[Heaviest casualties (wounded) to date: five US/AAM wounded by hostile fire - Nolan, Apr. 8; Griffin, May 22; Asta, Aug. 3; Goddard and Shaffer, Aug. 29]

[High altitude Volpars based at Savannahh for "AGP" Project [Altitude Survey Project or High Altitude Survey Project]. Rhyme was in charge of the sensor program, which began in the summer of 1967. [Bonansinga says program began in March 1967.] Initially, he was given three airplanes, but this clearly was not enough. This was increased to six. There were 28 crews involved (the long flights meant that the crews flew out of time quickly). The missions were 13 hours long. The planes carried 14 hours of fuel and 16 hours of oxygen. An airplane was on station all night at an altitude of 20,000+ feet. There was no autopilot and no pressurization. The heaters were not very good and the crew carried blankets. Usually, the airplane was relieved during the middle of the mission but sometimes one airplane had to remain on station all night. The photo crews and airplanes were kept separate. Lucky Waller looked after this program.]

[Stanley E. Wilson to WML, February 10, 1993 (tape): In April 1967, Wilson was assigned to Savannahh as chief mechanic for the high altitude program. Charlie Griffin was station manager. There were two aircraft on station from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M. There was a north orbit over the Trail near Tcheponge, and a south orbit over the Bolovens near Saravane. The normal altitude for the missions was 20,000 feet. The Volpars had fuel for about 14 hours. If there were sufficient aircraft and crew, the orbiting aircraft would be relieved around midnight. There was a tremendous group of pilots involved in this program. The on-time performance was 99.9 percent.]

[Rhyme, 9/14/91, confirms that Second shut down the Air America T-28 program shortly after he arrived. However, Rhyme had been telling Lair for some time that it should be shut down as Air America pilots were only flying for proficiency.]

[Third year of seasonal pattern. After Pathet Lao advances during winter, Hmong take offensive with onset of wet season and move close to Sam Neua.]

USAFHRC: The general situation in Laos was "reasonably good" from January to late fall 1967 but eroded considerably thereafter. The pressures generated by this deterioration were transferred from the Lao military to the RLG to the U.S. ambassador to the 7th AF commander. (The southern portion of Steel Tiger was designed Tiger Hound in December 1965; later, Barrel Roll was divided into A, B, and C sectors, Steel Tiger into D and E, and Tiger Hound into F and G.)

Larry Taylor: Taylor was with AAM from January 1967 to August 1968, flying a total of 1400 hours in UH-34s. Wayne Knight was the chief pilot; Jerry McEntee (sometimes Marius Burke) was assistant C/P. Tex Dew was base manager. Taylor compiled a list of serial numbers for 76 helicopters; 70 had Navy Bureau numbers and probably were ex-USMC. AAM operated about 24 at any one time. R/W and F/W pilots lived apart. Taylor checked out as captain in June 1967. The typical pattern was to spend three to six days upcountry. He would go from Udorn to one of four or five main bases (LS-118, LS-20, LS-20A, Pakse, Thakhe, Savannakhet), then be farmed out to smaller sites to work at the direction of the customer. The larger bases had American customers; the smaller ones sometimes did not. They mostly returned to the main base to RON, but sometimes slept out (often in the helicopter). They had to check in with a radio station once an hour. "Skyline" was the major station between 20 and 20A. By rough estimate, 40 percent of the flying was for USAID (Pop Buell), 40 percent for the CIA, and 20 percent in support of the FAR and FAN. They never used the initials "CIA" but referred to the contract number. "713" was the contract number for CIA flying. Taylor often worked for Tony Po at 118A. There were two Americans with Po: one was "Jack," an ex-USMC grunt. Po liked to drink, usually VAT 69 with a Kinmen wine chaser. Taylor sometimes saw a blue-black B-26 at 118 that was rigged for airdrop. It often was flown by Frank Boninseinga. He once saw the airplane headed north toward China when he was heading south. Taylor's relations with the customer were good. The only problem he ever had was with "Doug" [Swanson] at FS-7. He liked to talk on the radio and Taylor had to write him up. They mostly were no-nonsense types who seemed to enjoy what they were doing. They were supposed to plan and organize and not go into combat; however, Doug often would get on the aircraft at the last minute and go out in the field with his troops. USAF at first did not have combat SAR capability. Jolly Greens had just started to arrive when Taylor began flying. AAM gradually was giving up SAR, especially long range missions. Taylor was involved in only one rescue. He was working near LS-85 on 13 February 1968 when he heard "MAYDAY! PUNCHING OUT!" Firefly 15, a USAF A-1 had
broadcast the message over the frequency used by AAM. He aircraft reported a radial off the TACAN from LS-85. Taylor, who was operating under an overcast in the area, saw the A-1 come down about a mile away and crash into a mountain. Shortly thereafter, the pilot came through the clouds. He was so close that Taylor had to move out of his path. He orbited the pilot while he was coming down, then landed and picked him up within 30 seconds.

In his logbook, Taylor recorded the loss of 12 UH-34s while he was with AAM.

January 4, 1967
Warren A. Trest, "CHECO Report: Lucky Tiger Combat Operations," June 15, 1967, USAFRHC: On January 4, Aderholt proposed that Lucky Tiger T-28Ds be committed to combat in the Steel Tiger area. (The T-28Ds were being used to train RDAF pilots - they had 2 50-caliber machine guns and 6 external stores stations). Aderholt emphasized that they were a cheap, simple, rugged aircraft. He wanted to use them both for day and night operation. On 9 January 1967, the 606th ACS began flying T-28D missions in the Steel Tiger area. The first aircraft was lost on a daylight mission on January 17. It had been attempting to aid a downed O-1 NAIL pilot when hit by automatic weapons fire. The T-28Ds were integrated into the night interdiction program in February.

January 6, 1967
CHECO report, dated 28 April 1967: In late December 1966/early January 1967, intelligence detected a NVA buildup in the Sam Neua area that threatened LS-36/LS-85/LS-52. As it turned out, the object of the attack was LS-36. This site was a staging area for Jolly Green SAR operations and an aerial resupply point for guerrillas. The NVA had overrun the site on 17/18 February 1966; Vang Pao’s forces had recaptured it on 25 May 1966.

On the early morning of 6 January 1967, the site was attacked by 600-800 NVA troops. The weather was overcast, with base at 200-500 feet. One of two US advisers was killed in the initial attack. [Don Sjostrom - USAID worker] The survivor called in airstrikes. Two A-1Es responded and provided vital air support, coming down through the overcast. Vang Pao arrived later in the day to take command of the NVA forces. The assault was repelled but due to the location of LS-36 and LS-85, their continued security is questionable. "If North Vietnam made a determined effort and commits sufficient forces, almost any of these remotes sites could fall."

Michael S. Lynch, December 6, 1992, Washington, D.C.: LS-36 was attacked at 4 a.m. by 3 battalions. The attack was supposed to be coordinated but one battalion attacked first. Had all three attacked as planned, the site
likely would have been overrun. Don was killed shortly after dawn, hit in the head by a bullet while protecting the back of the team house. He acted heroically and deserved a medal. Two USAF photo recon jets appeared and 7 a.m. and made high speed/sonic boom runs. The two A-1s showed up shortly thereafter. Their fire stopped the attack and saved LS-36. Jerry Daniels and an air attache arrived during the day. That night marked the first use of a flareship and the first use of and AC-47 in the conflict. The AC-47 was very effective, and 35 enemy bodies were counted the next morning.

January 24, 1967
Successful POW rescue.

[Second, interview of March 14, 1992 - also, see his book - gives erroneous account of POW operation, mixing it up with another operation.]

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

In January 1967, Fosmire directed the only significant POW rescue during the war in Southeast Asia. A Lao farmer came in to Savannakhet and said that he had just escaped from a POW camp near Mahaxay. He said that the people there could be rescued by a small force, and he offered to lead it to the camp. After an extensive debriefing, Fosmire was convinced that he was telling the truth and decided to proceed. He selected Sergeant Te, his best team leader, for the assignment. Te was brought in, talked to the farmer, and agreed that it could be done. His team then was put into quick training. Fosmire buried the upcoming mission in his reports to Udorn, as he feared that headquarters involvement might jeopardize the operation. Te's 10-man team was inserted by helicopter northeast of the camp, below MuGia Pass. Te crossed Route 12 and came in from the east. He followed a creekbed, as briefed, into the middle of the camp for a nighttime assault. The prisoners were being held in cages that were dug into the sides of limestone karst, sealed by wire, bamboo, and locks. Te’s team came out of the creekbed and opened fire on the sentries, who ran away. There were few if any casualties among the guards. Te then lit the thatched roofs of several hooches used by the guards and illuminated the area. Using bolt cutters, the team released the prisoners. The plan was to take a circuitous route through the jungle during the day to reach an area of high ground and be picked up Air America helicopters. There were about 50 POWs in all, but some of these were common criminals and quickly disappeared. In leading the group, Te soon realized that the POWs were in such poor physical shape that they would be unable to make it through the jungle.
Taking a chance, he marched the group down Route 12 to the pickup point, as the sun began to set. He finally reached a clear area and radioed for the pickup. Two Air America helicopters picked up the group. (One of the POWs was Pisidhi Inradat, an former PABU and AAM kicker who had been shot down in 1963. His debriefing led to Dengler being stripped of his medals. Pisidhi later became head of AAM security at Udorn.) (Sergeant Te was killed later in the year in the same area during an assault on a Communist party provincial level meeting. They had learned of the meeting through intelligence.) Fosmire believes that Secord has this POW rescue mixed up with an extraction of a large group of people in the same general area. This involved both the Pony Express and a number of Air America helicopters. Secord had nothing to do with the POW rescue. In fact, Fosmire did not inform Udorn until after it had been accomplished. It worked became of (1) current intelligence, and (2) and skill and courage of Sergeant Te.

Jerry McEntee, telephone interview, March 21, 1992: McEntee was working out of Pakse when alerted for the mission. He and Sam Jordan had Thai copilots. They left around 1630, heading east toward a set of coordinates. Jordan went in first and picked up a group of POWs. McEntee followed, but could not get off because of the load. He left off 1 or 2, and Jordan came back and picked them up. In all, they brought out 20-22 people, including a Thai AAM kicker who had been shot down in 1963.

Sam Jordan, telephone interview, March 21, 1992: Jordan believes that they were launched from Thakhet to an area just north of the Muajia Pass, right on the border with North Vietnam. He recalls that that helicopters were full of people - maybe 14 or 15 on each UH-34. The mission was launched in late afternoon and the pickup was made in daylight. It was dark when they returned.

February 2, 1967
UH-34s HF [last of the lettered aircraft] and H31 destroyed when Luang Prabang (LS4) attacked by small arms and mortar fire. Both aircraft hit by rockets. Crews not involved. (Iver Gram was one of the pilots. Dan Carson may have been the other.) According to Larry Taylor, Gram was angry over the loss of his "good maps."

Rich logbook: LP attacked at midnight. 5 T-28s and 2 AAM choppers destroyed; 3 T-28s damaged; 8 killed. Used rocket launchers and small arms.

February 5, 1967
XWPS (P218) took round while 25 miles north of Luang Prabang. Round entered aft of cowl flap and hit instrument
panel, shattering windscreen. Utterback and passenger injured by fragment.
Utterback: He had been sent to Luang Prabang to work for USIS (Public Health). Another customer (CIA) talked Public Health into borrowing the airplane to drop good conduct passes for the enemy. He took off with a Lao lieutenant and several boxes of leaflets. About 15 miles northeast of Luang Prabang, the lieutenant began throwing the leaflets out of the side window. On the 3rd pass, they took a round through the instrument panel. The Lao was hit in the left side of the neck and began pumping blood. Utterback took three pieces of lead in the forehead. One severed an artery, which began pumping blood. His shirt was soaked in blood and he nearly passed out. He made it back to Luang Prabang, where the Lao lieutenant died. Utterback was sewed up by a Special Forces medic.

February 21, 1967

March 1967
Dick Elder checks out in Bell 204B; in October, he checks out in the 205. The 204Bs were N-registered and had 9 seats; the 205s were Lao (XW-) registered as they were bailed from the military, and had 13 seats. Initially the two models had the same engine, but the 205s later got the more powerful dash 13s. The Bells worked northern Laos because they had better altitude capability than the H-34s.

Elder recalls a number of infil/exfil missions in 1967 that were flown out of Thakhet to the border area. These were all intelligence, not action units.

March 2, 1967
Thai government gives permission for deployment of B-52s at U-Tapao RTAFB following request by Unger in January. Initially 15 B-52s; 25 by end of year.

March 10, 1967
C-123 #545 released for test flight following extensive damage repairs begun in December. [Continuing account in T/S Monthly reports]

March 28, 1967
Bill, My Work was an odd mix of military, AAM, and consulting for a Senator (Bud Case of NJ). I started by making some spot trips to Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh (the NEFA Region of India). This is where I became acquainted (albeit hardly authoritative) on the peripheral designs that China had on her back door areas.

This activity was replaced by military service with an NSA sponsored monitoring station in Taiwan. (Intellectually interesting, but lacking the human element). After some Vietnamese training, I was stationed in Saigon with 7th AF intelligence (a rather inept operation) then to Takli, Thailand to deal with ELINT related problems.

In 1966 left the Air Force and did a consultancy stint for Sen. Case with assignments in Indonesia and Southern Philippines. Then came the invite from AAM to join the FIC in Udorn. There I worked with Thai, US Military, CIA and Tribal sources up country in developing order of battle data bases used to keep our guys from being shot down and for supporting other intelligence agencies.

The FIC Function had undergone a set back when I arrived in 1967. In Vientiane it had been manned by two brilliant men who had built an intelligence infrastructure that was competing with the CIA. They were fired and it became a dispenser of outdated and skimpy information. I was assigned to Udorn and developed many of the same sources (and more) but in cooperation with the customer and military agencies. At times the shop seemed to be the focal transit point through which Intel agencies could pass info with out having to ask permission from higher echelons. However as the war wound down, the Intel function (which was never officially admitted by AAM) became almost irrelevant.

Only in Saigon did FIC grow in value, best exemplified in the work that they did during the final weeks of the Vietnam experience. There they shared in a dual role as both a dispenser of hard- to- figure intelligence, and as an air ops management fueled with a helluva lot of improvisation. I was not there, but heard enough and could figure what that section went through, based on my personal relationships with those men.

Towards the end (1972?73) I was more involved as an Ops Manager, i.e. one of the fellows running the Air Ops out of Vientiane.

During this period I curried highly informative liaisons (Indeed, lasting friendships) among politicos, business leaders, informed correspondents, bankers, priests, and interesting shady characters to help round out my perspective.
It didn't all end there. I was asked to develop a small company extensively as a small import export company. It started as an innocuous safe house, then as a company that sponsored Art Shows. In 1973, in support of a friend of Henry Kissinger it evolved into the biggest Shellac company in Thailand, which, in 1975, was lost in one of those gentile Thai ministry coups that kept springing up after the revolution of 1973. The main victim of that coup seems to have been me. (wanna buy an interest in a Lac Plant?)

After more consultant work ranging from Japan to Malaysia to Pakistan, I returned, in 1977 to the USA after a total of app 15 years.

This summary probably begs more questions than it addresses. But they are better considered as a function of someone's curiosity quotient.

There is one fellow who knows a lot of what was going through the Chinese leadership in the during those times: Dick Solomon, now head of an agency hastily called the United States Institute for Peace. He used to be a Quaker. However this is decidedly not in that vein. He did much to craft the China accords for Kissinger; and is slowly letting out some of what he knows. I hope to ferret out more insights from him and Jim Lilly, whom he has referred me to. I will you know what I learn.

Meanwhile, back to my day job. Will send you that intro blurb. Best regards, Jeff B

-----Original Message-----
From: William Leary [mailto:kleary@uga.edu]
Sent: Tuesday, June 15, 2004 7:35 PM
To: jeffrey.flanchford@ubs.com
Subject: Air America

Dear Jeff,

A colleague of mine, Bill Steuck, has written a diplomatic history of the Korean War which makes the point that it was one of the "necessary wars" during the Cold War. There are several other pretty solid accounts of the Cold War that also make this point, placing SE Asia in a broader context.

If you have the time and inclination, I would appreciate an account of your time with Air America. I have some good info on the origins and early history of the FIC but not much on its later evolution. Anything at all would be helpful.

I look forward to seeing your presentation.

All best wishes,

Bill

William M. Leary
Coulter Professor of History
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April 6/7, 1967

April 8, 1967
K.D. Nolan wounded by hostile fire.

May 1967
Soutchay Vongsavanh, RLP Military Operations:
In May 1967 a plan was developed to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail east of the Bolovens Plateau. The primary purpose of the operation was to test the NVA response to a large force; also, the Americans wanted to test the use of irregular forces (used only as squadrons and platoons to this point) in company-size airborne operations. A 100-man company was loaded on 10 Air America helicopters and assaulted south of Chavane early in the morning. The NVA reaction was "swift and violent." The company was wiped out within 12 hours; only 15 men escaped. (p. 38) [Glerum: "Recognized as a tragic mistake, not to be repeated."]
Road watch/action teams usually consisted of 12 men. They observed traffic and called in airstrikes. Action teams ambushed and destroyed trucks, planted anti-tank mines, etc. They were normally inserted by helicopters that were covered by T-28s/A-1s (sometimes they entered the area on foot). They faced NVA dog-equipped security teams. Later, the 12-man teams were increased to 50-man teams. [According to Oudone Sanaikone, Thais first entered the war in Laos to watch Ho Chi Minh Trail - recruited and trained by Americans. Royal Lao Army, p. 129]

[Posmire, Feb. 8, 1993, comment: "I had 5- to 12-man teams. I had only one large 30-40-man team, but this mostly recruiting and intell team, not roadwatch. Also, we had SGU Ops." The Thais had first entered Laos in 1960 when they helped Phoum against Kong Le.]

[Glerum to WML 2/15/93: "In all regions, a senior Royal Lao Army officer was designated as the commander of guerrilla forces. Vang Pao was unique in that he also was a 'tribal'; all others were lowland Lao. The guerrilla commanders in Savannakhet and Pakse were very capable, and also very responsive to base/unit support and guidance. Their counterparts in Luang Prabang and Nam Yu were less capable (and of somewhat questionable integrity), but generally cooperative. Perhaps fundamental to understanding the relationship is recognizing that the tribal groups and
even the MR III and IV lowland Lao did not have to be encouraged to fight the NVA. Hatred of the Vietnamese was deep-seated."

May 22, 1967
PC-6C N193X turning final for landing at Pou Pha Lovom (LS228) when it took numerous hits by small arms fire. Pilot H. T. Griffin wounded in upper left leg. 5 pax OK.

June 30, 1967
Technical Services report: The On Mark aircraft, which arrived Udorn in May, has been "plagued with radar and related navigational equipment difficulties for two weeks on and off." Systems are "highly sophisticated in function and constructions." Corrections are time consuming. No problem with cabin pressurization system. Low flying rates.

Jim Rhyne: Initially, roadwatch teams in northern Laos were resupplied by Caribou. In May 1967, the customer brought out two On Mark B-26s for use in bad weather night drops. There was a lot of money invested in these sophisticated aircraft. The concept was not bad but it never worked. The airplanes were fast and had self-sealing tanks. They carried a navigator under a curtain with a repeater radar scope (Robert B. McKeen/John O. Kessock) who passed up messages to the cockpit (where there also was a scope - the radar was similar to that used by F-4s). They were given drop coordinates prior to departure, but these only approximated the location within 5-10 kms. You had to search for a light signal from the ground. The B-26s had two problems. First, the 56th Wing was using B-26 to attack targets on the Trail at night. The people on the ground came to recognize the sound of B-26 engines and would not turn on a light lest they be attacked. Also, the B-26 was too fast at 178 knots for jungle terrain. It worked fine in the deserts of the U.S., but by the time you picked up a light signal through the jungle canopy, it was too late to drop. You had to come around for a second pass, which was not a good idea. Jim Rhyne wrote a paper on the problems with the B-26s which caused some problems with the backers of the program. The airplanes did not last long. The equipment was temperamental and you always had to have a Caribou standing by to fly the mission.

The navigation was difficult on a Caribou night drop. You had to figure your approach carefully. You sat down with maps and drew out course lines, figured distances, times, headings, altitudes, etc. You had to plan carefully. It was best to drop in one pass and avoid circling a team. There was little wind so drops tended to be accurate. The kicker usually saw where the load landed. Sometimes, you were ordered to drop at a spot if there was no signal. The ground teams knew the time of the drop and there was a
predesignated light signal. The teams reported receipt of the drop by radio. In the early days, there usually was no radio contact with the teams. Later, all the teams had radios and could direct the aircraft in bad weather. In the early days, the teams were mostly Thai; later, they were Lao. The enemy shot at sound. Rhine never lost an airplane on a night drop, although one Caribou took an airburst that dented but did not penetrate the skin. C-123s were used on the program from time to time.

The Twin Otter was brought out in November 1971 for use for bad weather night drops. You had to navigate by radar. One pilot did the flying and the other did the navigating. "You dropped your pencil and you were lost." The system required a great deal of power. If you lost one generator, the system had to be shut down. Most of the teams on the ground had radios by this time so there normally was radio contact with the ground.

July 7, 1967

Accident Report: Pilot Eugene E. Rainville [DOH 9 September 1966], FM William Parker. "During take-off from a helicopter pad located in up-country Laos [TF-6272], H-51 crashed and burned. The crash and ensuing fire was fatal to two of the passengers[,] the pilot, flight mechanic and one passenger received serious burn injuries. The aircraft was destroyed." Aircraft lost altitude immediately after departing pad. Helicopter hit knoll and tore off gear. "At this point, I wrapped on full throttle and pulled up collective." Aircraft raised up into air and Rainville thought it would fly again but RPM was zero. Aircraft hit house directly ahead, then toppled over steep drop-off. Aircraft rolled on left side and fire started. Accident report blames pilot for failure to properly ascertain aircraft's operating capability, resulting in over-loaded take-off under prevailing conditions. The report recommended that "consideration be given to supply and make mandatory the use of long sleeve, fire proof suits by helicopter and STOL aircraft flight personnel." [Taipei contacted stateside companies about the purchase of Nomex. Samples received, and Tainan Supply has been requested to procure small quantity of material for evaluation.]

Note: The first mention of "all AAM helicopter crews" stationed at Udorn and Saigon "are being furnished with flight uniforms made of NOMEX, a high temperature-resistant nylon fiber, produced by The DuPont Company" appears in the Air America Log, vol. VI, no. 4, 1972.
THE BLUE GOOSE & THE STEEL TIGER

Air America's B26 Night Drop Project

By: Frank Bonansinga

A dark blue long nosed twin engine airplane showed up at the AA ramp in Udorn, Thailand in May of 1967. It was to make night drops to supply infiltrated indigenous troops in unfriendly territory. These surveillance teams operated between the Mu Gia Pass to Tchepone in east central Laos. This area with its jagged hills, called karst, had a network of roads from North Vietnam snaking in and out of the jungle cover toward South Vietnam. The network of roads was referred to as the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the area was code named "Steel Tiger." The sleek machine was a B26.

The similar modifications consisted of wing tip tanks, copilot instruments and controls, and enlarged rudder for better control, oversized anti-skid brakes and an air stair door on the starboard side. The engines had reversible props and with water injection, gave each P&W engine 2500 hp on take off. Also our Blue Goose had the bomb bay doors removed and the addition of a large couch with several seats as in the corporate Marketer modification.

The paramount changes featured in this B26 were Terrain Following Radar, precise navigational gear and a cargo drop ramp. These additions enabled "598" to deliver supplies at night, at low level and in most any kind of weather. The TFR was new at that time. In fact, the only aircraft to have it was the new USAF F111, an all weather twin jet fighter bomber not yet deployed in SEA. Installed in the B26 nose, this unique radar enabled it to fly low at night over any terrain getting to the drop area and away from it as quickly as possible. The auto pilot could be coupled to the TFR and the navigational equipment was checked before and after each flight with exceptionally accurate results.

This AA B26, N4659R, was painted blue with white trim stripes and nicknamed the "Blue Goose." It was also affectionately referred to as the "Bliver" which implied something-stuffed full of more than it could hold. This was true, as it had everything from A to Z when it came to electronic equipment and then some!

The Blue Goose was considerably different from the WWII Douglas A26 Invader, a medium bomber whose designation was changed to B26 in the 1990's. This hybrid B26, arrived with many of the modifications taken from the OnMark Company's corporate Marketer and a few from the OnMark USAF B26K attack bomber also known as Nimrods when flown at Nakhon Phanom in eastern Thailand.

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Continued on Page 3
Blue Goose Continued:

Navigational equipment besides the radar and computer was a military type Tacan, an ADF and the VOR/ILS nav/landing aid. Communications gear was UHF, VHF and HF radios and an IFF encoder, a radar altimeter and one black box in the center console, its use never explained and never used.

The navigator was stationed behind the pilot with his table and chair where he operated the navigational equipment and radar. Besides this important job, he helped spot the drop zone (DZ) lights on final run in to the drop site.

The crews flying in the 26, as best remembered, were: Chief Pilot Jim Rhyne, Pilots, Bert King, Gene Hughes and Bonansinga, Cogilots, Walt Darran, Bill Reedy, Ed Dudek, Dave Krebs, Bill Harvey and Terry Luther. Navigators, Roger "Mac" McKeon, Richard Andrews, Raymond Feind and (?) Richey. Kickers, Billy Hester, Miles Lechtman, Mick Swift, Bill Buzzard, Robby Roberts and Cliff Hamilton.

Pilot Don Gearke along with electronic technician Paul Byrne and Mechanic Leonard Billotte, all from Intermountain in Arizona, gave us a short ground school on the aircraft and its electronic equipment prior to check out in the B26. After about 7 hours and a similar number of landings (from my log book) AA’s check captain Albert "Rocky" Meier gave King, Hughes and Bonansinga, line checks with Don Gearke observing the rides. We then flew together making practice day drops at the Thai Border Police camp outside Udorn followed by several night drop missions to road watch teams, training in Laos.

On one such night training flight northeast of Savannakhet (I-39), “practice” tracers were coming our way. Bert I stopped dropping and returned to Udorn. That night, at the Club Rendezvous, we learned the troops where we had dropped had to expel attacking unfriendlies. Only then could they call it a night after their “training” exercise.

The typical mission was to supply the surveillance teams with food, hard rice (ammo) and whatever they required. A road watch team, “Stag & Quail”, were two code names remembered, would radio in their needs, giving a drop zone location and receive an agreed upon drop time and signal; usually it was a T or L made with flash lights. The DZ signal was turned on just prior to the expected drop time or when the 26 was heard. There was no communications between the infil team and the Blue Goose, so if no signal was seen, it was a no drop. And only one pass to the DZ coordinates made.

The aircraft was normally towed to the Udorn customer’s warehouse, referred to as the AB-1 ramp, for loading and briefing. The kicker supervised the loading while the navigator and pilots figured the flight plan, usually departing Udorn after dark. The flight called for the plane to descend to a low altitude entering the Steel Tiger after crossing the Mekong River into Laos. We’d hit an initial point (IP) at 7 or so miles from the DZ, slow to approximately 140 knots and the kicker lowered the ramp. After the DZ lights were spotted and the load dropped, we headed back to Udorn or sometimes to Savannakhet to reload for a different DZ.

AA had excellent, if not the best maintenance in SEA and this was particularly true at Udorn. We were most fortunate to have Stan Wilson and crew at AA’s Savannakhet base. They furnished the 26 with excellent service and maintenance, besides keeping the Volpars going on their “all alterns”. Nonetheless, problems occurred as in all machines. Several in flight engine shut downs and an electrical fire are well remembered. Another time, a load got off the tracks and the AFs somehow managed to kick it out and kept from going with it. Then once, departing from the customer’s warehouse at Udorn, a prop got damaged when a wheel dropped into an unseen pot hole one very rainy night. Fortunately, soon thereafter, the entire customer ramp and taxi way was repaved.

The B26 was similar to dropping in AA’s other aircraft except for two problems. First, it was too fast, with a minimum drop speed of 140 knots (163 mph) compared to 122 knots in a lighter A26 Invader. This minimum safe control speed, if an engine failed (Vmc), was higher than most of our other drop machines and cut down the maneuvering or line up time once the DZ lights were spotted.

The other major problem was seeing out to drop. The pilot’s forward vision was hindered by the Blue Goose’s nose. Once the DZ was spotted, a slightly curved approach in a left turn was required to keep the DZ lights in sight to make a successful drop. Somewhat similar to having to turn to see the LSO’s signals making a carrier landing approach to a straight deck carrier in days of old. This problem was particularly true flying the long “hose nosed” F4U Corsairs.

Duskness was not a factor in the project’s outcome. But a DZ surrounded by high jungle cover could pose a problem when coming in low for drops. We did have a couple missions where no DZ lights were displayed; it’s likely the night watch team had more steel than tigers to worry about, in the unfriendly Steel Tiger. Our last night drop mission was with Terry Luther, Ray Feind and Cliff Hamilton aboard the Goose on the night of October 7, 1967. Shortly thereafter the project was canceled. The results indicated the other AA drop aircraft at Udorn could do the job better then the B26. The project was somewhat reminiscent of the AD4N Skyraider missions with crew members who operated electronic equipment during night carrier missions. Reliable teamwork was a must in getting the job done in both missions. The support crew at AA were professional, reliable and you couldn’t find better anywhere.

The Blue Goose was one going machine and I enjoyed flying it. The night drop missions were always interesting. But that one black, super secret, box will forever remain a mystery. Probably was a fax machine!

PRESIDENTS MESSAGE

Bill Forsyth of the Joint Task Force Full Accounting has located another long lost crew. The crew of James Earl “Earthquake” McGovern and Wallace Buford, missing since May 6, 1954, may soon be recovered. Bill has requested our memberships help in locating the family members of McGovern. His request is in this edition of the log.

The 1998 Reunion is just around the corner, we hope to see a record number of you in Berkeley. Joe Mish our reunion host will make this a memorable event.
July 29, 1967

CIA, Intelligence Information Cable [DDRS 1992/3089]:

Subject: "The Improved Position of General Vang Pao's Forces Operating in the Second Military Region between the Latter Part of the Dry Season and the First Part of the Rainy Season." Appraisal by "a staff officer of this organization [AB-17]."

Enemy has been able to take only one significant piece of terrain for regular and irregular forces during dry season of October 1966-July 1967. This put enemy in control of Nong Khang (VH 0581) area. Lack of enemy success has resulted in "a tactical shift in the balance of power" in MR II, giving RLG opportunity to exercise several offensive options during 1967 rainy season. "The successful implementation of these options could contribute to permanently changing the tactical balance of power in Northern Laos in favor of the Royal Lao Government." Success by RLG attributed to VP's "improved intelligence apparatus." It has furnished him with information that he used to hit enemy with spoiling attacks in staging areas. Morale of VP's forces is high. With rainy season offensive, VP's units expected to expand outward from existing positions in Houa Phan Province.

On 3 April the enemy mounted an attack on Nong Khang with two NVA and one PL battalions. "After repulsing several assaults the defenders lost this position to the enemy, chiefly because bad weather prevented close air support and aerial resupply of the defending force." This was only significant enemy success and cost was high. Enemy suffered at least 150 casualties in assault; also, Lao Army Forces Volunteer Battalion 28 was "badly mauled" when the unit was ambushed while withdrawing from its position at Nong Khang.

Enemy intended to follow up success with attacks on Phou Pha Thi and Na Khang. VP moved one battalion by air to Phou Pha Louan, southeast of Route 68, to engage in harassing operations. Two ADC battalions attacked enemy positions guarding Routes 6 and 61, east of Phou Pha Thi. "This forced the enemy to react and he had to focus on these thrusts before moving on to his planned major offensives." Enemy never recovered momentum.

Throughout 1966-67 dry season, VP's forces withstood a series of NVA infantry close assaults and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. "A leading factor in Vang Pao's success in defending fieldsites has been his improved intelligence capability. Patrols and intelligence teams have continued to produce hard intelligence on enemy concentrations and movements. By using these reports, Vang Pao has been able to call for air strikes to hit enemy forces in their staging areas before they could launch attacks on Meo positions. These air strikes have been so successful that the badly hurt enemy has usually cancelled
attack plans and withdrawn." Classic example was air strike against NVA battalion moving against Phou Pha Lang. Air strike reportedly killed 24 NVA, including unit's commander. Enemy forces withdrew from area after strike.

VP's intelligence nets also produced good intelligence on major storage areas in Houa Phan province and along Route 7 in Xieng Khouang Province. "An analysis of aerial photography invariably confirmed this ground-source intelligence." Small but effective air effort carried out against these targets.

Instant availability of close air support in darkness has caused enemy to break off several attacks. This happened twice at Pha Hng and nine times at Phou Pha Louam, when A-26s appeared during attacks.

"The combination of road-watch teams working with English-speaking ground forward air controller and A-26 aircraft against enemy truck traffic moving at night on Route 6 and 68 in Houa Phan Province has continued to be effective." Between April 1 and July 18, this system has resulted in destruction of about 92 trucks. It also has limited enemy's ability to move supplies from major support complex in vicinity of Routes 6 and 65 to his forward fighting units. "Since the inception of this system on 1 November 1966 more than 250 trucks have been destroyed."

Vang Pao's soldiers have grown in confidence as they have inflicted heavy casualties on NVA. Defenders of Nong Khang killed 40 NVA soldiers; defenders killed 150 NVA during attack on Nong Khang.

"The current rainy season, which is the offensive period for Vang Pao's forces, thus finds them in a better tactical position than ever before."

[Glerum to WML, 27 April 1993: "This was very much a Shackle product, thus typical for the time, and exactly what the source paragraph describes - not finished intel, but rather the 'appraisal' of the COS. The facts in the cable are not necessarily incorrect, but the message is somewhat 'colored.' Although there was legitimate reason for guarded optimism in 1967, the picture was by no means as rosy as the cable painted it. However, in fairness to Ted, the use of a certain amount of hyperbole probably was necessary to ensure continued political and financial commitment from Washington to expansion of the Laos program."

August 1967

AAM operating 34 Twin Beeches (mainly in Vietnam):
9 C-45s, 12 Ten-Twos (with max. gross weight increased from 8,750 to 10,200 pounds), and 13 turboprop Volpares (with tricycle landing gear).
August 3, 1967

“Aircraft Accident Investigation, H-38, Local Board Report, August 13, 1967,” CIA Corporate Files, Box 59, UTD

Aircraft destroyed as a result of hostile action. Capt. Weitz and F/O C. L. Asta suffered minor wounds; F/M Pirkle and one passenger (a Lao lieutenant) killed. UH-34D H-38 departed LS 131 for a medevac at TH 2867. Thirty seconds after landing, the aircraft was hit by hostile fire. Weitz had noticed an incorrect signal displayed when first approaching the pad and had returned to LS-131. Radio contact was established with site and signal problem resolved (they had been displaying the previous day’s signal). Weitz landed at 1745. Thirty seconds later, the aircraft was hit in the center of the fuselage with a 57mm recoilless rifle round. Weitz and Asta got out on the left side and into a nearby foxhole. The flight mechanic and passenger died inside the aircraft. The area came under heavy attack, and the local commander pulled out of 2130. They marched until 0245, rested, then resumed at 0500. They were picked up by an AAM helicopter at 1245. “Hostile forces were much nearer to the landing zone than suspected by personnel holding the area.”

August 8, 1967

“Investigating Team Report, UH-34D, H-43,” August 24, 1967; CIA Corporate Files, Box 59, TDT

John J. Cooney and F/M Earl E. Bruce, Jr. were working out of Pakse when the aircraft hit the side of a mountain cliff at 4,600 feet, three miles from destination of Ban Thatang, LS-210). During a check ride on October 28-29, 1966, check pilot Charles Frady reported of Cooney: “This man will get lost due to lack of attention to maps. Depends on Captain to point out way, tends to be lazy.” “All evidence indicates that this accident is the direct result of a pilot violating good common sense flight practices by flying in instrument flight conditions at altitudes below the surrounding terrain.”
August 3, 1967

Lowell E. Pirkle (F/M) killed by gunfire when UH-34 H-38 was near Luang Prabang. This was Pirkle's last flight before his resignation became effective.

Charles A. Weitz, March 28, 1992: In early August, Weitz began a normal tour of Luang Prabang with new copilot Cy Asta [C. L. Asta]. Pirkle, whom he had not flown with before, was the flight mechanic. On August 2, they flew a medevac mission under heavy fire. They landed at a pad and picked up ten wounded, remaining on the ground only a few seconds. Just after they lifted off, the pad was hit by mortars. Asta inquired: "Does this happen all the time?"

The next day, they had another medevac call to a location a short distance away from the previous day's mission (just north of Luang Prabang). Shortly after landing, a rocket hit the transmission. Weitz and Asta jumped into a nearby trench just before the aircraft blew up, killing Pirkle. Asta had some minor shrapnel wounds in his legs. The pad came under attack as night fell, and the Lao commander decided to pull out. Weitz and Asta walked through the jungle for two days with the Lao troops (both pilot had left their survival radios in the aircraft; the Lao radio was unreliable) before being picked up by Wayne Knight. When they got back, Asta wife gave him an ultimatum: quit or get a divorce. Asta left Air America.

August 8, 1967

John J. Cooney and Earl E. Bruce, Jr., killed in UH-34 H-43 enroute Pakse-Ban Thateng when aircraft hit mountain in bad weather. Accident report blamed pilot error.

August 14, 1967

Casterlin to parents: I have been flying the turbine engine helicopter. H-34 shelled on pad recently; pilot got out but crew chief killed [Pirkle]. One pilot flew into a mountain in a bad area [Cooney]. "We are doing more dangerous work lately, not like 1965 but potentially bad." [Casterlin had become involved in infil/exfil program]

August 27, 1967

Casterlin to parents: Busted check ride on Bell. The Bell performs better than the H-34. "It is programmed for a little more hazardous type work than before but we have been doing in in a 34. We are putting teams into places where they can observe the roads the enemy use. There seems to be very good results so far." He is supposed to receive extra pay but there has not been any money as yet. [When money was received, Elder declared the pay on his income tax - likely the only Air America pilot who ever did so! Elder interview.]
August 29, 1967

P.C. Goddard and Benjamin A. Shaffer wounded by hostile fire.

Larry Taylor dates this to August 29. He was working the Nambac Valley (Bob Bedell, F/M) when Phil Goddard, flying Huey 39F, asked Taylor to accompany him north, as he was going into an area he didn't know. Both Goddard and his flight mechanic [Benny Shaffer] were wounded on the mission. Although it looked bad, it was not serious. They flew back to Nambac with Taylor as escort. To Siegel: "Several holes in the bird, one round went thru the back of his helmet, creased his skull, another shattered his flight mech's lip mike and took away part of his thumb. Both of them damn lucky."

Taylor says that "August was an unbelievable busy month and I'm bushed. Was off until the 10th and flew 19 of the last 21 days of the month for 113 hours. That will make for an October paycheck of over $3000."

August 31, 1967

TJS report: "On Mark availability has been low. The airplane has proved a maintenance headache for a number of reasons, not the least of which are: The high speed profile providing very limited working quarters; the sophisticated, integrated electronics system; inclusion of pressurization and fuel flow systems; and the peculiarities inherent to the On Mark program."

September-November 1967

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

"The level of truck traffic in the Lao Panhandle reported by both air and ground observers was much greater in the period September-November 1967 than in the corresponding three months in 1966. Air-observed traffic was over 15 times higher this year; roadwatch teams, however, noted only a slight rise. The destroyed and damaged total was nearly nine times greater this year (over 900), with most of the losses recorded in November. The more numerous sightings and losses in 1967 relate to a real increase in traffic as well as improved detection and strike capabilities.

The 1967 resupply effort started over the Route 911/912 corridor into the Tchepone Base Area in late October. Roads clearing Mu Gia Pass were repaired and generally serviceable by early November. By late November, the flow of traffic had shifted from the Route 137/912 border crossing to the Route 15/12 corridor through Mu Gia Pass. In addition,
traffic on Route 914 south of Tchepone increased in late November."

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September 14, 1967
John Ford Logbook: "While following a small river through an area of known enemy activity, our engine backfired and quit. I elected to land in the river as the rest of the terrain was covered to 75 to 100 foot trees. A standard 'zero' ground speed autorotation was executed. After the fuselage was firmly in the water, I rolled the a/c on its left side. The flight mechanic (Harold Augustine) and I then climbed out of the right hand side doors. The a/c required about 30 seconds to submerge. During this time, Harold and I started our swim to shore. The swim itself was fairly short. Once on shore we hid in the jungle. We agreed to stay hidden for two hours to see what developed. At the end of the first hour we observed a boat coming down the river. It passed within 20 feet of us. During this time we tried to determine if the 9 soldiers on board were friendly or not. We felt certain they were friendly. We waited however until they went around a bend in the river before firing a signal flare. This gave us the opportunity to observe their reactions without revealing our position. Everything seemed normal so we exposed ourselves to them. The soldier (Capt. Pah and his men) then took us to their village. Once in the village we were treated to a meal of boiled chicken and sticky rice. Four hours later we were able to signal a search plane piloted by Lee Mullins. We were subsequently picked up by an Air America helicopter pilots by Vern Clarkson. Total time in the jungle: 6 hours and 15 minutes."

September 30, 1967
First Bell 205, XW-PFF, arrived Udorn. Four more aircraft due from BKK shortly.

Knight: I flew PFF - had to proceed BKK/VTE/UDN as clearance was international. Not enough fuel, so made technical landing at UDN en route.

October 1967
Time. October 23, reports 42,000 NVA; 24,000 Pathet Lao; 60,000 FAR, 10,000 Neutralist; 10,000 Meo. Communists control two-thirds of country and 20 percent of population.
October 17, 1967
Taylor to Murray Siegel: "For the 9 months or so that I’ve been here we’ve lost 7 [UH-34s]; 4 in accidents and 3 to enemy action. We’ve had 3 crew members killed, about 4 bad enough to have been evacuated and several others hurt to a lesser degree. As of about a week ago, I’m the only captain here that has yet to bring a bird back with some battle damage of some sort. I guess I’ve averaged getting shot at least once on each trip upcountry. Never anything more serious than temporary terror and nothing bigger than .50 caliber..."

I discover that I have trouble sleeping without a tranquilizer the night before I go upcountry and while upcountry, after 8-10 hours flying I take one, or else all night I’m reliving the whole day. When I’m not flying I’m more careful about everyday things like crossing the street. And whenever I approach the end of a period of time off, I get a little morbid & apprehensive. But while working I usually fell pretty good in the head (get tired, of course) and I haven’t had too much problem keeping cool when the situation called for it. ‘Course like I say, so far I’ve been lucky.

October 21, 1967
Taylor to Siegel: "You will recall my pompous mouthings upon my combined luck/skill in not getting popped as yet? Forget it. Today I got my cherry busted." Taylor was working in southeast Laos. On his first landing of the morning, about 200-300 high, "all of a sudden it was Chinese New Years directly below me. About 10 seconds solid small arms & automatic weapons fire. As we added power and began to depart post-haste I felt the bird get hit." Landed at nearest friendly field, about 15 miles away. Had taken 6 hits, 3 through the cabin (missed flight mechanic by 1-2 feet), 2 in fuel cells, and 1 in main rotor blade.

November 15, 1967
Seven Garrett Porters transferred from UTH to VTE.

November 30, 1967
T/S report: Caribou 61-2401 landed short at Sam Thong during the month, sheering left main gear and rendering major damage to left wing and center section.

December 1, 1967
Rich logbook: Hazard pay cut 30% or more. [Strike on 2nd and 5th.]

December 4, 1967

December 5, 1967

Captain A. F. Nugent report: December 5 date set for pilot group to shut down. There was a four-hour meeting in Dunn's office on December 4. Heated discussion. Inconclusive. Shut down on the 5th. Resumed flying on the 6th. Grundy and Madison arrived VTE on the 7th and discussed company's position on loss of project pay.

[Glerum to WML, 2/15/93: "We generally respected and appreciated the AAM pilot group, and recognized that some of their 'demands' were not unreasonable. However, the last thing we wanted was a pilots' union. In final analysis (and despite the trauma), loss of effectiveness during the 'strike' period was relatively minimal. Existing good relationships with the chief pilots helped in meeting the highest priorities and the line pilots in the main were very flexible in their acceptance of missions defined as life saving or otherwise essential."

December 11, 1967

Rich logbook: PDK crashed; hit on drop near LS-21. Mike Lepai and kicker killed. [Continental]

December 15, 1967

Six Volpar Beech aircraft transferred from Udorn to VTE; one additional aircraft expected in near future.

December 24, 1967

Four Air America personnel (Thai nationals) killed when radio station [TACAN] at Site LS-61 [Moung Phalane] overrun by enemy forces. Also, 2 Americans killed. [TACAN, Channel 77, established at LS-61 in early April 1967.]

Taylor to Seigel: "We lost a bird at Moung Phalane the day they captured it. They shot him up and he managed to get it a few miles west before she quit on him. Crew got picked up the next morning, both wounded but not bad. Moung Phalane was considered a relative secure spot, the company even had a permanent radio station and the Air Force had a Tacan station. They killed the radio operator and the Air Force people. Two of our people are still missing."

December 25, 1967

UH-34 H-56 departed Luang Prabang at 1600 for Mong Pha Lane (L61). Pilot Sarisporn orbited area while cover aircraft checked site. Reported clear of unfriendlies. When H56 landed, it received "intense unfriendly fire." Two minutes after takeoff, oil pressure dropped to zero and
engine quit. Emergency landing. Crew and two pax spent night in jungle, hiding from enemy. Picked up at 0615 next morning. Accident report faults Customer for passing along "unsupported and uncorroborated statements concerning security." [Casterlin, Jan. 9, 1993: Pilot on pickup was Ed Reid. He saw hand-held flares at first light.]

Fosmire, Dec. 28, 1992:

On December 25, 1967, after the enemy overran Mount Phalane, Fosmire sent in case officer Mick McGrath and a Lao officer to check the site. After landing, McGrath found the bodies of the two Americans who had been working with the TACAN equipment but was unable to recover the bodies because their helicopter came under fire. The Thai pilot of the helicopter was clipped in the neck by a round and the helicopter was hit several times, but they managed to take off. The helicopter crashed a few miles from Mount Phalane. T-28s, that had been escorting the helicopter, saw people running away from the downed aircraft. A USAF Jolly Green was brought in, but no one could be located before nightfall. They were picked up the next morning.

Fosmire, Feb. 8, 1993, commenting on accident report:

"[The accident report] does not reflect the fact that the aircraft landed in Savannakhet where the pilot/crew was briefed and picked up two passengers (McGrath and Lao Capt.). Also two T-28s were assigned to fly cover. (And did fly cover, making strafing runs on enemy.) We were told two Americans were at Mount Phalane and we were directed to check it out. We knew the site had been hit and were unaware of Americans being there (Air Commandos/Air Attache - whoever was running the TACAN site had not informed us until the message from headquarters). At that point, with American lives involved, I ordered the helo, T-28 recce to check it out. McGrath verified the dead bodies. When shooting started, i.e. enemy opened fire, they departed the area, mission accomplished.

I think the rules were followed. The report seems unaware of the T-28s escorting the helo and providing cover. Everyone involved, Air America pilots, T-28 pilots, and my officer and Lao Capt. knew the mission and hazards and received a briefing from/in front of a situation maps in our ops room at the airport. McGrath would have been awarded a Silver Star (or maybe at least a bronze w/"V") if this had been a military operation. He treated the pilot's wounds, kept them together overnight, and was in charge the next morning when we picked the 4 mission team members up.
This was a high risk mission. It was flown to rescue/pick up/determine the fate of two Americans as ordered by our embassy - on Christmas Day!!

December 31, 1967
33,000 USAF personnel and 527 aircraft in Thailand.