1969

[Stevenson: With the incoming Nixon administration, Sullivan was placed in charge of Laotian and Vietnamese matters at State. Robert Hurwitch was acting ambassador from March 15 to July 15, 1969, then G. McMurtrie Godley took over. "There were some fresh faces, but little new thought about Laos." The military situation deteriorated during the first half of 1969 when a combined NVA and PL attack in both northern and southern Laos; NVA/PL capture several key airstrips in north. US planes leveled Xiang Khouang in April 1969. NVA push on Muong Soui despite monsoon and it falls on June 27. Godley arrived in mid-July to a deteriorating situation. He had been ambassador to the Congo, 1964-66; CIA station chief Devlin also had served with him in Congo as had several other key officials (known at "the Congo Club"). "Godley seemed fascinated with military operations and was decidedly sympathetic to military requests," Vang Pao moved north in August 1969 to increased US bombing (Khang Khay bombed for first time). He quickly moved on to PDJ. Secret War attracted increased public attention. There were hearings for the Symington subcommittee and growing Congressional opposition. NVA/PL offensive in February 1970. Xiang Khouang airfield (Lima Lima) falls by end of month. Nixon approves invasion of Cambodia in April 1970.]

[The war went badly during the first half of the year, but improved dramatically during the wet season offensive of August-October. Muong Soui fell to the NVA/PL in late June, but it was retaken by September, together with the entire PDJ.]

[Air War in Indochina: U.S. air activity over Laos rose sharply when aircraft that had been flying missions over North Vietnam became available with bombing pause. Much went into Trail interdiction; however, northern Laos also saw significant increase. "The sharpest increase came early in 1969. Then, in May, the decision was made to accede to General Vang Pao’s request for direct air support of his BG units, including the bombing of the town of Xiang Khouang, a long-time Pathet Lao stronghold off the southern edge of the Plan of Jars. Yet another escalation marked the counteroffensive mount by Vang Pao in the late summer, in which he retook the Plain of Jars for the first time since 1964." Sortie rate, which had been fairly constant since 1965 at about 10-20 a day, shot up to 300 per day in 1969, then decreased in 1970.]
[Ballard, Fixed-Wing Gunships, pp. 67-70: Between January 1 and May 15, 1969, enemy offensive resulted in fall of 34 Lima Site bases. Crisis in March 1969. Decision by Seventh Air Force to shift four AC-47s to Udorn. Col. William H. Ginn, Jr., deputy commander for operations, 14th Special Operations Wing, flew to Laos and briefed Vang Pao and provided strobe lights to mark Meo positions. Ginn assured VP that he "had lost his last Lima Site." Blue Chip (Headquarters, Seventh Air Force) orders to Alleycat to Spooky (one AC-47 on night airborne alert and one on ground alert). First mission on night of March 15. Swampat (forward air control guide) called in Spooky and two A-1s with success. In May, Air Attache, VTE, wrote Seventh Air Force: "The concentrated firepower provided by AC-47s of this detachment has been a major factor in site defense and air to ground support for tactical operations in northern Laos."

[Lofgren & Sexton, Air War in Northern Laos:

In 1969, irregular forces totalled 33,000: MRI, 5,000; MRII, 16,000; MRIII, 5,000, MRIV, 7,000. (In addition, 37,000 FAN/FAR and 58,000 NVA/PL). The irregulars bore the brunt of the fighting. In 1969, the Hmong were reorganized into Guerrilla Battalions of approximately 300 men (three companies of 100 men) and Mobile Groups (GM) of three to six battalions. There also were smaller, independent units. The Hmong fought the NVA in these larger, conventional units for the first time in 1969 and were decimated. Regular Thai units were sent to Laos in 1969 to stem the NVA drive on Huong Soid and Long Tieng. They were replaced by volunteers recruited from the Royal Thai Army. The US provided all equipment. Also, equipment was supplied to Thailand to replace troops serving in Laos on a one-to-one basis. The volunteers were sent to the CIA training center at Koke Kathem, where they were organized into battalions and GMs. By April 1971, there were 12 Thai battalions serving in Laos (one battalion took over 60 percent casualties defending Long Tieng).

[James Costin interview with V. H. Gallacher and Lyn R. Officer, Feb. 6, 1973:

Costin flew A-1s from NKP in 1969-70. There were three A-1 squadrons: 602d SOS (SANDY); 22d SOS (ZORRO), which flew night missions; and 1st SOS (HOGO), which flew a variety of missions. Costin was assigned to the 602d. This unit did mostly Barrel Roll strikes and SARs. During his four months with the squadron, he participated in approximately 40 SARs. Costin found the Ravens in MR II to be "extremely good." Also, he worked with FAGs on FM. He recalls working with BLACK LION with great success.]
The 'Forgotten' Conflict in Laos Goes Into a New Offensive Phase

North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao Open Small-Scale Attacks in Area Where U.S. Has Deep Commitments

VINH MINH, DRV June 3-Most control of population has been achieved in the continuing drive to create more important features of normal daily life among the people of South Vietnam, and soon to be extended to the people of North Vietnam.

Typically, the offensive has involved a dozen or so small-scale attacks and close-range engagements, mostly along administrative boundaries, in areas where the population is sparse. In contrast, the Pathet Lao military campaign is more regional in character, involving the occupation of territory by armed forces in areas of larger population.

The Pathet Lao campaign has been characterized by small-scale attacks and close-range engagements, often involving a dozen or so soldiers. The Pathet Lao military campaign is more regional in character, involving the occupation of territory by armed forces in areas of larger population.

In the north, the war in the northeast is part of a regional conflict for control of territory. Each side takes into account its own strategic and tactical objectives.

Central Intelligence Agency

COUNSELING IN TORONTO: Mrs. and Mrs. Irua, chairmen of the Ontario American Legion, meet with American students to discuss the current situation in Laos.

The successful operation of the American Legion has been crucial to the development of a strong military tradition in the U.S.

Two Killed by Explosion at Saigon Girls' School

SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 31 (AP) - Two explosions and a fire did serious damage to a girls' school in Saigon.

The explosions occurred just before the school bell rang, and the fire was started by a gas leak.

The school was evacuated, and the girls were safely removed.

FOR WARMER CLIMES

The 100 ft. air-conditioning plant, which is the largest in the United States, was completely destroyed by the explosion.

The United States has been providing air-conditioning plants to support its military presence in South Vietnam.

The American Legion has been working to maintain the air-conditioning plants in good working order.

The fuel available in South Vietnam has been limited, but the American Legion has been working to secure additional fuel supplies.

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"In early 1969, PAVN launched its most amitious dry season offensive into northeast Laos." Hanoi ordered the 148 Regiment to attack Na Khang. "In previous years, PAVN had approached the garrison from along the treeline; US airpower always anticipated this line of attack and had handed the Vietnamese excessive casualties. This time, the 148 Regiment approached through an exposed expanse of elephant grass, a completely unanticipated direction that caught the garrison by surprise and allowed PAVN to overwhelm the post before aircraft could begin to reaction."

PAVN then moved the 316 Division onto the PDJ. The 316 was a light division, composed of three 1,500-man regiments (148, 174, and 176), plus antiaircraft and support units. According to PAVN deployment doctrine, two regiments (usually 148 and 174) were committed to the battlefield, and one held in reserve. By May, the 316 Division were in control of area around the PDJ. Unlike previous years, Hanoi decided to keep the forces on the PDJ during the rainy season. "The reason for this departure from tradition was that a new route was being constructed directly west from Vinh through Nong Het to the plain, which would simplify resupply missions and allow PAVN forces to be supported even during the rains."

These plans began to fall apart when the rains began in July. Existing supply trails turned to mud. USAF bombing campaign took heavy toll. New route was not finished in time to carry sufficient supplies to sustain 316 Division. "As a result, government forces were able to inflict an embarrassing rout of PAVN, sending the half-starved 316 Division fleeing back toward North Vietnam."

January 27, 1969
T.D. Allman in BKK Post: Pathet Lao have gone onto attack, mostly in Sam Neua province. Pressure on Nha Khang. If Na Khang falls, NVA likely to attack Muong Soui, neutralist stronghold, with ultimate objective of Sam Thong/Long Tieng complex.

February 1969

[JHM: Enemy against assaults "Alamo" - TACAN facility and staging base for SAR operations. Despite US air, site lost. "Na Khang, "The Alamo," which Hmong had fought so hard to hold for so many years, had fallen." SAR now out of Long Tieng. TACAN installed at Bouam Long (LS-32). Jerry Daniels moves from Na Khang to Bouam Long. "While Hmong considered their defense of Bouam Loung as critical, it is
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doubtful that they knew the importance of the electronic surveillance they guarded. The intelligence gathered from the Bouam Loung installation would be so important that a National Security Agency hook-up was made." Installation provided information about North Vietnam's intentions.

[Glerum to WNL, 2/15/93 re communication intelligence at Bouam Long: "News to me."]

February 10, 1969
Captain Joseph Bush, American Army adviser to Royal Lao Army, killed in action. NVA attacked compound near Moung Soui [L-108]; Bush killed one enemy before hit by automatic weapons fire. [New York Times, March 9, 1970, article re Nixon denial on March 6 that "no American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations."]

March 1, 1969
Government suffers major defeat with the loss of Nha Khang. NVA troops dislodged several Hmong battalions. Some 4,000 Hmong eventually fled the area, slipping past the NVA positions.

March 19, 1969
Amb. Sullivan leaves.

March 19, 1969
Casterlin to parents: Special missions pay now by check and accountable to IRS. Union has been started and he has joined. Most fixed-wing pilots have joined but there has been hesitation on the part of the rotary-wing pilots.

March 25, 1969
Bowers, p. 461: Operations against hill area in southern panhandle. 10 USAF and 8 AAM helicopters inserted 200-man assault force. Heavy enemy reaction required immediate withdrawal. AAM helicopters picked up 700 troops; 5 USAF CH-3s hit; one pilot wounded. Evacuation completed the next day with A-1 support.
Cease: Two 115-man SGU companies involved. Seven CH-3s, three UH-1s, and eight AAM H-34s for airlift; six A-1Es for escort, two O-2s for FAC, eight F-105s and four A-1Es "to kill and disperse enemy" enemy between landing zone and enemy cave complex.

March 25-26, 1969
On March 25, William N. Utterback was en route from Long Tieng to Ban Na in Porter 95X with a load of ammunition. He had just leveled off at 6,000 feet when the engine flamed out and the prop automatically went into feather. He called MAYDAY and headed toward Sam Thong. He managed to get the engine restarted, and landed without
incident. Dan Williams was there but could not find the problem. He ordered a new fuel control unit. Utterback went back to VTE on a shuttle flight.

On March 26, Jerry Gudahl went to Sam Thong to test hop 96X while Utterback flew 57F to work out of Ban Houei Sai, where he picked up a Meo kicker. His second drop of the day was to Team 28, located on the Chinese border on the Mekong River. The team was surrounded and scheduled for multiple airstrikes, but Utterback had not been briefed on the situation. He overflew the drop zone (about one hour from Ban Houei Sai) at 3,000 feet. There was an arrow pointing toward the north (river), indicating the location of enemy troops. As he approached for a drop (3 degree flap; trimmed for nose down), heavy automatic weapons fire filled the sky. One of the first rounds severed the trim cable and the airplane dived toward the ground. Utterback pulled back on the stick as hard as he could and managed to get the airplane level. While this was happening, rounds peppered the airplane, hitting every part of the plane except the engine (and Utterback and his kicker). He headed for Nam Yu, about 35 minutes away, maintaining the pressure on the stick. A Continental Baron flew alongside and reported that the Porter was full of holes and that the leading edge of the vertical stabilizer was gone. Utterback waited for the cable to the horizontal stabilizer to part as the minutes passed slowly. He made it to Nam Yu, where he counted 25 7.64mm holes and 14 12.7mm holes. Tony Po apologized for failing to provide the information about the situation with Team 28; then they had a few drinks. While they were drinking, Utterback received word that 96X had crashed on the testhop at Sam Thong. He decided that the time had come to leave the little bird program and applied for the next opening in Caribou.

Williams: Williams went with Gudahl on the test hop. The engine surged badly and was shut down. They glided back to Sam Thong for a landing. Coming in a couple of feet off the runway, Gudahl had too much speed to set down. He tried to do a 180 but stalled. Williams went through the floorboard with his seat and injured his back. He had to return to the US for medical treatment. Gudahl was not injured. (Gudahl was killed in August 1972 in a C-123 crash.)

April 2, 1969
Casterlin to parents: War has picked up and we are in the middle of a small offensive. "The smoke this year is the worst ever" and flying is "extremely hazardous."

[Vang Pao counterattacks and captures Xieng Khouang. (JHM dates this to late April.) The enemy had withdrawn
under intense bombing, leaving behind armored personnel carriers, jeeps, trucks, 37mm guns, and supplies.]

[Operation Xiengkhouang Ville (April-May): After extensive bombing and artillery attack, CMs 21, 22, 23 and a Parachute Battalion from Savannakhet move from Phou Khe to Xiengkhouang Ville. They withdrew after one week.]

April 20, 1969

Washington Sunday Star reports the U.S. slowly losing the "quiet war in Laos." Laotian forces have suffered a series of small but significant reverses. Some 40,000 NVA troops are permanently based in Laos. Current NVA drive aimed at Muong Soul on western edge of PDJ. Muong Soul defended by former Neutralist troops, now merged with PAR. Most dramatic defeat during the current dry season offensive came at Nha Khang, near western border of Sam Neua province. It was held by several battalions of Hmong and was the last significant government outpost in the province. A symbolic defeat. Government hopes to stop communist offensive before it reached Sam Thong. While the enemy grows stronger, the government forces grow weaker. Hmong troops now commonly include 14 and 15 year olds. Until recently, the government always recaptured during the rainy season what it lost in the dry season. But the government has never quite recovered from the loss of Nam Bac, north of Luang Prabang. According to one observer: "The battle of Nam Bac was not significant by itself, but it was the straw that broke the camel's back." The government did not try to recover its losses during the last dry season, so they entered the current wet season in a worse position that ever before. The enemy has also consolidated its position in the central and southern provinces.

May 4, 1969

Casterlin to parents: Working up to front lines. This has been the hottest season that I can remember.

May 13, 1969

William J. Gibbs in UH-34 H-68 killed by sniper round through window near Ban Bong Hene (LS-54). Copilot Charters saved aircraft and passengers. According to LaShomb, it was this incident that finally persuaded company to put copilots on all flights. [Knight: Not exactly - other factors.]

Telephone interview with Robert L. Charters, April 7, 1991:

Charters (senior captain) and Bill Gibbs were flying an infiltration mission north of LS-54 (LS-54 is near Seno) on 13 May 1969. A second aircraft, flown by Larry Fraser, held at 8,000 feet as they went in to drop off the troops. This was the second mission of the day, and Gibbs was in the
Telephone interview with Robert L. Charters, April 7, 1991:

Charters (senior captain) and Bill Gibbs were flying an infiltration mission north of LS-54 [LS-54 is near Seno] on 13 May 1969. A second aircraft, flown by Larry Fraser, held at 8,000 feet as they went in to drop off the troops. This was the second mission of the day, and Gibbs was in the right seat. After they made the drop and were on the way out, the aircraft began to take ground fire. Charters was looking out to see if mortars were involved when the helicopter jumped up. He grabbed the controls. Looking over, he saw Gibbs slumped over. There was no visible sign of injury, and he thought it might have been a heart attack. It took 30 minutes to get back to LS-54. When they pulled Gibbs out, his helmet came off and blood gushed out from a head wound. He was rushed to the hospital in a C-123 but died four hours later. A doctor later told Charters that Gibbs was as good as dead as soon as he was hit. Charters carries a vivid memory of Gibbs repeatedly singing the song "Skip Rope" at LS-54 the night before the flight.

Telephone interview with Maj. William Gibbs, April 7, 1991:

Gibbs was a retired army pilot who had served two tours in Vietnam. He retired and was involved in instructing pilots but became bored. Within a year of retirement, he joined Air America. He loved to fly and loved the job. (He... Gibbs loved to fly and loved the job. He was less inclined with living at Udorn). He was less inclined with living at Udorn. He... He... He... He... He... He... He...
right seat. After they made the drop and were on the way out, the aircraft began to take ground fire. Charters was looking out to see if mortars were involved when the helicopter jumped up. He grabbed the controls. Looking over, he saw Gibbs slumped over. There was no visible sign of injury, and he thought it might have been a heart attack. It took 30 minutes to get back to LS-54. When they pulled Gibbs out, his helmet came off and blood gushed out from a head wound. He was rushed to the hospital in a C-123 but died four hours later. A doctor later told Charters that Gibbs was as good as dead as soon as he was hit. Charters carries a vivid memory of Gibbs repeatedly singing the song "Skip Rope" at LS-54 the night before the flight.

May 15, 1969

Washington Star reports that 32,000 Hmong are walking across the rugged hills of northern Laos in an effort to escape the biggest Communist offensive of the war. Dr. Charles Weldon, in charge of public health for USAID, terms the situation "pretty grim." Enemy launched current offensive in November 1968; usually, the enemy waited until after the December harvest to begin dry season offensive.

May 19, 1969

Capt. D. L. Frazer, R/W Udorn, requests transfer: He knew that an undeclared war existed in Lao but "I was unaware that my role in this war would be as extensive as it has turned out to be." He heard that the situation in 1966 was not too bad but now flying involves "taking combat troops into known enemy strongholds for the purpose of military assault." Since late February, subjected to fire while en route 7 times; shot at once while on pad; mortared on ground once; taken fire while approaching or leaving pad; subjected to antiaircraft fire three times. Fraser former USMC R/W Vietnam.

May 21, 1969

French Smith, working out of 20A, evacuates 32 dead during the day.

May 28, 1969

Duane Keele to WML, 16 Apr 85:
"Just before the fall of Moung Soui, I was called to work in that area for the day. I had spent the day resupplying outposts in the area. There was one outpost that had been coming under more and more pressure from the Pathet Lao all during the day. I had been staying clear of the area after the customer told me they were getting incoming small arms fire that afternoon. As usually happened, just as I was finishing up the resupply mission the customer came over to my helicopter and asked me to make a run to the outpost. They were running low on ammunition
and couldn't make it through the night with what they had left. My first reply was that I wasn't going in there no way. Then the customer went over to a Lao [Hmong] pilot standing by the side of his T-28 on the parking ramp. I later learned his name was Lalou [Ly Lue]. The pilot then came over to my helicopter and climbed up the side to talk to me. He said that if I would make the flight, he would personally cover me while I was on the pad. At the time, his name meant nothing to me, and his personal guarantee meant even less. However, I agreed to do it felling I could always turn around if I didn't like anything along the way.

The pad was on a little hill just to the east of Moung Soui and west of some taller mountains where the small arms fire was probably coming from. I flew out to the outpost at an altitude which kept the outpost between me and the mountains. Just as I got to the little hill with the outpost on it, I popped up to take a look around and land if I liked what I saw. What I saw was the Lalou had positioned himself between the landing zone and the suspected enemy location and was circling at 500 feet firing a burst from his T-28 guns as it faced the mountain. I quickly landed and kicked out the supplies. I don't think kone round was fired at me. [Keele had no copilot and a Filipino flight mechanic]

Up until that time, I had seen troops deserting their positions at the first sign of an enemy attack or running over their commanding officers to get to a helicopter that was returning to a safe area. I had formed a very low opinion of our Laotian allies until this show of courage. I realized after this event that I could pick up and leave at any time; but these T-28 pilots usually got out of this war one way, by getting killed or busted up beyond repair. His war was probably a lost cause, yet day after day he went on his missions without the hope of a rotation date. A few months later I hear that Lalou was shot down and killed."

May 29, 1969

UH-34 H15 first model to reach 10,000 hours.

June 22, 1969

Helio WXPBT hit by ground fire while in vicinity of Tha Thom (LS11). Round hit pilot Virgil I. Hoch in foot. He managed to fly to VTE with help from passenger.

June 27, 1969

Bowers: Series of defeats in 1969 climaxed with evacuation and loss of Muong Soui, 47 miles ESE of Luang Prabang. Helicopter task force assembled at Long Tieng on June 27 for evacuation: 10 CH-3 from USAF 20th and 21st Helicopter Squadrons ("Pony Express" - established in Thailand 1966-67), 3 HH-53s from USAF rescue unit, and 11 AAM UH-34s. Withdrawal of 350-man Thai unit completed
during afternoon, followed by evacuation of Lao troops and families. One CH-3 shot down; crew and passengers picked by AAM. Evacuation continued next day in difficult weather.

Ballard, pp. 124-25: AC-130s diverted to assist Muong Soui on June 25-28. NVA/PL begin bombardment of site with mortars and rockets from surrounding hills on the night of June 25. "The friendly forces ground controller, "City Hall," called for the gunship to direct fire on enemy positions." AC-130 orbited area for 2:30 and helped suppress enemy assaults; 16 secondary explosions. AC-130s called back on the next two nights. Several times, they were asked to attack tanks, but bad weather prevented acquisition of targets. On the fourth night poor weather stopped all gunships attacks and the position was overrun.

June 28, 1969
NVA capture Muong Soui and decide to hold their gains during the rainy season. This turned out to be a major error. Operation Stranglehold: tactical air used to cut major NVA supply routes east of PDJ. NVA run short of supplies during July.

New York Times, June 29: Muong Soui, major neutralist base in northern Laos, evacuated following series of NVA assaults that began with a surprise attack on June 24. The NVA controlled the hills overlooking the town and have shelled the Thai artillery positions. The defending forces have suffered more than 200 casualties, including the Thai artillery commander. The NVA now control the western section of Xieng Khouang province. This follows their capture of Na Khang in March, the last major government outpost in Samneua province. In May, Vang Pao's forces had launched a successful surprise attack against Xieng Khouang, southeast of the PDJ, which diverted enemy troops from Muong Soui. With the coming of the monsoon rains in early June, "virtually all observers assumed the Muong Soui, and the Government's tenuous position in northeast Laos, was safe for another year. The attack this week proved them wrong."

[JHM: In April, Vang Pao's intelligence teams reported enemy build-up near Muong Soui, "the high plateau Lao town that sat just at the edge of the PDJ on the road to Luang Prabang." Muong Soui defended by 4,000 Neutralist troops "who reputation for cowardice was a joke among Hmong soldiers." "The Americans believed that if Muong Soui fell it would be a serious defeat for Souvanna Phouma's Royal Lao government. To stiffen the Muong Soui defenses, Thailand, with urging from the U.S., sent a 300-man Thai artillery unit."
NVA, supported by tanks, attacked Moung Soui on June 24. Neutralist troops panicked. When fighting died down, Neutralists and Thais extracted by helicopters. "The loss of Moung Soui was significant. The Lao Government needed this strategic village and its airfield. On July 1, 1969, about 1,000 Lao troops with U.S. air support were committed to route the NVA from Moung Soui. At the critical time, the Lao troops failed to move and bad weather kept most U.S. air support grounded in Thailand."

At this point, Vang Pao announced that he, would retake Moung Soui, using Hmong-piloted T-28s. Ly Lue killed on July 12 during attack on enemy positions.]

[Operation Off Balance, July: Neutralist forces, SGU units, and a parachute battalion from Savannakhet attempt to recapture Moung Soui but fail.]

June 28, 1969


Drury left NKP on the two-ship mission to Steel Tiger area. Lead piloted by Ops Officer, LTC Neal (who had just returned from leave) and Major Bagwell (who was giving Neal a check ride). Just prior to departure, intelligence briefer said mission had been changed: base at Moung Soui was about to be overrun, so they would be assigned to Barrel Roll area to cover helicopter evacuation. (Hobos flew mainly to Steel Tiger; another squadron covered northern area.) This was Drury's 14th solo combat mission and first to Barrel Roll. "Several helicopters, mostly Air America machines, were ferrying refugees in shuttle fashion, passing each other going and coming. They looked like small green insects buzzing about the hills. We gave them a call and took up a circling pattern above, keeping track of individual helicopters and keeping an eye out for advancing troops and gunfire." They circled for over two hours with nothing happening. Fighters were called in from time to time to destroy abandoned equipment on the base. As Drury approached low fuel state, lead requested that they strike and that another flight of A-1s take over cover job. A FAC in an O-1 described target as crates of supplies along the runway at Moung Soui. Lead rolled in and dropped his napalm. Drury followed, but this time "a steady stream of yellow-orange flashed by the right vingtip." Drury and lead attacked the guns, which were firing from a nearby small hill. Lead was hit. Bagwell ejected, but Neal's extraction system did not function. Neal finally managed to climb out just before the aircraft hit the ground. Drury spotted
troops running down a small road near where Neal landed. Although out of ammunition, he buzzed the troops and they scattered. A rescue helicopter arrived shortly thereafter.

William Bagwell to WML, May 25, 1992:
The two A-1s arrived over Muong Soi just after it had been overrun. The base recently had been resupplied with large store of fuel and ammunition.

"I was flying right seat with Lt. Col. Bill Neal, giving him of all things, a check ride. There was a stream of Air America helicopters extracting friendlies out of the site and there was anti-aircraft fire all over the place. We escorted the helicopters until fuel ran low and then we were asked to destroy the stores of fuel near the runway. I suggested that we drop our napalm unarmed on the stores and then ignite it with 20mm tracer. This worked well but from the low altitude we were at, we were blown up into the low clouds. When we descended we were told by a FAC that we were ‘getting hosed’ from a gun on the south side of the field. Bill Neal promptly rolled in on the gun.

We could see the muzzle flash for a few seconds and then our right wing caught fire. We broke away and tried to get as far away as possible. Finally, with the wing skin burning away, the flap separating and the aircraft rolling to the right, I extracted (ejected).

The canopy on my side failed to separate but the system pulled me through it and my parachute deployed. Bill Neal’s extraction seat failed entirely and he finally escaped by crawling out over the wing. We had heard our wingman call Air America for helicopters as soon as we broke away.

Sure enough, a few minutes later an Air America helicopter arrived at the top of the hill where I had landed. As I finally reached the helicopter a guy in back dragged me in and we left. Since the extraction system had fired me through the canopy, I had taken a shot to the head and was throwing up. At this point the Air America pilot came down from the cockpit, pulled my head up by my collar and said, ‘Just remember, I drink Scotch.’

Since Air America helicopters were not equipped with the fancy rescue equipment that USAF Jolly Greens had, the one that rescued Bill Neal had only a rope to offer him. He took it gladly.

We were both flown to Long Tieng, loaded into a Jeep and covered with a tarpaulin for a ride to the Air America ‘facility.’ Since I was still pretty groggy and there was no medical care available, they gave us some aspirin and some booze. A bit later we were turned to NKP by the Jolly Greens.

Two days later, remembering my rescuer’s drinking preference. I took a case of booze to their Operations at Udorn. I explained who I was, what happened, and that I had a gift for the helicopter crew. They refused to give me
July 17, 1969

"Report of Aircraft Accident, UH-34D, H-50," CIA Corporate Files, Box 60, UTD

Booth and F/M Centano were scheduled to work for the 713 customer at LS-20A. They were directed to a pad, carrying two passengers and 452 pounds of cargo. At 1230, the aircraft aborted the approach, crashed, and burned. One passenger survived. Probable cause: "The failure of the pilot to maintain sufficient airspeed for the degree of bank and the existing downdraft and downwind conditions resulting in the loss of translational lift at too low an altitude to effect recovery." A customer observed Booth make two approaches to the 5,800-foot mountaintop site. Both were aborted due to winds. The third attempt also was aborted, but as the aircraft made a steep right turn it crashed 100 feet from the pad, slid and tumbled down the mountainside. Booth had a history of landing problems: "His most troublesome area."
their names but assured me that they would get the gift. I've always wondered . . . !"

**July 1969**

Amb. Godley arrives, replacing Sullivan. Godley brings in Larry Devlin to head CIA operations ("Congo Club").

[Air Attache Col. Robert L. F. Tyrrell had problems with Godley. "I just didn't hit it off with Ambassador Godley." Godley was "quite close" to Devlin. There was continued tension between the USAF and CIA over the control of the air war at this time. The CIA brought in their own air experts. Tyrrell does not believe that they were as qualified as his USAF personnel. The CIA had just about given up on the FAR and FAN forces and were concentrating on Vang Pao's forces.

Air America has 143 pilots at VTE and 77 at Udorn (mostly R/W).

**July 17, 1969**

Gerald A. Booth and Montano L. Centeno killed in UH-34 H-50 at Khang Kho. Booth aborted approach to landing site. Aircraft lost altitude and struck edge of steep incline before falling down mountain. One psgr killed and one injured.

**July 21, 1969**

Casterlin: "Laos is grim. It really looks like we are going to lose a big portion of it." The NVA has moved in and mean to stay.

**August 1969**

Operation About Face: Ambitious operation to recapture entire PDJ for first time since 1960. Pincer assaults to cut off eastern access to PDJ at Ban Ban. Two Hmong regiments push onto PDJ from the south, capturing tons of equipment, including 25 Soviet PT-76 tanks. Xiang Kuong occupied on September 12; Muong Soil taken September 28.

Vang Pao's forces capture 1,761 tons of food, 2,563 tons of ammunition, and 640 heavy weapons. However, as a later CIA report notes, Communist operations were disrupted for only a few months. [CIA, SNI 14.3-1-70, "North Vietnamese Intentions: Indochina," June 3, 1970, DDRS 1980/32A]

[Vang Pao, 11 Oct 91: VP had intelligence that the North Vietnamese were preparing to launch a major offensive against Long Tieng. About Face was a preemptive attack, designed to destroy the supplies that the enemy had built up for the planned offensive.]
[Operation About Face, August 6 to October 1969: This was a three-phase operation to recapture the PDJ. In early August, two task forces approach Route 7 from San Tiau (LS-2) and Bouam Long (LS-32); government units moved onto the souther PDJ and move north; in late September, government forces moves into Muong Soi. A commando company parachuted into the San Tiau area to landing zones, followed by elements of GM 21, brought in by helicopter. These forces capture Phou Nok Kok, overlooking Route 7. GM 22 walks from Padoung to southern PDJ, then across PDJ. GM 23 moved into the Xiengkhouang Ville area.] Meanwhile, Junction City launched from Savannakhet: four battalions of Lao guerrillas capture regimental Pathet Lao headquarters at Muong Phine in October (retaken by enemy later in month).

[Interview with Senior CAS in March 1970, which appears to be Devlin: 
"Vang Pao would not have stayed as long as he did where he did without airpower. Especially at Phou Nok Kok. It was a damn good air/gound interdiction. It was the only way to do it - there was some artillery but that wasn't important; the T-28s were primary." USAF system not flexible enough for this kind of war; too many technical problems (fragging, scheduling, etc.). "One main problem is that you can't schedule the enemy." There is a need for reliable aircraft more than fast aircraft.

The success of About Face was due to tacair support. Aircraft were used like artillery, flying 150 sorties a day. "Vang Pao looks upon air as a magic wand. All he has to say is 'Kill all the enemy' and it's done. This worked well on offense but not on defensive.

Air couldn't get at Phou Nok Kok due to weather. VP's troops could not hold out without air support. PDJ was lost at Phou Nok Kok. It had little strategic value itself, but "it has psychological importance for the Meoos and Laos." The King and Souvanna told VP to hold the PDJ. "It's not a real defeat. But the Meo's character fluctuates violently - has large up and downs. Morale crumbled with the loss of the PDJ." LS-22 more convenient as a supply center than important.

"We don't run VP. We advise him. We had a large defense plan, with four successive lines of retreat. It called for a fighting withdrawal, to hit them with air and then pull out. We mistakenly thought we could teach them defensive tactics overnight. But he didn't prepare his positions right. The idea of a phased withdrawal was alien to them. VP was fully briefed on the plan. But it wasn't followed." VP did not lose much manpower but he could have done much more damage to the enemy with better use of airpower.}
We had good SGU troops. FAN troops walked into an ambush four days before LS-22 fell and pulled out. On the northern flank, they panicked when they saw tanks. They ran through the SGU position, then the SGU broke. This happened on a day when Vang Pao was not with the troops (he was a Long Tien to greet the king). "Without VP around and because of fear that air power would not show up, the troops panicked and left." Fortunately, there were few losses.

"The most precious commodity of the Meo now is manpower."

We had 6,000 troops in About Face. They were on line constantly from August 1969 to February 1970. When VP in not in the field, all action stops. VP has no staff. He does not trust the Lee [Li] family, his primary Meo rivals. USAF does not understand the problems of this kind of war. "Based on my experience in the Congo" I am convinced that slow, reliable twin-engine aircraft are needed to find targets. The yearly rotation of FACs is a problem as it takes a year to learn the area. "We're fighting a political war."

USAF and Army do not seem to understand the politics involved in decisions. There is a need for A-1s. "If the Air Force is told to reduce its sorties, it will have a direct effect on our effort. To take away the air now, we'll never get the guerrillas back in the hills, We'll be back in a guerrilla posture. Right now, we need a Lao victory and that can only come through air. Granted we get spoiled on it, but we need it."

"Vang Pao runs the war. The Ambassador makes political decisions. We advise him in Tacair, targets, etc., but it's still Vang Pao who runs the war. I told Vang Pao that it's his job to tell the Air Force when and where to put the air, but not how."

FAC concept presently is undergoing a change. FACs used to operate in a large area. Now the FAC is becoming part of a five-man team: FAC, CAS, Lao backseater, Meo command, FAG.

7th Air Force is too concerned about BDA and tend to concentrate on trucks (easy to quantify). "But bodies don't explode. They don't give secondaries."

Bowers: On August 2, a joint State/Defense/CIA paper on Laos for Nixon was pessimistic about future prospects. One hopeful aspect of the situation was the use of fixed wing and helicopter airlift for surprise attacks in rear. NVA/PL have shown difficulty in reacting to such tactics.

The appraisal seemed justified by the success of About Face, which began in late summer and recaptured Muong Soi and the PDJ.

August 14, 1969

Norman A. Grammer and Glen R. Woods killed in Bell 204B N8511F on approach to 20A. [Vang Pao was supposed to fly on this aircraft; pilots suspected sabotage]
Meanwhile, Junction City lunched from Savannakhet: four battalions of Lao guerrillas capture regimental Pathet Lao headquarters at Muong Phine in October (retaken by enemy later in month).

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October 8, 1969
French Smith, working out of 20A, evacuates 20 dead during day.

October 26–27, 1969
French Smith, working out of 20A, evacuates 20 dead during these two days, including 2 American.

December 7, 1969
Records indicate that Earl Trager died in line of duty. French Smith log note: "AAM crewman killed."

This is totally untrue - aircraft was observed by witnesses to break-up in flight, one main rotor blade was found 2 miles from fuselage. Severe mast pinching, indicating negative "G" pushover maneuver. 20A had been closed by weather for several days. On day of accident, persons on ground at 20A radioed "some holes opening in near south overcast". It is believed that Norm entered into a negative "G" situation trying to "push over" and down thru one of these holes. (Bell underslung rotor head responsible for several of this type accidents in SVN - major lawsuit resulted.) Some pressure in being first aircraft into 20A after longest closure ever.
Knight to WML, Jan. 5, 1962: Aircraft was observed by witnesses to break up in flight. One main rotor blade was found 2 miles from fuselage. Severe mast pinching, indicating negative "G" pushover maneuver. 20A had been closed by weather for several days. On day of accident, persons on ground at 20A radioed "some holes opening in ear solid overcast." It is believed that Norm entered into a negative "G" situation trying to "push over" and down thru one of these holes. (Bell underslung rotorhead responsible for several of this type accident in SVN - major lawsuit resulted.) Some prestige in being first aircraft into 20A after longest closure ever.

August 19, 1969

Ralph S. Davis in Porter PC-6 N196X hit by gunfire from Meo while carrying ten passengers (including two Americans) from Long Tieng to Sam Thong. Meo rifleman identified by Vang Pao and executed.

Dan Williams: "Cotton" Davis had been having fuel control problems and Williams had fixed them. Davis then taxied over the the Customer Air Ops area and picked up ten passenger, including two US Army personnel. Williams watched as the airplane took off and headed over the ridgeline toward Sam Thong. As it watched, it fell to the ground. He grabbed a fire bottle, and he and Ed Bustamonte got into a helicopter and flew to the crash site. The airplane was still burning fiercely; everyone had been killed.

Conboy: Two Americans were US Army personnel, Nelson and Verbosky.

September 1, 1969

Casterlin to parents: We have made some gains on the PDJ lately.

September 8, 1969

RLG forces capture Muong Phine, east of Savannakhet and close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a Pathet Lao headquarters for past 7 years; RLG forces also move against Tchepone.

September 10, 1969

Casterlin to parents: It is hard to believe but the PDJ has been recaptured from the enemy. NVA/PL left behind 8 tanks, crew served weapons, and other equipment. I am flying in areas that I have never been before. I spotted a camouflaged POL dump which was blown up in a spectacular explosion. Vang Pao says that he intends to hold the area but the NVA are likely to come charging down Route 7.

October 5, 1969
Casterlin to parents: I flew 172 hours last month. The union is coming along nicely and a contract is to be submitted to the company shortly.

October 8, 1969
French Smith, working out of 20A, evacuates 20 dead during day.

October 17, 1969
Time article describes AAM pilots as "the Lord Jims of Laos."

October 26-27, 1969
French Smith, working out of 20A, evacuates 20 dead during these two days, including 2 American.

October 23-24, 1969 [New Times article on Laos (Senator Strom Thurmond's hearings)]

October 1969 - April 1970
Major Jesse E. Scott was with Project 404 in Laos in TDY from the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlbert. He was nominally assigned to Udorn but in fact was with the Air Attache's office at VTE. He first served in the Air Operations Center (AOC). From January to late February 1970, he was a T-28 operation at LS-108 (Muong Soi in the northwestern corner of the PDJ). The site was overrun in late February. They then opened a T-28 operation at LS-249, about 30 miles west of the PDJ. (He went home in April but he believes that the site operated into the summer.)

Scott deployed from the US in civilian clothes and was processed into Laos as part of the USAID contingent, listed as a "communications technician." He had firm instructions not to fly in combat. The TDY personnel were known at PALACE DOG. There was an AOC for each of the five military regions in Laos, with a site commander for each (on TDY). In all, there were about 100 to 120 USAF personnel involved.

CIA chief of unit was the counterpart of the AOC site commander.

Army attaches worn uniforms, flew in Army helicopters, and advised FAR units. Neo were handled by the CIA, using Air America. CIA not involved with FAR. There were CIA case officers with each Neo battalion. They would touch base with the unit every day for rice and ammo requirements.

Thai pilots flew missions from VTE, arriving from and returning to Udorn every day. There were some 20 Thai pilots on a six-month contract to fly T-28s. In April 1970, Scott recommended that the contract be cancelled as there were sufficient Lao pilots for the T-28s.

Scott found the Thais very professional. "Although they were mercenary, they had a deep concern for what they were doing." [Contrast with Randle comments]. The Thais had operated from at airstrip at Muong Soi during the 1968-69 fighting but declined to return in 1970 due primitive
conditions. It was a short dirt strip with no rescue capabilities, but it could generate a high number of sorties per day and therefore was extremely useful. When Scott went to Muong Soi in January there were four Americans and about 20 Lao involved. Lao and Meo pilots flew strike sorties. Vang Pao would send in food and water every day via Air America. Sorties averaged 50 to 60 per day.

Initially five Meo pilots were trained at Udorn. CIA selected them and conducted a language program. They flew T-28s from Long Tieng and were funded by the CIA (there also were Lao pilot at 20A. The group were known at Long Tieng Strike Force. [Glerum to WML, 2/15/93: The pilots were nominated by Vang Pao, then given language training, FAC (backseat) training, and finally flight training.]

November 1, 1969
Fred Frahm hired by Air America. (Frahm to WML, 1 August 1992, for excellent description of conditions at the time and initial experiences of a R/W pilot)

December 7, 1969
Records indicate that Earl Trager died in line of duty. French Smith log note: "AAM crewman killed."

[Robert J. Stenslof to WML, 6 July 1991: Stenslof checked out in C-123B on 25 October 1968. "Participated in many night DZ missions in extreme Northern Laos supplying inserted teams with everything from live pigs, other foods, gasoline, hard rice (ammo), and you name it. Delivery was made at tree top level depending on a very accurate electronic altimeter and positioned by radar from above when available. Stobe light signals were the norm for identification of the teams. Many runs were aborted because of the tracers all around the area. Navigation at night without radio aids and/or radar had to be most precise to complete these very necessary missions to deliver these critical supplies to those needy Friendly Folks in the field in very hot areas. Always returned with a few reminder holes in the tail section. Most happy the unfriendly types never learned to shoot Mallards and had not received the heat seekers yet. Personally believe these seekers accounted for some of never found C-123 crews later on in 1972 and 1973."
Dear Prof. Leary,

Thank you so much for your letter of 11 May and notes from the CAS interview. There are extensive quotes from this interview in the CHEDO report dealing with Air Operation from late 69-early 70. I have a couple of comments. The references to Phou Nok Kok deal with a small mountain located on the northeastern corner of the PDU. It was strategically located, commanding a high view from which traffic coming down Route 7 could be seen. The NVA hit it around January 1970, and—to everybody's surprise—the Khmer held tight. Literally hundreds of NVA were killed, mostly by effective air support. The following month, however, the peak fell, and the entire PDU defenses came apart in a few short days.

Reference to Vang Pao's lack of attention to a staged withdrawal in 1970 was all too painfully true. This was rectified in 1971, but by then the NVA had introduced relatively sophisticated systems like the 130mm gun and the T-34 tank. These smashed through the friendly defenses even faster then in 1970. Losses in 1971 was much, much higher than in 1970.

Reference to not "running" WP is also very true, and remained that way throughout the war. In 1971, for example, he staged his big seasonal offensive in spite of clearcut opposition from Washington. He also kept word on some of his 1970 offensives (actually, they were mini-offensives that year) very closely held. Another point to remember is that while Vang Pao had a pretty close hold over most of his guerrilla units, the clannishness of the Khmer meant that he dished out a certain amount of autonomy to certain battalions, regiments, etc.

Incidently, there must have been two C-123 crashes at 20A. I have pictures of a C-123 burning out of control on the airfield at Long Tieng in either January or February 1972. I am told that there was no loss of life, and that it was the result of pilot error. I tend to think it took place in January. Any references to this one in your records?

Did I mention that it was Joe Hazen and not Ed Eckholt that I tried unsuccessfully to contact. Did you say that Eckholt was an approachable person?

One last point: a couple of A4 pilots mentioned a Jim Rausch who was killed in a crash around 1971 near Xiang Lon. Does this appear in your in your 1st?

I'm leaving on 1 June, and will spend about a week in Thailand. I'll let you know how the trip went in July when I get back.

All the best,

[Signature]
Vientiane, 20 April 1970.

Mr. Theodore Shackley
Saigon

Dear Sir:-

Having just learned of your forthcoming trip to Washington, I take this opportunity to send you my best wishes and otherwise to tell you of my worries concerning the present and future situation of my country.

At the same time, I have inadvertently learned that Mr. Pat Landry will soon leave us probably to rejoin you in Saigon. This disturbs me greatly, not for his departure, but for the sensitive operations which the USA is pursuing in Laos, particularly under these conditions where everything seems to be getting worse.

As you well realize, to help me carry my heavy load successfully during these difficult, nay, desperate times, I need a man who, because of long residence in Indochina, understands the country thoroughly, as Mr. Pat Landry does.

Furthermore, I take advantage of your departure for Washington to ask you to express to Mr. Holms my hopes that Mr. Pat Landry will remain at my side during these critical times, at least until the situation in MR II returns to normal.

Hoping with all my heart that with your wide experience in Laos, you will give me your sincere help in this matter in order that my wishes may be granted by Washington.

With many thanks in advance, please accept, Sir, my best wishes to you and your dear family.

General Vang Pao