage on rocky outcropping only 50 yards from nearest antiaircraft position. While F-105s attacked gun position, Tacky 45 asked for HH-43s and escorts from NKP. However, TKP task force grounded by weather for four hours. Finally, 2 AAM H-34s and 4 AAM-piloted T-28s reached scene from Savannakhet. Copilot of one of AAM helicopters lowered on cable; he found that pilot had been killed in crash.

Elder: I was in one H-34 with Kanach and Rick DeCusto; Bobby Nunez and Ed Reid were in the other. We left Nakom Phanom with two T-28's as escort in a roundabout way to the site of the downed pilot. The pilot had bailed out and was on a ledge of a large kharst about 200 feet from the top. I didn't see any sign of the crashed F-100. The kharst was east of a main road that came through Mugia Pass and then turned south, so we were about ten miles SW of Mugia pass. The chute was deployed and the pilot was laying on a ledge but did not move. Ed Reid went down on the hoist while Bobby hovered about 50 feet about the pilot with his rotor blades 10 to 15 feet from the rock cliff that towered above him another 200 feet or so. The pilot they recovered was dead as he had hit the ledge before his chute blossomed. Bobby had to hover for about 20 minutes during the recovery. After landing back in Thailand, Bobby was completely soaked with sweat. I believe it was one of the most difficult feats of flying skill I ever witnessed, due not only to the cliff but the duration. Incidentally, Bobby also picked up Tony Poe off the trail when he was wounded near LS-58."

[Nunez hired 28 June 1964]

[Knight to WML, 25 Sept 91: "Very gutsy effort by Reid."]

Edward Reid, Jr., to WML, 26 February 1991:

"Dick Elder and I were in the Air America club. Kanach and Nunez were working up-country in Laos. I believe it was C.J. Abadie came in and asked Dick Elder and myself to go to Nakorn Phanom for a SAR attempt. We flew to NKP in the back seat of T28s pilots by Air America pilots. Kanach and Nunez were there waiting in H34s. I climbed into the left seat with Bobby Nunez while Dick Elder got in with Kanach. I don't remember the name of our flight mechanic but Nunez would as he had been working with him for a few days.

Nunez took off from NKP and we proceeded northeast across the karst north of Thakhek. We approached the search area from the west by may of Mahaxie. We were in contact
A Yankee Team escort F-100 was shot down on November 18, 1964, at 17.33N/104.45E. Ball 03 was struck on the third pass. Fire was observed. The aircraft was out of control. No parachute was seen. (It was escorting a RF-101.) The pilot was recovered by an Air America helicopter on November 19. The pilot - Captain William R. Martin - died shortly after the rescue. (He was killed in the crash.)
with the SA16 (Tacky). He directed us to the karst area just east of the road coming from Mugia Pass. I spotted the parachute draped over the karst about 50 meters from and southeast of the Ball 03 wreckage. The pilot was about 6 feet down in a crack in the karst. It appeared to me that he ejected just prior to the F100 impact. The parachute deployed but did not open and slow him down. He must have hit the karst at considerable speed, and obviously killed instantly.

Nunez landed to a hover as close to the karst as possible (about 50-75 feet), while the other H34 and T28s circled the scene. I remember one of the T28 pilots was Marius Burke. He took a roll of 35mm film of the operation and later gave me copies. I climbed down from the cockpit, got into the horsecollar and went down on the hoist. The flight mech operated the hoist as Nunez had to keep his eyes on the karst which were near his blades. I had on short pants and shower shoes so it was very difficult to stand on the karst. The flight mech had a hard time keeping me light on my toes and allowing me to bend over to grasp the parachute. He had to let me down to grab the parachute apex and pull me back upright as I kept my weight on the horse collar. This accounts for the length of time the operation took. When I first got near the pilot, I knew he had not survived as I smelled the odor of decomposing. I hooked the parachute apex to the hoist and the flight mechanic hoisted both of us up to the helicopter. I climbed into the door but the pilot was hanging well below the helicopter in the parachute. I climbed up to the cockpit and Nunez hovered over near the road to an abandoned rice paddy. I could see across the road hidden under the trees, large stacks of wooden boxes which I guessed was supplies.

Nunez and the flight mechanic got out and rolled the pilot into the parachute and loaded him into the helicopter. They got back in and we proceeded to NKP."

New York Times, November 20, 1964, reported that the pilot of the F-100 was Captain William R. Martin of Alexandria, LA. Hanoi claimed that he had been shot down over North Vietnam.

Col. Jack H. McCreery, Deputy Commander, 2nd Air Division, to Hickler, November 20, 1964: Quotes message from General Moore, commander, 2nd Air Division: PASS TO APPROPRIATE AIR AMERICA PERSONNEL. I WISH TO EXPRESS MY DEEP APPRECIATION TO ALL CONCERNED FOR THE SPLENDID RESCUE OPERATIONS CONDUCTED IN CONNECTION WITH THE LOSS OF THE F-100 YESTERDAY. I WAS PARTICULARLY IMPRESSED WITH THE UNHESITATING RESPONSE AND THE AGGRESSIVENESS WITH WHICH EVERYONE PRESSED ON WITH THE MISSION. SCH COORDINATED
ACTION BETWEEN MILITARY AND CIVILIAN UNITS IS CAUSE FOR DEEP GRATIFICATION. McCreery adds "my appreciation and feeling of respect for your aircrews, their professionalism, utter disregard for personal safety and devotion to duty."

November 21, 1964
RF-101 Yankee Team aircraft shot down over Laos. LeMay proposed and JCS approved recommendation to conduct retaliatory flak suppression strikes along two infiltration routes. Administration took no action pending "searching reappraisal" of US policy. [see December 2]

Tilford: Aircraft lost 40 miles east of Thakhek. Pilot ejected and landed in tropical rain forest. Air America helicopter that happened to be in area recovered pilot within an hour. "Within thirty-six hours the Air Force was forced to rely on Air America twice to perform aircrew recovery missions. At the end of 1964 it was evident that the Air Rescue Service was not able to handle the rescue mission in Laos."

New York Times, November 22, 1964, reported that pilot Captain Burton L. Waltz suffered compound fractures. A Pentagon spokesman said that the plane escorting Waltz "delivered suppressive fire on the ground installation which had downed the reconnaissance aircraft."

November 25, 1964
Four WATERPUMP T-28 pilots (two planes) lost on flight from Udorn to Saigon.

December 2, 1964
Administration approves Barrel Roll.

USAF Plans and Policies: "On December 2, after Ambassador Taylor had conferred with NSC and other top U.S. officials, the administration approved very limited and highly controlled measures for exerting more pressure on North Vietnam. They included U.S. strikes on infiltration routes and facilities in the Laotian corridor, armed reconnaissance missions every three days with flights of four aircraft each, but no overflights of North Vietnam. Nicknamed Barrel Roll, the missions had a primarily psychological purpose: to "signal" Hanoi of the danger of deeper U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. The JCS quickly sent implementing instructions to Admiral Sharp.

After the Laotian government approved the initial targets and routes, Barrel Roll missions began on 14 December. USAF F-100s from Da Nang and F-105s from Thailand flew the first mission. Navy F-4Es and A-1Hs began on the
17th. Like Yankee Team, Barrel Roll missions were tightly controlled by Washington.

Thus 1964 witnessed the initial employment of limited U.S., Lao, and Thai airpower in Laos. Events in Laos figured increasingly in U.S. planning to thwart a Communist takeover in that country and in defending South Vietnam. By the end of the year Yankee Team aircraft of the Air Force and Navy had flown 1,257 photo, escort, and weather sorties. One hundred and fifteen aircraft received ground hits on 56 missions and each service lost two aircraft."

December 3, 1964
Mullen, FIC, to Mgr ATOG: AAM called upon to provide SAR assistance in four separate incidents in November.

December 10, 1964
After obtaining approval of Lao government, McNamara authorizes 2 missions (4 aircraft) weekly against enemy LOC in Laos. Operation called Barrel Roll.

{see below for Jan. 13, 1965}

Futrell: Barrel Roll missions began on December 14, 1964, tightly controlled from Washington (designed to intimidate the North Vietnamese). The 6th mission took place on January 13, 1965, directed against the Ban Ken Bridge. Aerial photos showed heavy defenses: 3437mm/57mm anti-aircraft guns. Eight F-105s with CBU-2As flew over the gun positions to two flights of four (abreast) and dropped their CBUs. This silenced some but not all of the guns. The strike force was composed of 16 F-105s. The first eight attacked, each carrying 8 750-pound bombs, and cut the bridge. The second eight, each with 6 bombs and 2 AGM-12B Bullpup missiles then attacked. One F-105 (Vollmer) and one F-100 were shot down during the attack.

Three days after the attack, the enemy converted the top of a dam upriver into a traffic route and resumed activity.

December 14, 1964:
First Barrel Roll mission flown. 4 F-105s launched from Danang, escorted by 4 F-100s. They attack the Nape Highway Bridge (near Ban Nape) on Route 8 and a strong point on Route 12. No enemy reaction. [DDRS 1991/3054]

December 16, 1964
Casterlin to parents: New pilots have arrived, including Charlie Jones from HMR 261.

December 19, 1964
Chester L. Cooper to Bundy: Cooper recapitulates substance of today's meeting on Laos: A two-week program for Barrel Roll was submitted. The program "continues in fairly low key and signals ('by design') no intensification of U.S. actions in Laos." It was agreed to continue "stoney-walling tactics" re information on flights. There appears to be a lack of interest in the U.S. and abroad on U.S. planes over Laos. However, "we should prepare for leaks to the likes of Alsop and Baldwin."

December 22, 1964

Air Attache, VTE: RT-28 shot down near Xieng Kuoung Ville. Pilot bailed out. Air America helicopter landed in area with search party. Also, an air search is underway. [DDRS 1967/3197]

December 31, 1964

Almanac: Although none of the combatants have formally declared war, it is undeniable that a fullscale war is now being waged in Vietnam and the adjacent territories of Laos and Cambodia." US has 23,000 military personnel in South Vietnam, still labelled "military advisers." Increasing numbers of NVA troops. "By December 1964, a continuous stream of North Vietnamese-trained soldiers is moving into South Vietnam." US admits losing 38 fixed-wing and 24 helicopters during year; 140 combat dead (vs. 76 in 1963).

(3,000 USAF personnel and 75 aircraft in Thailand by end of year. 12 USAF and 8 USN airstrikes in northern Laos during 1964.

Futrell: USAF presence still small at beginning of 1965: one squadron of F-105s at Udorn and one at Takhli, used against infiltration routes in Laotian panhandle. Twenty T-28s at Udorn for strikes in north. Also, eight Air Rescue helicopters at Udorn.

Anderson, "USAF SAR in SEA," p. 35: USAF SAR increased during 1964-65 (USAF moved 2 HH-43Bs to NKP in June 1964) but Air America was "the backbone of the humanitarian operation during the first year." Between June 1964 and June 1965, Air America made 21 successful pickups of American pilots, while the USAF made 5 (4 in March 1965 and 1 in April). Three pilots were reported captured, 3 believed dead, and 3 fate unknown.