1968

[This year marks major change in war. NVA/PL launch major offensives, unlike anything in the past.]

January 1968


[Conby, "Vietnam and Laos": "The first evidence of the new PAVN focus on northeastern Laos came in the first week of January 1968 when the PAVN 335 Independent Regiment, elements of the 316 Division and the Pathet Lao 409 Battalion overran the major government garrison at Nam Bac, north of Luang Prabang, after a prolonged siege. PAVN prisoners captured before Nam Bac fell claimed that Hanoi's goals were to divert attention away from the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos and to demolish the government's best parachute battalions which had been sent to bolster the garrison."

[Glerum to WML, 2/15/93, re order-of-battle information: "The Udorn OB shop product was not perfect, but it was the best tactical OB available in the theater. However, other than to say it was drawn from every conceivable source, I am afraid I will have to pass on the details of how it was compiled."

Interview with Daniel L. Williams, September 30, 1990, Atlanta, GA: Williams was chief mechanic for northern Laos, stationed at Long Tieng from January 1968 to March 1969, and from July 1969 to January 1972.

Williams (born in 1942) was with Reeve Aleutian Airlines out of Anchorage after he got out of the service (helicopter mechanic), working on DC-6s and DC-3s, when he was an advertisement in the Anchorage paper in 1966 and filled out an application. About a year later, he received a telegram from Dawson, offering employment as a mechanic at $599 a month. In the summer of 1967, Williams processed through Taipei, then was sent to Udorn. He worked at Udorn for several months, then was transferred to Vientiane when the Porters were relocated there [seven Porters were transferred to VTE on 15 November 1967]. A few months later,
Jack Pearsall asked Williams if he wanted to go to 20A. He agreed, and was transferred to Long Tieng in January 1968. [Re Porters: They had a problem with the fuel control unit. The engine gear box drove the fuel pump which drove the fuel control (scheduled fuel). The shaft would shear between the fuel control and the fuel pump. This happened on several occasions. Also, there was a problem with a gear in the nose case failing, causing the propeller to go into feather. Williams has a photo of the result of the feather problem in a Porter flown by Smokey Maxwell. In the picture, Jim McMahon (maintenance, VTE) and Peter Parker are inspecting the blade.] The original purpose of the assignment was to take over the contract for the FAC O-1s (L-19s) from the USAF. The airplanes had been having problems with engines and radios, and the Ravens had gone on strike. Williams and Stan Wilson (based at Savannakhet) quickly got the airplanes in good shape. The problems mostly had been caused by maladjustment of carburetors and dirty fuel. Wilson returned to Savannakhet on the Volpar program (chief mechanic, southern Laos) and Williams remained at 20A with four Filipino mechanics (one radio man) that had been sent out from VTE. Their job was to maintain the FAC airplanes and to look after transiting Air America planes (especially RONs). Williams also spent a lot of time at Sam Thong, looking after the eight airplanes based there.

At first Williams stayed at the Air America hostel (the Filipinos had a shed next to the hostel). He later made arrangements to stay at the Customer hostel, where he had a private room. Vince Shields was "head customer" when he arrived. Later, Dick Johnson took over. (Johnson, a pipe smoker, was "cool, calm, dignified." It was said that he had been involved in the Bay of Pigs. He was appreciative of Air America's efforts and made it a point to acknowledge the organization's contribution.) Williams became friendly with other Customers. Some worked mainly in the field: Jerry Daniels, Burr Smith, and Frank Odum. Others stayed at 20A in air operations: Ed Bustamonte (former smoke jumper), "Tom" [Luu?] and Shep Johnson (ex-smoke jumper and Air America kicker — he worked mainly in the rigging sheds and part of the time in air ops). There also were people involved with intelligence and communications. At one point, there were some 15 to 20 Customers at 20A.

Long Tieng was extremely noisy during the day, with the turbines echoing in the karst area at the end of the runway. Operations ended about 5 p.m. Williams had hired several Mesos to clean up the airplanes. After doing necessary maintenance of 3-4 Porters that would RON (several Bells also RONed but they carried their own mechanics), Williams would take a shower and eat dinner. He usually ate at the Customers' mess, where the food was excellent (especially the steaks). The Air Force and Air America had separate
messes; they food was not at good there. Later, the Customer built a small bar on top of the bear cage, and he used to play darts there on many evenings. Most people went to bed early. Sometimes there were movies, usually shipped in by the Air Force. On Sundays, they sometimes played touch football in a level area behind the Customer quarters. Williams and the Filipinos were the only Air America people permanently stationed at Long Tieng until Jerry Connors showed up later on. He stayed at the AAM hostel at first but later moved in with the Customers. He was "a kind of coordinator between the customers and the pilots," although Williams did not believe that the job was necessary. The pilots worked directly with the Agency air operations people, getting assignments, intelligence, etc.

In the beginning, Williams had some close friends among the Ravens, but as some many got killed, he tried to distance himself from them as an emotion defense. One of his best friends, Grant Uhls, was killed in February 1971.

Some of the Bell 205 pilots were reluctant to fly difficult missions and claimed maintenance problems (he remember Filippi doing this on one occasion). Ed Reed used to complain a lot but the CTA always turned to him for difficult missions and he always accepted.

Williams remembers the rice rats in the hostels at 20A and Sam Thong. They would run in the rafters and "sounded like the Green Bay Packers."

The Air America caste system was not pleasant. Thai, Filipinos, Lao, and Chinese all had to have different quarters and received different pay. This caused a lot of hard feelings.

The worst part was the suffering of the local people—the young soldiers bleeding to death in the back of airplanes. The best parts were the friendships and the great beauty of the mountainous area.

Williams/Utterback: Early in 1968, Williams rigged Porter XWPCB at Vietiane to spray Agent Orange. The project lasted for about two months. Williams flew out of Sam Thong to spray the area on Skyline Ridge near the Air America radio site. Utterback flew one day southeast of LS-36, spraying small patches. Pat Thurston and Pete Parker also were involved in the program. Williams says that dirt would plug the spray nozzle, which was the biggest problem with the project.

January 2, 1968

Casterlin to parents: We took a large pay cut in project pay for Laos and there was a strike at VTE. "There are a lot of disgruntled pilots around now, myself being one of them." Casterlin is getting $50 an hour for certain missions (paid under the table); he made $750 is special missions pay in December 1967.
January 6, 1968
Taylor to Seigel: "Up north I've been working around Nam Bac mostly which the PL & Viet Minh have been trying to take for 6-8 months now without success."

There had been big increase in workload. Also "a concurrent decline in the quality of maintenance of our aircraft. Quantity-wise this maintenance setup has always been fantastic and quality-wise it was at least as good as the military, but lately I've been finding things wrong with the aircraft that had been written up by previous pilot repeatedly. Kind of taxes your nerves to fly along wondering what's wrong with the bird that you haven't discovered yet."

January 12, 1968
AAM helicopter shoots down two Polish-built PZL Mielec Antonov AN-2 biplanes (Colts) of North Vietnamese Air Force. [Knight: Second AN-2 likely shot down by ground fire.]

Walt Darran: AAM Huey delivering 105mm ammo from US TACAN station on mountaintop in northern Laos [LS-85] to artillery positions below. Darran heard Ted Moore on radio that two Colts were strafing and bombing artillery positions. Moore pursued in Huey. F/M Glen Wood shot down the two [sic] Colts with an AR-47.

Gary Gentz: There were two Bell 204s working out of the TACAN site at LS-85. Elder had arrived earlier. Gentz (Goddard and Grammar) landed about 10:30 a.m. There was nothing to do, so they tied down the helicopter and went into the nearby crew shed. Gentz was heating soup for lunch about 11:30 when he heard a loud explosion. Going outside, he saw an AN-2 Colt directly overhead. He ran to the helicopter and untied the blades, then got behind some logs, fifty yards away. A second Colt came over. Dick Elder began shooting at it with his .32 caliber pistol. Goddard/Grammar/Gentz took off. One Colt hit a ridge trying to get away from them. Ted Moore and Glen Woods were already airborne. Woods shot down another Colt. Three bodies were taken from the airplane. The wreckage was taken to LS-36.

Dick Elder to WML, 19 Aug 91: "Ted Moore, Glen Woods and I went to LS85 to fly an infil from the site to the area to the northeast. On arrival, I went into the customer shack for a briefing while Ted and Glen were to fly water from the river up to the site. There was a loud explosion just outside the customer shack and I ran outside and saw several Colts on final while others dropping bombs and shooting rockets. The team we were going to infil were all shooting at the aircraft that were making passes at about 50
feet and 80 knots. The all looked like WW I aircraft, only bigger. Phil jumped into the cockpit and started the engine while a Colt on final was strafing right at the 204. The Colt was walking the machine gun right at the 204 but stopped firing just 10 yards in front of the helicopter (gun jammed?). I was returning fire with a pistol, having time to reload between aircraft. I had the customer's hand-held radio and started talking to Ted and he said he shot one down as they were departing to the north. Another Colt crashed 10 miles north from ground fire. Our escort aircraft (2 A-1s) just reported in over site 36 as the Colts were leaving."

[Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos," says that three AN-2s had been sent on this mission, marking the first use of the North Vietnamese Air Force on an offensive mission outside its borders. They were equipped with pylon-mounted machine guns and a tube through which mortar shells could be dropped. One was shot down, and another crashed into a mountain.]

CIA, Intelligence Information Cable, January 12, 1968
[DDRS 1992/14]: At 1325 hours, January 12, two black AN-2 Colt aircraft flew over LS-85 from the northwest and dropped 15 250-pound bombs in three passes on the summit of the mountain. Six people were wounded. One aircraft was shot down; the other crashed to the northwest at UH 5984.


UH-34 H55, Daniel L. Carson, F/M Bob Bedell, with 12 passengers, received ground fire after lift off from pad 15 miles northwest of Huie Thong [LS196]. Damage to tail rotor caused uncontrolled crash landing. Carson suffered spinal sprain; Bedell broke left arm; 2 pax injured. Crew and pax recovered by H50. Accident report faults lack of current information on fluid military situation in area and recommend "that liaison between friendly elements, the customer, and the company be strengthened with a view of minimizing the hazards of the operation."

John D. Ford Logbook: "While evacuating troops from a friendly position in Laos, Dan Carson, for whom I was flying wing, was shot down. He took many hits which wounded several of his passengers. He then lost TR control, and crashed on the side of a mountain. Danny did a beautiful job with the landing which resulted in only minor injuries to he and Bob Bedell, the flight mechanic. We landed to pick up survivors immediately. As we landed the enemy started throwing mortar & small arms at us. We received five rounds of mortar in close proximity to our a/c but were able to make the pick-up. I will always consider it a great honor to have been lucky enough to pick up such a fine
January 30, 1968

CIA, VTE, Intelligence Information Cable [DDRS 1992/21]: By late January, the enemy had encircled LS-85. "Since 22 January the area around Phou Pha Thi has been relatively quiet; the enemy is apparently waiting until his 105MM howitzers are in position. The enemy's operations against Phou Pha Thi appears to be one of his most carefully planned offensives in northern Laos during the war."

February 21, 1968

CIA, VTE, Intelligence Information Cable [DDRS 1992/33]: By late evening of February 20, the enemy was within heavy mortar range of Phou Pha Thi from the south. Fog persisted during the day, and is forecast for the next 24 hours. At 1930 hours, February 20, ADC forces brought in a map from the body of an enemy soldier who had been killed in an ambush on February 10. It outlined an attack plan by two regiments. Although the authenticity of the map has not yet been determined, the operational plan is "tactically sound." If the enemy implements it, and if the fog persists for two or three days, "he will severely challenge the ability of irregular forces to hold Site 85."

February 22, 1968

UH-34 H52 John L. Tarn and J. H. Hope, working in vicinity of Ban Phang [LS239], carrying cargo to outposts. Landed at pad at 1410 to offload. Hit immediately by large caliber projectile, probably from recoilless rifle. Aircraft engulfed in flames; fell over on right side. Tarn unstrapped and exited through pilot's window, crawled underneath main rotor system and away from burning aircraft. Flight mechanic also managed to get out but seriously injured. Unfriendly elements had infiltrated area. Accident reports recommends "that friendly forces be encouraged to actively patrol the outpost areas of responsibility." Also, Udorn should look into device to permit rapid off-loading of cargo.

Telephone interview with John L. Tarn, April 13, 1991

Tarn recalls that he tried to lift off after the aircraft was hit but he thought better of it as the helicopter was surrounded by flames. He set back down, but the right landing gear had been shot off and the helicopter rolled over to the right. Tarn fell out of the side window. The aircraft was completely consumed by fire. One passenger, a Lao interpreter, was killed. Also, one soldier on the ground died. Flight mechanical Hope was badly burned.
Telephone interview with James H. Hope, May 7, 1991

They were hauling rice when they landed at a pad to offload. They were hit immediately by what Hope believes was a 57mm round. The explosion blew Hope out and door and clear of the rotors (it happened in slow motion). His hand blown off and burning, he rolled in the dirt to put out the flames, then crawled into a bomb crater as the helicopter exploded. In shock, he started down the mountain, but soon collapsed. An enemy soldier (Hope could see only his form as he had burns on his face and eyes were glazed) came up to him and shot him twice, once in the head and once in the chest. Hope passed out. When he came to, he started to climb up the hill but soon collapsed. He was found during a perimeter check and taken to the hospital at Korat. They operated on him all night. He was in a coma for ten days. En route to the United States, he developed pneumonia in the Philippines and nearly died (a priest pronounced last rites). He has had a continuing series of operations ever since. His lawyer arranged a settlement of $55,000 and took $20,000 as his fee. The IRS then went after him for $60,000 in back taxes. He has been left bitter and disillusioned about his treatment.

February 25, 1968

CIA, VTE, Intelligence Information Cable [DDRS 1992/612]: Between February 23 and 25, Vang Pao has enhanced the security of LS-85 by sending 50 additional defenders, two 4.2 inch mortars, and an additional 105mm howitzer. If ADC units continue to harrass the enemy, and if aircraft strikes continue, LS-85 likely will continue to be viable for the next two weeks. However, it is impossible to predict the security of the site beyond March 10 because of the enemy’s willingness to escalate his commitment. "The ambassador has seen this report and has offered no objections."

February 26, 1968

J.D. Ford and T.E. Cournoyer, UH-34 H54 hit by large caliber round at 3000 feet while climbing out of pad 20 miles southwest of Saravane. Smoke in cockpit. Ford autorotated into minefield near friendly outpost. Crew and passengers picked up by H32. "Area not secure and mine field will make recovery [of aircraft] difficult."

Ford Logbook: "I was dispatched to the village of Lao Ngum to pick up wounded. We, flight mechanic Tom Cournoyer and I, landed without incident. We then on-loaded three wounded Lao soldiers. We then climbed to an altitude of 2,000 feet above the terrain and headed on course. As we rolled out on heading, a 50 cal. machinegun cut loose on us. The first rounds came through the cockpit. One of these
blew my altimeter out of the panel and embedded it in the copilot's seat. The a/c immediately filled with smoke from what we later discovered to be an electrical fire caused by one round which penetrated a major wire cluster. I made an autorotative landing near a friendly outpost. Upon landing the friendlies yelled that we should stay in the a/c. We had landed their mine field. After what seemed an eternity, the friendly troops picked their way through the mine field and led us out. At this point I must mention that the locals do not make maps of their mine fields. They displayed an enormous amount of courage walking out to get us. That was also the longest walk I had ever made even though it was only 50 yards by measure. By this time we had made radio contact and the first rescue a/c were overhead. I feared that a helicopter pickup would be too risky due to the close proximity of the enemy. I therefore told them to wait until we could move to a better area for pickup. Tom and I now confiscated a jeep and made one heck of a wild drive down a dirt road to the next friendly position. We were then picked up by an AAM helicopter piloted by Alex Nadalini. I cannot praise the courage displayed this day by all those concerned with our rescue. From the Lao who walked in to get us to Alex who had to fly over the guns that hit us in order to make the pickup, to my very good friends Stevens and Bonasinga who were overhead in a Volpar and asked me to let them land on the road to pick us up. At very best, such a landing would have been extremely dangerous. My thanks to all."

Interview with John D. Ford, Green Cove Springs, FL, April 26, 1991:

Ford had just picked up three wounded soldiers and was climbing out in a tight spiral over the village when a gun opened up on him. A round blew the altimeter out of the instrument panel. He immediately went into autorotation to land back at the pad; however, the villagers were crowding the landing area and enjoying the show. Instead, he landed in an open area a short distance from the pad. "It didn't dawn on me at the time that it was probably a mine field." He got out of the helicopter and heard the villagers shouting and pointing. He then realized the problem. Three villagers came out to get the crew and passengers. This was a courageous act, as their was no map of the minefield.

March 9, 1968
CIA, VTE, Intelligence Information Cable [DDRS 1992/1213]: Officers at Phou Pha Thi estimate that about 1,000 enemy troops are moving on LS-85 from the south and west.

March 10, 1968
CIA, VTE, Intelligence Information Cable [DDRS 1992/1214]: Aerial reconnaissance at 1200 hours, March 10, reveals no unusual movement of enemy forces.

March 11, 1968
NVA/PL capture LS-85. 100 Meo and 13 Americans killed.

[Castle: Phou Pha Thi was TACAN facility for USAF, built in 1966 on top of 5200-foot mountain in Sam Neua province, 20 miles from North Vietnam border. It was used to control air strikes over North Vietnam. USAF personnel, assisted by Filipino technicians, directed strike aircraft to targets in poor weather. It also was used as a base for ground ops (recon) against North Vietnam. It had been attacked several times, including AN-2 attack on January 12. Security maintained by Hmong unit stationed at base of mountain, controlling path to top. Other possible routes were protected by anti-personnel miles. There were 100 Hmong and 200 Thai defenders on site itself. NVA battalion, using light-weight metal detectors, climbed to top of mountain on March 11. They first attacked a building housing the resident CIA agent. He was wounded in the leg and later flown to safety. While the Hmong/Thai fought back, some 26 US and several Filipino personnel lowered themselves down the cliff to a limestone cave. 13 US killed. [Conflicts in some details with CHECO report]

Hmong attempted to retake site over next three weeks, but were not successful. It was later hit by B-52s and F-111s.

The loss of 85 seriously undermined US bombing capability in bad weather. Three weeks after its loss, LBJ announced a partial bombing halt.]

[Casterlin: Air America helicopters flew numerous missions to bring in material to strengthen defenses of Phou Pha Thi. He recalls flying in a cargo of napalm (a drop tank of jellied gasoline in a wooden crate) on March 9 and nearly crashing when the helicopter was hit by a wind current while trying to land on a pad on the south side of the mountain. All the material was for the south side; no one thought that an attack was possible from the other side. {Casterlin, interview, September 22, 1990}]}

Telephone interview with John L. Tarn, April 13, 1991:

Tarn was involved in the evacuation of LS-85 in March 1968. This was the only night mission that he flew in Laos. He departed LS-20 at 0300 hours in order to be at LS-85 at dawn. There were three H-34s and two USAF Jolly Greens involved in the operation. They went in and rescued the people without difficulty. Just as USAF fighters hit the site, a Jolly Green said that one person had been left
behind. He wanted Air America to go back. Air America declined, considering the armored Jolly Greens more suitable for the mission. A Jolly Green went in but could find no one.

CHECO Report, "The Fall of Site 85," August 9, 1968:

In August 1966 a TACAN facility was established atop Phou Pha Thi, a steep 5,500-foot ridge some 10 miles from the border with North Vietnam. In mid-1967 a TSQ-81 facility was added. The TSQ was a modified version of SAC's radar bombing scoring system. It was used to direct and control strike aircraft to targets in North Vietnam, providing them with precise bomb release points. It was the only facility which could provide ground vectored radar bombing in northern portions of North Vietnam and northeastern Laos and was especially useful for the period mid-October to April when the weather was unfavorable. The TSQ facility became operational in November 1967 (Commando Club). Between November and February, there were 421 strike missions against targets in northern North Vietnam; TSQ directed 96. (LS-85 also was a major supply point for guerrilla operations in northeastern Laos.)

The TACAN/TSQ facilities were located on the western rim of a steep ridge overlooking a helicopter landing pad, 300 yards away and 500 feet lower. The site was protected by Hmong guerrillas, 200 troops near the site and another 800 in the lower portion of the mountain. If the enemy threat was too great, the TSQ/TACAN equipment was to be destroyed and the US technicians evacuated.

December 1967: CIA briefing for CINCPACAF predicted enemy dry season offensive against Sites 220, 205, 201, 36, and 85. During November, enemy trucks and troops entering Laos had increased "at an alarming rate."

December 15/16: Two enemy companies engage Hmong defenses near Phou Ben In, 12 kms east of 85.

January 12, 1968: Four dark green AN-2 Colts passed in vicinity of Muong Sang at 1300L. Two aircraft began to orbit over Houai Souk area while the second pair continued to Phou Pha Thi and commenced bombing run while on a heading of 340 degrees. The aircraft made three passes, strafing, rocketing and bombing summit. Two guerrillas and 2 women were killed; 2 guerrillas wounded. One aircraft was shot down and the crew escaped; another crashed 25 kms to the northwest and three crew (Vietnamese) were killed.

This air attack marked the beginning of a determined enemy offensive against LS-85. Five battalions of PL/NVA moved into the area and began to encircle Phou Pha Thi. USAF flew 165 strikes sorties in January with 30 kms of 85 (mostly to east).

January 31: Photo recon reveals road construction east of LS-85 as enemy extends Route 602 to Phou Chik Nou. By
February 16, the road had been extended to one km east of Phou Den Din (13 km from 85). Only one airstrike flown between February 1 and 14.

February 17: Ambassador Sullivan authorizes visual and armed recon along Route 602.

February 18: Hmong ambush kills NVA officer with notebook detailing plan of attack: 4 battalions involved, with main assault force of 1 NVA battalion to attack from northeast.

February 21: Sullivan authorizes local Hmong commander at 85 to task TSQ facility to strike any target within 12 km radius of peak of Phou Pha Thl. This marks the beginning of an increased air effort.

February 26: Sullivan to USAF COS: "Enemy forward movement has been inexorable over the past months and neither air or ground resources which are available to us appear adequate to deter his intentions." We are in touch with USAF authorities on evacuation and destruction plans. "We are fairly confident both should be able to be carried out in orderly fashion."

[Decision to evacuate reserved for Sullivan. 3 USAF and 2 AAM helicopters designated for evacuation.]

March 2: Senior CIA advisor at 85 briefs senior USAF commander that attack could come at any time. (By now, 4 enemy battalions were deployed around 85 and poised for attack. Between March 1 and 10, there had been 314 strike sorties within 30 kms of 85 (76 percent by TSQ). Route 602 was a frequent target. Weather deteriorating.

March 10: Weather improves. Mortar/artillery/rocket attack on site beginning at 1800L and lasting until 1945L. Shelling begins again, more sporadically, at 2120L.
Sullivan orders partial evacuation (9 of 19) to begin at 0815L the next morning.

March 11: Some 20 enemy infiltrate the summit (perhaps by scaling 2,000-foot cliff). At 0300L automatic weapons fire cause crew to abandon TSQ facility in haste. Three USAF killed, including senior commander. Equipment not destroyed. Radio contact broken. Remaining Americans attempt escape with slings leading down steep slope. Enemy lobbs grenades.
At 0515L, although unaware of events at TSQ site, Sullivan order evacuation to begin at 0715L
At 0700L senior CIA adviser with 10 Hmong proceeds to site to ascertain status. Fire exchanged with enemy and CIA man slightly wounded in leg. Shortly after this, helicopters land and extract 5 USAF technicians, 2 CIA, and 1 USAF FAC. One technician hit in helicopter and dies en route LS-36. Hmong defenders melt away after 0730L.

Americans: 16 site technicians; 2 CIA; 1 USAF FAC.
Evacuated: 2 CIA (one wounded), 1 FAC, 5 technicians (one dies en route). Eight technicians known dead; 3 unaccounted
for but presumed dead. Airstrikes brought in to destroy equipment.

Richard V. Secord, 14 March 1992:

Secord was involved at the beginning and at the end. He recalls a meeting in Udorn in 1967 with General Hunter Harris, CINCPACAF. Harris explained the concept of the TSQ-81 facility and wanted to know if the Agency could defend the site. Lair said that it would become a real target if the system worked. The Hmong did not do well in fixed positions. He would need some "real troops." When Secord said that air support would be necessary, Harris told him not to worry about it. It was decided to go ahead. Construction of the facility was an impressive engineering feat. Concerned about the facade of the Geneva Accords, the ambassador insisted on sheep-dipping the USAF technicians. He also prohibited arms, but Secord went ahead anyway. 7/13AF agreed and provided M-16s and grenades. CIA case officers at the site training the technicians. A number of CIA case officers rotated through the site, including Freeman, Daniels, Quill, and Spence.

The road trace for Route 602 was noted even before confirmed by photos. Secord, who was chief staff officer in charge of defending the site, could not get airstrikes to stop the road. He prepared a evacuation plan, accepted by 7/13, that called for the destruction of equipment and departure of personnel at least two weeks before it could be overrun. However, a cable came in from CIA headquarters ordering them to hold the position "at all costs." (This no doubt came about because the JCS said that the site was crucial.) Secord's request for special forces soldiers to protect the technicians was denied. The defending units consisted of Hmong, with one company of Thai (commanded by a West Point graduate). SSgt Geary, USAF FAG, was at the site to direct airstrikes.

Secord believes that the NVA squad likely infiltrated through the lines and did not climb the sheer mountain face. He also is sure that Freeman was the only CIA case officer involved at the end [Secord to WML, 29 March 92: "I have checked with Tom Clines and my memory is correct. There was only one CIA man at LS 85 on the night of 10 March."], and that he was picked up by Phil Goddard. Only Air America was involved in the evacuation. No Ravens were involved. One A-1 pilot was killed. The site was lost (1) because there had been no air interdiction of Route 602; and (2) because he had been prohibited from using real ground forces.

The NVA went on from this victory to attack LS-36. There, it was a different story. After LBJ announced the bombing halt, Secord was able to get 300 TACAIR sorties a day. The intelligence fusion center worked to perfection,
and they were able to strike every known enemy troop concentration. This was the first major use of TACAIR with good intelligence. Several enemy units were destroyed.

Roland K. McCoskrie (commander of 56th Wing) interview, July 14, 1975: "They tried to blame it on us then it [LS-85] went rather quickly. They were looking for somebody to pin this on."

Glerum to WML, 2/15/93: "I was on leave from Washington at the time and received some details only after the fact. Although Sullivan, as ambassador, definitely had the final decision on evacuation, there was great USAF pressure to maintain the site. I am not sure that all the communication involving the decision even would have been copied to us in Headquarters. Since Secord was responsible for USAF liaison, his role probably was much as described - except that he would have been operating under close Lair/Landry direction."

[Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos:" Assault on LS-85 preceded by intensive reconnaissance by handpicked commando company. By first two months of 1968, three battalions of Doan 766 had infiltrated into the jungles around Phou Pha Thi. On March 9, a team of commandos scaled the mountain and overwhelmed the TACAN site. After the commandos secured the summit, the three battalions overran the remaining government defenders. By March 11, the NVA controlled Phou Pha Thi. After this, eight PAVN battalions attacked southwest towards the PDJ, sweeping aside all government outposts.]

March 14, 1968
Sullivan to SecState: The fall of LS-85 "opens a new time of troubles for Vang Pao and the Meo of Military Region II." The size of the attacking force and the heavy supporting weapons exceeds anything friendly forces can muster. L-36 is now likely to attack enemy attention. Although more heavily defended than LS-85, "it is questionable whether it can withstand a determined assault by seven NVN battalions, the strength we feel enemy is probably able to deploy against it." Steps are being taken to increased USAF attacks against enemy supply lines in northern Laos. (Unfortunately, bad weather worked against air campaign.) Edward Vallentiny, "CHECO Report: USAF Operations from Thailand, 1 January 1967 to 1 July 1968," November 20, 1968.

March 15, 1968
Taylor to Seigel: Have lost three more birds recently. One was hit by a recoilless rifle on the edge of the PDJ; another shot down by small arms on the Bolovens Plateau, and
a third crashed in an LZ on the Trail near the Mu Gia pass and was destroyed by USAF since it was in an insecure area. "Fortunately only one crew member got messed up seriously; probably will lose an arm."

March 16, 1968
UH-34 H49, Nadalini/Byrne hit by large caliber round while in flight near PS 7(7).

March 16, 1968
Casterlin to parents: "We are still losing everything over Laos. The enemy seems determined to consolidate and hold all recovered land. The poor Meo ranks are getting thinner all the time." I have been informed that a crash in a Bell 205 will mean my job. Casterlin reports being "very disillusioned."

Knight to Kelly: "I don't know whose men these came from."

March 18, 1968
UH-34 H54 R.E.Davis/Thomson/Serafico, 5 pax, hit be small arms fire vicinity of Nam Lieu (LS118h).

March 19, 1968
UH-34 H15, vicinity of Na Khang (LS-36), hit by automatic weapons fire. One of three passengers killed. Aircraft suffered substantial damage.

Telephone interview with John L. Tarn, April 13, 1991:
On March 19, 1968, Tarn was upcountry when a Hmong came in and reported that his village had been overrun by the enemy. Normally, Air America flew with a single pilot; however, when any problem was expected, two pilots went. On this mission, Tarn flew copilot to the more senior Frank Stergar. They took a Hmong captain, based at LS-85, and two soldiers to check out the story. Stergar flew under low clouds as they approached the village on a straight line at cruise power. Two rounds came through the cockpit; the aircraft was hit, and the Hmong captain was killed. Tarn took over the aircraft and made a hard right turn. He was not too happy with Stergar’s handling of the situation.

[Knight: Tarn was not one of our most believable or capable pilots. Big chip on shoulder!]

March 20-25, 1968
Amb. Sullivan to Michael Jarina, April 8: refers to emergency rescue operation in northeastern Laos. 8000 people brought to safety. Mission "accomplished under the most hazardous and trying circumstances." Magnificent success due to the "courage, skill and resolve" of everyone involved, especially helicopter crews.
March 21, 1968

Special National Intelligence Estimate 58-68, "Communist Intentions in Laos." - "We believe that Communist intentions in Laos are highly continent on development in South Vietnam." Communists have capability to reduce area controlled by RLG to a few enclaves "in fairly short order." However, SNIE concludes that Hanoi is primarily concerned with the security of the supply route to South Vietnam and do not wish to destroy the general framework of the 1962 settlement.

Since 1962, Communists have advanced during the dry season (November-April), while the RLG has counterattacked during the rainy season (May-October). Offensives of both sides have been limited. In August 1966 the RLG captured the Nam Bac valley, 60 miles north of Luang Prabang, which had been controlled for the PL for ten years. This greatly improved the morale of the RLG, whose temperament tends to be mercurial. In September 1967, the RLG undertook a new offensive in the Nam Bac area. In mid-January 1968, however, the PL/NVA turned the offensive "into a debacle." NVA has introduced new forces in 1968. On March 11, Phou Pha Thi fell. Also, there has been increased activity around the Bolovens plateau area. "What is noteworthy this year ... is the extent of reinforcement and the intensity of operations." NVA strength now estimated at 35,000. [DDRS 1989/1865]

March 22, 1968

Time reports that two Communist battalions attacked government outposts north of Luang Prabang in mid-March. In central Laos, two more battalions have been thrown back at Thakhek, important Mekong River town. In south, NVA have surrounded Lao Ngam, Saravane, and Attopeu.

March 31, 1968

President Johnson, in a televised speech, announces a unilateral halt to air and naval bombardment of North Vietnam except for the area around the DMZ.

Spring 1968

Shaplen visits Sam Thong. Time Out of Hand:

NVA reacted strongly against a government attempt to strengthen its hold on the Nam Bac valley, north of Luang Prabang. The NVA offensive began in January. Nam Bac was captured in mid-January, then the NVA pushed down through San Neua province and in Xieng Khouang province, capturing an important secret communications installation near the border of North Vietnam. Nearly 10,000 refugees fled south, while 25,000 tribesmen came under Communist control. In March Shaplen flew from Luang Prabang to Sam Thong on a Helio, flown by Gene Britzius:
"The atmosphere at Sam Thong was tense, with the N.V.A. only a day’s march away." Caribous were shuttling in and out with refugees being ferried from airstrips in the north. Shaplen was escorted through the hospital by Dr. Charles Weldon, who had given up his practice in a small Louisiana farm community in 1962. The hospital had handled 12,400 casualties in 1967. Now it was packed with victims of the current offensive, "mostly young men with bullet wounds in their faces and chests, or shattered limbs." Weldon: The whole region up north is falling to the Communists. This year they’re fighting harder than they ever did before, and they’ve brought in the first team."

Weldon, a soft-spoken and gentle man, was less bitter than Buell. Buell had hardly slept in days due to the refugee crisis and was in "a highly emotional state" over what was happening to the Meo. His was critical of US support of the Meo: "Their only real weapons are what they’ve captured from the enemy. Otherwise all they’ve got is old World War Two stuff, carbines and some mortars, which was good four years ago but not against the new AK-47 rifles the North Vietnamese now have." The said that Vang Pao had lost at 1,000 KIA since January 1, including all but one of his top commanders. Buell: "Was it their war at Pathè? We asked them to go and defend our lousy installation because of the Vietnam war. Why didn’t we defend it? We destroyed their homeland in order to keep that installation secure, and it was lost anyway. What’s more important? I’ve just lost twenty-five thousand people to the Communists, and they’re all my friends. A short time ago we rounded up three hundred fresh recruits. Thirty percent were fourteen years old or less, and then of them were only ten years old. Another 30 percent were fifteen or sixteen. The remaining 40 percent were thirty-five or over. Where were the one between? I’ll tell you — they’re all dead. Here were these little kids in their camouflage uniforms that were much too big for them. But they looked real neat, and when the King of Laos talked to them, they were proud and cocky as could be. They were eager. Their fathers and brothers played Indian before them, and now they wanted to play Indian. But V.P. and I knew better. They were too young and they weren’t trained, and in a few weeks 90 percent of them will be killed. For what?"

Buell already has suffered one heart attack and was due to retire within a few months.

Buell persuaded V.P., who was fighting off a NVA battalion 15 kms. away, to drive to Sam Thong and talk to the newly arrived refugees. He is a handsome man in his late 30s with five wives and twenty children. VP said that 46,000 NVA were now in Laos, supported by four Chinese battalions. (Shaplen says US authorities doubt Chinese combat presence.) VP spoke "impassionedly yet calmly, which made it all the more impressive." Vang Pao: "We’re losing
ten or twenty men killed a day. The North Vietnamese have us outgunned, with heavy mortars and artillery as well as AK-47’s. ... We need modern weapons and more than the few T-28 bombers we’ve got. We must mobilize the hillmen in this part of the country. The Communists are building up a political as well as a military offensive. They’re determined to throw us out of Sam Neua and the other northern provinces, and after that the cities, including Luang Prabang and Vientiane, won’t be safe either. It’s finished up here unless we get help quickly. Please hurry up, because we’re nearly all dead.”

Shaplen later visited southern Laos. There are 10,000 NVA providing security for the Ho Chih Minh Trail. Traffic on the Trail has increased since 1967-68. US air attacks are mounted from Thailand. Trail-watching "represented a vital undercover operation." He visited Pakse, a town of 32,000 on the banks of the Mekong. The local commander told him the the NVA are better armed and could take Saravane, Attopeu, and Lao Ngam if they wanted to attack in regimental strength. They are deterred by a reluctance to openly violate the Geneva Accords. All three cities were surrounded in late February 1968. The Communists have lost 1000-1500 KIA since January 1, and the government has lost 500 KIA. T-28s are the best equalizers for the NVA’s superiority in weapons. The attacks have diminished in March.

April 13, 1968

ALMANAC: Recent NVA/PL offensive has resulted in encirclement of provincial capitals of Saravane and Attopeu. This suggests that enemy has adopted a strategy of attacking towns and holding terrain.

April 22, 1968

NEWSWEEK notes intelligence reports that 70,000 NVA regulars now fighting in Laos. The latest NVA/PL has been described as "a blitzkreig." After overrunning Nam Bac in January, NVA/PL have taken some 22 outposts/airstrips. By mid-April, Sam Thong stood as the last major government outpost between the Communists and VTE. Luang Prabang is now surrounded by three NVA battalions. Weldon: "There is not comparison with previous years. This is a major territorial grab." Vang Pao: "The situation is highly critical. I can conduct a delaying operation for about three more weeks. If the offensive continued after that, it is all over for us." His last words to reporter: "Hurry up because all my people are getting killed!"

The war in south has been "equally ferocious." At the end of February, the NVA struck simultaneously at Saravane, Lao Ngam, and Attopeu. 10,000 heavily armed troops cut roads and took control of the countryside. 15,000 ill-trained and ill-equipped Laotian defenders retreated into
the towns. [Fosnire comment: "I suspect our troops were not as ill-trained and ill-equipped as indicated. If it was Lao army - ill-led."]

Moo at Sam Thong asked reporter: "You’re going to leave us, aren’t you? Just tell us when."

Unidentified Air America pilot: "We’re lying to these people. Stay in there and hold, we say to them. But do you think we’ll stay the course? Of course, we won’t. You know it. I know it. They know it."

[Glerum to WML, 2/15/93, in response to question as to whether or not the people as AB-1 "knew it.": "This is tough and still, to many of us, an agonizing subject - and I cannot give you a definitive answer. There is no question that we believed in what we were doing. The Hmong (as ultimately demonstrated) would continue to fight the NVA with or without our help, and we successfully tied down up to three main force NVA division that otherwise would have been free for redeployment to Vietnam. (The 312th and 316th, after refitting, were indeed the spearhead into Saigon.) On the other hand, the USG's record on staying theroute in similar situations was not cause for optimism and, despite some brave talk, there were strong signs of lessening commitment. Did we ignore what we knew in our hearts? Did we delude ourselves? At least in part, the answer to those questions is 'yes.' Would we act differently if we had to do it all over again? I have asked myself that question many times. I do not have an answer."

Late April 1968

Five enemy battalions are deployed 30 miles south of LS-36 by late April. Enemy probes from the east in late April and early May. Fifty strike sorties, including 17 A-1 sorties on May 5. Vang Pao's defenders numbered about 1,500 (same as enemy). 215 sorties flown in second week of May. The enemy push from the east was thwarted. A week of relative quiet followed. The expected enemy attack failed to materialize. Valenty, "CHECO Report: USAF Operations from Thailand."

6 August 1968

May 1968 (according to Glerum)

Tod Younglich, May 1, 1991: In mid-1968, Younglich was on a trip out of Pakse (or SVK) to take two customers (one Lao and one American) to a strip that was supposed to be secure. Just as they discharged the passengers, they received automatic weapons fire and mortars. They had low RPM so it took a short time before they could lift off. As they cleared the area, Younglich went back to the passenger compartment with his M-16 to provide covering fire. Laying on the floor, he felt a "dampness." He realized that his hands and arms were covered with blood although he was not aware of having been hit. When he looked behind him, he
saw that the American customer had been wounded. He was still breathing, although obviously in bad shape. Yourgich tried to stop the bleeding with compresses as they headed for a safe area, but he died in the hospital that same evening. A round also had come through the cockpit and plexiglass had cut one of the pilots.

The pilots were Reid and Hutchinson. The location was Moung Phalane (L-61), east of SVK.

Fosmire, Dec. 28, 1992: A battalion from Savannakhet was on an operation to clear an area north of Moung Phalane. Two helicopters, one with case office Wayne McNulty (Ed Reid was pilot) landed in what seemed to be a quiet area. However, the helicopters immediately came under fire, and McNulty was hit in the head. A round came though the windscreen and Reid received flecks of plexiglass in his face. McNulty was still alive when the helicopter returned to Savannakhet but obviously in bad shape. Trauma nurse Judy Barber accompanied him to NKP, where he died in hospital. Reid, meanwhile, had flown the damaged helicopter back into the area, leading Lao-piloted T-28s to the location so they could conduct an air strike.

June 14, 1968:
XOXO: UH-34D Hotel 40 - 3 miles east LS-247 - 0435Z - complete engine failure in flight; cause unknown but aircraft received ground fire approx. 10 minutes prior to failure. Crew (L. P. Egan and M. A. Baccay) picked up immediately by Hotel 41. "Area security very questionable and recovery attempt doubtful."

XOXO: June 18, 0750Z: Recovery thus far delayed because of security and weather. Site visited today by recovery team and engine found in good condition but would not start. Engine checks not completed due action at the site. Customer again requested to secure the site.

XOXO: June 22, 0100Z: Hotel 40 site overrun on June 21 AM. Customer advises Hotel 40 destroyed.

Telephone interview with Michael Jarina, April 13, 1991

Three UH-34s were involved in a FAR troop movement (replacements) in a valley north of Luang Prabang. They had instructions not to transport families. Larry Egan ordered a woman off his aircraft, causing an angry Lao officer to pull his pistol and take a shot at the departing helicopter. Egan lost power shortly thereafter and made a nice autorotation into a rice paddy. Jarina went in to pick him up while Dan Carson, who had a load of Lao soldiers, provided cover. As Jarina was lifting off, Carson radioed
that he had taken a hit and was losing transmission fluid. It turned out that one of the Lao soldiers had fired the round while clearing his rifle.

Jarina advised Abadie that it might be possible to recover the downed aircraft, although it was located in "denied territory." Jarina tried to return to the site later in the day to inspect the aircraft, but he could not get to it due to bad weather. Abadie sent an engine from Udorn for a retrieval attempt the following day. Jarina had a young ex-Marine as copilot, N. J. "Shaky" Bengtson (pipe-smoker; shaky hands) to try to start the downed helicopter, a mechanic, and five Lao soldiers for security. John Tarn would carry the engine. After customer Doug Swanson had assured Abadie that he had 400 troops in the area and that it was "safe," the two helicopters departed.

Jarina landed without incident. Bengtson determined that the downed helicopter had not been hit but had lost oil pressure. The young Marine copilot was out of the aircraft to direct Tarn for a landing when the first mortar round hit. Everyone scrambled onboard; however, there was some confusion. While Jarina was trying to assure that everyone was safely onboard, three more rounds hit. A-1s later destroyed the downed helicopter.

Telephone interview with John L. Tarn, April 13, 1991

One of his more memorable incidents came in the summer of 1966. They were flying out of Luang Prabang. An Air America pilot was mobbed when departing a valley where he had dropped troops. The friendlies, who wanted to leave, fired on the aircraft. The engine quit, and he made a fantastic autorotation into a rice paddy. As the aircraft was otherwise undamaged, there was a debate about whether to destroy it or try to repair the engine. Several days later, the decision was made to try to retrieve the helicopter. Jarina and Tarn were to take in the repair teams and equipment. Tarn refused, as he was convinced that the enemy would be waiting to see who showed up. Another pilots was sent to Udorn to take his place, but this individual promptly became "sick" when he heard about what was up. Tarn finally agreed to take the engine mount, figuring that by the time they need this piece of equipment the nature of the mission would be clear.

Jarina flew the repair crew in a Huey while Tarn obited high. There were A-1s and a FAC for cover. Jarina sat on the ground a long time. Tarn warned that he would have to return to LPB for fuel. Jarina told him to land and drop off the mount. Just as he set down, a round went off so close to the aircraft that he could feel the heat. He immediately took off and made a hard right turn. He could
see the firing position and called in the FAC. The FAC missed badly with his smoke. The A-1s then hit the smoke as Tarn tried to tell them that they were off the target. In the meantime, Jarina - "a fearless pilot" - sat on the ground until the repair crew climbed onboard. Rounds were falling all around the Huey. A-1s later destroyed the helicopter.

June 25 - July 15
Robert J. Stensloff assigned to ASP Project (to WML, 6 July 1991):
Operated out of Savannakhet in VTB-18 Volpar on all night (10-12 hours) high altitude (18-20,000 feet) electronic communication flights over Ho Chi Minh Trail. "These were busy night hours with constant AA fire exploding below out of range. The Volpar was a relay station to call in air strikes on movement along the Trail which was most active at night. We were flying gas tanks with added fuselage tanks in the cabin where all the passenger seats were removed. If one engine were lost we would remain on station to assure complete coverage at all times. The lower altitudes put us within AA range and some explosions could be seen above."

[Air America "Aircraft Accident Review," November 6, 1968, detailed some of the problems on the long, boring ASP missions. This involved VTB N9664C on May 29, 1968, which suffered $29,500 in damages on landing. The crew had spent most the night dodging thunderstorms. They returned to Savannakhet at 0630 for landing. "Upon flare to a landing, the tips of the blades of both propellers struck the runway due to the gear not being extended." Crew applied power and went around. Landing gear was lowered manually and landing made. Captain reported that he had placed gear handle in down position prior to landing. Neither pilot nor copilot heard warning horn. Report states that gear failed to extend due failure of gear motor; however, "this was primarily a pilot factor accident." Later tests showed all lights and warning signals working. "Exactly why two experienced pilots failed to properly assure that their gear was down in not known." They had been on duty for over seven hours, and night flying in thunderstorm conditions is tiring. They may have relaxed after a difficult night's work and failed to exercise normal vigilance. Report also notes that captain was a chain smoker, and he had removed oxygen mask and smoked at altitude. "This jeopardized the liver of other crew members, his aircraft and a very vital program. It is also in direct violation of orders by the program AMC." Investigation also revealed a shortage of properly sized oxygen masks.

June 22, 1968:
XOXO: UH-34D Hotel 47, 6 miles east of LS-190, 04002. Aircraft received heavy battle damage followed by loss of engine oil pressure and engine stoppage. Aircraft now lying on its side in heavily wooded area. Crew immediately recovered. PIC H. B. Potter suffered back injury; SIG T. Woozley chest injury; FM R. S. Nery jaw laceration and back injury.

July/August 1968

Bill Lair leaves Thailand to attend the Army War College. He is succeeded as commander of the 4802d Joint Liaison Detachment by his deputy, Pat Landry. Jim Glerum becomes deputy to Landry. [Secord supplies A-1s for fly by at departure ceremony at Long Tieng.]

[JHM interview: Lair concerned about policy changes that began to take place in 1967. He believed that only a minimum number of Americans should be involved in Laos, preferring greater Thai presence, if necessary. Thai, Lao, and Hmong had common enemy in North Vietnam. Des Fitzgerald, who became DDP in 1965, supported this view. However, Fitzgerald died of heart attack in 1967. It was after this that things began to change. "The CIA wanted to make our operation bigger and better. They thought that if you put more money and more Americans in there, it would get bigger and better. They were wrong." AIRA grew, as did other components of Sullivan’s operation. CIA concerned about Lair’s "hip-pocket operation" wanted facilities at Udorn upgraded. "In fact, I did run it out of my hip pocket. I had a small notebook that I carried in my pants pocket and it had everything in it. That changed in 1967 when architects from Washington came to Udorn. They came to build me a new office. I told them that my present small office was fine. I didn’t need anything bigger. They argued telling me that I needed a larger building for such a large operation. I designed a modest building that would cost about $100,000. This didn’t satisfy them at all. Instead, they designed a big air-conditioned building that must have cost a million dollars. It had lots of rooms. You know what they did with all those empty rooms? They filled them with Americans who sat at desks and created paper about the increasing number of Americans working in Laos. This is just what I wanted to avoid - a large American presence. That was the problem in South Vietnam where the Americans had taken the war away from the South Vietnamese. Now the Americans were taking the war away from the Lao, the Hmong, and the Thai. I was bothered that the idea I had worked on during my whole career which was to have a minimum American presence was being destroyed."

In 1967 Lair reminded officials in Washington that "the Hmong knew the terrain and could run up and down those hills without equal. They could run circles around the
Vietnamese. The Hmong, sitting on those mountain tops, could strangle the enemy. They were doing to the North Vietnamese exactly what the communists were doing to us in South Vietnam. They were fighting a true guerrilla war and the Vietnamese couldn’t come to grips with it." However, Washington was determined to expand the war.

Lair was especially concerned about the impact on the Hmong. "Beginning in about 1968, we were asking them to do more than they were capable of handling. We asked them to take on more military responsibilities, particularly conventional, set-piece military battles. Vang Pao was at his best in pure guerrilla warfare. I don’t know if he resisted the change to conventional warfare. I’m not sure he didn’t believe that by doing some of these things they would be of advantage to his people in the future. He could have considered it one way for his people to assume a bigger role in Laos without looking at the limitations."

"We had done so much in Laos at such a low cost. The success with Vang Pao was so good that everybody wanted to get into it. The reputations and big promotions were to be made for those Americans working with the Hmong. Washington went whose who they thought were the hot-shots and they began to do all those things which I didn’t think were exactly right."

Lair objected to the effort that forced the Hmong "out of what they did best - pure guerrilla warfare - into a more conventional war which meant more casualties. When we began to helicopter them to fight pitched battles, we got away from what was their greatest capability - which was to hit and run and to use the country which they knew so well." Disillusioned and concerned about the impact on the Hmong, Lair requested a transfer.

[Glerum comment to WML, 15 Feb 93: "I agree almost completely with Lair’s assessment of the Hmong and the impact on them. As indicated earlier, I also believe he was a better manager than people give him credit for. More importantly, he was an excellent leader; most Americans greatly respected him and enjoyed working for him. I also have never known an American more loved and admired and given more credibility by the Thai and Lao. At his BPP departure party, a senior Thai officer told me that the Thai called him ‘the man who never lies.’ On the circumstances of his departure, I honestly do not know; there was little or no paperwork wrapped around it. I suspect it was a combination of reasons, with the bottom line perhaps being not that he could not handle the job, but that (faced with growing complexity and increasing pressure for more ‘management’) he no longer wanted to. I know only that, during my phasing in, he could not have been more cooperative or helpful. There also were absolutely no signs of bitterness or hard feelings. (Obviously, I was and am..."
very fond of Lao, but the big bottom line is that, without him, his relationships with Van Pao and the Thais, his drive, and his vision, there probably would have been no Lao project.

[Fosmire comment, 8 Feb 93: "We could have run the operation and obtained the same results with somewhat fewer Americans. It would be hard to come up with a continuous flow of high quality Thai, Hmong, Lao junior & mid-level leaders without longer training and development programs. Early on we had a bitter mix: few Americans - more locals. A Phoenix-type program concentrating on the Lao Communist party might have added to our overall results. This would be using mostly Lao."

July 9, 1968

Firefly 01, an A1E on an escort mission, was hit by small arms fire while on an escort mission about 30 miles west of Samneua. Pilot LTC William R. Buice ejected and was recovered. Time 1405L.

Phillip E. Jennings, March 11, 1988:

"Captain [Jack E.] Pogo Hunter and I were flying SAR for flight of six Air America choppers on an insertion mission in the Sam Neua area. On a low level recon, before the choppers went in, the escort aircraft (two A-1s) took 50 cal. and 37 mm fire. The number two was hit and pulled up out of the zone and across a ridge line. Lead joined up with him and reported heavy damage. [Number 2] reported heavy controls, smoke and fire in the cockpit. Lead said, 'Do what yo gotta do, son.' Number two ejected and his chute popped open just above the trees. We heard his beeper, but no voice. Captain Hunter and I reached the area over the chute. Again, we could not get voice contact. We had a very difficult time hovering against the hillside at that altitude and were taking some small arms fire. I was flying left seat, and finally decided to ride the hoist down to see if I could find the guy on the ground. We had one crew member in the belly who needed to stay on board to work the hoist. On the ground, I yelled out and heard a shout and then a painful moan about fifteen feet away. I fond the pilot in a thicket with what looked to be both arms broken. Although he weighed about 200 to my 150 lbs., the adrenalin got him on my shoulders and down the hill to a clearing. An Air America Huey piloted by Captain Charlie Weitz came over me and dropped his jungle penetrator. I strapped the Air Force guy on it and jumped on with him, but Charlie couldn't lift us both. I jumped off and motioned for them to the Air Force guy out. He said something like, 'I won't leave you here.' He was going into shock. He fumbled his pistol out and gave it to me and about that time Charlie picked him up.
17 aircraft were hit by gunfire during October. All aircraft sustained minor damage from small arms fire.
When the choppers departed, I could then hear the small arms fire in the trees above my head. The PL were above me firing down so they couldn’t really get an angle on me. Captain Hunter thought Captain Weitz had picked both of us up, so when I made it to the nearest clearing, I saw the entire flight leaving the area. Fortunately, Captain Gentry in another chopper near Luang Prabang asked Captain Weitz if I was okay, and Captain Weitz said Captain Hunter had me - so they realized I was still on the ground. Captain Hunter came in and got me, sitting there facing the small arms fire directly in front of him while I was hoisted up."

August 15, 1968
"Forecast Aircraft Assignment" for Aug. 16-31: One Bell 204B at Udorn (10 at Saigon), and 26 UH-34s. Two UH-34s damaged on Aug. 15 when struck by C-123 freefall drop at UTM YB5505.

August 1968
Devlin replaces Shackley as COS at VTE. He remains until October 1970.

September 23, 1968
Casterlin to parents: Have met Will Green ["Black Lion"]. He is "nice to work for."

October 1968

"Since October 1968, USAFSOF has provided continuous personnel manning to Laos under Project 404, Palace Dog. Deployed on a 179-day TDY rotation basis the personnel are assigned to APO 96237 (Udorn AB, Thailand) with duty actually performed in Laos under the operational control of the Air Attache to Laos (USAIRA)." At beginning of project, Air Operations Center commander, line chief, medic, and communications specialist assigned to each of four operations centers at Vientiane, Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, and Pakse. In addition, there was an advisor to the Lao Combat Operations Center in Vientiane. In July 1969, the OCC position was converted to an ACC commander at Long Tieng. Long Tieng also was assigned a line chief and radio operator. There already was a medical officer assigned to the 20A hospital.

Through coordination with "special staff agencies" and senior staff of FAR in his region, the AOC "develops targets for strikes by both RLAF and USAF air and advises the country team and Lao military authorities on the correct employment of air resources." AOC responsible to Air Attache for employment of all USAF and RLAF air in his military region. He also exercises operational control over
USAF-piloted O-1 Raven program at his location. "In summary, it is his judgment and his initiative that ultimately insure adequate KLAP and USAF air support for the Lao Army and for special agency programs in the military region."

**October 1, 1968**

Vang Pao meets secretly with Walt Rostow at White House.

In summer 1968, VP had accepted official/secret invitation to visit US. Lair escorted him on tour of Disney Land and Colonial Williamsburg. Also, the Aderholts hosted VP and his "senior wife."

**October 10, 1968**

James A. Cunningham, Jr., replaces Frank L. Dunn as Base Manager/VTE.

**October 31, 1968**

President Johnson address to nation announcing a halt to all bombing of North Vietnam.

[Father Menger in refugee hearings in 1970 points out that the North Vietnamese used the bombing halt to move supplies into Laos. It usually took about three months for a supply build up. An offensive, as predicted, began in February 1969. The U.S. sharply increased its bombing of Laos in 1969, in part in response to the NVA attack, and in part because the bombing pause meant that the airplanes usually targeted against North Vietnam were now available for use in Laos.]

**November 1968**

Vang Pao launches Operation Pigfat. First major airmobile assault. Guerrillas storm base of mountain at LS-85. Fighting lasts for a month. NVA take heavy casualties but hold. VP retreats to 20A.

[JHM: "It is not clear why he decided to re-take this site. When his troops stalled under heavy enemy fire, 7th Air Force allocated 50 sorties a day for five days."]

[Gerum to WML, 2/15/93 says that Vang Pao and the Long Tieng unit were behind the decision to undertake the operation.]

[Operations Pigfat - November 1968 to January 1969. The objective was to recapture LS-85. BGs 202, 204 and 206 fly out of Na Khang (LS-36) to site south of Phou Pha Thi. They battle to foot of mountain but are unable to capture the objective.]
[Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos": "In late 1968, the
government parted from the standard flow of the war and
decided to launch a major operation to recapture Phou Pha
Thi. The operation began with a massive outpouring of US
airpower to soften up the elements of Doan 776 dug into the
side of the mountain. Government forces then stormed the
sides of the mountain and were able to get a toehold at the
base by early December. Despite early advances, PIGFAT soon
bogged down. The three Doan 777 battalions, ordered not to
surrender, refused to relinquish any ground. In the
process, half of the 927 Battalion was wiped out. At the
end, only 480 Vietnamese out of the original 1,500 defenders
survived the onslaught of ground assaults and airstrikes.
By late December, PAVN had dispatched two fresh regiments to
Phou Pha Thi, including the entire 148 Regiment of the 316
Division. PAVN continued to take heavy casualties,
including an estimated 128 dead from the 148 Regiment, but
was able to maintain its grip on the strategic mountain. In
doing so, Hanoi had demonstrated its will to absorb
tremendous losses in the Laotian battlefield. Hanoi had
also shown that PAVN formations would be dominating the Lao
battlefield from then onwards; the Pathet Lao would be
conspicuous by their absence.
"

November 25, 1968
Emmons B. Hodgkins, Jon C. Murray, Lester M. Porter,
Baltazar Reyes, Chaveng Yupaphin are killed in C-46 N1386N.
Engine failed after take off from Savannakhet. Aircraft
crashed one mile from runway. Twenty-one passengers killed;
two survived.

December 7, 1968
William Fraser, Patrick F. McCarthy (F/M), and trainee
F/M Bernardo L. Dychian killed in Bell 205 XW-PFI at Houei
Ma (LS-107) when pin pulled out of bag of grenades while
offloading. [Knight: This was ruled most likely cause.

XOXO: "Indigenous observer reports following:
"Aircraft was at a hover over the strip, two meters above the
groundwhile landing. He heard two popcor bangs and the main
rotor appeared to become erratic. Aircraft fell to ground,
caught fire and exploded. Aircraft burned for five minutes
preventing rescue of crew." From initial reports cannot
positively determine exact sequence of ground contact, fire,
and explosion.

XOXO: Team reports XW-PFI took off from LS215 and made
normal landing at LS107. Aircraft destroyed by explosions
immediately adjacent to left side cargo door while unloading.
Eight indigenous fatal and 13 indigenous injured.

December 10, 1968
Casterlin to parents: "Laos is getting very tough again. The enemy is all over the place and we are getting hit frequently. We have an operation going to regain Pathi. It is sort of a morale thing for the Meo. I got popped at twice in one day. FACed against antiaircraft guns and picked up a downed pilot on the next day. Quite exciting!" Lost Bell and crew recently when grenade got loose. Lost twin-engine plane in mountains recently. Other planes heavily damaged.

December 31, 1968
33,500 USAF personnel and 600 aircraft in Thailand
Brothers,

Most of us know the story of the fall of Lima Site 85 in March of '88. I just finished reading the declassified (mostly) official cables between the Vietnamese embassy and the State Dept. re. events leading to the site's fall and its aftermath. Makes for some very interesting reading. For those who have not seen them, they can be found at http://www.aiipowmia.com/phouphaith.html

Bob Wheatley
Det 4, 6922 Security Wing
Ramasan Station / Udorn
Dec, 1987 - Oct, 1988
Proud Member of the TLC Brotherhood
Lifetime Member, Udorn VFW Post 10249
Personal Web Site: Viet-REMF http://38.155.99.147
Bob & Rosie Wheatley, Carthage, Indiana

How to Abandon An American... In Advance

Phou Pha Ti - Lima Site 85 - was a strategic, special navigational site secreted in the jungles of northern Laos. By the end of 1987, it was evident that North Vietnam was aware of and heading to Site 85, its high-tech equipment and high-tech technicians. As early as January 1988, the site was attacked by two small aircraft, both of which were brought down by the US. Immediately afterward, 6 Vietnamese battalions slowly and methodically made their way to Site 85, building roads and hauling material to do so, while US officials sat, watched, wrote to one another and waited. The following cable traffic shows that the US knew for an extended period of time that Phou Pha Ti and its personnel were in imminent danger yet officials allowed it to fall and its men to go missing in a secret battle.
over a secret site.

What is particularly disturbing is the following: As you know, the TSQ 81, as well as a TACAN facility, is located at Site 85. When the decision was made to install these facilities it was understood that no last ditch stand would be made to defend them. Although this equipment is costly, it is expendable—the men who service it are not and they will be removed prior to the fall of the site, if the situation becomes hopeless.

It is evident from cable traffic and contemporaneous reports that the situation was hopeless, yet the men were left like sitting ducks on that mountainside, ultimately removed not by the US, but by enemy forces. Although the US maintains that the men perished in or as a result of the assault on Site 85, consistent reports of men being taken off the mountain and the issue of Mel Holland’s name surfacing on a Soviet list counter official US claims.

Ultimately we find this final ‘I told you so’ in the cable traffic: “We made clear from the very beginning that this site could not be defended against a determined and superior enemy force. We gave regular and accurate estimates of its progressive deterioration, and as early as Feb. 26, advised you that it could probably not be held beyond March 10. Therefore, its fall should have come as no surprise to anyone.”

The cables are presented in chronological order. All emphasis is by All POW-MIA.

Cable Traffic 1967 - Setting the Stage

Telegram From the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson in Texas
Washington, December 26, 1967, 6:02 p.m.
CAP 671165. LaoSit Situation Report (as of 6 p.m. EST, 26 December 1967).

1. Communist forces are keeping up their pressure against government positions in Laos.
2. An enemy unit, estimated at about battalion strength, raided the government base and airstrip at Muong Phalane on 25 December, and destroyed most of the camp’s facilities, including the USAID and Air America buildings. Although government reinforcements apparently have moved into the area, they have not yet reoccupied Muong Phalane.
3. Preliminary reports suggest that the attack was specifically aimed against the U.S. presence at Muong Phalane. Two American technicians who manned a navigational station which assists U.S. air operations in southern Laos are missing. The station itself apparently was not damaged.
4. The attack on Muong Phalane is the first significant enemy action in this part of the Panhandle in over a year. It may be related to recent attacks farther south in the Bolovens Plateau area. These operations appear to be part of a new Communist campaign to forestall stepped-up allied efforts to interdict the infiltration corridor.
5. In northern Laos, the Communists launched a mortar attack on the government airstrip at Nam Bac on 24 December. Continuing reports of a Communist build-up in the vicinity suggest that more ground assaults against Nam Bac’s outlying defenses may be in the offing. Government troops are being repositioned in an effort to reduce their vulnerability.

6. Although the Communists appear to be putting a little more bite into their dry season offensive this year, there is no evidence that they intend to mount a concerted drive into government-held territory. We agree with the U.S. Embassy’s appreciation that the Lao reports out of Vietnam on the status of the North Vietnamese threat are highly exaggerated. In fact, the recent Communist effort against Nam Bac in the north and the Bolovens positions in the south, appears designed to restore the status quo. Until last year, both areas long had been under Pathet Lao control.

7. Nevertheless, we believe that the Communists will make things even hotter in the coming months as they attempt to regain some of the military initiative in Laos. This probably will be particularly true in the Panhandle, where stepped-up allied operations into the infiltration corridor will hit a highly sensitive nerve.

Cable Traffic 1968 - Who Knew and When

Memorandum From the County Director for Laos and Cambodia (Herz) to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy)

Washington, February 1, 1968.

SUBJECT: Enemy Pressure on Site 85

1. The most recent reports of enemy action around Site-85 (Phou Pha Thi) indicate that an attempt to seize the site is imminent. Two key outposts defending the approaches to Site-85 have already been taken by the North Vietnamese and pressure is continuing to close in around the site.

2. Over a year ago when Vang Pao attempted to defend Site-86 (Na Khang), his troops suffered a great number of casualties. At that point he decided never again to commit his units to the all-out defense of a position. That tactic is still being followed and, while his units will continue to defend Site-85 as long as possible, he does not intend to accept heavy casualties in exchange for real estate.

3. As you know, the TSQ 81, as well as a TACAN facility, is located at Site-85. When the decision was made to install these facilities it was understood that no last ditch stand would be made to defend them. Although this equipment is costly, it is expendable—the men who service it are not and they will be removed prior to the fall of the site, if the situation becomes hopeless.

Action Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy) to the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Bohlen)

Source: Department of State, Central Files, POL 27 LAOS. Top Secret. Drafted by Slutz and cleared by Herz.

SUBJECT
Air Support for Counter-insurgency Mission in Laos
Ambassador Sullivan has requested our assistance in obtaining a re-ordering of air support priorities in order to give him sufficient tactical air strike support for key targets in Laos at the time he needs it. He has specifically asked that the 56th Air Commando Wing (ACW) at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, be “dedicated” to Laos. In view of the increasing enemy pressure in Laos, and the important but fleeting opportunities there to inflict damage on the enemy, we think Sullivan’s request should be strongly supported.

-2-1 in telegram 4585 from Vientiane, February 20. (Ibid.)

The over-all counter-insurgency mission in Laos is to harness in an efficient manner three elements—Lao irregulars; perishable, all-source intelligence; and air power—in order to inflict the greatest damage possible on enemy personnel and logistical facilities. Operations have been highly successful when all these elements are present.

With the priority attention of the 56th ACW, Ambassador Sullivan believes he would get the number of daily sorties he needs: (a) nine A-20 sorties, (b) eight T-28 sorties, (c) eighteen A-1 sorties. In addition, U-2Fs and C-123s would be regularly available for Forward Air Control (FAC) and flare ship roles.

Sullivan would use this air support in the following order of priority:

a. Hitting fleeing targets identified on motorable roads which the enemy uses in Laos;
b. Striking enemy logistical facilities and troop concentrations throughout Laos; and
c. Providing close air support to irregulars who are being infiltrated into hostile areas, attacking enemy positions, or defending base areas.

[2 lines of source text not declassified] A specific and immediate area of high concern is Site 85, a guerrilla base and command post in northern Sam Neua province, which has been the target of concentrated enemy pressure for several months. The USAF installed its TSQ-81 navigational device there last fall.

[3 lines of source text not declassified]

Recommendation
That you discuss Ambassador Sullivan’s request urgently with the Joint Chiefs with a view to getting a sufficiently high priority for air support operations in Laos to meet his requirements. 5/3\n5/in telegram 120863 to Vientiane, February 27, the Department informed Sullivan that in light of a CIA presentation to the JCS about an imminent attack on Site 85 and the urgent requirement for increased air support for
the defenders, the JCS contacted CINC PAC about Sullivan's request and the Department "weighed in" with the Department of Defense. The question of "dedicating" air support for Laos was more fundamental and required resolution at a high level. The issue was being considered by McNamara. (Ibid.)

Editorial Note
On February 24, 1968, General Maxwell Taylor reported to President Johnson that he had spent 3 hours at the Central Intelligence Agency going over order of battle information on Vietnam and discussing possible "surprises" which the future might hold. Taylor summed up his impressions in a February 24 memorandum to the President. Part of the memorandum concerned Laos and reads as follows:

"Enemy Activity in Laos
"Recent enemy activity in Laos can hardly be termed an offensive since all movements have been to regain terrain which the communists have claimed since 1962. The areas attacked had been taken over by Laotian government forces in 1966 or 1967 so that the Pathet Lao probably feel that they are merely reclaiming lost property. However, the Pathet Lao supported by North Vietnamese troops are capable of moving almost anywhere in Laos and could use this superiority at any time to score a victory in concert with successes, real or claimed, in South Vietnam."

Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Laos and Cambodia Affairs (Herz) to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy)

Washington, February 27, 1968.

SUBJECT
Air Support for Counter-insurgency Mission in Laos
(Non-relevant points EXCISEd by All POW-MIA)
6. The Larger Context. Although Sullivan is immediately concerned about protecting Site 85, where we have the TSQ-81 and a TACAN, the lack of sufficient air strike assets for Laos has been flagged by him repeatedly, including in his periodic discussions with the Joint Chiefs, since 1965. He has been proven right in his "Gop with Camel" approach—that propeller-driven craft are superior to jets in the Laos situation. He has also stressed the importance of hitting NVN traffic as far north in the trail structure as possible (i.e., in the vicinity of Mu Gia) before it disperses under jungle canopy further south. We are, and he is, not taking a parochial Laos point of view. "Dedicating" air assets to Laos will improve also our posture in South Vietnam as well as Thailand. Also, we are not adjudicating a dispute. It is merely a question of upping the priority slightly in one country, in the interests of our position on that country and in the interests of the overall war effort.

Memorandum From the Director of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rusk
SUBJECT
Significance of Phou Pha Thi (Site 85) in Northeastern Laos
This is in response to your request for information on the significance of
Phou Pha Thi.
Equipment. Phou Pha Thi is the site of a very important US
radar-navigational station for supporting US air operations in North
Vietnam and northern Laos. Equipment installed at the site are:
TSQ-81—a portable version of the MSQ-77—an extremely sophisticated
radar-navigational device used by US bombers for precision-bombing of
targets in North Vietnam north of Vinh at night and in inclement weather.
It has an effective range of about 200 miles (see map for area covered in
North Vietnam) (not printed) installed on November 1, 1967, it is the only
device of its kind in Laos. Two MSQ-77's are installed in Thailand, and two
in South Vietnam.
TACAN—a navigational aid which emits beams to help orient US aircraft
operating primarily in northern Laos. It was installed about a year ago.
There are three other TACAN sites in Laos, the nearest one to Phou Pha Thi
being at Long Tien, south of the Plain of Jars (see map).
US Personnel. At any one time, there are 15 Americans stationed at the
site: 12 to service the TSQ-81, two to service the TACAN, and one
presumably to oversee the operation. As at the other TACAN sites in Laos,
these individuals are USAF personnel, formally converted to civilian status
as Lockheed employees for the duration of their tour of duty in Laos. There
are three teams based on Udorn, each serving a five-day shift. Prime
Minister Souvanna Phouma has authorized the stationing of US personnel at
the TACAN sites, but he has not been told about the TSQ-81 at Phou Pha Thi.
Guernica Base. Pho Pha Thi, which is situated only 25 miles from Sam Neua
town, has also served for some time as a major base for guerilla
operations. At present, about 700 Meo irregulars are based there to carry
out forays into enemy territory as well as to man a defensive perimeter
with a radius of about 12 miles. This perimeter has been breached during
the past week.
Enemy Threat. The enemy is undoubtedly aware of the importance of the site
as a radar-navigational installation and of the US presence there. The site
was bombed unsuccessfully by North Vietnamese aircraft on January 12./3/
Since then, the enemy has been completing elaborate preparations, including
the building of roads, to make a ground assault upon the site. Ambassador
Sullivan believes that this will take place within two weeks. We believe
that should enemy artillery come within range of the 600-foot airstrip, it
would become extremely difficult to extricate the small US unit as well as
the 700-man Laotian force.
/3/The attack was by two Soviet-manufactured Colt (AN-2) single engine
biplanes, which bombed the site at 1:20 in the afternoon. The aircraft
dropped 15 bombs of 250 lbs. wounding three Laot soldiers and one U.S.
technician. The bombing resulted in slight damage to the TACAN antenna and
temporarily closed it down. The TSQ-81 continued to operate. Both planes
were lost after the raid. One crashed into a ridge after being hit by small
arms fire from the ground, and the other was shot down by a sharpshooter with a rifle from an airborne Air America helicopter. (Telegram 3779 from Vientiane, January 12, Department of State, Central Files, POL 27 LAOS)

Central Intelligence Information Cable
TDCS DB-315/00669-68

March 9, 1968.

SUBJECT
Appraisal of the security of the guerrilla base at Phou Pha Thi, Site 85, as of 9 March 1968

ACQ
Laos, Vientiane

SOURCE
It is not an official judgment by this Agency or any component. It represents the observations and interpretation of [1 line of source text not declassified] at the time of its preparation.

1. Since 25 February 1968, when FOV 13,429 (TDCSDB- 315/00669-68) was prepared to appraise the security of the guerrilla base at Phou Pha Thi (UH 6663-880), the enemy has methodically continued to prepare the battlefield for his attack on the summit of Phou Pha Thi. In a series of penetrations of the 12-kilometer defensive perimeter around Phou Pha Thi the enemy has focused primarily on bringing more troops into the area and in so doing to consolidate his breach of the perimeter. As of 9 March the enemy has a total estimated force equivalent to seven battalions that could be brought to bear in a ground attack on site 85. In effect, in the period 25 February to 9 March the enemy has expanded his hold on Phou Den Din (UH 780595), has consolidated his position on the ridge line running west from Phou Houei Hao (UH 739583), and has extended the depth of his probes up toward the base of Phou Pha Thi and has thus penetrated deeper into the 12-kilometer defensive perimeter so that by 7 March 150 enemy troops had clashed with a guerrilla patrol in the vicinity of UH 725581, only about five kilometers from the base of the mountain.

[Here follows details of the NVN buildup of an attack on site 85 over the last 15 days.]

Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State Vientiane, March 11, 1968, 0532Z.

5038. 1. As Dept has probably learned from military sources, enemy has effectively eliminated air navigation facilities at Site 85. Action began yesterday evening with artillery and mortar shelling. Decision to destroy facilities by self-destruction was taken in small hours of morning. Helicopter evacuation was arranged for first light this morning.

2. Evacuation plans have been seriously disrupted by enemy activity and several [less than 1 line of source text not declassified] personnel have apparently been dispersed from pre-planned evacuation sites. Although seven of them have been accounted for as of this time, eleven are yet to be located. Of those seven accounted for, three are dead on the site, one died in the helicopter en route and three are at Udom.
3. In addition to these personnel, two CAS and one AIRA forward air controller have been withdrawn from their evacuation sites. Other local personnel (wounded, etc.) have also been extracted.
4. Fighting and shelling continues, as well as helicopter and ground evacuation efforts. Because of confused situation at site and withdrawal of our CAS personnel (one of whom was wounded) it will doubtless be some time before we have clear picture or further significant reports.
5. We will, of course, continue reports as information comes in. At first glance, however, it appears we may have pushed our luck one day too long in attempting to keep this facility in operation.

Sullivan

Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State
Vientiane, March 13, 1968, 0558Z.

5073. Ref: Vientiane 5038.
1. Evacuation operations at Site 85 have been completed and site is currently in enemy hands. Personnel from mountain-top positions have been extracted by helicopter with exception relatively small group SGU local troops who have descended to base camp positions, joined other units there, and are withdrawing overland to previously agreed safe havens. Since we may assume that these safe havens will also come under enemy pressure soon, there may be required a second phase of withdrawals for these latter personnel.
2. Final count on [less than 1 line of source text not declassified] personnel accounts for all but three. One of these may subsequently be listed as dead if and when we get more coherent information from survivors, some of whom in state of considerable shock.\3/\3/In telegram 5103 from Vientiane, March 12, Sullivan reported that there would be a search and rescue operation for personnel still unaccounted for, the remaining structures at Site 85 would be destroyed by napalm bombs dropped from U.S. aircraft, no publicity would be given to the battle, Souvanna would be informed, and the next of kin would be notified in the United States. (Ibid.) In telegrams 5119 from Vientiane, March 13, Sullivan reported that he informed Souvanna of the capture of Site 85. Sullivan also reported that 11 U.S. personnel were killed; the 3 previously unaccounted for were killed according to the survivors. (Ibid.)
3. Contrary to figures cited reftel, there was total of 16 of these personnel at communications site, rather than 18 as we had earlier understood. Of these 16, five were extracted alive but one was killed in helicopter when he was hit by ground fire. Eight others are known dead. Three are unaccounted for, although one of these, as stated above, may be presumed dead.
4. Confusion surrounding extraction these personnel stems from two factors not yet fully explained. First was fact that these personnel, instead of assembling at pre-arranged evacuation site, decide to climb down over face of sheer cliffs to a narrow ledge, using some sort of cargo harness system which they devised for this purpose. It is not known why or when they decided to take this action. But it is presumed that they must have thought, contrary to fact, that trail to evacuation site was blocked.
3. In addition to these personnel, two CAS and one AI/RA forward air controller have been withdrawn from their evacuation sites. Other local personnel (wounded, etc.) have also been extracted.

4. Fighting and shelling continues, as well as helicopter and ground evacuation efforts. Because of confused situation at site and withdrawal of our CAS personnel (one of whom was wounded) it will doubtless be some time before we have clear picture or further significant reports.

5. We will, of course, continue reports as information comes in. At first glance, however, it appears we may have pushed our luck one day too long in attempting to keep this facility in operation.

Sullivan

Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, Vientiane, March 13, 1968, 0558Z.

5073. Ref: Vientiane 5038.

1. Evacuation operations at Site 85 have been completed and site is currently in enemy hands. Personnel from mountain-top positions have been extracted by helicopter with exception relatively small group SGU local troops who have descended to base camp positions, joined other units there, and are withdrawing overland to previously agreed safe havens. Since we may assume that these safe havens will also come under enemy pressure soon, there may be required a second phase of withdrawals for these latter personnel.

2. Final count on [less than 1 line of source text not declassified] personnel accounts for all but three. One of these may subsequently be listed as dead if and when we get more coherent information from survivors, some of whom in state of considerable shock.///

In telegram 5103 from Vientiane, March 12, Sullivan reported that there would be a search and rescue operation for personnel still unaccounted for, the remaining structures at Site 85 would be destroyed by napalm bombs dropped from U.S. aircraft, no publicity would be given to the battle, Souvanna would be informed, and the next of kin would be notified in the United States. (Ibid.) In telegrams 5119 from Vientiane, March 13, Sullivan reported that he informed Souvanna of the capture of Site 85. Sullivan also reported that 11 U.S. personnel were killed; the 3 previously unaccounted for were killed according to the survivors. (Ibid.)

3. Contrary to figures cited ref tel, there was total of 16 of these personnel at communications site, rather than 18 as we had earlier understood. Of these 16, five were extracted alive but one was killed in helicopter when he was hit by ground fire. Eight others are known dead. Three are unaccounted for, although one of these, as stated above, may be presumed dead.

4. Confusion surrounding extraction these personnel stems from two factors not yet fully explained. First was fact that these personnel, instead of assembling at pre-arranged evacuation site, decide to climb down over face of sheer cliffs to a narrow ledge, using some sort of cargo harness system which they devised for this purpose. It is not known why or when they decided to take this action. But it is presumed that they must have thought, contrary to fact, that trail to evacuation site was blocked.
5. Second was fact that small enemy "suicide squad", which seems to have made improbable ascent up these same cliffs, surprised and caught these [less than 1 line of source text not declassified] personnel on their narrow ledge, gunning and grenading them while they were trapped in this inescapable position. It was here that these men suffered such heavy casualties and where most of them are reported to have died. Three bodies were subsequently seen on this ledge, but remainder are assumed to have fallen off sheer 2000 foot drop. 

6. We and Air Force personnel at Udorn will attempt reconstruct story further from survivors when latter have recovered from sedation and shock. Conclusion, however, seems quite definitive that none of missing personnel are likely to be alive. 

7. For this reason, USAF late yesterday afternoon flew several missions against remains of navigation and communications equipment on mountain top, as well as abandoned artillery position, in order destroy materiel left behind. Photo missions are being run today to determine whether further strikes are necessary. 

8. Several follow-up actions remain to be accomplished, and will be subject of meeting this afternoon between Ambassador and DEPoom 7/13 AF. A. We must discuss with RLG and determine what, if anything, needs to be said about this action. It remains to be seen whether Hanoi or Pathet Lao radios will announce their victory. 

B. We must decide how to handle next of kin notification, casualty announcements, etc. 

C. We must expedite action for replacement site, at least for TACAN. 

D. We should discuss possibility that Site 36 will be next on enemy list and what contingencies we should consider there. 

Sullivan 

Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State 
Vientiane, March 14, 1968, 0941Z. 


1. Fall of Pha Thi (Site 85) in Sam Neua Province opens a new time of troubles for Veng Pao and the Meos of Military Region II. The size of the attacking forces and their heavy supporting weapons are greater than anything friendly troops can muster in the immediate vicinity. Therefore, there is no alternative but to evacuate friendly troop units and their dependents in order maintain them intact for counterattack activity in rainy season. Ref A indicates dimension of refugee problem with which we are attempting to cope. A fleet of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft is engaged in this effort today. 

2. It should be borne in mind that North Vietnam mounted attack of this size and intensity because it wished eliminate U.S. installation, which had become "attractive nuisance" for them. Consequently, this vast uprooting of human resources and abandonment of useful territory is direct result U.S., rather than RLG, operational interests. 

3. Site 36, which is used as forward launch base for ARS helicopters, is another U.S.-dedicated activity which will doubtless also attract enemy attention. Although it is more heavily defended than Site 85, it is
questionable whether it can withstand a determined assault by seven NVN battalions, the strength we feel enemy is probably able to deploy against it.

4. Faced with these prospects, Vang Pao has sent message to Prime Minister Souvanna and to me asking for maximum air strikes against a series of targets in Military Region II. Most of the targets are in or lie close to towns and other centers of civilian population which Prime Minister has previously asked us to avoid. I went over list with Souvanna yesterday and we agreed to have U.S. photo-interpreters examine prospects for carefully controlled strikes against a number of Vang Pao's targets. We agreed to take joint look at photography as soon as my people can get target folders assembled.

5. Last evening subsequent to discussions reported para 4, Souvanna told me he had received disturbing message from Vang Pao which he interpreted as preparation for withdrawal from additional forward territory in Region II, raising prospect that north and east defenses of Vientiane plains would be significantly reduced in depth. Souvanna felt this was imprudent and hoped to dissuade Vang Pao from any such steps. He felt he needed assurances of air strikes as persuader for Vang Pao and again urged early meeting on subject.

6. Comment: Subsequent Embassy discussion with Vang Pao, who came to Vientiane for military meeting this morning, indicates Souvanna may have misunderstood his message. He reportedly was referring merely to location of new refugee centers rather than relocation of old. Of some possible interest to Embassy Bangkok was his thought of placing some of his Meo refugees in hills of Sayaboury, along Lao border with Nan province in Thailand.

Sullivan

Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State

Vientiane, March 27, 1968, 0610Z.

5412. Following sent action immediate Seventh AF; info COMUSMACV,

CINCPACAF, CINCPAC, CSAF, 16 Mar; sent to you for info. Request this be given absolute minimum distribution to be determined by Mr. Read, S/S, only. *Personal for Gen. Momyer from Amb. Sullivan.

Reur 141246Z Mar 68.

1. I thoroughly concur that post mortem of loss Site 85 is in order. Suggest your people and mine work out procedures for such analysis at next weekly Udorn meeting.

2. Believe you should understand, however, that enemy force was not "relatively small." Our intelligence indicates their numbers between five and seven battalions, with artillery and rocket support, considerably outnumbering local defense forces, which never numbered more than 1,000 men in 12 kilometer defensive perimeter which drawn around Site 85.

3. We made clear from the very beginning that this site could not be defended against a determined and superior enemy force. We gave regular and accurate estimates of its progressive deterioration, and as early as Feb. 26, advised you that it could probably not be held beyond March 10.

Therefore, its fall should have come as no surprise to anyone.
4. The manner in which enemy accomplished its fall is, however, instructive, and should, I think, be carefully studied with view to future operations. Artillery fire, at relatively long range, was surprisingly accurate. According fragmentary reports of survivors, direct hits were scored, very early in the barrage, upon personnel quarters, operations structure, and bunkers. It seems possible that installations were rendered effectively inoperable even before destruction order was given. There may be some lessons in this which should be studied with respect to length of time technical personnel should be required stay at their posts after installation falls within artillery range. In hindsight, it seems to me we should have pulled all technicians out morning March 10 even if this meant losing the last several hours of the installation's capabilities.

5. What concerns me most is not the defense action, but the disruption of pre-planned evacuation procedure. It is still not clear why technical personnel went over cliff to a narrow ledge rather than down trail to chopper pad. CAS and local personnel subsequently went up same trail to installation searching for technicians, so we know trail was traversable, even if under artillery fire. It is also not clear to me how small Vietnamese suicide squad got to installation site, although it seems they must have scaled the cliff which all of us considered impassable.

6. We can give you details of action taken by 224-man local defense forces at the site and casualties which they suffered in fighting. In their defense effort, these amounted to 8 killed, 18 missing, and 33 wounded. Their defensive tactics, of course, are based on guerrilla doctrines, and we will be pleased review with your people how we think these should be handled in future instances, and especially the role which air power can play in these tactics. 

Sullivan

For those interested in more on Lima Site 85, we recommend the following:
Project CHECO Report
The Fall of Site 85

We're widely read
And often quoted
But it's shaved
Not signs
For which we're noted
Burma-Shave 1950