1966

[One US/AAM wounded by hostile fire in 1966: Matthew Luca, May 19]

[ Udorn flying hours:

January 2,518
February 2,359
March 2,603
April 2,797 (H-14 lost)
May 2,799 (H-42 lost)
June 2,699
July 2,902

[ Year of greatest USAF expansion in Thailand. In early February, Thai government approves deployment of 606th Air Commando Squadron. Also, 3 additional squadrons of F-4s and F-105s deployed. By the end of the year, there are 25,000 personnel and 400 aircraft in Thailand. During 1966, 6,416 USAF and 900 USN airstrike in northern Laos. ]

Utterback: Utterback was checked out in the Helio in September 1965. Because of his experience with F-100s and ALQ/FAC duty in Vietnam, Utterback was one of only a few Helio pilots to be used for FAC missions. "The FAC program was not a formal operation at Air America like the Alpha Program (the T-28 fighter operation - clandestine and separate). Prior to the Ravens setting up operation in Laos, the customer would organize and co-ordinate air strikes in Laos. Most of the FAC missions were done out of Na Kham (LS-36) although some were flown out of other strips. They were flown in Helios and Porters. Unlike the Air Force FACs, the Air America pilot of the Helio or Porter on a FAC mission was more or less a taxi driver. Some of the AAM pilots who were former fighter pilots and FACs could add to the effectiveness of the mission with their input. There were no specific pilots listed with AAM ops who could or couldn't fly FAC missions. However, it was common knowledge that the customer had a list of those pilots preferred for FAC missions and a list of pilots not to use. It would be just a wild guess - but I would say about 20 percent of the Helio/Porter pilots flew a least one FAC mission up country. Over a 2 year prior I flew many missions with Frank Odum (call sign "Bag"). I also flew with several other customers but can't recall their names. (I did a lot of missions for Shep [Johnson], including dropping homemade napalm from a Caribou.) The customer would have the list of incoming aircraft call signs, etc. We would put about 200 pounds of radios on the airplane
along with survival gear, weapons, and smoke grenades. Also the customer would bring along a local military radioman (either Lao or Hill Tribe ethnic, depending on what friendly troops were in the area.) The local would communicate with the ground troops and the customer would communicate with the fighters. Any fighters that had VHF, the Helio or Porter pilot could communicate directly with - otherwise we would relay thru the customers’ UHF set any recommendations. The customer used his call sign with the fighters. We continued to use our aircraft call sign when talking on the aircraft’s radio. We had no marking rockets on either the Helio or Porter but would occasionally drop a smoke grenade."

Utterback flew hundreds of these missions over two years, often flying all day long, as the customer directed USN, USAF, and USMC fighters.

At one point, Utterback noticed an NVA camp on the top of a flattened mountain top north of strip 179, way north of the PDJ, and arranged for an airstrike. He spent the night at LS-36, then took off a dawn and orbited below the mountain, about 6-7 miles away. He directed a flight of F-105s with CBU's through a valley to the target. They made two passes, killing hundreds of enemy.

There were no pilots killed on FAC mission, although Wayne Ensminger (ex-F-100 pilot) had gone upcountry to do FAC missions and had radio gear onboard when he crashed at LS-48A (Moun Hien) on 6 March 1966.

Charles L. Jones and James J. Stanford (11 Oct 1991): Jones and Stanford were trained as forward air guides at Hurlburt. Jones went through the program at the beginning in the early 1960s and sent on to serve a tour in Vietnam in 1962 with Special Forces "A" teams. He believes that the success of this program lead to the introduction of enlisted FACs (Butterfly was their radio call sign) into Laos in late 1965/early 1966. They first trained Hmong teams that would go out on long range patrols to speak a few simple English phases, such as "I have a target." Air America helicopters then inserted the teams into northern Laos. On a typical day, Jones or Stanford would leave Long Tieng at dawn, land at a forward airstrip (LS-36/LS-2), speak with the local people, then take one of more of the locals to the target area. Arriving in the area, a ground team would hear the aircraft and come up on the radio. Jones/Stanford then would call in the strike aircraft: F-105s from Takhli (later in the year, they were fragged for morning and afternoon strikes), Thao Ma's T-28s (not too often), Thai-piloted T-28s, and A-1Es (Fireflies) that were looking for targets of opportunity. Returning to Long Tieng at sunset, there would be a session every night at Vang Pao's house, discussing the day's activities and getting request for the
following day. They would get BDA from teams that had been
sent into the strike area, intelligence about underwater
bridges and other targets, etc. Jones/Stanford would
contact Takhli via HF radio (sometimes, Vientiane) and
request F-105s for the next day’s mission. The program was
very successful. They often observed secondary explosions.
Stanford arrived in March 1966, then transferred to
LS-118A in the summer to do the same job for Tony Po. They
left in October 1966.

Robert A. Downs (10/11/91): Downs served as aviation
adviser to General Thao Ma for six months during 1966. He
had been preceded by Joe Holden. Thao Ma had about 40-50
T-28s. Downs flew several missions with the Lao Air Force.
No planes were lost during his tour, although several were
shot up badly. A few pilots were wounded, but no one was
killed.

Billie R. Keeler, interview #651: Keeler (out of
uniform) arrived in Laos in January 1966. He spent most of
his time at Long Tieng with Vang Pao. "I was sort of his
advisor." There were three USAF people at 20A: LTC John
Garrity (an intelligence officer who had arrived late in
1965), MSgt Charlie Jones, and Keeler. Keeler worked
directly for COL Pettigrew, the air attache in Vientiane.
"Ambassador Sullivan is a very strong character and
what he said was pretty much law. He didn’t mess into our
operations too much - the way we did things - what we did,
yes."

Keeler sometimes acted as a FAC. He adhered to the
ROE, especially "don’t bomb villages." He would FAC at
times with Air America. Also, Vang Pao sometimes would send
someone up to ride along and point out targets."

February 1966

AAM Udorn Communications Center becomes control center
for weather net stations in Laos that begin operation in
February. (Weather net control transferred to VTE in August
1969.) Udorn facilities include HF (8765/5568) and VHF
(119.1) Air/Ground; Single sideband Flight Watch relay
(7355/3832); and point-to-point with TPE, VTE, BKK, and SGN.
[Shane Tang, "Udorn Communications Center," April 23, 1970,
AAM Archives]

February 4, 1966

BKK Post reports military situation in Laos "calm but
uneasy" with small and scattered encounters, mainly in the
Sam Neua area.

[Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos": North Vietnamese
government made decision to expand significantly its
military involvement in Laos. Previously, PAVN had
supported PL; PAVN now to dominate specific operations. On
February 15, elements of the 160th Regiment of 316th Division
departed Phu Yen, North Vietnam; two days later, the
regiment overwhelmed Na Khang. The regiment then captured
nearby bases at Muong Hias and Muong Son. PL plays only
minor role.

PAVN forces withdrew toward Sam Neua City with onset of
rainy season in mid-1966, allowing government forces to
reclaim the lost garrisons.

This marks the beginning of a familiar pattern: PAVN
forces spearhead Communist drive during dry season, then
withdraw to Sam Neua during the rainy season.

February 17, 1966

Urgent phone calls from deputy commander, 2d Air
Division/13th Air Force to Saigon for AC-47s to help defend
LS-36, which was under heavy enemy pressure. "The two
gunships were sent immediately to Udorn RTAFB, performed
well, but failed to save Lima Site 36. Nevertheless, the
Ambassador to Laos and the Air Attache were sufficiently
impressed with the gunships' capability that they requested
the AC-47s be left Udorn permanently." Mission against
Trail flown on night of February 23, destroying eleven
trucks. AC-47s stationed at Ubon RTAFB in April and used
mainly against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. "One aircraft took
off at 1800, the other at midnight. The gunships flew a
planned schedule that allowed at least four contacts per
night with each of the roadwatch teams operating
clandestinely around the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. After
flying to the designated area, a Lao observer on board the
gunship radioed the roadwatch team. If a target was
indicated in the area the gunship would drop flares along a
road or trail in an effort to acquire the target. Once a
truck was spotted, the gunship went into its strike orbit
and fired away. At times it would call for additional
strike aircraft. This system was first employed on March 21
and proved effective." Enemy responded with more and better
AAA, including 37mm, which outstripped the range of the AC-
47 miniguns. By June 30, 1966, four gunships were lost to
ground fire. By the end of August, all AC-47s had departed
Thailand. General Hunter Harris, Jr., commander in chief,
PACAF, had doubted that the AC-47s could survive in the
hostile environment over Laos and had expressed his
reservations to Chief of Staff General McConnell. McConnell
proposed A-26s as an alternative and offered eight aircraft.
Harris accepted this substition, with the concurrence of
Ambassador Sullivan and the Thai government. A-26s began
operating in June. [Ballard, pp. 45-47]
February 18, 1966

PL/NVA attack on Na Khang (LS-36), northeast of PDJ. This was an important forward operating base for SAR and recon missions. Two CIA advisers stationed there: Jerry Daniels, and Mike Lynch. Jerry and Mike evacuated by helicopter while Hmong and Thai PARUs fight off attackers. VP, arriving at small village near Na Khang, shot in right arm and chest as he stepped off helicopter. Evacuated to Korat; injury not serious.

Fonberg: Vang Pao had landed at LS-36 after the enemy had taken it and presumably left but after looking around pronounced it safe and called me in to land. He was standing on the wheel of my H-34 when shots rang out from the wooded area across from the rice paddy. Vang Pao fell to the ground grasping his shoulder and I lumbered down the runway heavily overloaded with some of his people who had gotten on board. I finally bounced it into the air. Vang Pao was only wounded in the shoulder and after I got off (and it was a stagger with gunfire chasing me all the way), I landed at LS-48 to check my aircraft. It had 4 hits. One just missed me in the cockpit, one just missed my engine, and one missed my transmission area, and one just missed my tail rotor gear box. Any one direct hit would have ended by escape. After checking the aircraft over, I was back to pick up a wounded Vang Pao for evacuation within minutes and took his to LS-48 where a Caribou was waiting for evacuation to Thailand for medical care.

Notes of interview with Michael S. Lynch, December 6, 1992, Washington, D.C.

Lynch arrived in Laos in January 1963, a new career employee of the CIA. He remained until May 1967. He was 25 years old in 1963.

Lynch spent a good deal of time at LS-36. This was a FAR area, commanded at first by Colonel Tong. VP sent a battalion to defend LS-36 when the FAR force was no longer viable. LS-48 was held by the Neutralists, and VP was reluctant to move there after LS-36 fell. Jerry Daniels also worked at LS-36. (Lynch heard that Daniels was the junior chess champion of Montana.) Daniels specialty was air operations. Lynch's job was mainly logistical in nature. He would get the daily list of food/ammo requirements and arrange for delivery. Also, he would give tactical advice to VP, mainly about air. There as only limited air-ground communications in the beginning, which was one of the major problems.

LS-36 support was more by fixed wing than helicopters, and Lynch worked mainly was CAS Porters (better than Helios
due altitude (4400 feet; runway 2265 x 130 Laterite). CAS
Porter pilots also used as FACs (AAM used after Porters
acquired). Lynch was complimentary re Phil Goddard.
Goddard often flew the AAM's first Bell, 39F, which was used
at LS-36. He would shut down (other pilots kept rotors
turning). He had a wicker hamper and would have a leisurely
lunch, at one point even using a tablecloth. He would
carefully question Lynch and the locals about the situation
in the area. "He never did anything dumb."
Jim Rhyme also
took the time to understand the local situation.

Lynch started the Forward Air Guide program at LS-36.
The first FAG was a Hmong named Moua Chong, with radio call
sign of TALLMAN. He would go into the area east of Route 6
with a team of 10 men, inserted by USAF Jolly Greens or AAM.
TALLMAN worked with B-26 Nimrods on night attacks against
the Trail. He was extremely successful and was well known
to the B-26 pilots (Lynch has tape). He was killed in
family feud (friendly fire?). Lynch heard that he received
the Silver Star posthumously. The second FAG was a Thai
with radio call sign REDHAT. He also was successful.

There were USAF weathermen at LS-36: Keith Crimes and
Jack Teague. Stan Monte, a USAF medic, supported the
weather program. Glenn Duke, a USAF captain, was one of
the first USAF personnel on the ground up-country. He
returned to NKP to command a T-28 unit and was KIA.

SGUs originally were small teams of 20 men, plus a team
leader and radio operator. They eventually were combined
into SGU battalions, Ranger-type units.

VP was wounded at LS-36 on February 18, 1966, while
standing next to an AAM helicopter (Lynch was next to him).
The helicopter took off and had to be called back. Lynch
recalls a luncheon in Honolulu, hosted by Admiral Sharp.
(Lynch was returning after home leave and accompanied VP.)
A USAF briefer praised the marvellous F-4. Sharp asked VP
what he thought. VP said that F-4s were like Cobras in his
homeland: "Very deadly - but few people ever bitten." (VP
had a higher regard for A-1s and B-26s.)

February 1966
Gary Gentz arrives in Udorn. Frank Davito, Hal
Augustine, and Jim Agnew arrived shortly after he did.
Roger Burdwood, Orville Mock, and Bob Collins (all excellent
mechanics) were the senior men. When he arrived, the
production line of UH-34s had just been reopened and AAM
began receiving brand new helicopters. He working in the
hangar (training) for two months, then began flying in late
April. About half the flight mechanics were American, a
half Filipino. The normal tour was about six days
upcountry. The situation was quiet, with the only fighting going on at LS-36, which had just been retaken.

March 6, 1966

Wayne W. Ensminger in Helio B-877 killed when stabilizer cable broke on take off; aircraft stalled into ground. LS-48 Chong Ha.

Lair to Andresevic: Re death of Captain Deja in crash of Helio 877. Deja left 4 small children, all under age 7, and a pregnant wife. Lair trying to establish trust fund for children. Asks for contributions from pilots:

"Captain Deja was always the first to volunteer to go anywhere to assist pilots and passengers of downed aircraft. I feel that many of us owe him a last gesture of our gratitude for his service."

Lair: Deja Adulrat was an officer in the Thai Service. He worked closely with me from 1951 until his death. When I first met him he was a young teenage private. "I believe he was about the most courageous man I ever knew." I was in Thailand and Laos from 1 March 1951 until the end of 1977. In my work I always used first CAT and then Air America aircraft. "I always tried to make the pilots feel that they were key partners in our activity and as a result of this effort Deja was closely associated with many of the pilots. Because of his ability and courage Deja was always at the cutting edge of our activity. He took a special interest in helping pilots when they got into trouble, usually at great risk to himself."

Deja was riding in a Helio with two AAM pilots and one USAID official when he was killed. He was riding in the back where the seat had been taken out. Since aircraft usually burned, he and the USAID man scrambled out as quickly as possible and ran away from the aircraft for safety. When Deja realized that the pilots were sitting there somewhat dazed, he ran back to get them out. While he was doing this, the plane exploded, killing him and the pilots. We got this information from the USAID man who remained at a safe distance and was not injured. This act was one of the many courageous and kindly things Deja did in his life.

The memo raised about $25,000, about 80 percent of which came from Air America pilots; I put the money in a trust fund to be administered by Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn for the education of Deja's children. Sometime after his death, a movie about him was produced by the King of Thailand and shown on Thai television.

Hazen: Deja worked out of LS-16, Phou Fa or "Agony." This was on the western edge of the PDJ. "Agony" was a bad place to drop. It had a elevation of 5400 feet and a short
dirt strip, 700 x 35. There were often high winds. You did not fly off the strip, you fell off the mountain, then picked up flying speed. The engine gave 28 1/2 inches of manifold pressure at sea level. As you lose 1 inch per 1000 feet, this meant 23 inches at 5400 feet - less than climb power out of VTE. Deja was known to go out at night with a 75mm recoiless rifle, which he used to fire on enemy camps.

Utterback: Ensminger was ex-F-100 pilot. He went upcountry to do FAC missions. He had the radio equipment on board but evidently had time to take a person or two persons to an up country strip about 15 minutes north of LS48A (Mounf Hiem). Made left turn after takeoff from SSW takeoff from LS-48A and started a northerly climb on course (most pilots did a 360 or two after T/O from LS48A to gain terrain clearance). Wayne crashed on T/O. Boost pump on was factor in fire. Rumor that acft overgrossed; another rumor that problem was bad load of gas.

Lynch, Dec 6, 1992: Jerry Daniels saw Ensminger's plane go down. Lynch flew into the crash site. He never heard the story about Deja returning to the aircraft. Cy Roberts, a USAF captain and photo interpreter on a familiarization flight, was killed. George Rainer, 8AM ground personnel, was thrown out of the aircraft and wandered away; he was not found until the next day. The aircraft was involved in the campaign to retake LS-36.

April 9, 1966
F/H Romeo B. Crisologo killed when UH-34 H-14 crashed on take off from ridgeline pad near Ban Pak Lo. Pilot R.V. Semora not injured.
XOXO: Three passengers escaped injury. Initial report from Semora says loss RPM on take off from ridge line pad, hit hill side and slid down steep slope. Acft began to burn from eng compartment. Cabin door was on top side but Crisologo remained inside acft." Semora was flying from left seat at time of accident.

John Ford Logbook: "While flying co-pilot on H-14 in northern Laos with Capt. Ray Semora, we experienced a loss of power and crashed and burned. The loss of power occurred during take-off from a 5,400 ft. pinnacle. The a/c crashed in the trees on the side of the mountain, rolled on its left side and burst into flame. The load (75mm howitzer, shells) shifted and crushed the flight mechanic to death. The three Laoaian army passengers, Capt. Semora and I crawled out of the burning a/c and ran down the mountain slope and the a/c began to explode. The Lao soldiers guided us across a valley and up another mountain to a friendly position where we were picked up by an Air America helicopter piloted by Prulhier."
April 9, 1966

“Report of Aircraft Accident – UH-34 – H-14” – CIA Corporate Records, Box 58 –

Semora in left seat, Ford in right, plus flight mechanic Crisologo and three passengers. Immediately after take-off, RPM decayed and the aircraft struck the ground, then rolled own a steep hill. Crisologo injuries were fatal. Probable cause: Semora exceeded the capabilities of the aircraft.
Interview with John D. Ford, Green Cove Springs, FL, April 26, 1991:

Ray Semora was checking out Ford. During the day’s operations, he suggested that Ford was using too much power for take off at high elevation pads, and that he should conserve the engine. At Ban Pak Lo, they loaded a 75 mm pack howitzer and 24 rounds of ammunition. Semora said: “Let me show you how to do it.” He then picked up to a hover. The RPM immediately started to drop off and Ford thought that Semora would set the airplane down. Instead, he dumped the nose in an effort to get flying speed as they headed down the mountain. The aircraft, however, dropped like a rock, with rotor blades cutting down trees. The aircraft started to burn before in came to rest. Hitting the ground, the load shifted and killed Chrisologo. Semora, Ford, and three Lao passengers ran for their lives as the aircraft exploded. The accident report blamed "loss of RPM." This was a time when "we were not being very honest with ourselves about some of the accidents." Ford believes that Semora should have put the helicopter on the ground.

[Casterlin says that this accident was pilot error. Semora was carrying a 75mm pack howitzer and got behind the power curve. Chrisologo was crushed by the gun.]

April 25, 1966

John Ford Logbook: "After landing at a landing strip in northern Laos and while we were refueling, we came under mortar attack. Another a/c in the area, piloted by George Carroll, saw our situation and started making low passes on the hill that the mortar was coming from. Even though Carroll’s a/c was unarmored, he managed to divert their attention long enough for us to evacuate the area. Thanks George."

April 30, 1966

T/S report: First Porter for Garrett conversion nearly completed; Garrett-powered Porters from Pilatus due to arrive shortly; first two Volpar conversions underway. Two C-123s received by Udorn in March, bring fleet to nine; salvage of crashed C-123 No. 538 completed in mid-April. "Chronic engine and propeller shortages kept the Porter fleet grounded most of the month as usual."

May 13, 1966 {m}

Weste to Grundy: We presently have 15 Porters (not counting the 8 purchased through Fairchild). 12 are currently in operation with recurring grounding due
unavailability of spare engines. The other 3 are in Tainan for conversion to Garrett engines. We should be able to start modification on 3 more in June. That will leave 9 Astazou-powered Porters, supported by 6 spare engines. [The French engine proved a problem for AAM.]

May 19, 1966

John W. Wilmot, Jr. UH-34 H-42 fatally wounded when aircraft hit by gunfire while landing FAR troops northeast of Bouan Long (LS-32). F/H Matthew Luca severely burned.

Knight to WML, Oct. 7, 1966: "The May 19 incident involved a rather large movement of FAR forces to a large valley site northeast of LS-32. Several of our helicopters were involved and several shuttles had been completed when Dick Casterlin sighted PL or NVA on a trail leading toward the landing area. Other aircraft in the flight were alerted, but Wilmot was already at or near initial approach to landing and he elected to continue; he was followed by Capt Ed Reid who was to observe the following sequence of events. At or very near to time of touchdown, Wilmot's H-34 came under fire and seemed to enter uncontrolled flight almost simultaneously with the commencement of ground fire. After ground contact the aircraft burst into flame and other H-34's coming under ground fire, moved clear of the area. I cannot recall the Flight Mechanic's name at this time [Matthew Luca], but he was able to crawl clear of the crash after suffering rather severe burns. He was able to avoid detection by searching unfriendlies and was rescued when support aircraft were used to reenter the area to search for survivors of the accident. Wilmot's remains were recovered and it was determined that he had received a fatal wound before ground contact. Wilmot had previously been a Flight Mechanic and had gone back to the USA and Canada and obtained a pilot's license and enough experience to qualify as an AAM helicopter pilot. He had been qualified for a few months as pilot-in-command at the time of the accident."

May 22, 1966

Casterlin to parents: "We had a lousy operation here the other day. I was shot up pretty bad and another plane was shot down with a few fatalities [Wilmot]. This shouldn't have happened." [Elder said that Casterlin tried to alert Wilmot that the enemy was on the ground but that Wilmot was on a different frequency.] [Casterlin believes that Mike Lynch was partly to blame for Wilmot's death.]

May 31, 1966

T/S Report: Astazou-powered Porter fleet of three "finally got back on its feet," following two operational accidents and upcountry engine change.
Three Garrett-powered Porters arrived Udorn toward the end of the month; we have learned that a total of eight Garretts will be assigned to Udorn.

June 1966

Aircraft and estimated monthly time for June:

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<tr>
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June 1966

AC-47s were used against the Trail with great success in 1966 - at least until the NVA introduced 37mm guns and shot down several. The decision was made to replace them with A-26s. The first 8 A-26s arrived at NKP in June 1966 on TDY from the 602nd Air Commando squadron at Hurlburt on Operation Big Eagle. Col. Domenico Curto was in command. The first permanent detachment arrived in January 1967.


8 June 1966: 8 A-26As deployed to NKP from England AFB, LA, under BIG EAGLE program to evaluate A-26As for night interdiction.

20 June 1966: First missions flown (daylight - familiarization). In the first four days, 26 recon missions flown with O-1F CRICKET FACs from 23rd TASS onboard. Night missions started the following week.

29 June 1966: Aircraft and crew lost to enemy ground fire on daylight mission. Four aircraft received battle damage in the first 10 days, all on daylight missions.

Early July 1966: Heavy and accurate flak encountered during five sorties directed against targets in Route Package I area in North Vietnam. Curto requested that A-26s
not be diverted into North Vietnam; 7th AF agreed. Sullivan approved use of A-26s to attack targets in Laos without FACs, and to act as FACs in Laos.

September 1966: Curto recommends that A-26 operations be expanded into areas beyond CRICKET. This was approved, and operations were expanded into the Mahaxay area. There was no battle damage in nighttime operations through September.

[Ambassador Sullivan had a requirement for night interdiction. AC-47s were deployed from South Vietnam in December 1965. Aircraft were lost on 24 December 1965 and 13 March 1966 (both disappeared — hit mountain?), in May 1966 (disappeared), and June 1966 (ground fire). By October 1966, Sullivan had become enthusiastic about A-26s operations and wanted eight more aircraft, which were to be used in place of eight scheduled AC-47s. 7th AF was reluctant and wanted additional evaluation. Sullivan approached Admiral Sharp, CINCPAC, and obtained his approval for the switch.]

1 November 1966: A-26s fragged for four sorties per night into BARREL ROLL area. They worked with roadwatch teams. November/December were months when NVA were resupplied for offensive operations in northern Laos. This decision resulted from a planning conference held at General Bond’s Udorn headquarters on October 25. CAS and AIRA/VTE urged increased air operations to hit the enemy before attacks were launched in Sam Neua province.

An integrated system of A-26s and roadwatch teams proved "highly successful." Two Meo commander [sic] headed teams: TALLMAN and REDMAN [RED COAT]. They worked with aircraft in the Sam Neua area along Routes 6 and 65 (northeast of the PDJ). Between November 2 and 9, A-26s destroyed or damaged 67 trucks and killed 384 enemy troops. Quotes intel report of November 15: "The Meo commanders reported that as of 10 November little traffic was moving along Routes 6 and 65 in their areas as a result of the successful A-26 bombings."

29 November 1966: NIMROD 32, Captain Billy L. Green and Navigator 1/LT Robert L. Tidwell, spotted truck lights at 1900. Fifteen ten-wheel trucks were on Route 65, moving southeast with their headlights on. They were accompanied by an armored car. NIMROD 32 made his first pass in the dark, from front to rear, with .50-caliber and CBU. He then dropped flare. He was in radio contact with TALLMAN. Other attacks followed. He then called in NIMRODS 34 and 35. TALLMAN reported that the trucks were loaded with troops.
December 1966: A-26s began arriving at NKP PCS and officially became part of LUCKY TIGER force. 606th ACS commander Colonel Aderholt arrived 9 December 1966 and "immediately began studying ways and means of more fully exploiting the A-26 capability in Laos." On 24 December 1966, Aderholt wrote that from November 1 to date, A-26s have restricted night movement of traffic "but not to a decisive degree." RWTs and photo recon continue to confirm heavy enemy traffic along Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger routes. A complete stoppage took place for a short time on Barrel Roll routes when four A-26 sorties per night were fragged into the area during the period November 1-12. This was reduced to three per night in late November.

Sightings in Barrel Roll slowed in December (celebration of Meo New Year). TALLMAN was accidentally killed by his rear guard while en route to base camp. There were 447 USAF sorties in December in Barrel Roll; only 20 by A-26s. Problems: limited flare capability and lack of aircraft availability (only seven aircraft by late December). Aderholt recommended that all 29 A-26As in USAF inventory be transferred to SE Asia, with 16 + 4 spares at NKP, and the remainder at Clark for training. The NKP force could then generate 20 sorties per night. [See January 1967 for use of T-28s.]

Tom Wickstrom, "Nimrods," Air Commando Newsletter, July 1988, pp. 1, 8-11, 13

In 1962, the USAF approached the On-Mark Engineering Company of Van Nuys, CA, to modify/rebuilt B-26s for COIN. The prototype TB-26K first flew in January 1963. The the loss of B-26s in Vietnam due to wing failure, LeMay awarded a production contract for 40 aircraft in November 1963. The first production aircraft was accepted by the USAF in June 1964. Twenty-two On-Marks were delivered in 1964, and eighteen in 1965.

The year 1965 saw a sharp increase of supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. AC-47s initially were used were great success, but the introduction of 37mm AAA resulted in several losses. The decision was made to replace, on a temporary basic, the AC-47s with B-26Ks. The first eight aircraft deployed to NKP in June 1966 (as A-26Ks). The crews were on 180-day TDY from the 602nd Air Commando Squadron at Hurlburt. The movement was designated BIG EAGLE. Colonel Donenico Corto, Wing commander at Hurlburt; LTC Al Howarth, commander of the 602nd AC Squadron; Major Joe Kittinger, Major Frank Gorski, and Captain Bob Dutten were involved with the initial deployment. Eight AC-47s were supposed to replace the 26s in the fall, but the decision was made to use the AC-47s in Vietnam only. The
A-26Ks had a number of advantages for the mission: long loiter time, a variety of weapons, low air speed, and two pairs of eyes - "a real hunter/killer aircraft."

The first combat mission was flown by Col. Curto in June. Enemy fire shot away the rotating beacon of his aircraft. The early missions were guided by A-1 and Zorro pilots. They worked with C-130 [C-123] flareships. The first aircraft was lost on June 28, 1966. A second was lost on July 24, and a third was shot down in December (three crew bailed out and were picked up by helicopter - LTC Howarth, Capt Jack Bell, and Capt Harold Cooper on his first combat mission).


Wickstrom went to NKP from Vietnam in early March 1967 on 120-day TDY to develop Candlestick (the use of C-123 flareships to work with the A-26s). At Aderholt's request, he developed the program to use Starlight scopes, hanging out of the bomb bay on straps from the rear compartment, and train combat controller for the position. It was uncomfortable for the person manning the scope, but it worked well, especially in northern Laos.

Many single-ship missions were flown in northern Laos (Barrel Roll), especially during the summer months of 1967. The use of the Starlight scope with operator began in the summer. Also, the aircraft began to use Mark 34 and 35 "funny" bombs - jellied fuel/CBU/HP. This was ideal for trucks and guns. Five aircraft and nine crew were lost in 1967.

One aircraft and three crew were lost in 1968.

1969 saw increased missions in Barrel Roll, both day and night, in support of Vang Pao. This year marked the first appearance of the hand-held missile. The Nimrods stopped flying in September 1969.

[The Air Force Museum has a modified B-26: pressurized, with the bomb bay modified for troop and supply drops. This was flown out of Udorn.]

Telephone interview with Col. Dominico A. Curto, December 21, 1992:

Curto, who was director of operations of the 1st Air Commando Wing, went to Saigon in April 1966 for pre-planning of the B-26 operation. He arrived at NKP in June on 30-day TDY but remained until September, when he turned the operation over to LTC Al Howarth (now deceased).

Curto, who had flown night missions in Korea, came up with the call sign NIMROD. He was looking in the Bible for something appropriate when he came across nimrod. The first
response from the pilots was unenthusiastic; however, as Curto was a full colonel, the name stuck.

There were no airborne controllers at first, but they soon appeared. He recalls one night when one of the more aggressive pilots (Mitchell) stopped 15-20 trucks on the Trail, hitting the first and last vehicle. While he was attacking, the airborne controller asked him to pull off to allow F-4 to come in. He refused at first: "I found them; I'll kill them!" When he did pull off, the F-4s came in - and missed the target. Mitchell had to finish the job.

Some 45 days after arrival, Curto went to Saigon to brief Momyer and his staff. They all hated the B-26s and were unfriendly. Curto pointed out that the B-26s had constituted 8 percent of the effort on the Trail over the past 45 days and had accounted for 50 percent of vehicular traffic destroyed. Although 7th AF intelligence supported these figures, Momyer still didn’t like prop aircraft.

Frank F. Gorski interview with V. H. Gallacher and Lyn R. Officer, February 15, 1973

Gorski deployed with the original group of B-26s to NKP in June 1966. He returned to the US shortly after Christmas. He flew two or three daylight missions in the beginning to become familiar with the area, then went on night operations. The B-26 pilots were certified as FACs and could strike at will on the Trail, as long as they remained within the ROE (major ROE: no villages). They were all single-ship missions, with pilot and navigator, that lasted about two hours.

Gorski worked with FAGs in Barrel Roll area. "We had some very good results with these people because they were sitting right on the side of the hill. They knew where the stuff was parked and hidden and everything else." He recalls his first encounter with a FAG - RED HAT. Gorski dropped a flare (the B-26 carried 12 flares on each wing). RED HAT: "Good. From flare, drop bomb were road turns." He then told Gorski to drop a bomb 500 meters in the opposite direction. He was then told to hit everything in between the two. Gorski got credit for 2 1/2 trucks and some personnel.

The Nimrod pilots had individual callsigns. Gorski: Oilcan Harry.

Telephone interview with Barry L. Bonwit, December 19, 1992

Bonwit was with the first PCS group of A-26 crew members, arriving NKP early January 1967 with five aircraft. He stayed for about 11 months and flew 178 missions.
He recalls working with FAGs TALLMAN and REDHAT. The A-26 crew would check in with the FAGs on a pre-arranged frequency. If there were targets, the A-26 would drop a flare. The FAG then would give distance and direction information from the flare. After the strike, he would pass along BDA. The major problem with the FAGs was their poor English, which permitted only limited communication.

The early starlight scopes were not too useful. They consisted of long tubes and were used from the cockpit. The addition of another crew member worked much better, but the USAF had problems with this individual.

The A-26s had torquemeter. If you did not get the proper reading on takeoff, you had to abort the mission. After a number of aborts, Aderholt solved this problem by taping over the meter.

Bonwit recalls one incident in which a hilltop site was about to be overrun. The defenders put flashlights in tubes, and made a cross from them. They instructed the A-26s to fly down the long leg of the cross and release their CBU at the bar. This worked extremely well. The cross was moved around the hill, and the CBU swept the area.

At one point, Gene Hughey asked Bonwit for the Dash One, or operating manual for the A-26. Hughey never told him what it was for.

[Roland K. McCoskrie interview by Robert G. Zimmerman, July 14, 1975: McCoskrie took over the 56th Wing from Aderholt in November 1967 and remained in command until November 1968. Approached about the replacement of B-26s and T-28s by A-1s, he assured General John D. Ryan (PACAF) that the A-1 could do the same job as the B-26 at night. The problem with the B-26 was that there were only a handful of the aircraft, and Ryan was concerned about keeping open the logistical supply line. McCoskrie considered Aderholt a bit too adamantly on the subject of retaining the B-26s.]

June 2, 1966
General Thao Ma rebels and seizes Savannakhet airport.

June 19, 1966
First Volpar Beech conversion completed.

Rhyme: Rhyme developed the Volpar photo recon program for Lair, beginning in the summer of 1966. Fred Walker, as regional chief pilot, selected three pilots for VTE for Volpar training, and they arrived with the aircraft. Rhyme, who had known from Lair that Udorn would be getting the Volpars, as surprised when three pilots showed up "who didn’t belong to me." However, they were sent back to VTE after a short period, and Rhyme checked out Berl King and Bob Main. These three flew the airplanes for the next six months.
[King was "very quiet." A Porter pilot, he had come to Rhyne's attention in August 1965 when he took a case officer north of Luang Prabang, looking for a team. They took 26 small arms hits on the mission. King went back the next day and took 24 hits, with one round going through his left wrist. [Rich logbook: 7 July 1965: Berl King in Porter northwest of LS-121 shot in arm and leg attempting air drop in bad weather.] When he returned to duty, he went to work for Rhyne. He was well liked and got along well with the customer (essential). Bob Main was an ex-Alaska Bush pilot. He also was quiet. "The Customer liked people who didn't talk a lot." He helped develop procedures for the Volpar that were in conflict with those developed by the Volpar representatives. Air America procedures turned out to be correct.]

Rhyne took the air conditioning unit out of the Volpar and put a camera in the hole in the floor. The Air Force provided film cassettes, which they developed in a truck-trailer at Udorn that was part of the 21st Recon Squadron (RF-101s). Initially, the Air Force read the film; later, the Customer provided photo interpreters. It reached the point where USAF pilot preferred to be briefed by Agency photo interpreters.

The program was an outstanding success. They flew over 2,000 missions (usually one a day) until 1973 and exposed millions of feet of film. As enemy guns increased on caliber, the cameras became bigger and the planes flew higher (there were three camera ports). There were a number of close calls on missions, but the only loss was an airplane returning from a mission. Frank G. Thorsen and Denny D. Thomas were in N95422 on July 31, 1973, when they saw a L-19 in the jungle, about 13 km north of Pa Boung. They went down for a look (it had been there for some time) and took AK fire. One round came through the side window and hit Thorsen under the nose, killing him instantly.

The photo program likely began because the Agency was having trouble getting photographs of the areas in which it was interested. It was connected with the trail watching program in northern Laos. [See May 1967]

Rhyne recalled [September 14, 1991] an incident that occurred in late 1964 or early 1966. Lair asked him to check out some reported activity south of Mu Gia Pass. He and William R. Demmons, who worked for Lair, went out in a Helio. Rhyne had a camera that took half-frame negatives. He flew south of Mu Gia, toward Tchepone, covering about 30-40 miles at 80 knots, often a tree-top level. He saw and photographed tracks of bulldozer and other signs of heavy activity. Also, he was able to pinpoint the exact location
of the Trail. When he returned to Udorn, the pictures were processed by the RF-101 squadron photo lab. The first pictures did not show what Rhyne had seen. He realized that not all the negatives had been processed, so he had them do it again. This time the revealing photos came out. Lair was tremendously excited and wanted 1000 copies of different pictures. Rhyne bought a case of beer for the people in the photo lab and the multiple copies were done overnight.

Shortly thereafter, Rhyne and another of Lair’s assistants went back to the area with a case of road nails. Using buckets, they dumped the nails on the road, often flying 5-6 feet off the ground. Landing back at Savannakhet, he informed General Ma that he likely would find some stranded trucks in the area. Ma sent in T-28s the next day and did find targets, but he lost a T-28 to antiaircraft fire and was not pleased.

June 21, 1966
Frank L. Dunn replaces Hickler at VTE.

June 28, 1966
First Garrett Porter conversion completed.

June 30, 1966
Garrett Porters began full upcountry operations and did very well in the beginning but developed problems toward the end of the month with fuel pump drives failing. [Later, engine problems.]

July 1, 1966
Gen William W. Momyer replaces Lt Gen Joseph H. Moore as commander of Seventh Air Force. He will remain until July 31, 1968. Moore had been commander of 2d Air Division since Jan. 21, 1964, and the first commander of 7th Air Force when it replaced the 2d Air Division on April 1, 1966.

July 1966
Shackley replaces Blaufarb as COS at VTE. He will remain until August 1968.

July 1966
Richard V. Secord arrives in Laos. (14 March 1992):
Secord was contacted by the CIA in 1966 while assigned to the Air Command and Staff College. He agreed to go with the Agency as a detaillee and was assigned to Saigon in June 1966. He worked in the air branch at the embassy, basically as an aide-de-camp to branch chief Mo Cuthbert. He was disappointed with the assignment and complained to a senior deputy to William Colby who was visiting Saigon. Within 48 hours ordered arrived directing his assignment PCS to Vientiane. He arrived in Udorn in July 1966 and remained
there until September 1968. (Initially a captain, he was promoted to major during the tour.)

He experienced "culture shock" when he first encountered the CIA operation at Udon. AB-1 was a ramshackle building. Lair and Landry were unimpressive. The whole operation had a "country store" atmosphere. There was one junior career officer, an ex-USAF SAC copilot named Tierney, who was working on air matters (he soon left), assisted by a USAF captain (detailed) who was a freight expert. [Fosmire: "This sounds like comments I heard from Shackley, not Secord."]

Secord visited the five military regions in Laos. He found that the CIA unit chiefs acted as "their own little warlords." They would request Air America/Continental aircraft, then manage the assigned planes as they saw fit. With air requirements growing, Secord recognized the need for more centralized control. With Bill Lair's approval, he set up an Air Liaison Office, which soon evolved into an Air Liaison Division. The creation of this organization generated needed personnel slots. This placed Secord in charge of the one the three operational divisions at Udon: Air, F-1 (spies), and ground operations [run by Tom Clines before he became chief of unit at Long Tieng]. He had full releasing authority for staff communications, and he acted at chief of base when Lair and Landry were absent. There was a bit of a turf battle with Charlie Gabler, head of the air branch at VTE, but Ted Shackley was goal oriented - Udon cooperated the MACs, so he left them alone. [Fosmire: "This is all overstated. I don't recall ever dealing with Secord as base chief. I do not recall Secord visiting Savannakhet at all/ever, 1966-1969. Releasing authority at Udon did not mean much. As I recall, Udon Base had to send everything to Vientiane for station release to Washington and other stations."]

Shortly after Secord arrived, Shackley ordered that 80 teams be maintained on the Trail. This required an enormous increase in the trail-watching program. It reached the point where Secord was scheduling one infil and one exfil a day, seven days a week, plus frequent emergency infil/exfils. At least two helicopter were needed for each mission. Secord insisted on the use of turbine-powered helicopters, which had better performance and lift capability. He considers his single greatest achievement the fact that no helicopter crew member was lost on any of these missions. [Fosmire: "I doubt the timing here. I had been doing serious roadwatch since 1966. This didn't start with Secord. All the infil procedures for A.A. and USAF infils had been worked out in detail by 1968, along with exfils and resupply. Hark-1 reporting system and use of overhead photography were all in use by 1968."]

One of the keys to the operation was good intelligence on the LZs. This generated the Volpar photo recon program.
Two pilots (King and Main) were assigned full-time to the project. The film was developed in USAF labs of the photo-recon squadron at Udorn and read by photo interpreters at AB-1. The program grew to include 9 photo interpreters and 2 support staff, under Peter Saderholm. Saderholm was a superb photo interpreter, and Secord often took him to brief Ambassador Sullivan (who considered himself an expert on military matters). (Fosmire: "True.")

Night drops to the teams on the Trail were done by Caribou. Gene Hughey, a retired SAC pilot who loved the work, was mainly responsible for this aspect of the program. Worried about the amount of traffic over the trail at night, Secord arranged for the installation of Skyspot beacons in the tails of the aircraft. This emitted a constant radar signal that gave the precise location of the aircraft. This "deconflicted" the drop aircraft. (Fosmire: "What is missing here is the fact the Continental Porters did a lot of night drops day in/day out - week in/week out. I don't think Secord knew much about Continental and their work. There was little night air ops except in South Laos by A.A. and Cont. and Cont. flew a big piece of it. We did not have [Skyspot] on the Continental Porters which made the big share of our drops.")

Gar Thorsrud was responsible for the assignment of the two On-Mark B-26s. They were assigned to Secord for management. They were not really needed, as the Caribou were perfect for the mission. Also, the first generation navigation equipment was not reliable. The pilots referred to the aircraft as the "Off-Marks."

Secord was mainly responsible for managing the HARK I program that began in 1967. This involved the monitoring of sensors (hand held transceivers operating on VHF/FM frequencies - not related to IGLOO WHITE sensors) by orbiting Volpars. The theory was that the Volpars would transmit the signal to Udorn, where it would be passed to 7/13, then passed to ABCCC and used for targeting. In fact, there were plenty of targets without the signals. The program was first tested out of Savannakhet with a Continental Dornier. (Fosmire: Secord was not responsible for managing the Hark I program. "The 5 Volpars flew out of Savannakhet. I worked directly with the chief pilot in mission planning. The Volpars sent their signals to Savannakhet, not Udorn. Savannakhet had a secure voice link to the Igloo White Command & Control Center. Igloo White passed into to ABCCC who directed strikes. I was a frequent visitor to Igloo White to give reality briefings about conditions on the ground in Laos.")

[Fosmire, January 4, 1993: The original Hark I units had a moisture problem (due to use in jungle), and an Agency communications expert had to retrofit all the units before they were effective. The Continental Dornier had a
55-gallon fuel drum in the cabin. There was no oxygen. The aircraft hit a hangar on takeoff from Savannakhet, and the pilot (John Preston) was killed.]

In summer 1967, General Starbird of the Defense Communications Planning Group came to Udorn and brief everyone on IGLOO WHITE (Air America was not involved in this.) Starbird was concerned only with the deployment of the system, not its use. In fact, the need was not for more target information but more striking power. However, it was clear that air alone would never interdict the trail: a ground blocking force was required. (At one point, Aderholt successfully interdicted the trail. The NVA responded by bring in major AAA units.)

Early in 1967 [McShane dates this to January], Secord ended the Air America T-28 program. He was not happy for the "A" and "B" team program. The Air America pilots lacked training, while the Thai pilots did not have much enthusiasm for the job. Secord made arrangements for Waterpump instructor pilots to take over the mission - the "C" team. Initially used for SAR, the T-28 role quickly expanded into route strike missions. (Secord flew on some of these, with the callsign Tiger 96.)

People: Bill Lair was calm in the midst of crisis, constantly chewing on his cigar. Pat Landry, who always carried a stick, could be more emotional. Secord considers Landry the brighter of the two and more creative. He got along well with Ted Shackley, COS VTE. Shackley was an excellent intelligence officer, cold and efficient. He was labelled "The Man" by Pat Landry, and the appellation stuck. [Fosmire: "I've worked for Landry and Lair - both bright."

Secord had a good relationship with 7/13; the problem was 7AF. There was a running battle with Momyer for tactical resources. Momyer took the idea of centralized control to an extreme. "Centralized command, decentralized execution" was holy writ. It was difficult to get fragged missions for the ground war in Laos; they had to rely mainly on divers. [Fosmire: "I thought Secord's job was to get us air support."

Jim Rhyne was one of the best pilots Secord has ever known. Wayne Knight was bright, a good leader, and had good judgment. Abadie was "a problem. He was CSA cleared (Covert Security Agreement) and privy to all aspects of the operation, but he displayed little curiosity. He tended to be conservative to a fault, forgetting that a war was being fought. Also, he had to be reminded who was in charge. Secord recalls an incident that took place [on November 25, 1967]. A helicopter [PFF - with Marius Burke and Ellis Emery] got lost on a mission out of LPB, ran out of fuel, and autorotated into a sandbar in a streambed, damaging the tail rotor. After the crew was picked up, Secord wanted to send people in to remove the main rotor and engine and sling
out the aircraft. He sent a Volpar in the next morning to photograph the area. The helicopter had been partially covered by cut branches, but he decided to go ahead, using A-1s for escort. Abadie refused. Secord had to remind him who was in charge. Abadie complained to Taipei but to no purpose. The mission turned out routine.

[Ellis Emery, 15 March 1992]: He was on his check ride with Marius Burke when they were called away to fly a special mission. They picked up six troops in Luang Prabang and headed north. They got lost and likely flew into China, where they picked up some small arms fire. After autorotating into the streambed, they had to hack their way up a hill to a clear area. During this time, they heard a weapon go off and thought it was enemy fire. They were picked up about two hours later by an H-34. Only when they reached Udorn did they learn that one soldier had accidentally killed another.} (See accident report)

By 1968, Air Division had moved into a new building, east of the parking ramp of the Waterpump compound. It was two stories. Operations and communications were on the first floor with BOQ rooms on the second. The photo interpreters took over AB-1. Air Division consisted of (1) Infil/exfil section, staffed by 2 experienced CIA officers and 2 clerks (CIA employees); (2) SI - communications intelligence, which analyzed signals from ground stations and (later) a C-47 equipped with Airborne Radio Direction Finding equipment; it was staff by one senior and one junior CIA officer and a clerk; (3) TACAIR, staffed by two senior and one junior officer; (4) INPIC, with 9 photo interpreters and 2 support staff. They also received HUMINT from HQ 333 compound, the covert Royal Thai military unit that handled PARU teams and intelligence collection. This was an intelligence fusion center, using map overlays from the various components to put together an excellent picture of the enemy order-of-battle. (Used effectively in March 1968 in the defense of LS-36).

Glerum to WML, January 4, 1993:

"By the early 1960's, coordination of contractor air activities was working generally well under procedures established by the AB-1 and Vientiane Air Branches and the contractor managements. But the growing relationships with 7/11th AF and (through them) the 7th AF needed attention. Dick was assigned to Udorn in a new position as Air Liaison Officer to organize ("regularize") those relationships and the project's increasing needs for USAF tactical, airlift, recce, and other support. Dick did his job well - establishing sound operating procedures and, in general, increasing both the levels and effectiveness of the support receives. On the down side, his confrontational style
tended to alienate the USAF contacts and relations not infrequently were "strained." Dick’s replacement, while perhaps less dynamic, got along much better with the 7/13th principals during a period where our use of USAF resources grew even larger. In part, improved relationships also were due to recognition (admittedly somewhat belated) by those of us in base management that a little massaging in the form of detailed briefings, upcountry trips, souvenirs, etc. would go a long way towards facilitating cooperation. (I also should add that I was responsible for arranging Dick’s detail and subsequent Laos assignment - based on a strong recommendation from Heinie Aderholt. Although USAF Headquarters discouraged "name requests" for detailees, they went along with it in this case - but, it was some years before I stopped hearing about it from USAF Special Ops.)

Glerum to WML, February 15, 1993:

"Initially, AB-1 was indeed rather loosely organized. The Laos project started small in the late fifties, grew slowly, went into Thailand exile after the Geneva Accords, and then expanded more rapidly than anyone at the time had anticipated. Throughout the project’s lifetime, a fundamental base operating principle was to keep the American personnel involvement (and visibility) as small as possible. This conservative approach did tend to cause manning to lag behind workload for much of the early years and we probably did not reach what I would consider a good balance until circa 1968-69. (The U.S. mission as a whole ultimately went well over good balance with the assumption by the military of logistical support.)

During most of Secord’s time, the base consisted of the following elements - north ops (Clines), south ops, air, air liaison (Secord), PI, techs, OB, and support. The first four were staffed by one of two officers each and were referred to more often as ‘shops’ than anything else. Secord was assigned a deputy (still employed today) circa late 1966 or early 1967. Over time, the shops became ‘branches’ and we ultimately added a Chief of Operations (Morton) and, towards the end, a Deputy COps. As the order of battle, reports, etc. functions grew, the Reports Chief also became de facto chief of intel. Secord probably did have cable releasing authority within his area of responsibility. Although I cannot say with certainty that Secord never was acting chief during the period prior to my arrival (TDY Aug-Nov 1966, PCS May 1967), I consider it unlikely. There were other officers at the base of senior equivalent grade and anyway (to make the issue somewhat moot), during the entire history of the project, I can recall only one time when both the chief and deputy were absent for more than a few hours. ‘Division’ also is a brand new word to me.
Shackley did order a dramatic increase (perhaps to eighty) in the number of roadwatch/intel teams on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and this did place considerable strain on infil resources. The increased use of turbine powered helicopters however, is better ascribed to universal customer and contractor recognition of the obvious - they were more suitable for the missions than the H-34’s. AAM’s wisdom in acquiring the S58T conversions and their introduction over time also increased turbine availability. Udorn Air did the scheduling with AAM, but the missions were planned and run by the Pakse and Savannakhet Units. Air Liaison’s primary job was coordination with USAF - including tactical cover arrangements.

Although it often took PI’s used to strategic work a while to become familiar with Laos tactical requirements, their input was of enormous value in virtually every phase of project operations. I personally do not believe we over-relied on the photo-recon program. The Volpar project was vastly superior to anything we could get from military sources and we had to rely on something for operations into enemy held areas. We did however, stress (throughout) the all-source approach and, when available, PI and tactical intercept always were combined with photography. All of the PI chiefs over the years were very solid citizens and, interestingly, each seemed right for his time. Saderholm was at his best in a developing program, while some of his successors were better suited for managing larger and continually expanding workloads.

All operations required prior Udorn approval and the air resources were allocated from Udorn and Vientiane. However, the unit chiefs did have a great deal of authority and, in my judgement, properly so. They had the ultimate responsibility to support and (to the extent possible) guide their troops in the field. They were in the best position to direct the daily activities of the assigned air resources. Some units were more effective and efficient in this role than others.

Working relationships between Udorn and Vientiane varied considerably over the years - primarily as a function of the personality and/or m.o. of the COS at the time, plus the degree of Washington interest. There never was any real question about who was running the project (Udorn), but some COS’s more than others ‘enjoyed’ becoming personally involved. Shackley usually was typically precise about what he wanted accomplished, but did not attempt to involve himself in details better dealt with by the base and units. For example, if he established a specific number of required roadwatch teams, where we put them and how we did it was Udorn’s job. Devlin, on the other hand, liked to visit the field and involve himself in such detail (well outside the area of his expertise) as the positioning of individual artillery pieces. He also could be somewhat precipitous in
his decision-making. As a consequence, he was not very 'popular.' However, at least in retrospect, he was very supportive throughout of what we were trying to do. I believe Landry would agree with me that, of all the COS’s, Tovar struck the best balance between remaining on top of what was going on and relying on Udorn as his 'executive agent' for the 'war.' He probably also was the most trusted by Vang Fao and the senior Thai project officer.

Because the fixed wing aircraft (except for photo and special projects) were scheduled by the Vientiane air branch, there was some inevitable 'tugging' and even the occasional disconnect. However, in the main, the system worked and we generally were well supported by Vientiane.

Both Lair and Landry are complex and genuinely unique individuals. Lair was indeed soft spoken and calm in the face of crisis and Landry certainly more mercurial, but each in his own way was very capable at managing both crises and day-to-day project activities. Each in his own way also was excellent at dealing with, motivating, and earning the loyalty of the locals and project personnel. (Landry did not particularly enjoy the U.S. military and also preferred to leave the air contractors to me, but could work well with them if he had to.) I am well aware that a good part of the rationale for my assignment to Udorn was 'better management.' However, at least from the purely functional standpoint, Udorn ran quite well before I got there. As a matter of preference and practicality, Lair tended to focus on the north, and Landry on the south, but they were an effective team. The base may not have had the perfect organizational line, and paperwork occasionally may have left something to be desired, but the work got done (the troops were supported properly) and little if anything of importance ever fell through the cracks - well, hardly ever. After Lair's departure and my arrival, I concentrated on base and project management, while Landry focused on what he did best - dealing directly with the unit chiefs and their guerrilla commander counterparts on the conduct of operations. (This is not to say that I did not participate in tactical decisions or spend time up country, nor that Landry did not involve himself in base management.) I believe that we also were a good team and the split of responsibilities was a natural one.

As to Lair's alleged lack of 'creativity.' From the various vantage points of AMH, acting Vientiane C/Ops, and TDV's out of Headquarters, I had a lot of contact with him during the years prior to his departure from Udorn. Although he was basically conservative (probably Secord's principal problem with him), it is fair to say that during his time, Lair generated the vast majority of project innovations. A good example would be the Hmoung flight training.
As I indicated in an earlier letter, acquisition of fragged warites became easier as our relations improved with the 7th and 7/11th, they became more aware of what was going on in Laos, and Washington interest in the project grew. The latter was a mixed blessing. Support improved, but paperwork requirements also increased dramatically - as did the number of experts and second-guessers.

Interview (tape) with Thomas G. Fosmire, Florence, SC, December 28, 1992

Fosmire was assigned as chief of the unit at Savannakhet from 1966 to 1969. His primary duty was the trail watching program, which Shackley had ordered expanded. Fosmire had 20 active 8/10-man teams on the Trail at any one time, with another 10 to 12 teams resting or training. The mission of the teams included trail watching, mining the Trail, and directing airstrikes. On one wall of the communications room, there would be posted a list of the teams in the field by call sign, with room to grease-pencil in the last radio contact. Fosmire would check the wall three times a day to see if contact had been made. To go 12 hours without contact was not a problem, but he began to get concerned if they had not been heard from after 24 hours. A case officer then would fly over the area, looking for a mirror flash or signal panel from a team that might have been overrun. The teams were composed of Lao army personnel. They used the Hark I, which was "very good," but most air-to-ground contact was done with HT-1 and HT-2 radios. They used Delco 5300 medium speed CW equipment for contact with base (and one-time pads). This equipment was excellent.

After the initial buildup, Fosmire had three Porters assigned (Continental - flown by Thais) and two UH-34s (Air America - flown by Thais). For more than a year, there were 5 Volpars assigned that flew daily Hark I orbits (2 Volpars flew orbits each night, with one in reserve). The Porters were used to drop 1000-1500 bundles to a single team. They were rigged with an inverted platform that allowed the pilot to drop with great accuracy (no kicker required). Air America Caribou (and sometimes, C-123s) could carry enough to drop to two or three teams in one night. Gene Hughey flew a lot of these missions. The drops usually consisted of food, batteries for radios, cigarettes, and other "comfort" items in specially rigged parcels. Glenn F. Hale, an ex-smoke jumper, was the air operations officer responsible for the resupply operation. Stan Wilson was the full time Air America mechanic and did a great job. Continental did most of their maintenance at Udorn.

Fosmire also used the USAF Pony Express helicopters out of NKP. They were excellent at first, but the Air Force ran
out of helicopter pilots and sent out retrained fixed wing people. "They weren't worth a damn on infil ops." There also was a problem with maintenance, and the helicopters frequently aborted missions. Fosmire used them only for big lifts, involving the Savannakhet battalion. He used the Jolly Greens infrequently.

Photo recon was nice, but it was no substitute for men on the ground. At one point, a team stumbled over a pipeline. They could hear it pumping at night. PIs at Udorn said that the team must be lying. The next time the team went out, it took hacksaws. It returned three weeks later with a three-foot section of four-inch pipe. Fosmire took it to Udorn and put in on Pat Landry's desk. (Before the pipeline, one truck would have to carry the fuel for three trucks transiting the Trail; the pipeline increased efficiency by 25 percent.) In another incident, a team found that the NVA had trellised a road for 15 kilometers, changing the vegetation every few days. These kind of tricks deceived the PIs.

There were five units in Laos: Pakse, Savannakhet, Long Tieng, Luang Prabang, and Nam Lieu. The five chiefs would attend monthly meetings at Vientiane, along with the people from Udorn. They would be given current requirements for intelligence and operations, and they would report on the previous month’s activities. Shackley presided over these meetings. "He was a pretty articulate guy with a pretty strong agenda." "Polished." "A good technocrat." Nobody doubted that Shackley was the boss. All administration was handled through Vientiane. When Shackley ordered increased activity in the south, he began assigning people directly to the area and not through Udorn. The ambassador sometimes addressed the group at these meetings.

Glenn F. Hale to WML, May 4, 1993: Hale was air operations officer at Savannakhet from June 1966 to June 1968. An ex-smoke jumper from Idaho, he had just been discharged from the Army, where he had been a parachute rigger and heavy drop instructor. "My duty in Savannakhet was to coordinate aircraft for infiltration, exfiltration and air rescue. A large rigging shed was built close to an existing warehouse that housed ammunition. Shortly thereafter a barracks was constructed for the Lao army riggers to live in. This setup allowed our organization to use me as aircraft operations, five Thai army airborne kickers and thirty-eight Lao riggers to drop over 100,000 lbs. of resupply at night per month. We would rig cargo all day in 150 lb. packages and attach parachutes that were made in Thailand. We had three Porter aircraft assigned to Savannakhet that were flown by Thais and provided by Continental. This type of plane was especially adapted to this operation because it had a large door on each side that
could be left open in flight. I had engineered a drop device that was roller skate wheels on a sloped platform. This allowed us to set a pallet on each side of this apparatus and attach it with a single point ring. The pilot would then just push a handle to release the bundles. One bundle would drop out either side. This was significant in that the plane would have to make only one pass over the drop zone and thereby keep the roadwatch teams more secure. In addition we would use a Caribou, no. 851 with ‘the colonel’ [Gene Hughey] as the pilot and occasionally a C-123 from Air America for larger drops, troops movement, and cargo runs. Our Ammo came from Thailand via military C-130s. Since military aircraft were not allowed, their ground time in Laos was minimized. To accomplish this, our rigging drew would lineup four farm trailers and install crossover conveyor tracks. The aircraft would land, taxi to a spot on the ramp, the trailer would be hand pushed to the tailgate of the airplane. By that time the aircraft crew would have the cargo untied. All together the crews would push the entire load onto the trailers in minutes. We would have the C-130 off the ground in about 9 minutes from touchdown. Just as quickly we would hookup a tractor to the wagons, have the cargo to the warehouse and unloaded. This whole operation would take under 40 minutes, for security reasons. Our operations required some close co-ordination with the U.S. Air Force. About twice a month I would fly to NKP, Thailand, for a briefing from the anti-aircraft gun mappers and brief them on our pilot reports of the gun locations. There were times when our pilots would have to fly around the bigger guns located on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to supply teams that were located on the east side of the Trail.

Another operation at Savannakhet was the Hark 1 program. This was an communications platform started with Dorniers, a twin engine four passenger small plane. Fifty-five gallon drums of fuel were installed in the rear passenger/cargo area. This would allow the Dornier to fly over three and a half hours. The Continental pilots, Americans, would keep a commo platform airborne all night every night. This Hark 1 project was successful to the point the Air America took it over using Volpar aircraft. The Volpar was a converted Air Force C-45 with Pratt and Whitney turbo engines. This airplane created avery stable and improved operation for the roadwatch commo platform. The teams could have constant communications to our base in Savannakhet. Information from these would be forwarded to the U.S. Air Force in NKP, Thailand, for air strikes."

Hale notes that he worked closely with the USAF, which provided cover for infils/exfils. His brother was a Sandy pilot out of Udorn. "Through him I knew some of the other Sandy pilots and they knew that I worked in Savannakhet. At a particular time only about sixty miles from Savannakhet we
had a fairly large team of people that was under Pathet Lao fire. I had a drop plane returning from a daylight mission. The Thai kicker picked up the radio signals from the skirmish below and radioed to me that they were in a lot of trouble. Since we did not have strike capability, they were sunk. Out of the clear blue came a very welcome American voice. The Sandy pilot had switched to our radio frequency and had been listening. He said, 'This is Sandy and I have a load of Napalm and bombs that I need to get rid of before I return to base, can I help you?' ‘Why, of course,’ I answered. I called the drop plane, the kicker contacted the team, set up the strike, and burned the enemy emplacement. It was successful and made us look just wonderful to a small group of people in the jungle.'

July/August 1966

RLG retakes Nam Bac region, north of Luang Prabang, which Pathet Lao had controlled for several years.

[Gerum, 2/15/93, accounting for rare PAR success: "PL largely finished as an effective force by then and NVA probably weren’t interested or didn’t believe it worth maintaining supply line."]

August 31, 1966

T/S Report: "The rainy season set upon us with determination during August and showed little sign of letup at month’s end. Regular torrential downpours interspersed with hours-long periods of drizzling rainfall slowed the flying pace [at Udorn], harassed the aircraft maintenance sections and vexed contractors engaged in construction work." [Also, major flooding at VTE]

Hotels 44, 45, and 46 due to arrive BKK by Sept. 10; aircraft are new production models, similar to those received last year. [Reference to high incidence of powerplant failures during the 1964/65 hot season.]

September 1966

Miles G. Lechtman arrived in VTE at the tail end of the annual floods, remaining there until March 1968, occasionally rotating to Udorn (where no one wanted to go because it was full of U.S. servicemen; VTE, by comparison, was a paradise - still very much an untouched provincial town). The senior kickers were Bob Herald (not liked by everyone but respected by all; he knew everything there was to know about aerial delivery and ran a safe operation) and Tom Greiner. He flew on C-47s, C-123s, and Caribous. He spent a lot of time on night drops with the Caribous, flying out of Savannakhet, resupplying teams along the Ho Chih Minh Trail and into China. These missions increased as time passed. There were two kickers on night drops. The often used B-851, carrying c. 7,500 pounds of cargo. There was a
single track. They usually did three drops at night. At first, he would spend 3–4 nights a month on this project, but toward the end it became two weeks at a time. Gene Hughey ("the Colonel") was the pilot on many of these flights, with MacAlister as copilot.

Lechman also flew on the B-26 On Mark program out of Udorn. The aircraft was painted dark blue. It carried a pilot, copilot, navigator behind the curtain (facing rear), and one kicker. Jim Rhyne did much of the research and development for the program. Pilots included Frank Bonasinga, Gene Hughey, and Birl King. McKean flew as navigator. The majority of the electronic equipment was for navigation. They dropped at low level (500–800 feet); also, from 2000 feet, using impact chutes. The chute came down partially opened with a 75-foot nylon leader. When the leader hit the ground, a blasting cap opened the chute fully. It was very accurate. Lechman did about 20 missions on the B-26.


In late 1966, David was involved in night drops with the Caribou over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Gene Hughey also was on this program, which was run by Jim Rhyne. He would fly heading, time, and distance, then let down and look for the drop signal. The signal was often different from the one that he had been briefed on. You had to use your best judgment about making the drop. If the drop was not made, the customer was unhappy. One customer, an ex-AAM kicker, once told David that teams would sometimes claim that the package was not received, but the articles would show up several days later in the village markets. It was difficult to fire the team leaders, as volunteers were hard to find. [Fosmire comment: "I was never aware of this [sale of airdrop items]. Mostly food items, batteries, and ammo dropped, not weapons or other readily marketable stuff."]

September 2, 1966

Secretary of State to VTE [DDRS 1981/212D]: Requests comments on DOD proposal for Operation Popeye. This will be a controlled experiment of limited scope to be undertaken during a 30-45 period in September and October in the area of the Se Kong watershed. It will involved seeding approximately 50 large cumulus clouds with silver iodide smoke or inert smoke introduced into the clouds by one or more 3"x7" caseless cannisters dropped by aircraft. Three aircraft will be involved in the covert project.

McNamara to President Johnson, "Project POP EYE," September 15, 1966 [DDRS 1980/38C]:

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POP EYE is "a covert and highly classified operational experiment which we plan to run within the next few weeks in the Laotian panhandle. It will determine the feasibility of increasing the rainfall during the current monsoon season and possibly extending its duration." Dr. Hornig has verified the technical merits of the project, and Ambassador Sullivan has approved it on the condition that it be conducted covertly.

"I have authorized the program to proceed even though there may be some objections raised by the international scientific community - if there is a breach in security. Such possible objections have not, in the past, prevented the carrying out of military operations considered to be in the interests of our national security."

The task of inhibiting infiltration into South Vietnam remains "one of our most serious unsolved problems."

October 1966

USAF Raven FACs introduced into Laos. Needed for proper control of growing air operations. [Aderholt: The Butterfly program ended after General Momyer discovered that enlisted men had been FACing "my jets."

October 15, 1966

Arrival of Hotels 44, 45, and 46 at Udorn brings fleet up to 30 and relieves shortage caused by crash of two aircraft in September.

October 21, 1966

Six KLAf T-28s bomb military targets in VTE area. Likely resulted from personal feud between fired air force commander and rest of Laotian high command.

October 26, 1966

Boonrat Com-Intra and Sarisporn Bhibalkul hired as R/W copilots. They were upgraded to captain a short time later. They worked out of Savannakhet for Tom Fosmire. Fosmire considers Com-Intra the best of the Thai R/W pilots.

Com-Intra graduated from the Bangkok Drama School as a music major. He was training at the Korat Flying School, and served with the RTAF's 63rd Squadron at Don Muang. He flew a T-6 in 1961 against the PL and was shot down. He was picked up north of Pakse by a PARU element with Phoumi. He flew for Bird & Son from 1964 to 1966 before joining Air America.

September - November 1966
DOD, "Comparison of Truck Sightings in the Lao Panhandle During the Months of September, October, and November 1966/67," DERS 1992/3351:

"The initial resupply effort in early September 1966 utilized roads clearing Mu Gia Pass. However, late rains beginning in mid-September and continuing well into November limited traffic throughout the Panhandle. Traffic continued at a low level over both entry points (Mu Gia Pass and Routes 137/912) into Laos throughout October and November. Ground and air reported movement was mostly confined to upper Panhandle routes."

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November 3, 1966
Crash of Garrett Porter 197X at Site 36 described by Udorn 7/S report as "the worst Porter accident yet." Cause of accident "not mechanical."

November 8, 1966
UH-34 landed at unnumbered strip TH 0688. There were people on the ground and the proper signal displayed. Immediately after touching down, there was ground fire from the tree line to the left front, 50 yards, from the aircraft. Pilot lifted off and made right turn. There were c. 100 holes in aircraft. Engine faulted twice while enroute to LS203 (Nam Bac). When collective lowered for approach, engine cut out, causing pilot to go into autorotation. At touchdown, when collective raised for landing, engine again cut back in. Landing was made without further damage. Battle damage includes both main landing gear tires flat, holes in three main rotor blades, several hits in rotor head and hydraulic and oil lines cut, all radios hit, several hits in engine compartment, including carburetor and hole in number 7 intake, all fuel tanks hit. One passenger DOA Luang Prabang and one serious at Korat. Flight mechanic received severe shrapnel cuts in back and right elbow and two deep wounds in left leg. Pilot in good condition.

Marius Burke to WML, Dec. 13, 1985: Pilot was Larry Wilderom, working out of Luang Prabang for USAID. Scheduled for "milk run." Customer's two sons on summer vacation (one high school, one college) were taken along for the ride. The strip had been overrun shortly before the aircraft
landed. The regular signal was still displayed and there were troops moving around, so everything seemed normal. Wilderom not hit, but bullet hole on both sides of head and through heel of shoe. Boy riding in left seat died; other boy seriously injured.

November 30, 1966
Helicopter flying started slowly in November, but eventually totalled 3,148 hours, most of which was flown during the last 15 days of the month.

December 31, 1966
T/S Report: Although the operational fleet increased only slightly, with approx. the same flying hours, 1966 brought major changes to Udorn. The capability for massive rebuilding of crash damaged aircraft was "developed and honed to a fine edge of performance" with major repairs to UH-34s, T-28s, Helios, Porters, L-19s, and one C-123. Many of these involved recovery of crashed aircraft from remote sites using UH-34 external sling and side-saddle techniques developed over the years at Udorn.
Helicopter maintenance at Udorn "stands second to none."

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