[Stevenson: "The secret war in Laos was William Sullivan's war." Ambassador from December 1964 to March 1969. 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: (1) actions had to be carried out in relative secrecy to avoid embarrassing Souvanna or the Russians, and (2) no regular US ground combat troops involved. There policy was generally successful. Extent of war not revealed until 1969-70. Really four wars, administratively distinct and only partially coordinated:

FAR general limited to major towns; Meo; air war in northern Laos; air war in southern panhandle along Ho Chi Minh Trail. Each year country team would estimate level of forces for Communist dry season offensive, then allocate resources. The estimates were fairly accurate until 1968. FAR troops (48,000 in 1964; 60,000 in 1970) divided among five military regions. Bulk of fighting done by Meo (5,000 troops in 1961 to 40,000 in 1969, with 15,000 full time fighters in 1969).

By late 1960s, Long Tieng second largest city in Laos with popular of 40,000. "CIA personnel played the key operational role in Laos and were subject only to control by the Ambassador." They advised the clandestine army; help decide targeting for air war; controlled intelligence from enemy zones. "Over time, CIA power grew with its operational responsibilities." The influence of the military attaches declined. Sullivan prevailed over the CIA in most disputes; he accepted CIA involvement as an alternative to US ground forces. Sullivan also controlled air operations. There were 20 stikes in northern Laos in 1964; 4,568 in 1965; 7,316 in 1966. Propeller planes did most of the work until 1966. Major build up in Thailand in 1966; American FACs introduced in October 1966. "Nothing much changed in Laotian politics after the events surrounding the April 1964 coup." Phoumi fled to Thailand in January 1965. US supported Souvanna as "the best compromise." Kong Le left for Thailand in October 1966. "By the end of 1968, Americans were in charge of much that went on in Laos. They had supplanted the military and civil authorities in many functions and were responsive to their own government's needs and wishes. But the war war reaching a stage where it no longer could be kept secret."]

Pilots hired (all):
1962 - 86
1963 - 13
1964 - 79
1965 - 303 (2/3rds between June and November)
1966 - 192
[No US/AAM wounded by hostile fire in 1965]

[Udorn report: Aircraft maintenance workload increased rapidly throughout 1965. $900,000 spent for improvements, including paving old laterite runway, new hangars, shops, etc. Development of more extensive shops, sophisticated precision inspection equipment, light manufacturing capability. 28,130 total flying hours; 142 average/aircraft/monthly hours. Three UH-34s lost: (H-20 and H-26 in March; H-23 in September.]

| January | 1,705 |
| February | 1,651 |
| March | 2,029 |
| April | 1,954 |
| May | 2,500 |
| June | 2,509 |
| July | 3,279 |
| August | 2,824 |
| September | 2,508 |
| October | 2,314 |
| November | 2,274 |
| December | 2,583 |

[Rich Crafts flew 41 T-28 missions during the year: 4 in January, 3 in February, 8 in March, 9 in April, 5 in May, 3 in June, 2 in July, and 7 in December. In all, he flew 53 T-28 missions between November 1964 and April 1966. Most of the missions involved cover for rescue missions, many with USAF Jolly Greens. A couple of planes were damaged and landed at Lima sites but all pilots were recovered.]

[Anderson, "USAF SAR in SEA," p. 36: Increased operations in Lao and airstrikes against North Vietnam in spring 1965 placed new demands on SAR forces. Although Air America not specifically authorized for rescue operations in North Vietnam, its pilots crossed the border on several occasions. Air America, however, could not make a fulltime commitment to SAR; also, there were political risks involved. This led to decision to place USAF helicopters in forward staging areas. "The State Department in an effort to keep official and visible American activity in Laos at a minimum, suggested that Air America continue to furnish the major SAR effort in Laos." In the end, however, USAF ended up playing the major SAR role in the country.]

[Series of coups and countercoups in VTE. Fighting in northern part of country. Pathet Lao have the initiative during the dry season, which usually lasts from October to May, operating in platoon-sized elements. Government forces pull back to fortified position around the PDJ. In June, with the monsoons, the Pathet Lao retreat toward Sam Neua]
(supply problems). The government then uses its air assets to move into the vacuum, leapfrogging deep into enemy territory. The war in the north is increasingly fought by Vang Pao’s forces.]

[Davis, undated, description of LS-36: "LS-36 is located in the northeastern part of Laos. It is a major strategic supply center and the headquarters for General Vang Pao’s northernmost operations. From this site, support is rendered to nearby outposts which overlook the Plain of Jars to the south. The area consists of a small pocket of Meo troops, surrounded on three sides by the enemy. South is the PDR which is almost completely controlled by the Pathet Lao. To the east in Sam Neua province, which is the headquarters of these same Pathet Lao. And to the north is rugged mountains all the way to the border of North Vietnam, some forty miles away."

Blind runway about 2,000 feet, carved out of a flat sloping area on the west side of a 5-6 acre former rice paddy. On the north end of the strip is a small collection of ramshackle buildings called the village of Na Khang. Many of the buildings are roofed with flattened 55-gallon gasoline drums. Runway is at elevation of about 4,000 feet; surrounding area of rolling hills and secluded valleys. Rolling hills become more rugged with several jagged limestone peaks to the north and south. Headquarters of military adjoins northern part of runway near village. Several wood and tin buildings, with one large canvas tent as combination storage area and Air America crew quarters. There are about a dozen cots with mosquito netting. You throw your sleeping bag on a cot and tuck in the netting. Lots of soldiers. Officers have a separate tent for their mess and Air America crews usually invited to eat evening meal there. This is encouraged by "Tony," the head customer for the area.]

[Terrence M. Burke, March 13, 1992:
Burke was assigned to Sayaboury Province to begin the process of retaking ground from the Pathet Lao. There was few NVA in the area, as it was not a strategic threat. He put in a strip and brought in the first Thai Special Forces team for training (not PARU). He recruited Hmong and Laotun, armed and trained them. This was a prime opium growing area; he considered opium a nuisance, as periodically recruits would disappear to harvest opium.

The program was extremely successful. Burke’s troops met only limited resistance. The Pathet Lao usually abandoned villages when threatened. The only problem was the need to constantly recruit and train new men as there was a reluctance to fight any distance from the local area.

Resupply was a problem. Burke, from time to time, would ask Tony Po was airplanes to make drops. At one
(supply problems). The government then uses air assets to move into the vacuum, leapfrogging deep into enemy territory. The war in the north is increasingly fought by Vang Pao’s forces.]

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Resupply was a problem. Burke, from time to time, would ask Tony Fo was airplanes to make drops. At one
point, Tony sent Paul Severson to work for Burke. Severson brought a message from Po, on which were stapled two ears. The message read: "When are you going to start killing enemy?" As it happened, there was a Hmong feast that evening, complete with a water buffalo. Burke took the severed penis, wrapped it in plastic, and sent it back with Severson for Po with the message: "We’re fighting real men here."

At one point, Burke recruited a new group of 100 and called for the airdrop of a "standard package." This included weapons, uniforms, and sneakers. By mistake, it was dropped into a KMT-controlled village. Burke went to the village and asked for the return of the material, alluding to the possibility of an airstrike. After some negotiating, Burke got everything back except for the sneakers. (It was unusual to contact the KMT: Burke’s forces and the KMT usually stayed "on their own turf.")

January 5, 1965
Mullen, FIC, to ATOG: Flow of information from Customers remains "piece-meal as well as erratic, making day to day briefing progressively more difficult." For the past two months, Lyle Brown (Customer) has failed to call meeting of interested parties that is necessary to coordinate rice program. FIC needs to have information about all strips. Have sent letter to Earl Jones, asking him to persuade customers in the field to provide the necessary information.

January 13, 1965
Captain Albert C. Vollmer, flying F-105 out of Korat, shot down near Ban Ban during attack on highway bridge (Barrel Roll mission). Picked up by Howard Estes. [good account]

[Article in Time, Jan 22, about attack. This was first major attempt by USAF to take out bridge that Eckholdt had attacked in May. They succeeded but at a cost of two fighter-bombers shot down. The area was dotted with camouflaged antiaircraft batteries. Vollmer was picked up the same day. AAM helicopter also picked up Captain Charles F. Ferguson, who had hid out in the jungle during the night, the next day.] [Crafts flew T-28 missions on Jan. 13 and 14]

[McCloskrie interview #843: McCloskrie was air attaché in Bangkok in 1964. General Joe Moore was commanding the 2nd Air Division. A big concrete bridge in northern Laos had been attacked by T-28s without result ("This was when it was kind of chancey to be bombing in Laos.") There were no A-1s at this time. Moore asked permission from Washington (McNamara?) to use F-105s. Moore wanted a strike force of 16 F-105s but Washington only gave permission to use two aircraft. This mission failed. Moore again asked for 16;
Cable, Sullivan (Vientiane) to SecState, January 13, 1965, Country File, NSF, LBJ Library

An F-105 pilot on the Ban Ken strike has been safely recovered. "Once again Air America helicopter crews, which in this instance drew ground fire while effecting rescue, performed in manner well above and beyond call of duty."
this time, he received permission to use four. One was shot
down, and they still didn't get the bridge. In the end,
Washington finally allowed Moore to use the 16 aircraft, and
the bridge was knocked out.)

January 14, 1965
Charles O. Davis arrives Udorn.

Davis was in the Marine Corps at New River, NC, due to
be released in mid-November 1964. He received a call from
Major Swede Larson to talk about the future. Larson
mentioned "a company called Air America." Several ex-
Marines had gone with the outfit, and the pay was supposed
to be good. Davis went to Washington the following week and
was interviewed by "Red" Dawson. They spoke for about a
half an hour. Dawson said that the pay was about $1,500 a
month plus $10 for all flight hours past 70. There was an
additional $10 an hour for flights "up country." Dawson
explained that this would be for flying in Laos, where he
would be hauling people and cargo around. Everything was
pretty vague, which contributed to the attractiveness of the
job. Out of a combination of adventure and money, Davis
decided "to try Air America." Dawson called just before
Christmas, and Davis accepted the job.

Davis cleared through Taipei (3 days) and Bangkok (2
days) in early January, then took the train to Udorn. He
arrived in the evening and had dinner with Abadie. Abadie
spoke about the flying. "Ab mentioned that a very important
key to a safe operation is to know the country and to know
where all the enemy or 'bad guys' are. If you know that
well then you will do alright. He strongly stated that in
the next few days while I was marking and learning my maps,
that I should try to remember as much as possible so as when
I got a good briefing on where the hot areas (or bad guys
areas) were I'd be more apt to remember what I was being
told. He said I am expected to be checked out as captain
with a minimum time upcountry, as they are short of people.
It all sounded alright and rather exciting to me."

Davis went out to the airport the next day. He picked
up his maps, met Ben Moore and the McCaslands, and was given
a tour of the facilities. "Two old wooden buildings which
appear to have been military barracks at one time are the
main parts of the compound. One is straight, long and
narrow, and the other is long and narrow but has a dogleg
bend in the middle of it. The straight building houses the
pilots' and base manger's offices. And various other
offices such as pay records and other operations records and
clerks to man these offices are in different parts of this
building. Part of it is enclosed and part is fronted by a
screened in porch. The other building, at the dogleg bend
has a never and wider part inserted. This newer part houses
the "Rendezvous Club" which is the bar and restaurant and also has a back room used for movies and meetings when they have them. Flanking the club in one of the older wings of this building, is the club manager’s office and quarters where Ben Moore stays. Ben is the only one who lives on base. These two buildings are directed across from each other fort-like, and about forty yards apart. Directly between them is a swimming pool. Over at one end and still between the buildings is a gezebo type building which sort of closes that end to the fort-like image. This small building is used as a store which sells some food and other odds and ends such as medical supplies. However it is very limited and the stock is not too well kept up. It is supposed to be closed soon as anything for sale here can be bought in Udorn for a similar price. Further away and behind all these buildings is a huge aircraft hangar which also houses the aircraft maintenance offices.

January 16, 1965
CIA, Office of Current Intelligence, Intelligence Memorandum, "Communist Troops Movement in Laos."
Reports from roadwatch teams indicate that approx. 4 to 5,000 Communist troops have moved into southern Laos along route 23 from the Mugea Pass to North Vietnamese border, beginning in mid-December. This coincided with opening of road following rainy season. [DDRS 1976/226B]

January 18, 1965
Col. Jack H. McCrea, Deputy Commander, 2nd Air Division, to Hickler: "Again I express my appreciation for the outstanding accomplishments of your aircrews during the recent SAR in Laos. The USAF in SEA, at all levels of command, was greatly impressed with the courage and expertise which was displayed. Knowing that your organization with this superb capability stands ready to respond with such determination has also had a favorable psychological effect on our pilots."

Hickler to Grundy, Jan. 29, enclosing McCrea’s letter about SAR of Jan. 13-14: "Yes, very definitely we were completely absorbed - 100 per cent - in this rescue operation." Capt. Campbell flew C-123 on both days as control ship and did his job "in an extremely competent and professional manner." Smaller aircraft used on 13th and 14th for search were protected by "outside friends as well as our own forces." - second man successfully picked up by helicopter on 14th. "This SAR effort was one of the most successful and well organized ones to date." After the second man was picked up, one of the USAF fighters radioed Victor control: "Victor Control, Golly you Air America types are the best ever."
January 19, 1965

Rich logbook: "Zulu [Tony Po] shot through stomach defending LS-86 [Hong Nom]."

January 22, 1965

Davis to fly copilot for Jack Conners on special mission. Billy Zeitler and Ed Reed are crew for second aircraft. They will take a team out of Thakhet to a landing zone near the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and bring out a group of the same size. Before the mission, Davis feels a sense of unease/excitement:

"The same feeling is creeping into my stomach as it used to before a football game in college. No fright, but a dull, numb uneasiness that lingers deep down inside and will not go away. A restlessness which comes with knowing you are going out on the edge of your limits. And yet, also like the hours before a big game, this uneasiness and feeling is honing me to a fine edge. Forcing me to dig deep into the depth of myself to get my senses up to a higher plain of awareness. Perhaps I am uncovering the key to the reasons I'm really here. Perhaps deep down I want to see how I will react under combat situations. Maybe I need to see how I can handle being on the edge of danger and how capable I am in reaching down to that depth of inner strength and having what it takes to get the job done. And the uneasiness is having a very positive effect because I'm glad they picked me to go and I'm looking forward to the mission.

The two helicopters left Udorn at 4 P.M. and flew to NKP, about a 50 minute flight. The crews were briefed by an American in civilian clothes.

Jack Conners: Barrel-chested, about 6 feet tall - not a big talker "but a man you immediately respect. He carries himself in a manner of one whose self-confidence is certainly there and not altogether unjustified."

Billy Zeitler: "a short, chunky guy who was always laughing and joking. He acted like a man that had slept well and didn't owe too much money."

Ed Reed: "A lanky, likable Carolinian who had a sharp, dry wit. He looked like a man who could function under a strain."

A Filipino flight mechanic told Davis that Zeitler earlier had been shot down and burned badly. He had been rescued by Conners. This would be one of Zeitler's last missions before going into fixed-wing aircraft.

It was dark by the time the team of ten men boarded the aircraft with their gear. They climbed to 8,000 feet and "it was complete silence for the next hour and a quarter. I could see very little outside the cockpit as it was very dark and no moon out. Occasionally I could faintly see a few mountain peaks down below us but nothing could be seen
clearly. I am always a bit uneasy flying at night and this trip was no exception." They were the lead ship. "Jack just held his heading and never looked at a map. Never said a word until almost there and he commented that the landing area should be over the next little hill. And right out of the black, there appeared 5 smudge pots, burning to mark the spot and to give the signal that it was safe to land." Conner made a wide circling descent to landing. The team was quickly off-loaded and the outgoing people boarded. Then they lifted off and held clear while the second helicopter came in. "Within 10 minutes after sighting the landing area, we were heading back for Thailand. The mission could not have been any smoother."

January 25, 1965

Feature article in New York Times by Seymour Topping on "The 'Twilight' War in Laos."
Topping notes that the US had become deeply involved in a "twilight war" in Laos. Neither the US nor North Vietnam have formally renounced the Geneva Accords "because both sides may yet find it necessary to implement their provisions to prevent a major shooting war in Southeast Asia." This is the significance of Washington's "strangely ambivalent attitude" in dealing with the January 13 raid on the Ban Ken bridge. The State Department announced that it was helping the Laotian government defend its rights under the Geneva Accords.

In April 1963 the Pathet Lao broke the Accords by attacking Kong Le's Neutralist forces and resuming the civil war. The Accords had never stopped supplies from North Vietnam. The ICC was not permitted to survey border areas. In May 1964 the Pathet Lao pushed the Neutralists of the PDP. The US began recon flights after this. As peace talks in Paris bogged down, the government launched an offensive and reopened the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang.

The US is now pressing an air offensive "because the war in Laos is so intimately intertwined with the Vietcong guerrilla war in South Vietnam." Most of the strikes are against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The January 13 attack was an exception. US air strikes in Laos are "more psychological than military" in purpose. They can delay but not block supplies going to the Pathet Lao and Vietcong. "Implied in the air strikes is a warning to North Vietnam that it cannot escape punishment if its support of the Vietcong continues on the present scale."

Charlie Davis gets his first good look at Long Tieng: "Approaching Long Tieng from the east, the long dirt runway just leaps out into view from its sheltered valley. The valley is surrounded on three sides by abrupt rising limestone and some tree covered mountains. On the northwest side of the valley, nestled abeam the highest mountain, is
the settlement of Long Tieng. There are several long wooden, tin covered barracks which apparently are used by the Nho soldiers for living quarters. And further to the west is a small village containing some bamboo and grass native huts and some time covered wooden buildings. There are women, children, and older people there, doing their daily chores. Off in another area, closer to the aircraft ramp are two buildings used by Air America crews. The larger is a rectangular shaped, wooden building with about 20 cots spread out in the open bay style. This is where the crew members sleep. And nearby, is a more squarely built construction that is made of the same material as the barracks. This building is used as the kitchen and dining area."

PDJ is approximately 25 miles across in the north-south axis and maybe 30 the east-west. "The oval shaped flat surface is surrounded on three sides by high mountains. Some are jagged and rough shaped but most are fairly smooth and covered with trees and brush. The area between the flat inner plain and the rugged mountains is broken by small valleys and ravines sloping down from the mountain foothills and opening out to the plains. We are to keep off the plain. They had anti-aircraft guns there and could knock off a slow moving chopper like a row of ducks in a carnival shooting gallery."

January 27, 1965

George C. Denney, Jr. (Intelligence and Research) to Secretary Rusk [DDR 1988/211]: Communist troops and supply buildup in Laotion corridor since December has raised the possibility that Hanoi intends to initiate a major new offensive in Laos or introduce NVA regular units into South Vietnam. However, Denney believes that the moves are more in response to recent pressure and are designed to increase security of infiltration routes. He notes that RLAF T-28s and Yankee Team aircraft have conducted intensive air recon and interdiction programs in the area since October; road movements now take place only a night. Also, since November FAR units have advanced 10 miles along Route 9 and captured several PL strongholds. In addition, there have been 4 or 5 Nho intelligence/training team infiltrations deep into Communists territory and one mission has lead to a clash with Communist forces.

January 28, 1965

Hickler to Grundy: Loaded Lao T-28 caught fire on ramp at VTE. Two 500-pound bombs cooked off. Six AAM aircraft suffered damage from flying metal. Minor damage to buildings. Number of people outstanding. Between bomb blasts, Hazen started up Caribou that was loaded with gasoline drums and taxied out and took off and flew to Udorn
with landing pins still inserted. "This man showed real
courage and real intelligence during the emergency."

February 1965
Udorn Monthly Report: "The whole base is in the throes
of an expansion push with no let-up in sight."

February 1, 1965
McShane: McShane and Joe Potter arrive Bangkok on
February 1. While they were with WATERPUMP they had got to
know Ben Moore and expressed interest in a job with Air
America (McShane was attracted to the money and adventure).
They were contacted after they returned to the US. Although
just promoted to major, McShane (and Potter) decided to
leave the USAF for Air America.

For the first four month, they flew copilot on C-46s
out of VTE. Not happy with this, they volunteered for
Helios (also T-28s). McShane flew a lot with Lee Mullins,
who was in charge of instruction. He was checked out by Joe
Hazen (tough and critical). Within a short time, Mullins
became chief pilot and McShane took over training.
He remembers his first experiences during the rainy
season. The strips were small and slippery, and the
visibility out the curved windshield was lousy. It is
surprising that there were not more accidents.

February 10, 1965
Davis to get check ride as captain after the day’s
trip. "I have learned the north country very well. I have
landed at most of our frequently used landing sites and
runways. And I have learned that this map is a very useful
tool and I am navigating myself satisfactorily up in the
mountains."

"I am beginning to really appreciate a good flight
mechanic. They are a hard working group and they put in a
lot of time at the job. They take all the chances that the
pilots take and are responsible for the loading the
unloading of all passengers and cargo. And after the pilot
is finished for the day, the flight mechanic still has work
to do before his day is done. After every day’s flying, the
rotor head must be greased which takes about 20-30 minutes.
And about every 3 days the oil in the engine must be drained
and new oil put in. And various other daily chores are
required to be done on a regular basis. These guys are the
keys to keeping these choppers in the air."

February 11, 1965
ALMANAC: President Johnson decides to undertake
sustained bombing of North Vietnam - Rolling Thunder.
Operations begin on March 30 and continue (with suspensions)
until 31 October 1968.
February 16, 1965

New York Times article, dated Vientiane, February 15, reported that Hua Muong, government guerrilla base in Sam Neua Province, fell to strong Communist forces on February 14. Government forces, mainly Meo, has withdrawn into the hills surrounding Hua Muong. Hua Muong 30 miles southwest of town of Samneua. "Western military sources believe the motive for the capture of Hua Muong may be a Communist plan to open an alternative supply route from North Vietnam to aid the Pathet Lao forces in southern Laos." Route 7, which is 45 miles south of Hua Muong and leads from border with North Vietnam to PDJ, has been under attack. Important bridge destroyed by USAF last month [Ben Ken Bridge].

February 17, 1965

Davis completed his check ride and is now a captain. Wayne Knight gave the check. "He's about six feet tall and about two hundred pounds of wide shoulders and sturdy frame. But his real bigness is in his leadership. Wayne doesn't take himself too seriously and just does his job without making too many folks made at him. We have a lot of independent thinkers among these pilots and not a very easy group to men to lead. Some need a kick in the ass and others require a pat on the back. It takes a rare leader to recognize which is needed for a particular guy during a particular situation."

February 18, 1965

Casterlin to parents: "We are again losing in Laos." He had spent three days in the combat zone and "I was extremely nervous." He has been working in Sam Neua province at Site 58 (Hua Moung). He had spent night 20 miles north of 58 on a 5000' mountain. 58 fell the next day. He picked up the wounded commander as mortar rounds exploded on the airstrip. LS-36 full of fleeing refugees. This is a repeat of the evacuation that took place a year ago. "Our little world is coming down all around us is Laos."

February 19-21, 1965

Casterlin receives letter of commendation, dated March 30, from M/C Moore for his rescue work on February 19-21. A RF-101 recon aircraft had been hit over the Ban Ban Valley. The pilot flew north and rode the aircraft in. The wreckage was spotted from the air. Casterlin dropped in Meo troops to recover the gear and the body. Victor Control was on station (a Caribou; C-123S took over the job shortly after this). This was in no man's land, and "I was a bit apprehensive." Recovery of the team was launched from LS-85 the next day. As Victor Control circled, Casterlin went in for the pickup. Several Meos came charging down a hill and
Captain Charles D. Jones and five passengers departed Pho Lang Mou (helicopter pad Foxtrot) at 1553 for Chieng Ngim. Six minutes after take-off, the surviving passengers stated, the engine began to cut out and misfire. The aircraft crashed one miles from the point to departure, 25 miles SE of Luang Prabang. Only the guide in the left cockpit seat survived. Probable cause: Powerplant failure for reasons undetermined.
through some brush and high grass. They were carrying something slung on a pole, wrapped in a poncho. As they approached the aircraft, Casterlin could see that it was the trunk of a body. As he took off, he got a whiff of "the worst smelling thing I had ever experienced" and nearly lost control of the aircraft.

Casterlin to parents: Teams of Nco were sent to locate a pilot and had to struggle through difficult terrain. "It was the first time I had picked up one of our pilots and it was not a happy occasion."

[New York Times, Feb. 22, reported that Major Robert F. Ronca of Norristown, PA, "regarded as one of the best jet pilots" at Danang, had been shot down over Sanneux province on February 19; his plane crashed into a hill.]

March 2, 1965
ALMANAC: Rolling Thunder begins while over 100 USAF jet bombers attack ammunition depot at Xombang, 10 miles inside North Vietnam.

March 5, 1965

Casterlin: Casterlin first met Jones when he joined newly formed HMR 261 at the New River Facility, Jacksonville, North Carolina. Jones was a senior major, acting as executive officer while awaiting assignment as OIC of maintenance. Casterlin worked for him a maintenance line officer. "Charlie was a large, corpulent bear of a man who showed his age and previous dissipation. He was an extremely entertaining, affable individual who as fun to fly and party with. He was a competent, proficient UH34 helicopter pilot, a fact I could not state concerning some of his peers. He had been a ace in World War II, shooting down six Japanese planes, and he had flown helicopters during the Korean War. When he retired from the Marine Corps, he was hired by Air America. The policy of hiring retired ex-military officers "failed miserably" and later was discontinued.

During the smokey season of 1965, helicopters suffered from a rash of maintenance problems, primarily having to do with engine carburetors. AAM experienced approx. 17 forced landings due to this problem. "The engines would cough, cut out, catch again and quit." The pilots were concerned about the situation. At the time, they were flying a great deal, mechanics were in short supply, and the aircraft were in the field a major portion of the time.
"On the morning Charlie "bought the farm" I returned to Udorn after a five day RON at Long Tieng. I learned that he had been killed, but it was not until evening that the facts of the accident filtered in. He had crashed resupplying a high mountain position northwest of Moung Soi. He was in the process of a troop shuttle when he reported a rough running engine. He further stated that he was able to keep the engine running by activating the primer button, normally depressed only during the start cycle. [This introduced only a small amount of fuel into the engine.] One of Charlie's numerous 'sea stories' described his ability to keep an engine running on prime in order to return home. Apparently this technique was deeply instilled in him, and this influenced the questionable decision to continue and attempt landing at a higher elevation. The only other landing area was at the foot of the mountain mass in heavily wooded ravines. On short final the helicopter engine sputtered its last. Charlie was heard to say that he was not going to make the landing zone. The aircraft crashed violently against the side of the mountain, rolled downslope, caught fire and finally came to rest hundreds of feet below where it burned to ashes, incinerating all occupants. The remains were recovered the next day."

For unknown reasons, Jones had left his Filipino crew chief on a hilltop across the valley. "In the aftermath of the event there were doubts, rumors, bitterness and recriminations banded among many employees. Others were sickened at the attitudes that prevailed and eventually left."

Jones, who survived two wars, "died ironically in a country that was more or less a never-never land; however, he expired doing something that he loved. I attempted to convey this to Charlie's wife, Martha, but she never was able to resolve it."

"I was terribly shocked at the death, especially since this had been the first time one of us had passed during my time. It tended to refocus all our our efforts into perspective and graphically demonstrated our mortality. I was so traumatized by the loss that I vowed in the future, rather than be polarized by a similar event, I would immediately forget the concerned party. This was not easily done in all cases."

From Casterlin: Memo from AMS/UDN to "All Concerned," "Maintenance Problems: UH-34D Helicopters," March 29, 1965:

"Let's face it, we are having engine problems. The burden of responsibility rests with AMD, no alibis required. The number of aircraft now assigned versus the manpower now available to maintain these helicopters is inadequate. Much has been said verbally, messages have floated around concerning flight mechanics. Yet, we do not have them, so,
every capable service mechanic is pulled from ground maintenance to attempt to keep the aircraft flyable at outstation areas. It is a vicious cycle and maintenance wise we lose ground. . . .

At the present stage of affairs practically all pilots have lost faith in AMD and the UH-34D. This is obvious from log book entries which are carrying unnecessary remarks to repetitious items. This accomplishes no purpose. The prevailing attitudes are understandable from the past and present number of engine failures."

Memo discusses problems with carburetors, oil coolers, fuel booster pumps, oil leaks, clutch leaks, and intake valve failures.

Casterlin comments on memo: "This tells the story. Charlie Jones had already died & morale was bad. SAR's were driving us crazy (me). I met my wife during this period & she helped me keep my equilabrium. Amen."

"Forney entered the scene & the maintenance problems actually improved."

Terry Burke, 13 March 92: Burke recalls the atmosphere during the time that Air America was experiencing H-34 engine failures; there even was talk of sabotage.

March 7, 1965

Davis flew 108:47 in February; on February 24, he flew 10:40, and several days over 9 hours. "I realize why I am so tired." He has been flying as captain for two weeks "and already I'm beginning to feel like an old salt. I'm not completely comfortable with my knowledge of all the country I'm expected to know, but I'm learning more every trip and getting more confident in that aspect."

Davis has rented a small one-bedroom house on the outskirts of Udorn for $75 a month. Most pilots have 50 cc Honda motorbikes which cost about $300. Udorn is a fairly large spreadout town with about 10,000 people. "It has modern streets, sidewalks, and buildings, and traffic flows in and out of the main part of town through European style roundabouts. There is one large park on the south end of town that contains a large cinder running track, an outdoor basketball court with a concrete floor, and a soccer field. The modern stores have everything the average person could need to buy. There is one relatively modern hotel, with several others that are not quite as new and modern but are certainly adequate. And there are a cold of good American style restaurants and others which serve Thai and Chinese food." Everything is growing at a rapid rate. New nightclubs are popping up everywhere. Davis prefers the Jute Box. It has a Juke Box which plays Elvis and the Beatles and probably the only pinball machine in town.
"This place had a casual, relaxed atmosphere and no one hustles you."

Davis finds the Air America pilots an interesting and unique group. "Even though there are many different personalities and backgrounds, there is something in common that they all possess. And it's not something I can quite put my finger on. It is something that is felt, but off hand I can't put into words. It might be a combination of independence, confidence, defying the established ways of doing things, but at the same time, strong patriotism and a strong belief in which our country is trying to do there. They're certainly not the average run-of-the-mill men, but a proud group and all of this can't help but rub off on a new guy like myself."

March 13, 1965

FIC to ATOG: Refers to recent coup in VTE. Major Pathet Lao offensive unleashed in Sam Neua province, directed toward friendly stronghold of Hua Muong (LS58). Loss of site would mean loss of valuable radio facility for operations north of the PDJ. PL had attacked Hua Muong twice last year but the defenses held. This time, site was evacuated on February 13 and radio equipment fell into enemy hands.

March 1965

FIC to ATOG, Monthly Report: "March is characteristically a dangerous month for flight operations in Laos. The smokey season is at its height, with visibility minimal. Pilots operating at low levels; increased activity by hostile ground forces. "The net result is usually a spate of ground fire incidents and appreciable aircraft damage." There were 6 incidents in March versus 2 in February.

[Sometimes during month, according to Castle, helicopter shot down [H-20?] with six Americans onboard. A rescue helicopter, with Po onboard, dispatched to crash site. Meanwhile, Hmong military unit secures site and moves crew to safety, suffering one killed and five wounded. Po is wounded in the hand while trying to retrieve the radio from the downed helicopter.] [Bobby Nunez picked up Po?]

March 24, 1965

LaDue: LaDue was an employee with USAID (ex-AAM), working for Pop Buell. His travel around northern Laos depended upon the Helo. On March 24, he was with Harvey L. Gulick (who had just come off a month's grounding) in Helio #865. They had a request to pick up a Hmong school teacher at Muong Cha (LS-113) and take him to San Thong. Usually, they flew east down the Muong Cha valley, then north over Long Tieng to San Thong. This time they flew
more northerly, gaining altitude to pass of Ph Bia, tallest mountain in Laos. In the process, they found themselves in a deadend mountain valley. Gulick applied full power and tried to get the nose up, but it was too late: they hit some tall trees. Gulick and LaDue were flung into the instrument panel, while the school teacher went out the door. Part of the engine had been pushed through the fire wall and laying on LaDue's lower right leg. Fuel was pouring out of the engine cells. Gulick, despite a serious arm injury, found a branch which he used as a lever to pry the engine off LaDue, enabling him to crawl away. They spent the night on the mountain and were picked up the next day. Gulick ended up losing his arm; LaDue needed a year to recover from the leg injury; the teacher died a few months after the accident of internal injuries.

March 25, 1965

Casterlin to parents: "Our engines have been quitting with a frequency that has appalled everyone." There has been on distinct pattern. "It is enough to worry about the enemy and the weather but to not trust the machinery is too much." Pilots are dissatisfied and some have quit. Casterlin took hard the recent loss of his friend Charlie Jones.

March/April 1965

47 Hmong soldiers killed in action during these two months.

April 1965

Udorn Monthly Report: "Although some new employees are dribbling in, we never seem to catch up with the increasing workload, and a continuous crash program appears to be normal."

April 1965

Operation Steel Tiger: night bombing missions against Ho Chi Minh Trail. There is followed by Prairie Fire: Special Forces dropped onto Trail.

(Major Donald Randle returned to Waterpump with the Thai program. He found that little had changed since the summer of 1964. Sullivan was "a very aggressive individual" who was interested in military operations. Some AAM pilots were ex-Waterpump: Joe Potter and Bill McShane.

April 6, 1965

McGeorge Bundy drafts and signs (for LBJ) NASM 328.

April 9, 1965
Casterlin to parents: Five new copilots have arrived. The company is trying to cut the pilots back to 85 hours but we keep getting more machines and they are being flown in a maximum effort. Maintenance believes that the engine problem is in the fuel system. Dust has been clogging the carburetors.

"We had a gift rain that dissipated the dense smoke in the area. I had never experienced flying in the smokey season for any period and it was tought and probably not over yet. One did not have a quarter mile visability. I would come down with a slight case of eyestrain from staring into the void. We put a few hours in last month in this mess. One hundred and forty to be exact. [For the year I was second highest in flight time for the entire company with over 1200 hours.] Do you know that I made more last month than I made the first year as an officer in the glorious Marine Corps. This includes the base pay and food allotment but not the housing part which we never saw.

We have five new co-pilots checking out in the area. The company is trying to cut us back to 85 hours per month but they will never do it because we keep getting more machines and are flying them in a maximum effort. The maintenance department has found out what was wrong with the machines, we hope, and it had to do with the fuel system. It seems that dust had been accumulating in the tanks for some time and it had picked this period to cause trouble. This resulted in the carburetors clogging partially causing engine failures. Usually they would give some kind of indication in the form of an adverse mixture check or coughing. We have had trouble in the past during the dry season. The heat and sun are particularly detrimental to engine performance. The maintenance people have been hot on this and have suggested several things that we can do to help prevent the trouble. With any luck at all we are over the crucial period.

I was in another pilot pick up two days ago. These fellows are very lucky as we are getting most of them out. Much effort and expense is gone to to pull them out of the enemy areas. We don't receive any more pay for this and receive no thanks at all but get some satisfaction after performing the pick ups. It seems to me that we are losing an awfully lot of jets needlessly. We are not bombing with the right material to eradicate the anti-aircraft guns.

April 10, 1965

Hickler to Grundy: Escalation of fighting in Laos. We will soon need a full time organization for SAR. Almost daily SAR demands. Routine work suffers which upsets Customers. "Our record to date has been outstanding and we can only hope our luck continues."
"Serious thought has got to be given to added compensation to our chopper crews while participating in SAR activities. These men are going through hell both in nervous tension while waiting and while actually going in for the pick up. We give them all the protection we can but we are going to have to give them more. Other people get special compensation, and they feel they should get something too. I full agree too."

[Crafts flew 8 T-28 missions in March and 9 in April]

April 13, 1965

Davis was flying out of Pakse. It was a clear day, with a light wind. In the afternoon, he was told to take a group of soldiers to Attopeu, on the other side of the Bolovens. He flew over the plateau, landed, off-loaded the soldiers, and headed back to Pakse. Climbing out, he looked to the west and saw the Mekong about 40 miles away. "I decided to go to Pakse that way, following the outside perimeter of the plateau. The distance was about the same as the way I had come, so I figured a change of pace and seeing some new country would be enjoyable. That proved to be wrong figuring."

Unknown to Davis, the enemy had a stronghold along the river. "Passing approximately 3,500 feet, the first bullet hit the chopper. I'd never heard the sound before, but I knew immediately what it was. It sounded almost like a thick ice-cicle snapping in two, and a very small but distinct shutter in the entire chopper. Following the first hit were two more in rapid order." Davis headed north and pushed the nose over to build up speed, adding maximum power. He headed for the southern lip of the plateau, about a mile away. It took about a minute but "it seemed like a long time." Over the plateau, he slowed the helicopter down while the flight mechanic walked around outside to inspect for damage. Everything looked OK, so he continued to Pakse. He counted five bullet holes when he got on the ground. The customer at Pakse apologized for not giving a proper briefing on the area but explained that he had not realized that Davis was a new pilot and unfamiliar with the area. He said that he would take to Wayne Knight to make sure that this did not happen again. "I learned today that I must use extreme caution anytime I go to an area I am unfamiliar with. I can't trust anyone else to have the initiative to brief me. I must seek out this information, checking the intelligence maps, asking the customers, and talking to my fellow pilots."

April 18, 1965

Casterlin to parents: New pilots are arriving all the time. Casterlin flew 94 hours in the first two weeks of the month.
April 23, 1965

Cable, Sullivan to State, Subject: Laos Cross Border Operations [DDRS 1992/3347]—Sullivan discusses recent SEACOORD Meeting in Saigon re proposed cross border operation. Sullivan agreed that ARVN assets could operate in all three zones "in accordance with their capabilities and characteristics." Also, he agreed to the presence of U.S. advisers accompanying ground units infiltrated overland into two southern zones of operation provided they do not penetrate more than 20 kilometers into Laos and remain in penetration area for no more than ten days. "I do not repeat not concur in presence U.S. advisers introduced by paradrop or by helicopter, or by light plane. I further do not repeat not concur in presence U.S. advisors with any ARVN teams which may be introduced (a la Leaping Lena) in northern region around Route 9." "As for region in vicinity Route 9, I am convinced it is so sensitive and so well guarded that introduction any repeat any assets there runs high risk capture. . . . To send Americans would, in my view, be suicide and would also be politically counterproductive."

Sullivan concludes that "the rather wistful expansion" proposed by MACV "strikes me as an old White Star ghost pulling my leg. It is, in my view, totally unrealistic to think in these terms under today's circumstances. In fact, I have some doubts it has ever been or would ever be realistic. The hill areas of the panhandle accessible from the Bolovens are very sparsely populated (perhaps 15,000 people at most). These are the most primitive tribes, civilizations removed from the Meo or the Rhade, or the Jurai. They do not repeat not ordinarily hunt with firearms but with crossbows, etc. The firearms which an earlier White Star generation gave them were in (and collected by) the FAR because the Lao did not repeat not consider it safe to have them loose in the hills. It is, in my view, far-fetched to think of storming the Ho Chi Minh trail with a fare bottomed bunch of these boys.

In the final analysis, my feeling is that in the Lao panhandle a little intelligence scouting, with luck a little sabotage, and maybe even a little interception can be done by assets foreseeable available to be spared from the counterinsurgency effort in SVN. This could be all accomplished in southern reaches of panhandle. But is there is any serious intent to break up the real marrow of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the area where the Viets truly protect it by organic battalions, we had better start thinking in terms of regiments and divisions, and not tribal assets."

May 8, 1965

FIC to ATOG, Monthly Report: FIC to be established at Udorn. With increased air operations in Lao, SAR mission more frequent. We need better equipment: increased UHF
capability and Direction Finding Steer equipment. The Lao Airfield Directory has been updated. The previous compilation contained "an unbelievable amount of errors."

May 14, 1965

Tilford: AAM C-123, 2 UH-34, 6 T-28 mission to Sam Neua area. Hmong team had reported captured US pilot in cave near Sam Neua city. UH-34 hit while picking up part of team. T-28s attack gun emplacements. One hit. Makes emergency landing at LS-36, runs off end of runway, and flips over. [Keith Nolan]

Mike Lynch, Dec. 6, 1992: Jim Rhyne told Nolan to land wheels up at LS-36. However, Nolan landed wheels down, ran into stumps at the end of the strip, and flipped over on his back.

Al White: This may have involved White's old USAF fired Charles Shelton. Shelton was TDY Udorn from an RF-101 squadron at Kadena and wanted to see a little of the country from the ground. White took him along for a day's work in a C-123. He recalls Shelton's apprehension during the landing at Mong Soi, a 700-foot dirt strip with three big dips in it. That same afternoon, Shelton was shot down during a mission over Sam Neua. White went out as Victor Control. He made a 300-foot pass over the Sam Neua airport during the search (not a recommended procedure), during which he saw Shelton run out of a nearby cave, waving a white handkerchief. Helicopters brought in a Hmong special forces team, who they dropped south of Sam Neua. They returned the next week, but neither the team nor Shelton showed up. [Shelton's wife is active in the MIA movement.]

Casterlin to parents, May 18: "I came under some heavy fire for the first time since I started flying here." He was in the Sam Neua area and was forced by weather to fly low as he looked for a downed pilot. Ed Reid was in a second aircraft. The sky suddenly lit up with red tracer bullets. He pulled up into the overcast. He later landed in the area. Through sign language, a villager indicated that the pilot had been captured. He was fired at on the way out of the area. Co-pilots are getting a fast introduction, until the calm, relaxed atmosphere that existed when he first arrived. Estes, who has had a lot of bad luck, will be leaving shortly.

May 21, 1965

Pathet Lao capture Ernest C. Brace.

Brace was an ex-Korean War USMC pilot who had been dismissed from the Corps in 1961 after bailing out of an aircraft and trying to fake his death. He joined Bird & Son
in July 1964. In May, he was stationed in Chiang Mai, flying daily mission into Laos in a Pilatus Porter. On May 20, he was working for Terry Burke, the customer at Boum Lao (LS-174), 75 miles northwest of Luang Prabang. Burke, who had worked with Vang Pao at 20A and was an ex-USMC sergeant, had recently been assigned to Boum Lao. Brace went back to Chiang Mai following his day’s work. Earlier the next morning, Burke’s compound came under attack by NVA forces. Burke managed to escape but was unable to get a radio message out.

On May 21, Brace and Filipino flight mechanic Tony Alfante left Chiang Mai to fly Thai border partrolman to base on Burmese border, near village of San Tan Dau. They then flew to Xieng Lom, a supply base that supported smaller bases in western Laos, where they picked up five passengers for Boum Lao: 2 Laotian soldiers, one with wife and baby, and a Thai special forces sergeant. He also carried sacks of rice, salt, and dried fish. Because of the heavy load, the flight mechanic remained at Xieng Lom. Boum Lao had not reported to the Xieng Lom communications center that morning, but this was not unusual. He took off at 8.30 a.m. for the 30-minute flight to Boum Lao. Arriving overhead, everything looked normal: the proper signal was displayed, a large L made from parachute cloth. However, as soon as he landed, small arms fire shattered the windshield and wounded the woman passenger. He was on a one-way strip (trees blocked the other end.) In order to take off, he had to taxi to the end of the runway. He did not make it. The Lao soldier, husband of the wounded woman, jumped out of the airplane and was immediately killed by machine gun fire. Brace managed a quick "Mayday" before he was captured. Less than a hour later, F-105s and T-28s attacked the strip.

Brace was picked up later in the morning after attracting the attention of a passing helicopter (Goddard) with his mirror and was flown to Xieng Lom. One of the F-105 pilots reported that the pilot might still be in the porter. Burke and a Thai captain named Deja flew back in an Air America helicopter. While T-28s strafed the jungle, the helicopter landed and Burke jumped out and checked the Porter.

Brace searched the area by air over the next two days, guiding T-28 strikes on suspected positions around the airstrips and dropping leaflets. A Hmong commando unit was standing by at 20A for a rescue attempt.

Brace was marched three weeks through the jungle to Moun Lao on the border of North Vietnam, then taken by truck to prison camp. He was released seven years later, in March 1973.

Romes: Romes was on the mission, led by Rhyne, that looked for Brace. Based on information being received by Pop Buell, they hit some known bad areas in the valley near
Mong Sai. They were aiming at military targets but it was getting dark and apparently a few rounds hit a wat. In his book, Brace says that he was given a hard time about this.

Casterlin: Casterlin was flying with Robbie Roberts. He let Roberts, who had been a gunship pilot in Vietnam, sit in the right seat (the left side had no brakes). They were working in the Long Tieng area when called to Xien Lom. They flew Terry Burke in to see if Brace was alive. AAM T-28s, led by Jim Rhyne, laid down fire on either side of the strip as they landed. Casterlin had a carbine. There was no ground fire. Burke checked the plane, then got back into the helicopter and they promptly left.

Elded to WMI, 15 Aug 81: "The incident at Pak Beng when Ernie Brace was captured I was directly involved in with Ray Semora. We each were flying an H-34's. The day he was captured I was working site 69A and heard everyone trying to call him to divert him as the site was lost the nite before. The next morning after he was captured [May 22] Ray and I followed in behind a T-28 strike flown by Air Am pilots and landed troops within a mile of the site. On the second trip in we picked up the passengers that were captured with Ernie. I was in on the debriefing and they said Ernie was with them at the time of the T-28 attack but that he refused to make a run for it with them as there was complete confusion during the attack."

Terry Burke, March 2, 1992: Brace took some liberties in telling the story in his book. Burke had been in the area to train new people and open an offensive. They only recently had opened an airstrip at Boum Lao (LS-174) and only two or three planes had landed on it. On May 20, Brace had come in while Burke was washing in the river. Burke had landed without seeing a proper signal, and Burke had warned him against such action.

About 5 a.m., May 21, a mortar round took out the side of the hut where Burke was sleeping. Moments later, two soldiers burst in and began spraying the room with automatic weapons fire. Burke killed both men with his M-1, then headed for the nearby brush. The troops clearly were NVA regulars, with uniforms and pit helmets. The advanced by fire and maneuver. Burke killed several NVA on the airstrip. He was organizing a counterattack when a grenade burst among the group that he was preparing to lead, severely wounding a Lao officer and slightly wounding Burke. He was moving backward through the bush, carrying the wounded, when a Helio flew over (Louis O’Jibway was onboard). The enemy opened fire; the Helio pulled up and broadcast a warning.

It was several hours later that Brace showed up. Contrary to the book, there was no safety signal displayed.
Also, Brace was known for turning his radio off. Burke was still close enough to the airstrip to hear the Porter land, then turn around. Everything was quiet. Something must have alerted Brace because the engine suddenly went to full power. As Brace was attempting to take off, the enemy opened fire, and the sound of the engine died.

Burke continued to move south, with the enemy close behind. He heard airplanes pass overhead but could not signal because the enemy was too close. About noon, after joining up with a larger group, he was able to signal a passing helicopter. Phil Goddard, with O'Jibway onboard, picked him up. He was able to give directions for airstrikes over the radio.

Back at Xieng Lom (LS-69), word came in that someone had seen Brace inside the Porter on the runway. Burke returned to the area with Casterlin; this time Deja was with him (Deja was close to Bill Lair. There was a story of how a 105 mm howitzer position was overrun and Deja had to lay in the grass in center of the position for two days before he could safety crawl away.) Burke instructed Rhyne to set up a daisy chain of a half dozen T-28s to stafe either side of the airstrip as he went in for a look. Casterlin landed about 50 yards away from the Porter. As Deja set up a firing position, Burke raced for the aircraft. He got up on the step and looked inside; it was empty. About this time, the T-28s came by for a second pass and nearly hit Burke. As he started back for the helicopter, ground fire began coming from the village. For a minute, he thought that Casterlin was going to leave without him.

Burke continued the search for the next couple of days, flying with Bob Hamblin in the Bird Baron.

Burke later heard on good authority that he had been the target of the attack and that General Guane Rattikone was involved. Rattikone apparently was angry because Burke was discouraging the Hmong from growing opium. Burke considered opium cultivation a waste of time; he wanted the Hmong as soldiers.

Burke received the Intelligence Star for his conduct during the Brace episode. It was #16 (he was told that #15 had gone to Francis Gary Powers).

(Re O'Jibway: "a gentle giant of a man." He had been a sparring partner for Joe Louis during World War II. His nose had been broken several time. He lost his wife in a traffic accident while he was in SE Asia, leaving him with teenage twins (boy/girl). The boy, Buddy, used to help the AAM mechanics at Udorn. He later was a door gunner in Vietnam, involved in SAR in North Vietnam.)

(Re opium: Burke lived in the middle of the opium growing area. He considered opium a nuisance: it distracted the Hmong from the military task at hand. Air
America was not involved in the drug trade although individual amounts were certainly brought onboard as the screening process was minimal. Touby Lyfoun was involved in the opium trade.)

[McShane: McShane and Joe Potter joined the T-28 program in mid-1965. The first major effort came when Brace was captured. They searched for him for over a week, flying two or three missions a day.

Romes ("one of the most aware people I’ve ever flown with") and Rhyne often led T-28 missions. He does not recall the number but "it seemed like a lot." Many were six or seven hours in length. Except for two or three, they were SAR missions.

They lost two planes while he was with the program. He was flying with Joe Potter, around Sam Neua, looking for the USAF pilot. Potter was hit by ground fire. He pulled over a ridgeline, his rocket pod on fire, then bailed out. He was picked up almost immediately by an Air America helicopter.

On another mission, Keith Nolan was attacking a position on a ridgeline when he was hit. He crashlanded on a friendly strip and the airplane went over on its back. The airplane was a write off but Nolan was OK. McShane was ready to go the Na Khang LS-36 in January 1967 when the program was abruptly terminated.

May 24, 1965 (m)

Doole to J. T. Drescher of Fairchild Hiller: AAM agrees to purchase eight Turbo Porter PC-6/As with Garrett TPE-331-25D engines for $95,000 each. Two aircraft to be delivered every other month beginning in October 1965.
Cable, Sullivan (Vientiane) to SecState, May 18, 1965,
Country File, NSF, LBJ Library

Sullivan expresses his concern over the increased use of Air America pilots for T-28 SAR operations. One was shot up last week during a rescue operation; it crashed in friendly territory and the pilot was "whisked away." "Every time I authorize Air America pilots in RLAF planes, I am consciously jeopardizing entire Air America operation in this country and am risking severe embarrassment to both U.S. and Lao governments."

Grimes died in an aircraft accident in September 1977. The interview was conducted in 1974. Grimes graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Texas with a degree in geology; he was a member of the Air Force ROTC. He was doing graduate work in geology at the University of Nevada’s Mackay School of Mines when called to active duty in 1956. He attended the Air Force Institute of Technology’s meteorology program at Penn State. He was promoted to captain in October 1962. Between January 1963 and August 1967, he commanded Detachment 75 of the 5th Weather Wing (the Air Commando weather team).

In fall 1964, monthly reports were coming into Eglin from Col. William C. Thomas, commander of Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing (Water Pump), about the high rate of T-28 aborts due to weather. In early spring 1965, Grimes sent M/Sgt Thomas M. Watch and A/1C Lloyd W. Mitchell to Thailand/Laos to assess the situation. The embassy in Laos was allowing only a handful of people to enter the country, so Watson was able to make only one brief visit to Vientiane. He was unable to convince the AIRA, Col. Tyrrell, that a weather network was needed in Laos. Based on Watson’s reports, Grimes obtained permission from B/G Gilbert L. Pritchard, commander of the Special Air Warfare Center, to go to Laos and try to persuade Ambassador Sullivan to approve the weather network.

Grimes arrived in Udorn at 14 June 1965, then entered Laos in mid-July. He found Col. Paul Pettigrew, who had just replaced Col. Tyrrell (Col. William G. Von Platen was assistant AIRA), more sympathetic to the idea of a weather network. However, Ambassador Sullivan was intent on keeping small the U.S. military presence in Laos. There were only two Air Commandos in Laos, Major Frank M. Drew and his deputy (Captain Glenn Duke), who were running a hastily established air operations center in Vientiane. "Between the two of them they ran the air war as it existed in northern Laos." (12) There was no real working relationship with the Meo. The summer monsoon had begun, and there were many T-28 aborts.

Col. Pettigrew was looking for someone to control airstrikes and to coordinate with Vang Pao’s forces. Attempts to use Lao and Thai PARUs had not been working, as they lacked proper training. Grimes, who had gone through Air-Ground Operations School (including an extra weeks
specifically designed for FACs - he had controlled
airstrikes on the range at Eglin), volunteered for the the
job. Sullivan personally approved Grimes' assignment.
Before leaving Vientiane, he met Captain Jack Teague on
July 17, who had come down from LS-36 and was "completely
worn out." As Teague would need R & R, Grimes also would
assume Teague's duties at LS-36. Grimes, assisted by T/Sgt
Stan Monnie, also considered himself the "senior
representative" to Vang Pao.

Grimes visited LS-36 on July 19, then Long Tieng. He
met Tony Po at LS-36; he was in charge of operations north
of the PDJ. Grimes was impressed with Po: "He's wild and
dedicated." Also, Grimes was impressed with Vang Pao.
However, with the exception of Po, Grimes was unimpressed
with the military expertise of the other CIA case officers:
They "simply were not up to the military moxie that was
required to keep the ground operation together in a
disciplined manner. They were bright boys. Most of them
had some military service. But they didn't have the
background that let them come to grips with some of the more
mundane military problems. I mean, they simply didn't know
tactics like they should have. They were dedicated men;
very sophisticated; willing to endure a lot of hardship.
But they lacked a lot of basic military moxie." (52)

Grimes learned that there were some 12,000 to 15,000 NVA
in Samneua province, and that the NVA was doing almost all
of the fighting (rather than the Pathet Lao). Vang Pao had
about 3,500 men (mostly Hmong). Vang Pao fought a war of
movement. The NVA was bogged down by the southwest
monsoon/rainy season, and the Hmong would conduct raids,
supported by T-28s. During the summer of 1964, however,
T-28 had aborted nearly 30 percent of their missions. (With
Grimes providing basic weather information, mainly on the
movement of thunderstorm cells, the abort rate fell to less
than 6 percent during the summer of 1965.)

Grimes soon became absorbed in his work. "You just
forget everything. Your world becomes those mountain tops
and those people." (34). Grimes, Monnie, and (later)
Teague, all of whom had had FAC training, began to travel
with the Hmong, controlling airstrikes. "I know that
because of the air strikes I controlled that over 1,200
North Vietnamese were killed. These were bodies we lifted
identification documents off of." (34) At one point, Teague
identified a NVA regimental command post north of LS-36. I
was located deep inside a limestone cave. Teague controlled
a strike by two F-105s with 2,000-pound bombs. They
obtained a direct hit which killed a NVA brigadier general.
"It stopped the war for about three weeks in that part of
Laos." (37)
Grimes worked mainly with Thai-piloted T-28s (he had learned enough Thai to conduct the necessary exchanges). He usually could count on five to eight aircraft (which also were used for pilot training); once, he worked with 13. He also had four F-105s and four F-4s on call daily for airstrikes, but the jets frequently were diverted to other missions.

Grimes returned to Vientiane on August 4 and briefed Pettigrew and Ambassador Sullivan on the air strike net. He also gave them a detailed proposal for a weather network. Sullivan agreed to the weather network. There initially were 12 sites in northern Laos, manned by Thai PARUs. They were equipped with Brunton compasses and trained to track thunderstorm cells. They turned out to be tremendously effective and dramatically reduced the rate of aborts.

Grimes spent most of his time up-country in Laos until he returned to the U.S. in early December 1965. He worked at LS-36 and at Nam Lieu. (Tony Po was sent to Nam Lieu in fall 1965. He sent on intelligence mission to Muong Sing in Yunnan to photography rumored road building. The teams brought back photos that showed the beginning of the "Chinese turnpike.") He estimates that he spent about 70 percent of his time on building the weather net, and about 30 percent directing airstrikes.

Grimes recalls that there were less than a dozen USAF people in Laos in fall 1965: Frank Drew, Glenn Duke, Stan Monnie, Dr. Grant B. McNaughton [a graduate of UCLA medical school, Air Commando Flight Surgeon McNaughton arrived in Laos in July 1965; he started a hospital at LS-36, then worked with the Weldons at Sam Thong; he was instrumental in driving off the incompetent Filipino doctors at Sam Thong], and Jack Teague. Tom Watson, who had left in June, returned in October. Weathermen Andy Wilder and Maurice D. Kunkel also were there, as was S/Sgt Frank W. West (who had multiple tours in Laos).

Grimes heard, then and later, about a number of aspects of the war. Pop Buell told him that the earlier White Star teams had taken the wrong cultural approach to the Hmong. They had treated the Hmong as inferiors, and they had bothered the women. At one point, Buell learned that the Hmong were planning to assassinate a White Star team. Buell warned the detachment commander, who removed the team hours before the planned attack. (52)

[Glerum to WML, 27 April 1993: "I also have heard the assassination story, but have no way of judging its accuracy. Part of the context however is that Pop (not suprisingly) was very much against the program on principle.}
It was my impression that the SF people in White Star generally were sensitive to the Hmong and behaved reasonably well while deployed. However, there apparently were several 'foul balls.' In final analysis, of course, the program did not amount to much in the scheme of things."

Based on later reports, Grimes is especially hard on General Momyer. He says that Momyer in 1967 "forced" Vang Pao to fight set-piece battles on the PDJ, with disastrous results. Momyer's "most coercive urging" was responsible. Momyer believed that sorties had to be scheduled a week in advance in order for him to provide "efficient air support." A combination of FAGs - TALLMAN and REDMAN (REDHAT) "almost became legendary" - and A-26s produced spectacular results (both FAGs account for well over 1,000 NVA KIA), but Momyer refused to believe the figures. (59)

[Clerum to WML, 27 April 1993: "Grimes greatly overstates Momyer's impact. No one really controlled VP. He trusted Udorn and generally would follow our lead, recommendations and requests - but usually in his own way. (VP was a surprisingly good 'politician' in that he could make COS's and Ambassadors believe he was taking their direction, while proceeding with what he had intended all along. Probably the only Vientiane figure who had any real influence on VP was Shackley - and even that had its limits."]

Grimes heard that Po had been gut shot in Hua Muong, east of LS-36, early in 1965. [Rich's logbook notes that Po was hit on 19 January 1965 at LS-86/Hong Non.] Po was with a small unit of Meo who were trying to destroy some equipment and get some people out of a 600-foot airstrip when the NVA attacked with several companies. Po was hit. A handful of Meo leaped up and attacked the startled NVA, forcing them to retreat. (94)

[Mike Lynch to WML, June 10, 1993: "I first went up to Site 98 in 1964 to join Vint and Tony and when the in-country program was expanded to three officers. Vint and I later came down with hepatitis and I was hospitalized in April-May 64 in Bangkok and later returned to the USA to recover. I returned to Laos in February 1965 but did not go back up to Site 98 until about May. I started to visit Site 36 on a daily basis and later moved up there full time (July?). I recall that Tony was wounded in the groin and lower back by gunfire at Site 58 on the abandoned runway "Hua Muong." I think the Al Rich's logbook may refer to another time Tony was wounded by a mortar shell or grenade. (This did happen also, but earlier.) In the Hua Muong incident, Tony was with a small PARU team when he was hit and he was, as usual, doing something very heroic but not
officially sanctioned. He was rescued by either of the Drs. Weldon's, one of whom was flying in the area in AA plane and saw Tony flashing the back of a survival radio or mirror to attract attention. This was a very close call for Tony as he lost quite a bit of blood. The Hong Nor incident happened when someone detonated something when Tony was on the ground and he was hit in the posterior by a fragment.

As far as Grimes' narrative goes, it appears mainly based on fact but with his personal contribution somewhat out of proportion as I remember it. A good bit self-promotional, but what the heck, that is probably how one gets ahead in the Air Weather Service. Keith told me he picked this peculiarity as he had a chance to make general if he stuck with the program long enough. (He said there were two positions as this level.) He was ambitious and would have no doubt been an excellent general in the AWS. Keith did establish a Thai weather network in north Laos (which brought lots of laughs from some quarters from those who thought swinging instruments was not the way to win battles) and lived with me off an on at 36 for a few months. He was a brave guy, an Air Force "pioneer" in Laos, and a hard worker.

I think that the weather network served a useful purpose in getting the USAF more involved (they liked dealing with one of their own) and helping in the long range forecasting for attacks on fixed targets in the general area of operations and across the border. Our own airstrikes were mostly close support and were usually set up on a daily basis as no one knew what the targets would be or where the friendly forces would be located. In fact the tactical weather was also passed via radio each morning by all of us untrained observers and via the AA and CAS pilots. This was probably much more valuable for tactical strike decisions which were made on a daily or hourly basis or at the last minute.

Grimes was never a "senior advisor" to Vang Pao except in his own mind or on the USAF books. I am sure that Vang Pao would be amused by this description. Keith is entitled to his opinions and is partly correct in that the field "customers" were lacking in conventional military experience ("military moxie??"). This was also somewhat by design. I would ask Landry what he thought of this. None but Po had seen combat, but neither had Grimes. All had been extensively trained in the tactics and special mission at hand to include the tight rules of engagement, sensitivity of operations mechanism of intelligence gathering and reporting, and general conduct of special operations in Laos with all of the unique aspects of a strange war conducted by tribesmen in the hills and "supported" by the American
Embassy. Few in the U.S. military would have qualified for the job. Actually most of us were former military officers in peacetime. I was trained as a recon platoon leader at Ft. Knox in 1960. There were very good reasons why the slots were not filled by "active duty" military people or those with the military mindset. We needed a fresh look and fresh ideas. Tony was "Tony." What more can you say. Vang Pao ran the military operations. That is probably why they worked as they did. In spite of Tony's action, at that point in history, we were officially "restricted" from becoming directly involved in any combat operations.

There was no REDMAN. He was REDHAT, based on the cap he wore. He was a Thai we hired in Bangkok based on his capability in English. His first name was Jack. He was still working when I left in May 67 and I later heard he survived the war. A very unlikely hero. I believe the A-26 program was very successful with the unique program we developed at Site 36. Jerry [Daniels] and I worked with the pilots via radio at night from Site 36. We also provided weather info direct to NKP each evening. My call sign was "Watts" and NKP was "Sundial." I don't recall Grimes being involved in this program at all (at least from Site 36).

The skills of the A-26 drivers were legend. I have some of our conversations on tape from my radio (an attack on a convoy). We could talk to REDHAT by radio from 36 and also to the NIMRODS to set up the strikes. There was action nearly every night that the weather held up so at this point we were getting little sleep. We loved the operation which was unique to Site 36 and we got excellent BDA from the teams. Jerry, REDHAT and I went down to NKP to personally congratulate the pilots. I still have the patches they gave us.

I don't know how Grimes arrived at his casualty figures for the strikes. They could be a good guess but appear inflated. We never had piles of bodies to count on the ground. Glen Duke was a great guy. He worked with me for about a month off and on at Site 36 and he and I spent my birthday together weathered in up there in '65 (June 10). He was an pioneering observation mission up country but I have no doubts that he would have fit in with us very well had he had the freedom of movement that Grimes had later. Glen had the perfect personality to get along with anybody. I was very sad to hear he was killed in a crash at NKP (A-26?). He would would have been a great friend to have in the years after the war. Stan Monnie and Jack Teague were sharp guys and Stan was quite valuable with the locals helping out with the wounded, etc. He also showed me how to do self surgery to fix a badly ingrown toenail. He were all a bit nuts in those days.
The cave incident I remember were quite something. I went into the cave after the strikes and after the enemy had left. The strike pilots and the FAC (Teague?) claimed at least one bomb in the entrance. A great job by all. Vang Pao was delighted. The cave was not "identified by Teague" as it was well known to Vang Pao and his men. Teague may have "identified" the cave to the strike pilots. It was only a few miles south of 36 (not north) and was used to stockpile a huge cache of food, munitions, and a complete hospital. Vang Pao believed it was obviously set up to support a major attack on Site 36. I agree. It was spectacular. Grimes had a picture of it in his book on the Air Weather Service. I may have some as well. I was the subject of some teasing as I actually liked the captured rations (rotten fish, etc.) and lived on them for some time as a change from Meo food. The underground hospital even had bamboo beds and Eastern European medicine. I didn't try any of that.

The USAF FACs did not "travel with the Meo" but, like the rest of us, were mainly bound to the aircraft and air strips. All actions were coordinated with the "customer" reps. We and the FACs did often travel with the Vang Pao command element and visit various sites by air. I have a few pictures of Teague and Monnie in action when we were with V.P. supporting an action against a neighboring mountain top. I'll bet you a dinner of your choice that "we" never lifted identification documents off of 1200 NVA. I am sorry that Keith is no with us to discuss all of this. I don't feel right trying to argue with the dead."

June 1965
Udorn Monthly Report: "The expansion of this facility has not kept pace with the requirements, mostly due to waiting for requirements to become firm before taking action. The result has been a continuous 'crash' effort to catch up with increasing requirements which are dumped on us before proper preparations are made."

June 1965
Bowers: CIA and US Embassy/Laos recommend that C-130s be used for deliveries from Thailand to Laos. Missions began later in the year with AAM crews flying USAF planes. By 1967, at least one C-130 flew into Laos from Takhli daily. At first, they flew exclusively into Long Tieng. (Vertical cliff at NW end of runway; landings to NW and takeoffs to SE.)

June 1, 1965
Casterlin writes to his parents that the pilots received a $120/month raise as of June 1.
John O. Teague to WML, September 5, 1993:

Teague has not read Keith Grimes' autobiography "but I can attest to the fact that during my days at LS36 and about eight days on the western edge of the PDJ, the singular glimpse I had of then-Captain Grimes was when he escorted the Air Attache (Col. Pettigrew) up to a location where I was directing several days of airstrikes against a fixed target. Perhaps memory fails me, but I seem to recall there were only four USAF personnel upcountry during my tour from mid-June 1965 to late November 1965: myself (combat controller) and Sgt. Stan Monnie (medic) at LS36; Dr. Grant McNaughton at LS20; and Capt. Glenn Frick (pilot) at Luang Prabang. Charlie Jones (who arrived in late 1965) probably replaced me. I had replaced Captain Glenn Duke whom I believe laid the foundation for me and other to work out of LS36, but had not in fact participated in the control of any air strikes. I could be wrong on this point.

At any rate, I entered Laos in mid-June and spent my entire tour – excepting a few days on the western edge of...
the PDJ with some US Army personnel, mostly directing F4s against some AAA fixed sites - at LS36. I also caught a good case of dengue fever at some point during my tour and was evacuated from 36 to Vientiane where I was housed and treated in the home of Doctors Pat McCreary and Charles Weldon. I believe I was there for about 10 days. [It may have been during this time period that Grimes accomplished his many feats.]

There were two agency people at 36 while I was there: Tony Po, very much in charge, and a Mike [Lynch]. I worked rather closely with Tony Po, whom I admired greatly, and with Col Pham (local commander) and General Vang Pao. A typical scenario went thusly:

Those three identified a target (or targets). I "research" the target, determined best ordnance and TOT (time on target), and then sent my next day's request(s) back to Vientiane via HF code. Next day, off to the location. I communicated with the aircraft via UHF (USAF fighters) and VHF (T-28s), using a PRC-41 and Collins Bayside 900. I used the call sign "Cherokee." Once contact was made, I provided the aircraft with target ID (marking it with recoilless rifle phit phosphorous shell, if possible), gave them run-in headings (to keep them from bobming us - which occurred on two occasions), and the best direction to head for bailout if that became necessary. When the attacking aircraft were T-28s, I had several Thais (three that I recall) that directed the strikes, using my 990.

I directed some strikes from the air, also from the backseat of either an Air America or Bird & Son aircraft (a la Charlie Jones). In my case, the aircraft was either an L-19 or L-5, tandem-seating. I directed two strikes against Ban Ban in this fashion, and perhaps five or six against AAA in the western PDJ. I kept no diary or notes of any of this, so have no idea how many total strikes I directed: it could have been 40 (surely no less) or 150. Probably closer to the lesser figure since that was the rainy season.

What were my impressions? A tough question. I was a young USAF captain sent to 36 to provide the Royal Laotian Army (especially Vang Pao) an air strike capability. I like to think I was successful in accomplishing this. We killed a lot of enemy soldiers - which I saw - and reclaimed some real estate.

Lynch to WML, October 19, 1993:

"Jack is right on track with his comments as far as I recall. Glen Duke did not direct any air strikes during his visits but he did lay a lot of the groundwork for the
eventual close cooperation with the USAF. As a pilot, he was able to give me some valuable insights into the pilot’s end of the ground controller-pilot equation that later stood me in good stead. Although I never claimed to be a ground FAC and had no sanction or formal training in this discipline, I became rather proficient and experienced by necessity and through OJT. A good lifesaving skill under the circumstances.

Teague was a very good controller in my view as he had the patience and the opportunity to work with those of the ground to learn the tactical situation as well as to get a feel for evaluating target information. The tendency of the locals was to always describe the target in important enough terms to assure that they got an air strike. Some FACs without ground experience took them at face value when one of us was not around to temper the situation.

Jack’s comments on Grimes’s reported exploits were kind. It didn’t happen during my watch either. I guess that is one of the pitfalls of writing a book about yourself.

During the time Teague was visiting LS-36, Tony was handling the air ops and I was working mainly in other areas. My assessment of the air operation during Jack’s time was similar to his. The program was just getting going and most pilots were unfamiliar with the area. Thanks in part to Jack, air assets were effectively used with friendly losses minimal. Too bad he couldn’t have come back for a few more tours. He was a good one.

TALLMAN was killed by one of his own men but information pointed to an inside job (murder) either due to jealousy or a family squabble. V.P. indicated this to me conveying the distinct impression that he couldn’t do anything about it at the time even though he wanted to, due to ‘Neo politics.’ He was later awarded the silver or bronze star I believe, and the USAF did a flyover at his funeral at Long Thieng.”
Cable, Sullivan (Vientiane) to Admiral Sharp, CINCPAC, June 4, 1965, Country File, NSF, LBJ Library

A Navy pilot was shot down yesterday afternoon, and a major SAR operation is taking place today. There has been heavy AAA. One Air America T-28 has been lost (pilot recovered), and one Navy A-1H has been damaged. Weather has closed in a suspended operations for the day. We will try again in the morning. Several AAA positions have been destroyed. "It has been a hell of a hairy day."
June 7, 1965

Hickler to Grundy: Pilot shortage continues. "Our SAR efforts continue to be spectacular. Those chopper pilots have just got to get some extra compensation. Their work in the SAR effort cannot be beat by anyone." Hickler refers to efforts on June 3, 4, and 5. [AAM would hire 28 pilots in June]

June 5, 1965

Col. Robert L. F. Tyrrell, US Air Attache, Laos, wrote to Hickler on June 15 and thanked him for SAR efforts of past 14 months. Most recent rescue mission of June 5 was an outstanding example of "dedicated performance by members of your organization." Many instances of AAM aircraft encountering hostile fire. "Your pilots have risked their lives on several occasions to pick up downed aircrews from the very heart of unfriendly areas."

Tilford: Between June 1964 and June 1965, Air America picked up 21 downed crew members; USAF Air Rescue Service picked up 5.

Telegram, 2nd Air Division to American Embassy, VTE: Personal from General Moore. Expresses appreciation for "outstanding rescue work in connection with successful recovery of downed Navy A4C pilot on June 5. "The highly professional manner in which this mission was conducted in the face of adversities encountered should cause each individual concerned to feel justifiably proud of the part they played in this humanitarian effort."

Life, Aug. 6, 1965: Lt. Paul Ilg, with Attack Squadron 22, call sign BEEFEATER, flying 29th combat mission over North Vietnam [actually, Laos]; routine armed recon mission. A-4C Skyhawk hit by ground fire - felt tremendous jolt. Flames coming out of both sides of fuselage - ejected. Automatic ripcord release failed. Got chute open just before hitting ground (probably good thing because heavy fire from ground). Dropped into wooded area. Tried to make radio contact with circling wingman. Heard ground troops coming; crawled into bushes and lay still. Two soldiers came within 15 feet of him. He waited until searchers left, then moved off. Walked two hours, headed toward ravine. Ended up at dark close to enemy bivouac area in clearing. Slept for several hours, then crossed clearing into area of two-foot high grass and undergrowth. Slept. Heard planes at 10 a.m. "Suddenly the whole area erupted with ack-ack. I hadn’t realized how close the guns were or how many there were." Enemy troops search area but he was able to avoid them. Started for tree line on top of ridge across the field, where he hid out for a second night. The next day, June 5, he headed down the side of the ridge.
About 4 p.m., he climbed to the top of a 45-foot tree and turned on his radio, making contact. "I took a big breath and fired my flares." "Within minutes one of our helicopters came clattering in overhead. A hoist dropped down on me. And now, after two days in North Vietnam, I was reeled aboard."

Interview with Joseph Hazen, July 30, 1987: The day after Ilg was shot down, Hazen and copilot Bill Zeitler flew into area in Caribou to act as Victor Control (Caribous had VHF and UHF). Ilg had been shot down in Sam Neua area. Hazen/Zeitler spotted Ilg and established contact with him on emergency frequency. Ilg was in a field right next to a village, and soldiers were trying to locate him but were going in the wrong direction. Hazen advised him to wait until night, then cross a ridgeline to the southwest for pickup the next morning. About this time there were 37mm flak bursts near the airplane. Hazen turned to the right (to the chagrin of copilot Zeitler) and departed the area. He returned the next morning (with copilot Zeitler) and Ilg. Zeitler — Zeitler had become ill — and established contact with four ADs off one of the carriers. He got the downed pilot on the emergency radio. Ilg explained that he had been unable to cross the ridgeline because there were huts on the crest. Hazen instructed the ADs to take out the huts. Ilg then crossed the ridgeline, threw a flare, and was picked up by Hazen. Ilg later became an admiral.)

Interview with Don Romes: Romes was flying a T-28 during Ilg’s rescue, providing cover for the pickup. Ilg had popped smoke, and the helicopter was coming in to pick him up when the pilot reported "a cloud of dust" heading up the road toward the village where Ilg was waiting. It was believed that an armored car was on the way. The T-28s made several runs on the target, but they could not get a good look at it due to the nature of the terrain. As the "cloud of dust" neared the village, Romes made a determined low pass only to discover that the cloud of dust was being made by a thoroughly frightened horse. Romes was impressed by Dick Crafts on this mission. Crafts had left Udorn before dawn in a helicopter, in bad weather, to be in place as rescue for the T-28s. This was a long way to go. The T-28s were at the limit of their range and had to be leaned out to get back to VTE.

[FIC to ATOG, Monthly Report: The dramatic and successful SAR in June demonstrated the great merit of US Navy survival radio, PRC-49A. It performed faultlessly for almost 48 hours, alternately emitting UHF beacon signal and giving two-way voice capability. It is much better than our URC-4 and at half the weight.]
June 20, 1965

US F-4C shot down near North Vietnam border during mission against Son La Army barracks. Capt. P. A. Kari and Capt. C. H. Briggs bailed out. Col. Thong, ethnic Lao and one of few non-Hmong close to VP, volunteered to accompany AAM rescue mission. Thong, an animist, wore waist-length hair and a 10" beard. He always asked for the toughest missions. He was hit by ground fire and died in the hospital in Thailand. He was awarded a Silver Star in a posthumous, secret, ceremony.

Casterlin report: Casterlin enroute to LS-36 when alerted for SAR. Refueled at LS-36 and checked situation map with Goddard (H22). "We were given excellent instructions and advice as to the route of entry we should make into the target area. We were given guides who were supposed to be familiar with part of the area. USAF Control ship instructed the helicopters to proceed to the target area: positive sighting of downed pilot (later proved to be two pilots); cover aircraft available.

Weather north of 36 not very good; climbed through a hole and proceeded on top at 10,000 feet. Victor Control said he was over LS-107 and that he would direct us to target area. We tried to join on Victor by use of UHF ADF but were unable. Around LS-111, Casterlin and Goddard descended and proceeded north up the Nam Et River, avoiding all trouble areas. After passing the Song Ma river, they climbed as 37mm and 57mm guns were reported in the target area. They passed east of Na San airfield, noting extensive road network and elaborate fortified trench line. Arrived at the Nam Te river and turned west. At this point, they were informed that no actual sighting had been made.

"Previously we had realized that our time on station would be short but the inaccurate sighting compounded our trouble." They began a search of the area, protected by two 2 F4Cs ("a highly ineffective craft... for the cover we need.") Goddard started a series of low passes and reported ground fire. He also reported seeing parts of the downed aircraft. Goddard then reported being hit and having a wounded onboard. He wanted to leave the area, but Casterlin asked to point out the wreckage before departure, then wait five minutes. Goddard did this, while circling at 1500 feet. Casterlin spotted the flash of a signal mirror, about an eighth of a mile north of a road junction. The mirror was bright and he could not see who was behind it. Although this might be a lure, he decided to attempt a pickup. As he was descending, he felt several concussions and saw red paper fly up in the cockpit. Crew chief reported that aircraft was taking heavy small arms and machine gun fire.
Casterlin advanced the mixture and could only get it to the 3/4 rich position. The throttle rolled on while advancing the mixture, indicating some control damage. He began to smell raw fuel. Casterlin and Goddard decided to try and make it back to LS-107. He climbed back on top, carefully watching his quagas. He was down to 300 pounds of fuel when a hole opened up near LS-107. He was able to land without incident.

[Dick Casterlin sat down the next day and scribbled a note "For Posterity": "One the mission we lost a local commander who was flying in H-22. He was one of the finest fighting men that I have ever known. He was a definite friend of our country and did much for the SAR effort when he didn’t have to. He did not have to go that day but guided us up to the border."

"This hero stuff stinks and the old adage of a live coward rather than a dead hero is a good one. The AF doesn’t, I’m sure, appreciate what we are doing for them at great risk to ourselves. . . . What makes us mad is that the AF thinks we get $1500 for a pickup. We get nothing – but ulcers."]

Frank Stergar (tape): Stergar had arrived in Udorn in May 1965. He was first office on H-23, Steve Nichols was F/M. They left Na Khang (LS-36), together with Goddard in H-22 and headed for the target area. [He later learned that the downed airman was RDO Briggs] Goddard got hit going down on a false signal. Casterlin saw what he believed was a mirror flash and went down. This brought heavy ground fire. One round hit the log book, filling the cockpit with confetti. Stergar did not have a weapon, having been told that it was against company policy to carry one. But Casterlin had a .22 caliber pistol. Stergar took it and began firing out the window at the ground. It didn’t do any good "but it made me feel good." Casterlin managed to nurse the badly damaged helicopter to LS-107 (Houei Na) where they spent the night.

The next day, two UH-34s (Bobby Nunez and Robbie Robertson) showed up and they made plans to return to the search area. Nunez’s flight mechanic was reluctant to make the trip, so Nichols (who had arrived Udorn on May 20, 1965) took his place. When Robertson’s copilot also was reluctant to go, Sergar took his place. Before departing, Stergar borrowed a weapon and six fragmentation grenades from local Lao troops. When they arrived in the search area, they quickly located the downed airmen. Disoriented, he had moved toward a build up area. Nunez went in and made the pickup. Stergar they told Robertson to fly over the site so that he could toss out the fragmentation grenades. When he did, covering A-1 came up on the radio: "We’re getting airbursts!"
George Carroll: May/June saw the first major bombing sorties into western North Vietnam by carrier-based F4s. Air America provided SAR (USAF Jolly Greens, stationed at LS-36, took over this duty in Fall 1965). On June 20, Navy F4 shot down near Son La, North Vietnam. Crew ejected safely. H-22 Goddard/Carroll/Warren "Mitch" Drew arrived Na Khang about 1200. H-23 Casterlin/Stergar/Nichols had just landed - the crews reported to Colonel Tong, area commander for Meo forces in Northern Laos. Tong was well-educated, forceful leader, trained at Ft. Benning. Tong briefed the crews. Both aircraft to fly toward Son La, with Goddard in lead. Tong would be aboard, servicing a .30 caliber machine gun that he mounted in the aircraft. Two F-4s would provide cover. Son La was 60 miles north of the Lao-North Vietnam border and none of the crews had maps of the area. Tong provided guidance. Arriving in the pickup area, they saw the outline of the downed F4 on the ground, hald hidden by brush and branches in an attempt to camouflage the plane. They could see the town of Son La and its adjacent military facilities, including barracks and a 5,000-foot hard surfaced runway. They could hear signals from the downed airman's radio. Goddard said that he was pretty sure that he had sighted someone and went in for the pickup. The area was flat, bushy country, dotted with small villages. They were flying about 60 feet above the brush and had slowed down to 30 knots when they received automatic weapons fire from the left, right, and front. Tong answered with the .30 caliber machine gun. Goddard abandoned the pickup and began to climb out at full power. In the 10-15 seconds that this took, the aircraft suffered 40-50 hits. The .30 caliber became silent as they climbed out. Drew called up to say that Tong had been hit hard. As the aircraft did not seem in any immediate danger, Carroll got out of the left seat and went below to aid Tong. He found him on the floor, covered with blood. The left side of the fuselage was peppered with holes. Drew appeared uninjured but dazed. Tong had been hit just off the center of his spine around the belt line. Carroll took the gauze compresses out of the survival pack on this belt and pressed them into the wound, using the belt to keep the gauze in place. He then went back to the cockpit. Goddard was circling at 5000 feet. Casterlin had said that he had spotted mirror flashes and would attempt a pickup. Goddard came on the radio and said that the area was extremely hot. Casterlin decided to try anyhow. Carroll watched as H-23 came into the area, close to a hover. Then the ground fire opened up. H-23 climbed out, reporting serious damage. Casterlin warned that he might have to land on a sandbar in the Black River, but after a few minutes he decided to try to make it back to LS-107. H-22 informed Crown to arrange a medevac for Tong. The return to Laos was anxious. "We had come to the rescue site with no charts and no familiarity with the country,
only Col. Tong's directions, those being changed periodically to remain clear of known enemy and anti-aircraft emplacements." Also, both helicopters were running low on fuel. Carroll noted the low fuel warning light come on. Ten minutes later, they spotted landmarks near LS-107, the nearest friendly field. Tong was transferred to waiting Helio and taken to USAF Hospital in Korat, where he died. [Body was taken to Long Tieng for the funeral, which was attended by thousands of Hmong.]

H-22 was ferried to Udorn. The more seriously damaged H-23 remained overnight, where Casterlin/Stergar/Nichols spent a very wet and long night in the "Sikorsky Hotel."

Early the next morning, two replacement helicopters arrived, flown by Bobby Nunez and Orin Robertson. Both crew chiefs were Filipinos from the Udorn shop and not regular flight mechanics. At the briefing, it was decided that Nunez would lead, with Casterlin and Nichols as crew. Robertson, Stergar, and one of the Filipino crew chiefs would fly backup. They departed LS-107 at mid-morning. Nearing the search area, they established radio contact with Crown and escorting A-1Es. Crown located crewman. Nunez/Casterlin went in for pickup. To their amazement, Briggs had gone several miles toward the built up area around Son La instead of toward the higher karst overlooking the Black River. They make the pickup by hoist in a small clearing. Robertson and Stergar then made a high speed pass over the area and dropped six fragmentation grenades "to discourage ground fire."

Captain Briggs, USAF, was REO on the downed aircraft (the pilot was never found; he was captured and eventually released). He said that he had evaded immediately after hitting the ground. NVA obviously had a beeper and mirror because he did not use his and H-22 and H-23 did not come down anywhere near his position. They fact that neither aircraft had come near his position probably allowed him to evade capture for the rest of the day and night. On pickup, the right leg was missing from his flight suit. He said that he had cut in off shortly after landing to improvise a headgear to protect from the sun.

Telephone interview with Curtis H. Briggs, March 6, 1991:

Briggs was an ex-RO who had taken pilot training. Assigned to the backseat of a F-4, he was rather bitter. He arrived in Southeast Asia in April 1965 and was assigned to the 45th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Ubon. By June, he had flown 55 missions, mainly into North Vietnam.

On June 20, 1965, four F-4C attacked the Son Lon barracks with 750-pound bombs. Flying with Paul Kari (who he didn't particularly care for - a hardnose who tried to be a perfectionist), they were number 2 on the strike. Terry Johnson and Jim Buckerfield was number 1. Intelligence had the elevation wrong, and they went in too low. During the
attack, Kari/Briggs were hit by what intelligence late believed to be radar-guided 37mm fire. Both fire lights came on and there was hydraulic smoke in the cockpit. As the aircraft became enveloped in flame and rolled to the right, Briggs ejected. He blacked out momentarily, then his chute opened. He must have been low because he hit the ground hard within seconds, suffering a crushed vertebrae. He landed in high grass. This was about 1030 local time.

Briggs, who had spent a lot of time in the woods as a kid, was determined to evade the enemy if at all possible. He hid his parachute under some brush, then headed for a treeline at the base of a ridgeline. He found some brushes on a rockledge and tried to hide. About an hour later, he heard voices of small groups passing along a nearby path. About 1230, he heard the sound of a helicopter approaching. He went to the edge of a clear area and used the signal mirror that he had around his neck. He believed that the helicopter pilot had seen him. As it began to descend, he threw a flare, but he lit the night end. When the hoist from the helicopter was about 100 feet away, a machine gun began to fire. He watched the helicopter take multiple hits and heard the engine sputter as it pulled away. Briggs took out his .38 and began heading for the machine gun nest when he thought better of the idea, found some more bushes, and burrowed into them.

Briggs remained in the area until 1700. There was a large ant hill next to his hiding place, but the ants never bothered him. He heard military search parties all around, with whistles blowing and shouting. As it grew dark, the military was replaced by civilian search parties. A number of people came close to his hiding place, but he was not spotted. When it became dark, he no longer could hear what was happening because of the loud buzz of insects. He used his hunting knife (a good one) to cut the leg off his flight suit, which he used a a headpiece. After the moon rose, he climbed out of the bushes and followed a path that he believed led away from Son La, to the east and toward a river. He grew thirsty and became dehydrated. He licked the dew off leave for moisture. About 0200, he was exhausted and laid down near the path. Two NVA passed within 20 feet of him at one point.

About 0700 he heard an F-4 pass overhead. He turned on his beeper, which worked on batteries and he had been saving them (he did not have voice). The NVA resumed their search in the morning. About 1000 two A-1s flew over and he turned him beeper back on. They remained in the area as Briggs waved his handkerchief. They spotted this and promptly dropped their gear. As the noise of searchers grew nearer, Briggs headed by a nearby marshy area, with tall reeds. He lay down, holding his .38 and praying. About noon, some 26 hours after he had gone down, a helicopter came down for
him. He grabbed the hoist as it passed, was dragged along the ground for awhile, then finally was hoisted onboard.

Taken to LS-107, he was surrounded by Hmong. He distributed some tracer ammunition, was invited to shot a crossbow, hit the target in the center, and was given the crossbow (which he still has). Picked up by a Helio, he ended up in Udorn. After a brief visit to the hospital and a shower, he went to the Air America Club for dinner. He then went to Saigon, where they found the crushed vertebrae. He spent three days in civilian clothes, being debriefed in a compound, then went back to Ubon.

Telephone interview with James, D. Buckerfield, March 16, 1991:

Terry Johnson and Buckerfield were #4 for the attack on the Son La Barracks. They were given the incorrect elevation for the terrain. Kari pressed too low. Kari/Briggs were just pulling off the target when hit. At first, the flames were behind the aircraft. They were making a slight climbing turn to the right when Kari shut down the engines and flames enveloped the aircraft. They both ejected and came down about two miles apart. Buckerfield took the longitude and latitude off the inertial system and called for SAR.

Johnson/Buckerfield returned later in the afternoon and heard a beeper but saw no one. They came back early the next morning and again heard a beeper. Air America wanted a sighting before helicopters would be sent into the area so Buckerfield reported one ("a little white lie").

Buckerfield also was a former radar observer and qualified pilot who went TDV (four months) at Udorn as GIB in the F-4C. None of the pilot-qualified GIBs were happy about the arrangement.

Telephone interview with Casterlin, March 16, 1991:

Casterlin recalls that the time, Briggs said that they flew through their own bomb blast. Casterlin believes that he did not reach the area until after 1230. The H-34 had a range of 2:30 plus a small reserve, and they reached LS-107 around sunset. Casterlin was flying Hotel 33, not 23, on the first day. They counted 11 holes when they reached LS-107. On the pickup, Nunez did a 360 degree turn as he believed they were being shot at. It took a little time to bring Briggs onboard. At the time, Briggs told Casterlin that he had heard that AAM pilots received a bonus for pickups. As a result of this incident, better SOPs for SARs were developed. The use of two pilots and air cover was the result of the Seitzer incident. The note to his parents was written sometime in 1965 but not the next day.

[Al White recalls a SAR mission during which a Laotian colonel was killed. White was in a C-123 as Victor control.
On the way out after the pickup, they heard SKYLARK RED over the radio. This was the code for MiGs. MiGs began to chose the rescue force and were engaged by two USN ADs. One MiG spun into a karst in a low speed stall, and the Navy pilot got credit for the victory.]

Peter B. Mersky and Norman Polmar, The Naval Air War in Vietnam (Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company, 1981), p. 73: Two VF-21 F-4B Phantoms scored first two MiG kills of war on June 17. "On June 20, a third MiG-17 was brought down by a flight of VA-25 A-1 prop-driven Skyraiders, Lieutenant Clinton B. Johnson ultimately receiving credit for the kill." A-1 used its superior turning ability against the MiG.

Robert F. Dorr, Skyraider (Bantam Books, 1988), pp. 55-60: "Lieutenant Commander Edward Greathouse was division leader of four Skyraiders sent from Midway on June 20, 1965, to cover the rescue of an F-105 pilot downed near Dien Bien Phu. Greathouse belonged to squadron VA-25, called the "Fist of the Fleet," and was using the call sign Canasta. It was late afternoon, with the sun receding fast. The Skyraiders of Canasta flight made their run-in beneath a flat ceiling of cloud at 11,000 feet, typical of the 'crud' over North Vietnam that always seemed to hamper navigation.

Typical for a SAR mission, Greathouse's airplanes carried four pods with seventy-six 2.75-inch rockets (19 per pod) plus a full load of 20mm ammo. In addition, each Skyraider carried the 200-gallon centerline drop tank that was de rigueur for missions up north. . . .

With the mission under way, Greathouse was warned by a radar plane that he was being stalked by MiGs.

Two MiG-17s went past the four Skyraiders in the distance to their right. At first, it appeared that the North Vietnamese pilots were chasing Skyraiders from another carrier, up ahead. . . . [Then] the MiGs peeled to their left, rolled over, and turned to approach Greathouse's four Skyraiders.

Controlled by GCI operators who were watching Canasta flight on radar, the MiG-17s were being vectored to a firing pass . . .

One MiG broke away, but the other continued his approach. Greathouse ordered pilots to drop their centerline fuel tanks.

"One of the unlikeliest dogfights of the war ensued. The Skyraiders dived to ground level in a valley with sharp outcrops of karst limestone all around. With MiGs and Skyraiders jockeying for position, one of the MiG-17s headed straight at Canasta Three and Four, Lieutenants Charles Hartman and Clinton B. Johnson." MiG opened first just as Johnson dropped his tank. This caused airplane to lurch violently and avoid 23mm cannon fire from MiG. Johnson saw
Sullivan said that he was "increasingly concerned" about the political risks of the U.S. and RLG caused by the continued use of Air America helicopters in SAR work in North Vietnam. There had been no formal requests for these missions, which had been conducted on a "voluntary ad hoc" basis. However, there have been more jobs, more regularly. He cites a two-day effort on June 20-21. He suggests the use of USAF H-43, refueled at forward sites in Laos. (Air America never formally has been asked to assume responsibility for SAR in North Vietnam.)
red-gold balls pass within feet of aircraft. Hartman and Johnson then opened fire with their cannons. "The MiG-17 passed between the two Skyraiders, falling apart in midair and leaving behind a thin plume of smoke. All four members of Canasta flight saw the MiG bore into the ground and explode. Their was not parachute." Johnson and Hartman each received one-half credit for the MiG. The feat of bagging a MiG with a Skyraider was "nothing short of remarkable." [Second MiG-17 shot down by Skyraider 18 months later; no USN Skyraiders lost to MiGs.]

July 14-15, 1965
[The Hook, 1991]: Lt. Donald V. Boecker (pilot) and Lt. Donald Eaton (bombardier/navigation) were with VA-75, the first operational A-6A Intruder squadron, flying off the USS Independence (CVA-62). On July 14, they were part of a two-plane mission to attack a small bridge near Sam Neua. Aircraft was carrying five Mk 82 500-pound bombs. Arrived over target at 25,000 feet at 1800. Boecker began roll-in from 19,000 feet; bombs set to arm four-and-a-half seconds after leaving aircraft and detonate on impact. Shortly after release, aircraft rocked by explosion: one bomb had detonated underneath the wing. Boecker pulled out of dive as both fire warning lights came on. Eaton could see fuel streaming out of the wing. Wingman radioed that aircraft was on fire and they should eject. Eaton first out; severely bruised hands. Boecker landed on small hill about 200 yards from a village. Eaton landed in tall grass south of Boecker on far side of large grassy hill. Eaton headed east; Boecker went north. Both had to travel through thick undergrowth, making movement difficult. Boecker hid in abandoned animal den as search party approached; Eaton hid on the side of a hill beside a large tree. Searchers continued to hunt the men all through the night. Shortly before dawn the next morning, they heard a large aircraft overhead. They called over PC-49 survival radio. By 0715, several A-1s and two helicopters were overhead. One of the helicopters flew toward Boecker but took several machine gun hits in main fuel cell and departed. A-1s attacked targets in area. Eaton fired smoke flare. One of the two T-28s in the area headed straight toward him, with man in back seat waving. It was followed by a H-34 that picked him up. Boecker that lit a smoke flare. Helicopter lowered sling but it kept getting caught in tree. Finally, he leaped for horse collar. As the helicopter departed, Boecker was dangling from the helicopter, his arm barely through the sling. He finally was hoisted aboard. They had spent over 18 hours on the ground. [Both later reached flag rank.]

Jordan: He was doing routine flying, supplying outposts from LS-36, on July 14 when he heard call from Rescasp that aircraft was down in Sam Neua province. The
next morning, he was told the two other helicopter would handle SAR and to continue resupply operation. About an hour later, he was told that earlier pickup had failed when H-34 had been hit crossing Sam Neua highway. He returned to LS-36 to refuel, then headed for area. Shortly after arriving in area, spotted someone on a ridgeline (Eaton). He was told to wait for a positive ID. T-28 flew over and made ID, then Jordan came in an made pickup on tall grass-covered ridge. Then he circled area looking for other pilot. They spotted red smoke, and flight mechanic began to direct Jordan to area. He spotted gun flashes from nearby jungle area and directed T-28s to attack. They silenced gunfire. "I hovered in the area over Boecker for what seemed like an eternity. I had no communications at all with my flight mechanic, who spoke very poor English. To complicate the confusion, he had taken his hard hat off for some reason while attempting to retrieve the downed pilot. The 100-ft. hoist was about 10 ft. short of reaching the ground and Boecker must have had to do some climbing to reach the hoist. When I was told by my flight mechanic that we had retrieved the pilot, I started to move out of the area. As it turned out. Boecker was actually hanging from the hoist outside the aircraft. Sensing something was wrong, I asked again if he was on board. After a few moments I was told that he was definitely in the cabin. The total time in hover over Boecker must have been 20-30 minutes." He returned them to LS-36, where they were picked up by a Caribou and taken to Thailand. Jordan spoke briefly with them, then returned to his resupply mission.

**July 26, 1965**

Casterlin to parents: USAF planes still being shot down but USAF is starting to handle SAR.

**July-August 1965**

Rick Byrne checked out in the Caribou. It was in many ways "a big Hello." It was possible to do marvelous things with the airplane, thanks to its reversible props. Bob LaTurner was chief pilot/Caribou. Tony Durizzi was one of the earliest pilots on the airplane, along with Ed Eckholdt. The Caribou did pretty much the same things as the Helio. The only difference was the frequent drops of 55-gallon gasoline barrels.

**August 1965**

PIC to ATOG, Monthly Report: Ground activity stalled by mid-monsoon conditions. Only six incidents during month. However, one involved 85L with I. B. King. Weather was a factor in the incident. PIC notes influx of new pilots. [28 pilot hired in June, 25 in July, and 33 in August]

**August 5, 1965**
Joint State/DOD message to Sullivan, August 5, 1965, Country File, NSF, LBJ Library

"Political factors require that Air America helicopters continue to assume responsibility for all SAR operations in Laos." For North Vietnam, Thailand-based USAF helicopters will be used. They will be prepositioned at LS-38 and may refuel in LS-46 and LS-107. USAF aircraft and personnel will not be permitted to remain overnight in Laos.

August 20, 1965

Local Board of Review (Ben Moore, Jr. chairman; E. S. Dew, T. H. Penniman, E. W. Knight, J. C. Aspinwall), “Major Accident to H-23” – CIA Corporate Records, Box 58, UTD –

Nunez departed L-118A at 1605 with flight mechanic Nichols and four passengers (Helio pilot Calhoun in cockpit; Johnson, Ojibway, and two Lao intelligence officers). Enroute to Udorn, while in the “Twin Peaks” area (LS-154), while attempting to circumnavigate weather, Nunez “became geographically disoriented.” He turned south to intercept the Mekong and follow it to Vientiane (a common practice in Laos when unsure of position). The visibility was poor; it was raining, and the windshield wiper was inoperative. He let down over the river to 50-100 feet (or lower). At approximately 1930, when 20 kilometers from Vientiane, he contacted the water while in a banking turn to the rights. The aircraft rolled over on its right side. Nunez and Calhoun evacuated through the left window. The cabin filled with water. With the aircraft upside down and under water, Nichols was unable to release the door. He somehow got out through a open window. Nunez, Nichols, and Calhoun were picked up the following morning. Nunez was fished out of the river by Lao boats at 0330. Calhoun on shore at 0730, and Nichols shortly before 0800. Two bodies were recovered and two were missing. Probable cause: "Pilot’s misjudgment of altitude allowed the aircraft to strike the water.” Nichols said that 2/3 people surfaced behind him. Nunez called out “Jib,” and was answered “Yeh!”
Special National Intelligence Estimate 58-65, "Short-Term Prospects for Laos" - FAR now has 54,000 men. RLAF has 45 T-28s. Its pilots have shown "commendable courage and skill in close air support operations and in harassing enemy movements and supply." Report notes last summer's successful clearing operation around juncture of route 7 and 15 and this spring's successful defense of Dong Hene against NVA attack. PL strength estimated at 22,000-25,000, with 9,000 NVA.

"The Communists give no sign of wanting to stir up the military situation in Laos. They already control those parts of Laos which are most important to them: the areas adjacent to China and North Vietnam and the part of the panhandle used as a supply and infiltration route into South Vietnam." [DDRS 1989/1863]

August 18, 1965

Vang Pao is quoted in NY Times, Aug. 19, as terming military situation in Sam Neua province "serious." PL/NVA forces have moved into Sam Neua in force and are attempting to open Route 6, running from North Vietnam to PDJ, to replace Route 7, which was severely damaged for US and Laotian air strikes. Enemy has captured some ridges overlooking Route 6. Fighting started in February and is continuing.

August 20, 1965

Stephen I. Nichols: Nunez and Nichols were working out of 118A on 20 August 1965. They took off in mid-afternoon for the return to Udorn but were called back to pick up George Calhoun who had crashed in a Hell. After retrieving Calhoun, they had to go back to 118A to refuel. At this point, Louis Ojibway, Ed Johnson (a black case officer), and two Lao intelligence officers boarded H-23 for the flight to Udorn. By now it was late afternoon. They ran into heavy rainshowers on the flight. Nunez flew low over the Mekong, which was at flood stage. The windshield wipers were not working as the motor had burned out, and Nunez kept his lights on. Nunez flew into the river. He said that he had had a hydraulic failure but Nichols believes that he had become disoriented. The aircraft hit the water and rolled over on its right side. Nichols was washed into the tail cone. As he fingers were running along the stringers, by good fortune he felt the 18' square window. It had handles on the outside (it had been used on aircraft carriers); he grasped them and pulled himself out. He then swam around to the front, where he found Nunez and Calhoun. The helicopter was belly up, slowly sinking into the fast-moving river. They were in the center of the river. Nunez and Calhoun decided to strike out for the Thai side, while Nichols headed toward Laos. After about two and a half hours, and nearly drowning on several occasions, he reached the shore.
A pretty good swimmer, he was exhausted. He later learned that Calhoun had made it ashore without much difficulty; he may have been caught up in a favorably eddy. Nunez, who could not swim, caught a branch. He floated about 60 miles in the 6 mph current before being pulled out by soldiers at Nong Khai. [Casterlin: He was pulled out by a fisherman between Paksane and Nong Khai] The four passengers never got out of the helicopter.

Knight, 8/9/92: Accident report determined pilot error.

[Ken Conboy, 1/11/91: One passenger was Lao colonel in charge of Military Region 1.]

Shortly after this, Nichols replaced Aspinwall as chief of helicopter maintenance at Udorn.

Casterlin: Casterlin had surveyed the site for Nam Lieu (LS-118A) with Bill Young. [LS-118A was opened during the winter of 1964-65] Ojibway was the first senior case officer stationed there. After his death, Tony Po (who had been having problems with Vang Pao) replaced him. Terry Burke took over at 20A; later, Jerry Daniels replaced him. Nunez told Casterlin that he had gone under twice and was ready to give up when hit by a branch. He put it under his arm, then gathered other debris as he floated down the river. He was picked up by a fisherman after travelling some 80 miles. Divers did not find the aircraft and bodies trapped inside. Casterlin heard that the Agency was "pissed" over the loss of two case officers.

Casterlin, his wife, and Marius Burke took Nunez out to a nightclub the night he was rescued "to keep him from going crazy. He was depressed and it helped him to heal. The Customer never forgave him as Ojibway was a sort of hero in the Agency." Bobby had gone under twice and had decided to end it when a stick hit him. He collected enough to tuck under his arm and stay afloat until a fisherman picked him up the next morning. The doctor told him that he would get staph boils from the filthy water he had ingested. However, no sickness ever appeared. "It was a heck of a thing to happen to a well liked good guy."

Re Po: Casterlin got along well with Po. Some of the pilots didn't like him. He used to bump the collective in flight. Casterlin used to sit and talk to him over beers at 20A during the evening. Po was a heavy drinker. He lived with a "wife" that Vang Pao had given him. Tony showed different personalities to different people.

[Bangkok Post, Sunday, August 22, ran a small story for a "USAF helicopter" that had crashed near Nongkhal at 7.30 p.m. on Friday, August 20. Villagers managed to rescue
one American; five members of the crew are missing. A follow-up story on the Post on August 24 said that the US embassy has been notified that "Lewis A. O'Jibway and Edward Johnson" were missing in the accident. They are employees of "Bird and Son." O'Jibway is from Redonda Beach, CA, while Johnson is from Washington, D.C."

[Tom Fosmire, 8 Feb 93: "Ed Johnson’s body was recovered. He was a former marine. His funeral was attended by Bill Colby, chief F.E. Division at the time. John Greany knew Ed Johnson and also attended the funeral. I am not sure about O'Jibway's body. May or may not have been recovered."

[Mike Lynch, 10 June 93: "The Nam Lieu crash into the Mekong ended up in a strange way in that Ed’s body was found in the river after the crash and Jib’s was never recovered. He was thus carried on the rolls as "missing" until declared dead a year later. Although there is no doubt that he died in the crash, I believe his "missing" status allowed his heirs to collect his salary until he was declared dead and then receive the death benefits. Ed’s heirs collected only the death benefits. A number of us laughed later that Jib had pulled an old "Indian trick" (he was reportedly a full-blooded O'Jibway Indian) to get the extra money. The wall of honor reflects this delayed death. I recall one time that Tony said Jib was smart enough to carry a pocket full of rocks to make sure he sank on impact."

August 22, 1965

Casterlin to parents: Things are starting to slow down as the pool of pilots builds up. We lost two ships last month due to mechanical problems.

September 1965

PIC to ATOG, Monthly Report: Unusually large influx of newly hired pilots. Seven incidents of hostile fire. Two aircraft hit; slight damage. [48 pilots hired in September]

DOD, "Report on Selected Air and Ground Operations in Cambodia and Laos," September 10, 1973:

Worsened situation in South Vietnam caused US to undertake limited ground recon actions in Laos. Initially named SHINING BRASS; subsequently called PRAIRIE FIRE. These involved small recon teams composed of indigenous civilians led by Vietnamese or US Special Forces personnel assigned from MACV Studies and Operations Group (MACSOG). Later mission were undertaken in Cambodia under the name of DANIEL BOONE and later SALEM HOUSE. Total of 3,683 missions into Laos and Cambodia prior to termination of US participation on April 1972.

October 3, 1965
Frank Muscal (copilot with White) killed on C-123B which hit bulldozer on runway at Long Tieng.

Al White: This was a Sunday, and White was scheduled to fly into Long Tieng with 40 drums of aviation gasoline. His copilot was a new man, Frank Muscal, a retired USAF LTC. He remembers that Muscal had a pin on his lapel; he said that MAC gave it out for 10,000 accident-free hours. White was impressed. They briefing at VTE was routine. They arrived over Long Tieng and found low status with breaks in the overcast, a normal morning situation for that time of year. White flew overhead and caught a glimpse of the 1,200-foot north/south dirt strip. He turned toward the southwest gap, came down under the clouds and put flaps at 60 degrees for landing. Just as he was ready to touch down, a bulldozer came across the runway. White put on power and pulled over the dozer. Muscal then called out, "There are barrels blocking the runway!" The airplane stalled, then cartwheeled, tail end first, before coming to rest against the side of a karst. The right side of the cockpit had caved in, but the left side was OK. White had passed out at the moment of impact. He woke up hanging upside down. He unfastened his belt. Hearing the sound of liquid, he hit the fire switches. Muscal was laying prone, moaning. He gaw a gigantic fash in his head, through which he brains were spilling out. Fearing fire, White pushed open a crack in the side of the cockpit and dragged Muscal out of the airplane by his. People were running up and this point, and White heard an American voice say, "By God, someone’s alive." White and Muscal were taken by helicopter to the hospital at San Thong. White had only a few scratches and bruises but Muscal died of his injuries.

White later learned that the CIA people at Long Tieng had sent a message that the runway would be closed after the end of operations on Friday, but somehow word had not been passed along. The bulldozer operator was not to blame (although White heard that he was later executed). White was criticized for getting into a situation where it was impossible to make a go-around and was demoted to copilot.

October 12, 1965
Richard H. Lieberth & Franklin D. Smith killed at Saravane in UH-34 H-32. Also two CIA case officers under USAID cover: Michael Duel [Deuel?] and Michael Maloney.
overgrowth would prevent sighting by air. At 1625, H-15 reported sighting crashed aircraft at XC 675465. He reported possibility of one survivor as they had sighted a body stretched out on the fuselage. Caribou 853 arrived over crash site at 1725 and began to drop paratroops. By now, darkness was hampering the search.

At 0600 October 14, H-15 and H-28 departed Pakse for the search area. Various elements of ground search party spread along creekbed and had not reached crashed aircraft. A customer with a VHF radio was lowered by hoist from H-15 into creek bed downstream from crash. He contacted several members of ground search parties, who were then vectored into crash site by H-15. Reaching the crash, they ascertained that there were no survivors. Ford was then lowered into the creek and proceeded to the aircraft. Three people in passenger compartment apparently had died on impact. "The pilot, despite obviously severe and painful injuries, managed to extricate himself from the cockpit and crawl out on the fuselage where he expired. Area cleared so helicopters could land with additional supplies. Bodies were removed, then customer personnel departed.

Marius Burke to WML, Jan. 15, 1993: "Dick [Lieberth] and I had a personality conflict. He was a high-time pilot and a loudmouth who thought he knew it all. I gave him his final upcounty capt. checkout (it took about a week). It was just not satisfactory enough for me to release him so a down was given. I took a lot of heat for it because of the personality conflict, with some saying that was the only reason he got a down (not so!). In any case, he went out for another couple of months of upcountry training before I gave him another check ride. This was done, and although it was not a great ride it did meet our standards so I passed him. I saw him off the next morning for his first flight as a capt. and I remember telling him just prior to departure, "Whatever you do, just don’t screw up today." Off he went to Pakse and by noon had crashed.

I flew down with Herb Baker, and with about half dozen a/c searched throughout the afternoon for them. We knew within a mile radius where he had to be as he had taken off from a pad and almost immediately disappeared. Just before dark, the a/c was sighted. It had virtually knifed through the trees and left hardly any swath to facilitate search efforts.

An American Dr. who had just that day arrived from the U.S. was with us and with a local team ended up being dropped in an open area by a stream a couple hundred yards from the crash site. Due to darkness and a questionable enemy situation, they did not get to the site until the next day. (The Dr. was ill prepared for such an eventuality, wearing a short sleeve short and having no other equipment.) Indications were that Lieberth survived the crash and
crawled out of the cockpit, ending upon the side of the a/c. He probably died of shock. The investigation by John Aspinwall and myself could find no apparent cause other than loose linkage to the mixture control which over a period of time resulted in a leaner and leaner mixture which eventually would not sustain a high power setting. I believe Lieberth tried to nurse the a/c, let the RPM drop too low and the blades [ ] causing the a/c to virtually free fall through the trees. A lot more to the story including the wrong body being cremated."

October 12, 1965
Casterlin to parents: "It’s very slow here now."

October 1965
PIC to ATOG, Monthly Report: One Helio and two UH-34s damaged during month. Two passengers of one of H-34s injured by ground fire. SAR increasing with improved weather.

October 27, 1965
Robert M. (Sam) Hifler hired, one of 43 new pilots hired during October. He was ex-military (DOB 11/26/23), having joined Army Air Corps in 1942 (P-40s, B-25s, F-100s, B-66s). He flew as co-pilot on C-123s in the beginning. He later went to Helios and Porters.

To WML, 22 Jan 92: "The Porter originally had a radial recip. The lightweight jet engine-turbo prop modification required the long nose to get the weight & balance back in the ball park. When the company elected to phase out the Helio Couriers I had been flying I got into the Porter somewhat reluctantly. Although a real squirrel, the Helio was very reliable, strong, absorbed ground fire well, and seldom burned when parked hard. The Porter did prove very easy to fly, and with over 600 shaft horses could haul ones posterior out of a hole. The criteria for determining engine performance differed from a recip. As Gene Britzius pointed out, it amounted to 'Sympathy.' Five gauges - oil pressure, torque, tach, fuel flow, and EGT. If one gauge showed distress, you just kept an eye on it. If two or more gauges sympathized with each other, it was time to find a soft parking spot. The Porter could haul a bit over 1600 pounds. I had pilot-actuated drop doors, and some pretty weird stuff went out those doors. . . . The Porter prop can be reversed for short field landings and can even be reversed in flight should one become real bored. The prop control has a detent referred to as Beta. In Beta, it acts as an airbrake allowing 60 degree descents without appreciable increase in airspeed."

At one point, Hifler was working out of 118A. He was loaded with approx. 30 25-pound anti-personnel bombs. A young blond agency individual, a Meo soldier, and Lao
officer with radio also came onboard. He attacked a position about 12 miles from China, right next to Burma, where the Mekong and Nam Lieu meet, using the Beta position of the prop and "making like a Stuka."

Riffler recalls turning in at Wattay for overhaul a Lao-registered Helio - XW-PEA. The Operations Manager asked him to do a test hop on another Helio just returning for service. The tail number also was PEA. "After searching the ramp and find no PEA I went in one of the hangers and noticed a large crate with the fuselage of Helio therein. Though completely devoid of paint I could easily read the letters PEA on the tail fin. Returning to the ops manager I told him that PEA was not ready for test as it was still in the box. He said, 'Not that one, try around back of the hangar.' Sure enough, there was the third PEA. . . . The Helio was phased out of operations in June 1972. The took up the slack."

December 31, 1965

USAF has 9,000 personnel in Thailand and 200 aircraft. 2730 USAF and 1818 USN airstrikes in northern Laos during 1965.

ALMANAC: Operation Rolling Thunder has flown 55,000 sorties; 171 aircraft lost. Daily average of 55 sorties in southern Laos in Operation Steel Tiger.