1970

UH-34 Flight Time Report, Madriver Project, Contract F04606-71-0002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Hours</th>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>3,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>2,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>3,237</td>
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<td>October</td>
<td>3,377</td>
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<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>3,098</td>
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<td>December</td>
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[NVA employ 312, and 316 Divisions for major offensive, beginning in December 1969. They quickly overrun the PDJ and push southwest, burning Sam Thong and threatening 20A. Reinforcements from throughout the country and from Thailand are sent to reinforce 20A. Following diversionary attack in June (Operation Leapfrog) on southern edge of PDJ, enemy pulls back from 20A.]

[George Doole spends $85,000 for film "Flying Men, Flying Machines," done by John Willhelm Productions.]

[Glerum to WML, January 4, 1993: "USAF resources were difficult to use effectively in the Laos environment and thus perhaps easy to mis-use. The only true close-in tactical capability disappeared with the A-1's and B-26's, leaving primarily the fast movers with their limited loiter capabilities and SOP-mandated high altitude ordnance release minimums. Nevertheless, as time wore on, Vang Pao and the other local field commanders became increasingly insistent on tacair support and frequently would be reluctant to move at all outside of their artillery fan unless that believed the target areas had been softened by air strikes. Also we regularly were presented with short notice opportunities to use large weather diversion packages, orginally targetted against North Vietnam. Not wanting to look the proverbial gift horse in the mouth, we applied them as best we could, but they also often tended to produce little in the way of secondaries or other observable BDA. Perhaps the epitome of this phenomenon were the B-52 Arclight strikes. Vang Pao fell in love with the Arclights, which certainly did produce impressive noise and perhaps did have at least a significant psychological impact on the NVA. However, the perceived MIG threat dictated that the bombing runs be made north to south and, in north Laos, the valleys tend to run east/west. In other words, much of the ordnance was expended against the.
ridgelines while the NVA hunkered down in defilade. Tangible BDA again probably was limited in most instances. I recall visiting one of the Arclight target areas within a few hours of a strike and having difficulty even seeing where the bombs had impacted."

[Major Edwin J. Rhein, Jr., ETR, 19 Jun 1973: Rhein had been AOC commander at Long Tieng in January 1970. There were 22 USAF personnel assigned to 20A: 10 Ravens, 9 NCOs assigned to flight line and who did most of maintenance required on T-28s, flight surgeon, radio operator, and intelligence officer. "If all USAF personnel had been withdrawn from Long Tieng in 1970 I do not believe the T-28s would have operated more than a week before the operation would have come to a halt due to all aircraft being out of commission with nobody to fix them." Rhein complains that AOC charged with full responsibility for military region but in some areas lacks authority. This is especially true with Ravens. Ravens work for chief Raven, who writes OERs. AOC in many cases does not even see OERs. OER for chief Raven written by commander of Det 1. Ravens pay little attention to AOC because they "are not flying combat and don't know what is going on." He recommends that that AOC be made chief Raven, or chief Raven be made AOC.

Major E. L. Claassen, ETR, 1 Dec 1970. Claassen was AOC commander at 20A from 9 June 1970 to 4 December 1970. "My tour of duty as AOC Commander at Long Tieng has been the most challenging and rewarding assignment in my Air Force career. I believe the experience and insight gained through this assignment is invaluable to a junior field grade officer. The opportunity to participate in joint operational planning with General Vang Pao, ARMA, CAS with incumbent range and complexities of problems has been most stimulating." One of the problems has been "the absence of a definite, single chain of command between site personnel and ATIA" which has "caused some confusion and misunderstanding." Ravens work for chief FAC at Vientiane. "If the AOC Commander is ultimately responsible for all air operations in his military region, then the chain of command should reflect this responsibility and authority." During his tour, the chief FAC at VTE "fired" the senior FAC at 20A "without prior notice or coordination. This incident served to bring into focus the problems and potential chaos associated with the existing parallel chains of command." Claassen also complains about the restriction on AOC commanders from flying combat missions. "The ability and credibility of an AOC commander to advise and relate with combat aircrews is greatly diluted by his conspicuous absence from combat missions." This is not only a problem with respect to the Ravens, but the RLAF T-28 commander is an H-34 pilot without tactical air-to-ground experience.
"My ability to advise him is significantly impaired without observing the pilots in combat."

AOC personnel moved back to 20A on fulltime basis on June 1. "Prior to the establishment of a composite squadron in early November, no RLAF officer was assigned to 20A as AOC Commander. T-28 aircraft shuttled daily between Vientiane and 20A to augment the two Meo pilots. The constant change over of pilots and maintenance personnel essentially negated advisory and management efforts. Pilots and ground crews are now assigned for 90 days TDY. Discipline and combat efficiency have shown considerable improvement since the establishment of a functional AOC, with an RLAF major assigned as Commander. The decrease of USAF tactical air in support of MR-II operations has placed an added burden on the young and immature RLAF. For the most part, the pilots have responded in a most professional manner to remedy the resulting close air support void. T-28 sorties for MR-II increased from 249 in June to 1124 in October. Their response to Raven-generated air requests has improved significantly. Ravens now control 50 to 80% of the daily T-28 strikes as compared to virtually none six months ago. This increase in strike control by the Ravens has resulted in greater mission efficiency and vastly improved ordnance effectiveness as indicated by confirmed bomb damage assessment. The Ravens are to be commended for their infinite patience and demonstrated competence in helping to achieve this success. The establishment of a viable AOC has been instrumental to this transformation."

AIRA Operations Staff "has been outstanding in coordinating special air request with 7/13 AF. Response has consistently been 48 hours or less, despite an occasional short notice request from the field. The image and credibility of the USAF have been sustained by their aggressive efforts."

Interview with LTC Vaughn H. Gallacher by Mildred Wiley, December 16, 1971, USAFHC: Gallacher was Director of Joint 7/13 Air Force Tactical Air Control Center at Udorn from November 1970 to November 1971. "Back during February and March 1970 when Vang Pao was about to be overrun around Long Tieng, the Royal Laoian Air Force was flying between 2500 and 3000 sorties a month and with only 30 to 34 T-28s, a fantastic job, and the same thing with their gunships. They had ten AC-47s and were flying about 150 sorties a month. These were all day sorties. Lao pilots received about six month's training and lacked instrument qualifications."

January 1970
Minor uniform change: Baseball style cap is added to garrison cap. Also, four and three stripe epauletttes.
January 1, 1970
Abadie appointed Base Manager, Udorn; Knight appointed assistant base manager in addition to his primary appointment at manager of flying, rotary wing aircraft, Udorn. Richard Ford appointed assistant to Abadie. Knight to remain primarily concerned with "the efficient and safe flying of the aircraft we operate" - Ford to provide routine assistance of Abadie while Knight go become involved in base management only on important matters.

January 4-15, 1970
USAF/AAM helicopter airlift in Muong Soi area following NVA/PL offensive. Enemy pressure in Houei Tong Kho area in southwestern Sam Neua province cut land routes to south. 8,115 refugees aircraced.

January 12, 1970
NVA capture Phou Nok Kok, northeast entry point for PDJ.

January 17, 1970
French Smith shot down.
Smith was flying Bell 205 XVPF out of LS-20A. Vang Pao's forces had just retook the PDJ and Air America was flying into Lima Lima, a strip in the center of the PDJ. Smith left 20A for Lima Lima in bad weather. Chuck Campbell, WHITE TOP, was in the left seat and P. S. Valasquez was F/M. He picked up supplies and headed for Echo Pad, about 7 miles north of Lima Lima. About 5 miles out and at 1200 feet, the ship was jarred heavily 3-4 times. Every caution light on the panel came on and the engine flamed out. Smith got off a quick Mayday, then made "a real beautiful autorotation." He set down on grass 6-7 feet high, up to the rotor blades. He left on the rotating beacon and IFF. Campbell jumped out the left door and Valasquez the right. Smith tried to get out but had forgotten to unplug his helmet. He finally unplugged, grabbed his briefcase (letters, ID, first aid) and AK-47 and joined Campbell and Velasquez, who were now 50-100 feet in front of the helicopter. They lay in the grass, watching PFF's blades slowly come to a halt, then there was silence. Smith spotted a pit about 150 yards from the helicopter and they all ran for it. There was still silence. Then, all at once, they were being fired at from front and both sides. Campbell returned fire with his M-16, while Smith and Valasquez opened up with their AK-47s. After about 20 minutes, the firing stopped. Five minutes later, Smith heard H-34 approaching, flying SW to NE (Mick Prulhiere). Campbell talked to Prulhiere on the radio. Smith watched as 6-8 rounds impacted on the helicopter's fuselage (little puffs of smoke). H-34 went past to the north. The enemy
now moved in closer and began throwing grenades. Smith had fired two clips and was down half of his last clip; Campbell had one clip left; Velasquez as down to his .45. Smith took out a handkerchief and prepared to surrender when it again became quiet. The H-34 came back and landed about 100 yards away (Prulhiere could not tell crew's precise location). The enemy was about 200 yards from the helicopter and 100 yards from Smith; they raised up out of the grass and started running and firing. Smith, Campbell, and Velasquez also started running. Although 47 years old (15 older than Campbell and nearly 20 older than Velasquez), Smith beat them both to the helicopter. He pitched in his AK-47 (he had left his briefcase) and was pulled in my the F/M and given a canteen. Velasquez also jumped in, but Campbell turned around, knelt down, and knocked off five of the rapidly approaching enemy. All the time, Prulhiere and the copilot were yelling for Campbell to get in. He finally jumped in, and they took off for Lima Lima, where they were greeted by Van Pao. Taken to 20A for debriefing, Smith went into rooms that he had never known existed and was debriefed by several people that he had never before seen (one in a suit).

January 17, 1970
Small team of sappers attack 20A.

Dan Williams: Williams was playing darts in the Custo room that evening when firing began. They put out the lights and watched the exchange. At one point, Will Green left "to get me one of those bastards." He returned about an hour later, turned the lights on in the bar, and pinned two ears to the dart board.

January 18, 1970
Casterlin to parents: PDJ "getting touchy again" and we are losing ground.

[Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos": Two regiments of 316 Division ordered to recapture PDJ and Long Tieng. During the first week of February, attack mounted from Phou Nok Kok. "Government troops at Xiang Khouangville held back two tank assaults, but, after a Vietnamese rocket ignited the garrison's ammunition dump, the based defenders crumbled during a third attack." By April, PAVN forces controlled the PDJ; attack on Long Tieng frustrated by arrival of reinforcements. PAVN pull back from PDJ with beginning of rainy season. "The government forces, however, were so weakened that they were unable to significantly expand their area of influence."}
February 4-10, 1970

Major fixed-wing helicopter evacuation from Lat Sen aircraft to VTE. 13,840 refugees evacuated from PDJ to Vientiene area prior to B-52 strikes.

February 8, 1970

Washington Star, datelined Lat Sen, report that PDJ nearly empty of people as massive airlift of 18,000 people continues. 9,000 refugees waiting for transportation at Lat Sen. US officials said evacuation order give 10 days ago. Major NVA attack expected. [Evacuation prior to B-52 strike.]

February 17, 1970

War in the Shadows: "On February 17, 1970, U.S. B-52s were used for the first time against Pathet Lao forces in the around the Plain of Jars . . ." Souvanna Phouma sought U.S. assistance to blunt Communists offensive to recapture PDJ. Operation code name GOOD LOOK. Until 1969, air operations in Laos mainly centered against Trail, with limited number of missions in north in support of Vang Pao. "But with the inception of Operation Good Look the air war in northeastern Laos changed dramatically." Missions flown from February 17, 1970, to April 17, 1973: 2,518 B-52 sorties dropped 58,374 tons of bombs. Initially, crews used onboard radar bombing system; later, Skyspot radar system was installed at Udorn to direct Good Look missions.

Department of Defense, "Report on Selected Air and Ground Operations in Cambodia and Laos," September 10, 1973 [described by the Washington Post as "a Pentagon White Paper" that has been sent to Congress and reveals the White House-inspired system of dual reporting to keep B-52 bombing of Cambodia secret - also dimensions of bombing in Laos]: B-52s used for first time in northern Laos on February 17 to bomb targets on PDJ [aircraft previously used against Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos]. Purpose of GOOD LOOK "was to counter the buildup of approximately 15,000 North Vietnamese personnel and their supplies north and east of the PDJ area and poised for an imminent effort to recapture this area." First mission "in response to a specific request" from Souvanna. As PDJ area initially fell outside capabilities of ground radar systems [ground directed radar bombing site later located at Ubbon, Thailand], radar scope photography was needed of PDJ area as part of normal planning for any contingency. B-52 radar recon, GOOD LOOK ALPHA (authorized by RLG) was flown over area in August 1969. After enemy offensive in late January 1970, second radar recon, GOOD LOOK BRAVO, was flown. "This mission was authorized in the hope that Hanoi would perceive the warning that B-52 operations were being considered in the PDJ, and would modify its operations in northern Laos." Each PDJ
area target request submitted through special security channels. "The need for extra security had been established by the U.S. Ambassador to Laos based on the expressed concern of the Lao Government."

Sorties and total tonnage dropped in PDJ area from February 17, 1970 to April 17, 1973:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sorties</th>
<th>Tonnage</th>
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<td>147</td>
<td>4,217</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>270</td>
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<td>1973</td>
<td>1,050</td>
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February 18, 1970

Jon C. Merkel killed in UH-34 H-67 near Tha Lin Noi when single round comes through cockpit. John Ford landed aircraft.

McEntee: This involved a spur-of-the-moment mission in the late afternoon that called for four double-crewed H-34s to land troops in a dangerous area on the east side of the PDJ. The areas was suspected of supporting an NVA battalion and had been hit by B-52s. The troops were to assess the damage the see if any enemy remained. No one liked missions that were hastily arranged; they usually meant trouble. Cover was to be provided by Lao-piloted T-28s, meaning that there would be a communications problem.

Three helicopters loaded ten Lao troops each at 20A. the fourth helicopter would ask as SAR. They reached the area in about 20 minutes. The T-28s marked the LZ with phosphorous rockets. McEntee was first in. He went into autorotation to descend as quickly as possible, landing on a narrow ridge. The F/M shoved the troops out the door and they lifted off. #2 landed and took off. #3 Ford/Merkel dropped off the troops and were hit by a single round at 400 feet off the ground. Merkel died instantly, the bullet entering below his right jaw and going into his brain. McEntee believes that the shot came from one of the Lao troops that had just been dropped off, probably firing on the departing helicopter on a lark. [Knight: "I don't believe this!"

Ford Logbook: "During takeoff received one round of small arms fire. The round came through the right hand cockpit window, hit the training captain (Merkel), and exited above my head through the left hand skylight. Captain Merkel died instantly. I took over control of the a/c and landed at a nearby friendly position."

Interview with John D. Ford, Green Cove Springs, FL, April 26, 1991:
Ford was doing the route check ride for Merkel's upgrade to captain. This was his first trip with Merkel. They were doing routine missions when the call came in for a special mission to insert a Hmong team for BDA after the first B-52 strike in Laos. Ford remembers that during the briefing he looked at Merkel and was trying to decide whether to displace him in the right seat for the mission, as was his usual practice. Because Merkel had done such a fine job during the day, Ford decided to allow him to remain in the right seat. They were the last helicopter to land on a small pad. It was a tricky approach, and Ford got on the controls near the end. It really was not necessary, as Merkel had handled it well. They were starting to climb out, and Ford was getting ready to apologize to Merkel for getting on the controls, when one round came through the right window and through Merkel's neck, killing him instantly. Merkel slumped down in his seat as the helicopter went out of control. Ford was trying to recover the aircraft and get on the radio to ask that the two A-1s that provided cover for the mission not be released. He had a hard time breaking through the happy chatter on the frequency. In the meantime, flight mechanic Jose I. Gaculais thought that the helicopter was going to crash. Sitting behind and below Merkel, he was splashed with blood. This helicopter was not wired so that the flight mechanic could hear radio transmissions, so Gaculais had no way of knowing that Ford was OK. Believing that both pilots had been hit, he climbed up outside the helicopter in an effort to get in the left window. Just as Ford recovered the airplane, he looked out the window to see Gaculais looking in. Reassured, Gaculais crawled back inside.

As the round had come from the direction of the team, Ford had the customer radio the team to see if someone had inadvertently discharged a weapon. The team said that the round had come from off the pad. Ford is ready to believe this. At worst, it was an accident and not deliberate.

February 21, 1970

February 23, 1970
Casterlin to parents: PDJ has been lost as of February 20. There has been mostly voluntary withdrawal under strong enemy pressure.

February 24, 1970
NVA capture Muong Soi, 15 miles west of the PDJ.

February 24-27, 1970
Rich logbook: Evacuation of 20A due imminent attack. Reason no RON. Muong Soi lost. Encountered 37mm AA over Black Lion. No hits (air bursts) but very accurate.
February 25, 1970

“Report of Aircraft Accident, UH-34D, H-46,” CIA Corporate Files, Box 60, UTD

The accident took place 10 southeast of Luang Prabang. Capt. Harvey B. Potter, senior F/O John W. Beardsley, F/M Gaulais. Flight departed LPB for “Red Victor” pad with five passengers and 800+ pounds of cargo. On approach to the pad, the aircraft crashed and burned. Fatal injuries for Potter, Beardsley, and four passenger; Gaulais suffered serious burns, and one passenger minor burns. Probable cause: “Poor judgment on the past of instructor pilot [who] flagrantly disregarded Company directives.” The aircraft was loaded beyond its performance parameters. The cargo was two 55-gallon drums of water. Potter and Beardsley were able to exit the exit and walk away. Potter died on March 1, and Beardsley on March 10 in a hospital in Japan. The elevation of the pad was 4,850 feet. “All evidence indicates that the aircraft was grossly overloaded.”
February 25, 1970

John W. Beardsley, Harvey B. Potter killed in UH-34 H-46 10 miles southeast of Luang Prabang. Training flight for Beardsley. He lost RPM on approach. IP Potter, in left seat, grabbed controls, but he was unable to regain RPM and aircraft hit a rocky slope below helipad. Four passengers perished in fire. One passenger and FM J. I. Gaculais injured. Potter died of burns in Japan on March 2 and Beardsley on March 10. Accident report faulted instructor for allowing aircraft to be overloaded.

February 26, 1970

Bangkok Post article by T.D. Allman about visit to Long Tieng. Allman and two other reporters had walked to Long Tieng from Sam Thong along a 25 kilometer American-build paved road. They managed to spent two hours at 20A before being discovered and returned to VTE on STOL airplanes. They noted paved, all weather runway, with landing lights. Half dozen Air America transports; STOL planes; dozen T-28s; O-1s; 3 Jolly Greens.

March 1, 1970

Seven new Thai helicopter pilots join company. Two Thai pilots formerly checked out: Boonrat Com-Intra [hired 10/24/66] and Boonchoo Na Nakornphanom [6/5/67].

End of Tour Report by USAF Colonel Edward Kenny (Pratt, Vietnam Voices, pp. 421-23):

Key defensive position of Phou Nok Kok lost in January. Enemy pressure increased thereafter. In early February, enemy pushed friendly forces along Route 7 from Ban Ban to Noug Pet. A major offensive strafed on February 11-12, when eight sites in MR II came under heavy attack. The vital Xieng Khouang Airfield (L-22) was attacked by two companies of NVA, but the main effort was against Phou Houay, the high point dominating the junction of route 7 and 71 at the northeastern end of the PDJ. This attack was launched in zero-zero weather, precluding use of friendly air. It was successful. On the night of February 12-13, an enemy convoy of eight tanks, eight armored cars, and sixty trucks were reported to be headed toward Khang Khay and L-22.

Friendly forces fighting to the east of the PDJ were ordered to withdraw on February 13. Six outposts fell on February 14; 23 position were abandoned on February 15; 20A attacked by small group (7) of NVA on the night of February 17. L-22, under attack since February 12, fell on the early morning of February 21. "With the loss of this position General Vang Pao decided to evacuate his troops from Xieng Khouangville. Thus the entire PDJ was now in enemy hands."

Enemy pressure on Houng Sol (L-108). This was an important base for RLA T-28s. The aircraft could also be launched from 20A but could not carry a full ordinance load.
Mounng Soi came under attack on February 24 and fell late in the afternoon. All gains by About Face now reverted to enemy control.

March 4, 1970

Washington Post article by Peter O'Loughlin, datelined Sam Thong: "Covered with dust, a three-day growth of beard on his chin, Edgar "Pop" Buell stood in the door of his house and watched an American helicopter bring in a wounded Meo soldier, only 14. 'They can't take it much more,' he said. 'Do you know there have been so many young Meos killed that girls are having difficulties finding husbands? the soldiers are getting younger and younger.'" Buell responsible for feeding and caring for some 350,000 people in surrounding area, about half Meo tribesmen. Number of Meo have dwindled by 100,000 during course of war. Buell said Meo now have two choices: remain in mountains after the North Vietnamese take over or flee. In the past, less that 10 percent have stayed behind; the remainder have left. "Buell thinks the current fighting in which the Meos are taking most of the casualties may be their last stand." Buell considers Vang Pao "the best man I've ever met." However, Meo are unlikely to stop PL/NVA, who are now within 8 miles of Sam Thong. He commented that this year's offense is much bigger than last year's. "This time they've got more units, bigger units."

March 10, 1970

Elder: "I was fortunate to be in the area when the crew of Firefly 23 (Captains Donald Combs and George Luck) bailed out about 25 miles SE of L-108 (Mounng Soi). I had Benny Shafer [Bernard A. Shaffer] as my crew chief, flying a Bell 205, PFH. I called Nikki Fillipi to fly cover for me and went direct to the site where two other fireflies were making stafing passes at a small stream lined with trees. I spotted a pilot laying in a rice paddy still in his chute about 50 yards from the treeline. The fireflies told me that Combs had been shot coming down in his chute and he was still getting shot at from the treeline. As I spiraled down over Combs we got a couple of rounds in the fuselage and then I came to a hover about 30 feet from him. Combs could not move due to being shot but as I tried to hover over to him, his parachute would billow up. I backed off and had the firefly tell him to release his chute. By this time the fireflies had neutralized enemy ground fire. Benny jumped out and helped Combs into the helicopter and I took off. I asked where Luck was and the firefly told he was hiding in a cave in the side of a hill [In fact, Luck investigated but did not use cave]. The aircraft did not have a hoist, so I told the firefly to have Luck go up the hill and I would pick him up there. I had difficulty seeing Luck as he was moving all the time. I picked a small clearing and landed.
Soon Luck came running through the trees, jumped on and we went to LS-20 where American doctors took care of Combs. He was shot in the groin."

Telephone interview with George Luck, February 15, 1992:

Luck was with the 602nd Squadron (Fireflies) at NKP. He had gone over to SE Asia in September 1969 as an A-26 pilot, but this unit was disbanded in November and he continued with A-1s. There were three squadrons of A-1s at NKP: 602nd (Fireflies), 1st (Hobos), and 22nd (Zorros).

On March 10, he was flying an A-1E (about 2/3 of all A-1s were two-seat models) with Don Combs. LTC Michaud, the squadron commander, was in a second airplane. They had been fragged to a Raven FAC. The Raven identified the target as an enemy tank under some trees. Luck attacked the tank, which was under a tree on the NW edge of the PDJ. He dived bombed with a 500-pound bomb and missed. He then made a low pass and skipped in napalm. Coming off the pass, the engine died (no manifold pressure - small arms hit?). As Luck tried to restart the engine, Combs called out MAYDAY and spoke to the Raven. Luck pointed the airplane to some wooded mountains toward the northwest, but the Raven told him to stay in the open so that he could keep track of them. Luck had fuel and oil pressure, but the engine would not restart. He jettisoned the remaining stores, then he bailed out, followed by Combs. He recalls hearing three distinct sounds of gunfire aimed at him on the way down: the low, deep sound of a heavy caliber machine gun, the crack of rifles, and the pop of pistols.

He went down around 1:30 p.m. USAF SAR units from NKP had not launched, and it would take them an hour to reach the area. [Two Jolly Greens came down from Udorn every day to stand alert at NKP. Two A-1s were designated as Sandys, and were on five-minute alert. In the late afternoon, one the Jolly Greens (and 2 escorting A-1s) would fly north, and the other Jolly and escorts would fly south. If a pilot went down, his chances were of recovery were slim if he remained on the ground overnight, so the Jolly Greens wanted to be closer to the possible SAR sites late in the day.] Luck and Combs came down in dried out rice paddies, about 100 yards apart. There was firing all around, so Luck headed toward a nearby small hill. He crossed a small stream, passed a grass houch (deserted), and came across what appeared to be a deserted enemy bivouac area. There were a number of caves carved out of the hillside. He briefly entered one and found a room containing six cots, each with a small bag of rice tied on the foot of the cot. He then went deeper into the bush. On his radio, he could hear Combs giving instructions to Michaud.

(The visibility was poor because it was the smoky season.) Michaud, who had a 20mm cannon in his centerline
Ok, now to the tale at hand.

I was FF 22 in a single-seat H model A-1 and Don Combs and George Luck were in a side-by-side E model. I believe it was during the afternoon of March 10th and we were working with a Raven FAC on a stopped/stalled tank out in the middle of the PDJ. Frankly, hitting a tank with a 500 lb. hard bomb is not an easy task, and we had used up most of our ammo from the wing stubs. It was the end of the dry season and the Laotians were burning off their rice fields making an overcast at about 8 to 10K feet. This was our working altitude and we had had to assigned different altitudes for each of us, and tried to observe our positions on the clock for separation.

Suddenly we heard the Mayday call from FF 23 that he'd taken "a hit" and was going down. This was always a distinct possibility because the PDJ was infested with NVA troops. However, one never knew with the A-1 because the big 3350 radial engines on the Skyraider often came apart on their own!

I descended below the haze and picked them up in a descending glide. Don and George didn't stay with it long and soon punched-out. Although one normally doesn't come up on Guard channel while in the chutes, it seems to me that Don did to say (yell?) that he was taking ground fire. About that time he landed at the edge of a rice patty. His location was unfortunately clearly marked by the white chute. George had landed in some cover, over head-high, at the base of a knoll and looked safe there. I was pretty busy with Don trying to get him to tell me where the fire was coming from, but I think George acknowledged that he was okay and I told him to keep his head down. Don had apparently taken a round just about the time he landed and then he really came up on the hand-radio with a voice that was about three octaves higher than before. As you know the hit was in the groin area. (He continued to call enemy fire hitting all around him throughout the whole action). It took me several minutes to get him to simmer down enough to give me some idea where the fire was coming from. There was a slight rise to the southwest of his position about a block or two away and from his hollering on the radio, I guessed that that was the source of the fire. I think I had one bomb left, a couple of racks of bomblets and my 2400 rounds of 20 mike mikes.

The FAC had relayed the Mayday call in and then I believe RTB'd because I don't remember him around after FF 23 went down. I made a number of passes on the ridge for 15 to 20 minutes, firing some 20mm on the way in, dropping the 500 lb. bomb first, and then some bomblets on subsequent passes.
Your report from Elder says that there was two A-1s in the area, but I believe that I was the only one. I know that there wouldn't have been twos he mentions because if there had been another flight of Skyraiders joined me, that would have made three of us.

I finally ran out of ordinance and was making fake runs (I learned that one at Mopine) and dropping canisters and anything I could do to make the bad guys keep their heads down and not move in on Don.

Then suddenly, Elder called in and was immediately on-scene at about 2,000 feet. I flew over Don and gave Elder a mark on him and without a moment's hesitation, the AA helio spiraled down and pulled up alongside Don. I don't remember the billowing parachute, but the story at the bar later was that the AA crew chief yelled to Don to get in the helio. Don said something like, "I can't move" Whereupon, the CC jumped out, picked Don up by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his pants and tossed him in the helio, with a comment of, "S. Dammit, I said to get your ass in here." AA lifted off to the northeast away from the fire and asked where George was. I described George's location and gave him a "mark" with a buzz job over the spot. Elder contacted George and asked if he could get to the top of the knoll because there was no good spot for them land because of brush. (Sidenote here, George is one of the most gentlemanly guys you'll ever meet; he's down in enemy territory with bad guys all around and instead of screaming something like, "what the hell did you say?" George replied to Elder, "Would you say again, please?" Elder repeated his request to get to the top of the knoll and George gave him a "Roger, that." I could see him working up through the brush to the top of the hill and as he made it, Elder swooped down and picked him up and was off heading for Udorn. I thanked Elder for a job well-done and that's the last I saw of Don and George on the tour. I would have like to have met Elder but my home base was NKP.

As I said, AA's (Elder's) participation was voluntary, fearless without hesitation, highly professional, and he acted like it was no more than a stop at the post office on his way home from the office.

Well Dr. Bill, give or take a few items due to my "truthful" telling of the story a few times and a 60+ memory, that's the way I remember it. As I've indicated, the AA guys were "the best" and I hope you can correct their image with those to whom it counts. For we who flew with them, they will always be Sierra Hotel. (Hmmmm, I haven't thought of that expression for a long time, but in this case it seems appropriate).
gun pod, made three long passes, firing effective 5-6 second bursts on each pass. An F-4D with a gun pod then appeared and made several passes, preventing the PL from reaching Combs. After Elder picked up Combs, he instructed Luck to head to the top of the hill, where there was a clear area. When he got there, Elder and Filippi came over, both with flight mechanics firing from the door. Elder hovered so Luck could step on the skid and pull himself into the helicopter. They were taken to Sam Thong, then by Caribou to Udorn.

Later, he had a plaque made up from the 1st Air Commando Squadron to Air America. Also, Elder provided him with "private" frequencies, which he later used to run missions for support of Air America.

March 12, 1970

Casterlin to parents: FEPA has won. Company has signed the contract.

March 12, 1970

Cambodian government cancels trade agreement which allows NVA/Vietcong to use Sihanoukville as source of supply. Premier Lon Nol issues ultimatum that Vietnamese troops must leave Cambodia in 72 hours. Six days later, while returning to Cambodia from Moscow, Norodom Sihanouk is ousted as chief of state in bloodless coup by Lt. Gen Lon Nol.

These events cause NVA to place renewed emphasis on security of Ho Chi Minh Trail, launching a series of offensives in southern Laos.

March 17, 1970

Enemy attacks Sam Thong.

March 18, 1970

Washington Evening Star report attack on Sam Thong. Situation confused. Warehouses and several houses are on fire. Military hospital has been evacuated. Edgar Buell among last to leave area. Meo population of 6,000 has fled into the mountains. Some of the 40,000 people at Long Tieng are starting to leave. [Long Tieng now second largest city in country.] 300 Thai troops landed at Long Tieng by fixed wing and helicopters under shellfire.

Hugh D. S. Greenway, Life magazine, April 3, 1970: "Sam Thong has fallen. The North Vietnamese are in the town. The American bungalows around the airstrips, until just a few days ago the headquarters for U.S. aid and refugee relief, are now only burned-out ruins." Long Tieng, headquarters for Vang Pao's clandestine army, may soon be next. Thousands of Meo tribemen trudging south with all their belongings on their backs; Air America planes dropping
bags of rice to fleeing refugees. Situation "desperate" for Vang Pao: "In the last six months he has lost more men than any comparable period in the last 10 years. His people have become discouraged, and only Vang Pao's leadership keeps them going. There are no longer enough young men left for the Meo girls to marry, and some of Vang Pao's troops are mere 12- or 13-year-old children. Buell "darkly pessimistic about the outcome." Just before evacuation from Sam Thong his clothes rumpled and his eyes red from lack of sleep, wounded aloud how much longer Vang Pao and his Meo could keep up the fight. Maybe a couple of years more, he thought, but eventually the Meo would have to make some accommodations with the North Vietnamese. This is Buell 10th year with the Meo, and he put his leathery face in his hands and said: "It's all been running and dying, just running and dying."

"For years the Laotian war ran on in the wings of the larger Vietnam theater, with neither side pushing the other too hard..." This has changed in last two years. U.S. decided to escalate bombing in November 1968. "The decision was not made in response to increased North Vietnamese aggression in Laos, as President Nixon indicated in his speech." U.S. using air assets previously used against North Vietnam, first in south, then in north. NVA took strategic government garrison of Muong Soi in June 1969, causing morale to ebb. "Perhaps to restore their confidence, the U.S. last summer encouraged, helped plan and supported General Vang Pao's brilliant capture of the Plan of Jars. Militarily, the maneuver was a huge success. Lightning helicopter assaults, flown by American pilots, put Vang Pao's Meo deep into enemy territory to the east of the Plan of Jars, severing North Vietnamese supply lines. The plain fell with very little resistance and the retreating North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao abandoned huge stores of food and ammunition." NVA responded with current offensive.

JMH: Hmong patrols spotted enemy troops only a few miles from Sam Thong on March 18. "Sam Thong was defenseless except for a few policemen and school superintendent Moua Lia and his teachers." At 3 p.m., March 18, about 200 Lao/Hmong soldiers arrived at Sam Thong. The NVA attacked at 5 a.m., March 19, blowing up with satchel charges the hospital built by Pop Buell. Artillery fire from Long Tieng was ineffective. Sam Thong evacuated in the afternoon. NVA blow up warehouses and school and destroy town. Hospital staff moves to Ban Xon, LS-272.

March 20, 1970

Additional reinforcements arrive Long Tieng.

Rich logbook: Sam Thong has fallen. Enemy on Skyline.
March 21, 1970

Bowers: Visibility at Long Tieng borderline for air operations. Forward visibility near zero. Pilots saw "black burnt particles, some as large as carbon paper" flying past their windows.

March 23, 1970

Heavy rain improves visibility.

March 27, 1970

Rich logbook: 2 O-1As lost in LS-20A area. 2 pilots missing. No SAR.

March 27, 1970

Washington Evening Star, datedline Muong Phoum, reports 85,000 refugees walking along mountain trails to airfields like dirt strip near Muong Phoum, 16 miles southwest of Sam Thong. PL/NVA captured Xieng Khoung, Sam Thong, and are assaulting Long Tieng. USAID reports that 9,300 refugees have already been flown out. Reports that government forces have counterattacked, capturing Phou Pha Sai, a mountaintop 10 miles northeast of Long Tieng, and clearing Skyline Ridge.

March 30, 1970

With 3,400 reinforcements in place at Long Tieng, Ambassador reports situation "brighter."

March 31, 1970

Sam Thong retaken.

March 1970

NVA troops move under cover of heavy rains that prevent airstrikes and overrun govt positions two miles west of Sam Thong. Sam Thong abandoned to advancing troops on March 18. USAID moved to Huong Son (LS-272). 20A comes under siege. Reinforced by Hmong and Thai troops, with Thai positioned along Skyline ridge. NVA withdraws on March 26.

[JHM: Enemy infiltrated southern ridge of Skyline after taking Sam Thong. Enemy spotters direct artillery into valley. Some 30,000 civilians flee to LS-272. Thai "volunteers" and Hmong from other positions brought in by helicopter to help defend Long Tieng. Following pounding by US/Thail/Lao aircraft, NVA withdrew on April 1.]

[Henry Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 448-57: Hanoi was fighting two wars in Laos: (1) to protect Trail, and (2) to maintain enough pressure on Laotion army to prevent government from consolidating its power over country (restrained by US and Thai presence). US did not wish to disturb with uneasy equilibrium. "It would not make sense]
to expand the conflict in Laos, except for the minimum required for our own protection, where we were busy withdrawing troops from South Vietnam." (451) Hanoi disturbed arrangement in late January 1970 by sending 13,000 additional troops to northern Laos. On January 23, Godley requested B-52 strike against troop concentrations, following in February by formal request from Souvanna Phouma. This caused much debate in Washington before Nixon approved first strike on February 17. "It had taken a month of discussion, a major North Vietnamese offensive, and the near collapse of the Laotian front to induce exactly one B-52 strike." (453) There followed a domestic outcry and demand for the "truth" about US involvement in Laos. "Our role in Laos had been 'secret' in three administrations of two parties precisely because each President wanted to keep it limited." (453) Senate Foreign Relations Committee had been kept fully informed.

With threat to Long Tieng, Thailand offered to send volunteers if requested by Laotian government. State Department "strenuously resisted" the proposal; other agencies unenthusiastic; however, Nixon decided in favor. Thai troops stopped enemy drive.

**January-April 1970**

Air America involved in three major evacuations of Meo:

- January: 5,627 people carried from Moung Soul to Ban Xon, 37 miles to the south, in nine days, using 3 C-123Ks (holding 50 passengers with centerline seats installed), and 3 C-7As (configured to carry 32 pax).
- February: 16,720 refugees carried in six days from PDJ to Ban Keun and and VTE.
- March: 3,500 people carried from Phou Sam Soun to Phu Cum. Phou Sam Soun under attack during evacuation.

**April 1, 1970**


The 1969 wet season campaign saw the forces of Vang Pao push the enemy of the PDJ. This effort was supported by up to 200 USAF sorties a day. Meo forces held advanced position until January, aided by approx. 150 sorties a day. The numerically superior enemy began an offensive in January 1970, capturing Phou Nok Kok, a mountain guarding Route 7, the northeast entry to the PDJ, in mid-January. Xieng Khouang and Moung Soul fell in February. Sam Thong was evacuated. The enemy stopped one kilometer short of Long Tieng on March 17-21, 1970. The reasons for the failure to assault Long Tieng are obscure. The enemy had the
capability. Perhaps the enemy stopped because of orders from Hanoi. Perhaps he did not wish to pay the price.

In April-May 1970, Vang Pao’s force of 6,000 push out of Long Tieng and retake the Tha Bleung valley and LS-72. Until the end of the May, there are clashes and probes by each side, with frequent rocket and mortar attacks against Sam Thong and Long Tieng. Weather hampered the use of air support. Meanwhile, at LS-32, 800 guerrillas, led by Vang Pao’s father-in-law, hold off units of the NVA’s 312nd and 316th divisions and part of a separate regiment. This siege lasted until mid-May.

In June-July 1970, there were more scattered probes and clashes, with no gains for either side. Bad weather continued to limit air support. The Ravens acted as artillery spotters. Vang Pao was so impressed with the effectiveness of the artillery that he included an artillery support plan with battalion operations orders for the first time.

In August 1970, Vang Pao launches Operations LEAP FROG to secure the area around Ban Na, a airstrip on high ground 10 kilometers southwest of the FDJ. The offensive failed, with painful losses. VP’s forces did capture Mount Soui (L-108) in October 11. Ban Na was retaken by the end of the month.

By November, the ground war in northern Laos "had ominous portents." Despite the limited gains in October, the enemy still held advanced position for beginning his dry season offensive. VP’s wet season offensive of 1970 had pushed the enemy back only 30 kilometers.

The USAF withdrawal from SEA was apparent during the wet season of 1970. The A-1 squadrons at NKP were reduced from 3 to 2 (75 to 50 aircraft); 60 F-105Ds at Takhli were returned to the U.S. There was a new limit on sorties. In April 1970, sorties averaged 700 a week; by the end of the wet season, fighter-attack sorties for all SEA were limited to 10,000 per month, with northern Laos allocated 30 per day. The decision was made to focus on the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Commando Hunt V).

April 10, 1970
Kevin D. Cochrane, Hughey D. Rogers, Roger B. McKeen, Milton E. Smart, Gerald DeLong and Billy K. Haster killed on C-130 56516 at Phou Bai. Cochrane let down through hole on approach to 20A and hit mountain at 8800 feet.

April 13, 1970
Washington Star reports that NVA attack on Sam Thong in progress. Also, three 122mm rockets landed within 100 yards of the runway at Long Tieng.

April 17, 1970

CIA, Office of National Estimates, "Stocktaking in Indochina"

"The most positive thing that can be said about Laos is that it still exists as a non-Communist state." The major factor in its survival has been US support. The US pays the salary of all Lao military forces. NVA now playing the major combat role in Laos. "Hanoi quite clearly considers Laos a less important target than South Vietnam. The Communists believe that when they obtain their objectives in South Vietnam, Laos will fall into their hands. But as long as they have been able to use Laotian territory to support the war in South Vietnam, they have not been willing to pay the costs or run the risks of decisive action in Laos."

Communist military forces number 115,000, with 67,000 NVA (versus 9,000 NVA in 1962).

"The regular Lao forces generally perform poorly in combat. And although Meo guerrillas have fought well, they are battle weary and their losses over the past year or so have exceeded their capability to replace them."

"Although the Communists have the capability to overrun all of Laos, they probably believe that the situation as it has evolved since 1962 has served their purposes reasonably well." Their current objectives are to remove Vang Pao's forces as a serious military threat, obtain a halt to all US bombing, and enhance their political position in a reconstituted government.

Thailand has contributed planes, pilots, and artillery support for the war in Laos. It also has allowed its territory to be used extensive for US air activities. There have been recent discussion about a Thai regimental combat team for Laos and additional artillery support. [DDRS 1977/270C]

April 18, 1970

Duane Keele: Keele/Stergar arrived Luang Prabang on April 17 to join other two UH-34s that were working the area (Don Henthorn and Elmer Munsell). Customer Fred Costs briefed crews for pick up 13-man watch team in Dien Bien Phu area. Started north with CAS Beech Baron, flown by Eldon Walker, as airborne command post, and escorting T-28A. As they entered the target area, the team leader contacted Walker on the radio and informed him that the enemy was too close to the LZ for a safe pickup. This was most unusual; "we were regularly called into similar situations by teams panic strike to be picked up no matter what the danger to the landing helicopters. Also, this team was being chased by the enemy, had a badly wounded man with them, and were in
the middle of extremely rough terrain. "We immediately took a liking to this team leader and were ready to go to great lengths to get him out."

On April 18, Baron located team again, and returned to Luang Prabang. Costs (who was an improvement over Doug Swanson, who Hal Miller once nearly had a fight with because he believed the Swanson withheld information from him that nearly resulted in getting Miller killed) asked the helicopter pilots to make another attempt. Keele, Henthorn, and Munsell got into the Baron and flew into the area to survey the situation. Walker's flights to look over landing zones "were often as exciting as the extraction itself." He flew low, ignoring small arms fire. The team was on the side of a hill in 12-foot elephant grass, some 300 yards below a "big, wide, ugly road" that came out of the Dien Bien Phu Valley and crossed the top of the ridgeline. Below the hill was another valley where Henthorn and Munsell had encountered small arms fire the previous week. The team was exhausted and could go no further. The pickup would have to be made there or not at all.

They returned to Luang Prabang and talked the situation over with Costs. He said that they could run the operation any way that wanted. They arranged for the T-28 to make bombing and strafing runs on the road in daisy chain fashion. Keele would go in first and pick up seven team members. Munsell would follow close behind and get the other six. Henthorn would act as SAR for the two helicopters. Keele came in high, over the river valley, and autorotated into the area, staying as far away from the road as possible. Munsell waited about 90 second, then followed him down. Keele picked up his seven and tried to lift off but the heavily loaded helicopter refused to cooperate. As Stergar was shouting, "Look out for Elmer," Keele ran the rotor up to the emergency range of 2800 RPM, pulled up on the collective (trading RPM inertia for lift), and skimmed over the elephant grass with 2400 RPM ("a lot less than you feel safe with at that altitude"). To get back to safe operating speed, he lowered the collective and headed toward the river valley that was full of people "who wanted to shoot us." Within a short time, however, he managed to get sufficient power to climb out and cross the river at a reasonably safe altitude. Meanwhile, Munsell had picked up his six and lifted off in his more lightly loaded helicopter. That evening they enjoyed several beers at the Tree House Restaurant in Luang Prabang. It was been "a picture perfect operation," and they were particularly proud of getting this team out.

April 28, 1970
Casterlin to parents: Things are still grim upcountry. Sam Thong is ruined, with most of the village destroyed. The enemy fires mortars into the strip from time to time. Project pay has been raised to $12.50 an hour, with 70 hours guaranteed. 100 hours could mean $3800+.

May 7, 1970
Telephone interview with Michael Jarina, April 13, 1991
Jarina was involved in a memorable SAR on 7 May 1970 [see Incident Report]. There were two double-crew helicopters on a mission to resupply and topick up wounded at LS-32, which was under attack. Jarina was in Bell 204B 96W with Ellis B. Emery in the left seat and flight mechanic Terry Dunn. He also was carrying a case officer - BAMBOO [Dick Mann] - who was making his first trip upcountry. En route to LS-32, they heard a MAYDAY from a USAF F-4. Larry Henesy, flying a UH-34, spotted the pilot right away and made the pickup without any trouble; however, they could not locate the backseater. Seeing some smoke in the distance, Jarina headed toward it. The backseater was just inside a treeline but reluctant to come out. Jarina had to hover because tree stumps prevented a landing. They began to take fire from the treeline. BAMBOO had changed seats with the flight mechanic, who had gone back to operate the hoist, which was on the right side behind the pilot’s seat. The F-4 backseater, named Love, finally came out of the treeline. As they descended to pick him up, BAMBOO was hit by a round that came up through the helicopter, penetrated a logbook that he was sitting on, went through his rear and thigh, and lodged in his elbow. They picked up the backseater as A-1s hit the treeline. [Emery, telephone interview April 24, 1991, recalls the A-1s coming in at this time; Jarina believes that they arrived as he was departing the area.]
After delivery Love to USAF helicopters at LS-30, Jarina continued to LS-32. He finished the day with a total flying time of 9:47.

FIC "Activity Report," May 7, 1970: Bell 204B N1196W at 0955 local time, UG 1671, 4,100 feet MSL. Hit during hover and climb out by 7.62mm and 12.7mm. Duration of fire: 20 seconds. "N1196W was making a pickup of a downed airman at UG 1671 when the aircraft came under heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire. Tracers from a probably 12.7 mm were observed passing under the aircraft." Aircraft was hit nine times.

May 12, 1970
Casterlin to parents: The war has quieted down. The enemy is dug in west of Sam Thong.

May 29, 1970
19 May

I/C. PPH. Smith/Ortigia. 5+45. I mission LS32. After the mission
Frenchy Smith and I had been supplying by sling load, the many positions
in and around the bowl surrounding S32 and Site 50. Later in the day we
received an alert while working SSO for a SAR (These were rare for us
with the advent of the large AF helicopters, but still time was critical
in saving a life. All normal work would cease as the A/C would proceed
to the downed area).

The coordinates given us by a young voice in the King A/C (the
controller) were in the vicinity of Nong Pet, the Route 7/71
intersection SW of Ban Ban, known from the FDU days as the "7/71 split."
Even during the days that we had "owned" the FDU it had never been a
safe area. Now it was a high threat area with some AAA previously
reported. I couldn't believe that they were sending us into such a high
threat area. During refueling ops at SSO and enroute, I asked King 3
times as to the coordinates, remarking each time about the hazards and
hoping that they had made a mistake. I recalled the "40 mile rule," of
the past and again asked them concerning the spot, hoping they would
come back with a new set in a better area.

We flew direct (as direct as the wx would let us) to the projected
area, 1 Huey and 2 H34s who had been working in the area and flown by Al
Cates and Tim Wooley, both with Thai P0s. A Porter flown by KD Nolan
(who I had known and liked for years) with Customer Jerry Daniels on
board preceded us into the area (fixed wing often were helpful in a
search). They were already there circling in the Phou Nok Koki area on
the western edge of the Ban Ban Valley. The H34a and our ship all
arrived about the same time. We were already violating SAR SOP by not
hazing cover A/C, but could sort this out later.

There was a extensive cloud cover and storms churning about and at
our altitude we couldn't go west toward Nong Pet without getting down
dow in between the heavily forested mountains that bracketed Route 7.
Rather than do this, we commenced a search right there. From altitude
there was no smoke, beeper or any sign of downed aviators. To better
access the situation, I decided to descend to a lower altitude. Knowing
that the enemy had to be down there, I began slow 360 degree descending
circles over the jungled slopes on the north side of Route 7 with my ICS
triggered (I had used this technique for years this to hear any crackle
of ground fire. At altitude the helmet, the invariable radio talk, rotor
and transmission noise masked these sounds and I had learned that
I could hear the fire easier using this method). I descended until the
sound of small arms became too intense and then climbed back to
altitude.

Now the fast moving clouds and rain began forcing us east toward
the BB Valley. There had been 6 37mm guns reported to have been dug
into fixed positions in the middle of the valley. Looking over in that
direction I saw multiple black flak bursts under Tim Wooley's A/C (Iike
those I had seen around Routes 6 & 61 in the past). Apparently the
gunners were unable to traverse or fire to his altitude or were merely
adjusting their fire. At any rate they missed. I dreaded having to go
into that valley after him. Against that scenario, I told him that he
better get out of the valley.

It was obvious that we weren't doing any good and had better vacate
this area before one of us went down. The px had precluded a decent search, the area was definitely hot, no beeper or voice. It was time to go. Like the others, I elected to depart north (really the only viable way out) toward S32 when volleys of red tracers tore by my right side. I was the only one in the crew who had seen this. I hadn't heard any hits, but was unsure about the blades. I headed to S50 where the security was a little bit better than at 32 to check the bird for hits. On the way a Raven A/C called and said that we had been looking in the wrong area (naturally). The downed aviators were at coords UG4242 east of Xiang Khuangville and north of the valley.

At 50, I shut down while Ortillo quickly checked the machine. A lot of lead had been flying past us and I was amazed that we hadn't been hit. The H34 drivers didn't hesitate. They proceeded immediately to the area. As I cranked up, I reasoned, even with our stop at 50, we still could all be in the area at the same time. They had gone direct, flying the lumbering beasts over enemy controlled areas on the northern PDU. To overtake and join up with them, I would have to take generally the same path. The coores placed the doomed pilots 40 miles from our position and I calculated, sans any great problems, that we had just enough fuel to complete the job and get back to LT. As we proceeded toward our destination, I couldn't believe that we were doing this, flying over areas of known enemy and AAA guns. It just went against the grain. Still the H34s were well ahead, passed Arrowhead Lake and Xiang Khu without incident. Perhaps we would be equally lucky. But perhaps the enemy would be alert and ready for us. Consequently, there was an element of doubt to our progress and my anatomy lower sphincter muscle was twitching. We would have to take this one step at a time. Keeping low to the ground where we could for protection, we finally reached the XQ valley, apparently without having been fired on. I knew the element of surprise had worked and felt we would be ok. Our speed and short cuts had put us in position to arrive first prior to the H34s.

The Raven A/C had indicated that the guys were in an isolated area with no reported activity. They had been spotted well east of the Ville on sparsely forested low hills, in an area that I was partially familiar with and had worked during the PDU operation last year. Even though there were no reported friendlies in the area there was no reason for any bad guys to be in these foot hills. It was a hell of a lot better place to be than the last one we had left, if that was possible. Still with the Route 72 (LOC) close, there was sufficient apprehension. We had to get the job done and depart quickly. Our response had been quick. The enemy had not moved to the area yet, but also, no friendly cover was available and the Jollys had not started upcountry.

Unlike the more than adequate fixed hoist of the H34, our A/C was equipped with an internal hoist and jungle penetrator with which we could participate in any rescue. They were designed for use on the larger 205 rather than the 204 which could be equipped with a permanent overhead hoist. The jungle penetrator was a vast improvement over the yellow rescue "horse collar" that the H34s carried.

I settled in over one of the AP pilots and Ortillo payed the cable out. Prior to this I had been talking to one pilot on his rescue radio and had received assurances that everything was ok. As he settled onto the seat of the penetrator, knowing that he was saved, he put this radio in the pocket of his survival vest. Relieved, thinking that this portion of the mission had been a piece of cake, I instructed Ortillo to
bring him up. But the cable wouldn’t reel onto the drum. Ortillo seemed to be at a loss as what to do. It was embarrassing. Nothing he did would counter the problem. I couldn’t hover there forever, so I told the F/M to get the pilot off the seat while I called Cates and Wooley to prepare to pick him up. They had been busy with the other pilot and were only too glad to help (it was the highest high ever achieved).

This AF guy wasn’t about to get off. With salvation almost achieved, his radio was off and he was looking down with his arms wrapped around the shaft of the penetrator. For several minutes we hovered. It seemed a long time as every second I expected ground fire to commence. I attempted to activate the guillotine, a device to cut the cable at the drum during just such situations. It wouldn’t work. Christ. What else would happen? In desperation, I considered hauling him into the valley where I could land, but discounted this as too dangerous for the pilot and the possible enemy action that might ensue.

Then Murphy struck with a vengeance. He was always there, only needing the right time and place. All the radio transmitters on my side of the cockpit failed, reducing me to shouting instructions to Frenchy across the center pedestal. Finally the pilot, tired or confused due to the delay, looked up and the F/M conveyed to him that he had to get off.

Now, due to the weight of the cable and penetrator, Ortillo was having a difficult time pulling the hardware into the cabin. To facilitate the I34 PU, I moved off the spot and hovered toward the valley. Frenchy went into the passenger cabin to aid Ortillo. When he climbed back into the left seat he was grimacing in pain. In retrieving the cable and penetrator, he had almost fallen out of the ship and been hit in the leg by the penetrator.

Both pilots had been picked up. It was past time to leave. Now the red low level fuel warning light was looking at us, illuminated brightly on the console. We only had 30 minutes flying time left. Frenchy, normally an easily agitated person, began to squirm noticeably in his seat. I wasn’t particularly concerned about low fuel, as during the PDJ operation, I had flown this ship to LL, more than 20 miles west while on the red light, to refuel. Weather permitting, LT wasn’t much further only over much rougher terrain. While I was shouting all this, Frenchy still seemed concerned.

Convinced I could make LT, the only thing that worried me was running the enemy gauntlet. We would have to fly between Phou Kabo (where I got hosed on my first flight in 63) and Phou Sao and over portions of Route 4, never a good place to go down. I breathed a lot easier when we passed these checkpoints. Now Frenchy started badgering me about landing at LS5 to refuel. It had been ages since I had been there and wasn’t sure that fuel was available. And we were only a few minutes from LT. Once we cleared Padong ridge, it was all downhill.

We arrived first and while we were taking on fuel the old, bald air ops guy came over to see what was going on. After hearing the story, knowing that the Jolleys were enroute and since we had to RTB for repairs, he insisted that we take both pilots to UTH. Why should the AF get the credit for this pick-up when AAM had successfully done it? It was too late in the day to do much more work so it seemed like a good idea. When the J34s landed the pilots were transferred to our ship.

By now I was wasted, tired from the strain and stress of this mission. I got in the left seat and turned the ship over to my
co-captain, retaining only the task of handling the radios. The pilots were in reasonably good shape after their ordeal, but dehydrated. I had seen this before and was not surprised when one of them quaffed my canteen in one gulp. As we taxied out and began to take off, the flight leader of the Jolly Greens called and wanted us to return and relinquish our load. I tactfully responded that I had been instructed to proceed to UTH (Short of Murder I wasn’t about to transfer these pilots). I could imagine what they’d said about AAM pilots. Returning to UTH with live pilots was a first for me. It was with some sense of accomplishment and euphoria (the highest high) that we flew the jet jocks to “home plate,” once more acing out the notorious foot dragging AF rescue unit (with all fairness, they had to follow regulations, but this didn’t help the guy on the ground and that could have been us).

At UTH we were directed to land on a taxiway where an AF reception committee waited, complete with high level officers and champagne for the returning warriors. After depositing the happy crewmen, we air taxied back to the AAM ramp. It was gratifying to see the end result of a successful SAR. What had initially been a “bag of worms,” turned into a pleasurable experience.

I explained what had happened to Wayne and Geza Siler and they immediately began to trouble shoot the problem.

What happened next was embarrassing. After talking in the office for awhile Geza called me out to the flight line. He had the hoist cable payed out on the ground to its extreme length and proceeded to show me what our problem had been. The 205 narrow access door that was opened to allow the hoist to be swung out into PU position had contacted the cable uplim switch at the top of the hoist drum preventing retraction of the cable. None of us had even considered this. In our vast experience this had never happened before and in the heat of battle none of the crew was smart enough to have figured out the problem. After years of flying the machine, we had learned something new concerning the A/C hoist system. Fortunately, no one had been hurt and except for some wounded pride, we had learned the hard way with our buddy Murphy at the helm. I never did find out what caused the radio failure. Perhaps continued keying of the hoist switch while it was jammed caused a short. The guillotine release wasn’t charged and I couldn’t take a hit for that.

The AF had a party for their heroes that night. We were invited, but I was too tired to attend. Besides, it was all in a day’s work. Not like some of our pilots, I didn’t believe in mixing with our AF counterparts. Aside from aviation, I didn’t feel much in common with them. I continued to be pissed about their lousy SAR procedures, allowing too much time to elapse before launching, and their extremely bad reporting of coordinates. I didn’t want it to rub off on me.

A letter of commendation dated 23 May was written by Knight naming all the helicopter crews that participated in the rescues. It had been some time since I had received one. But it was over and just as quickly forgotten.

Big

THIS WAR SHOW WHAT COULD HAPPEN
DURING AN OPERATION. WHILE PERHAPS
NOT TYPICAL, IT USUALLY WAS STANDARD
FOR ME.
Casterlin to parents: There have been 5 SAR saves this month. He has picked up two pilots.

May 29, 1970
Godley to SecState: "The tempo of the Laotian war continued to increase in 1969–1970 as the North Vietnamese increased the level of their military involvement in Laos to a new high of 67,000 or more men. Most remaining vestiges of earlier tacit understandings about cease-fire agreements and territorial control in relation to them went down the drain." [Blout, CHECO: Air Operations Northern Laos, 1 APR – 1 NOV 70]

May 30, 1970
Pilot F. G. Steele and F/M R. C. Bundalian in UH-34 departed 20A to the southeast and made right turn to fly through narrow open area between karst and hill and bad weather. The valley narrowed as cloud descended. Pilot believed that he did not have enough room for a 180 degree turn so he began to climb on instruments. Some 15 seconds after entered the clouds, his main rotor blades struck trees. The aircraft hit on the 30 degree slope and slide down 200 feet. The crew exited shortly before the aircraft burst into flames and was destroyed.

June 1970
Souvanna asks Thai government for three army battalions to counter increasing NVA/PL attacks.

Theodore Shackley, The Third Option: In June 1970, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma appealed to the Thai government for three army battalions, to be employed around population centers in southern Laos to counter increasing NVA/PL attacks. The US was to underwrite these units, as well as those already in northern Laos. The US and Thailand refused the request "for policy reasons." Instead, Thai volunteers were formed into "CIA Special Guerrilla Units" and seeded in southern Laos trouble spots. There were no trouble finding recruits. As the men were trained, they relieved the regular Thai units at Long Tieng, who had been there for more than a year. By mid-1971, all Thai regulars were out of northern Laos. Thai participation was now on a volunteer basis. Each new 550-man battalion was led by officers from the regular Thai Army. The program developed a formidable combat force which made a major contribution to the defense of Long Tieng. By the end of 1971, there were 6,000–8,000 Thai soldiers in Laos; by the end of 1972, the number had reached 21,000. Meanwhile, Vang Pao fought a war of position and maneuver against two NVA divisions.

Success was largely due to the professional fighting instincts of the individual Thai soldier, the leadership of General Vang Pao, and the sound approach by Lao, Thai, and
American officials to what at first appeared to be a complex problem."

[In April 1970, the NVA seized Attopeau in an effort to expand security of Trail to the west following coup in Cambodia; in May, they seize Saravane.]

June 16, 1970

Pilot Robert W. Bailey in UH-34 H-66 took off from high altitude site with 10 passengers. The customer had requested that passengers be dropped at site but armed passengers refused to deplane. Taking off from a cone shaped hill, RPM started to decay. Bailey lowered nose and crashed straight ahead in a ravine. Aircraft rolled on right side but did not burn. Two passengers killed; remainder injured. Bailey fired but FEPEA protest led to hearing that allowed him to resign.

July 1, 1970

Excellent AAM equipment list (with serial numbers):
VTE: 12 C-129K; 5 C-7A; 7 C-46; 10 PC-6; 11 H-395; 1 VTB. At UTH: 2 VTB, 1 DO-28, 3 204B, 3 205; 24 UH-34.

July 1970

Castle, "Alliance in a Secret War"

"In July 1970, a team of twenty-two Hmong commandos were infiltrated into North Vietnam. Their mission was to attack the town of Hoa Binh, which was an important supply link on Route Six to Sam Neua. The Hmong succeeded in firing eight mortar rounds at the supply depot before their position was detected by Vietnamese soldiers with tracking dogs. Twenty-one team members were killed in a lengthy fire-fight, while the remaining soldier was captured." p. 60

[Glenn to WML, 2/15/93, responded to query as to whether or not there had been any successes: "Yes!! but sorry can't give details even today."

August 18, 1970

Operation Leapfrog begins with insertion of 500 troops on the rim of PDJ by USAF and AAM helicopters. The operation had only limited success.

[Operation Leapfrog was designed to capture the PDJ. There were two phases. Phase 1 involved operations along the southern and northern rims of the PDJ and lasted from July to September. GM 24 was taken by helicopter to Bouam Long, then walked to Lat Bouac and Nong Pet. GMS 21, 22 and 23 operated east of the PDJ. Phase 2, lasting from November 1970 to January 1971, was designed to interdict Route 7 near Ban Ban. GMSs 21 and 22 were taken by helicopter to San Tiau]
(LS-2); other units involved. It concluded in January after Ban Ban could not be captured.]

September 1970
B. Hugh Tovar replaces Devlin as station chief in Laos.

Tovar, March 13, 1992: Tovar served as COS until May 1973, when he was replaced by his deputy, Daniel C. Arnold, who remained until the end. Before Arnold, Clifton R. Strathern had been Tovar’s deputy. Strathern had served as chief of the Laos desk at Langley. Bill Dodds, a retired army colonel, was a member of Tovar’s senior staff.

His objectives, as he understood them, were (1) to sustain the Royal Lao government, and (2) to support the war effort in Vietnam.

Tovar sees Devlin as wanting to control everything. Also he lacked a Far East background. Tovar had a good relationship with Pat Landry, who he had known since Pat’s days in Indonesia. He also got along well with Ambassador Godley. Unlike Sullivan, Godley had an open style and would delegate responsibility. He was completely privy to all aspects of the operation, was intimately involved with most, and had a zest for the job. Vang Pao ran his own war and was not "a controlled agent." Tovar wonders "How far did we push him beyond the point he was prepared to go." Tovar sees Generals Evans and Searles as having a narrow USAF view on the use of air power. There was a constant battle for air support. The situation improved under General Hughes at 7/13AF and General Vogt at 7AF. BGEN John W. Vessey, Jr. (DEPCHIEF February 1972) was "wonderful to work with."

[Glenn to WML, 2/15/93: "VP was mercurial to say the least. On some days he was ready to assault Hanoi - on the next, he'd be ready to quit."]

October 12, 1970
Major General James F. Kirkendall, ETR. Kirkendall was deputy chief of staff for operations, 7th Air Force, from June 1969 to October 1970;

"Target development for northern Laos is delegated to the Deputy Commander, 7/13AF, who maintains close relationships with the American Embassy in Vientiane. Sorties allocation comes from 7AF and evolves from the relative level of enemy effort as well as our ability to identify fixed targets. The Embassy’s preference for allocation of unassigned sorties to employ as desired was understandable, but is not supportable when sorties are limited. Seventh AF and 7/13AF relations with the Embassy have been good since August 1969, with frankness and respect on all sides."
Kirkendall points out the single management of air in SEA had not been "all encompassing," involving only part of USMC and only tactical control of CTF-77 Navy air when it enters 7AF operational area (plus other exceptions). "In spite of these limitation, the single management of air that did exist was a big step in the right direction for the SEA war."

"Air support played a major role in enabling Laotian General Vang Pao to gain military control of the strategically located Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) areas beginning in July 1969 and continuing until late in the year." However, VP failed to hold PDJ, and lost almost all of gains of About Place by 15 April 1970. After airfields at Xieng Khouangville and Muong Soi fell to NVA, VP's defensive lines retreated deeper into the hills south and southwest of the PDJ. NVA moved on to Sam Thong, which had to be evacuated with assistance from 7/13AF helicopters and aircraft. "Confusion and lack of control reigned throughout much of the Laotian general's forces, especially when his headquarters at Long Tieng were threatened. For some reason, however, the NVA failed to follow up their advantage, and even though Vang Pao evacuated Long Tieng, no final enemy advance on the location was made." RLG moved in with reinforcements. Break in weather permitted up to 200 USAF and RLAFF sorties a day, enabling VP to regain some of the ground he had lost.

Vang Pao retook the offensive in April 1970. Barrel Roll interdiction program gained momentum. "Roads, trails and water lines of communication were successfully severed and the only notable road from North Vietnam to the PDJ became the prime target for 7/13AF missions."

Vang Pao attempted to move back toward strategic military sites in vicinity of PDJ with Operation Leap Frog. "In August 1970, intelligence sources pinpointed many targets for air strikes by 7/13AF and RLAFF aircraft." These were of great value in sustaining VP's offensive around Muong Moc. Friendly advances stalled, however, by logistical problems. Offensive resumed after USAF support fragged into area. It took about a month to clean out NVA strongholds around Muong Moc. Considerable enemy equipment fell into hands of RLG troops.

In southern Laos, 7/13AF tactical support given to variety of ground operations. Strike flown in late July in support of Operation Waterbug to retake Tchepone Airfield. Also support for Operation Gauntlet to retake Bolovens. "This operation continued into early September with limited success."

October 16, 1970
George W. T. "Digger" O'Dell arrives Long Tieng.
O'Dell enlisted in the USMC following graduation from the University of North Texas. He was commissioned in December 1965. O'Dell served with the 3rd Marine Division in Vietnam from June 1966 to November 1968, as a rifle platoon commander, platoon commander with the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company, and ARVN adviser. Released from active duty in December 1968, he returned to the University of North Texas, earned an M.A. in psychology, and was accepted in the Ph.D. program in clinical psychology when recruited by the CIA in October 1969.

O'Dell went through one year of training for the Special Operations Group (with Greek, Kayak, and Redcoat), then was assigned to Laos. He arrived at Long Tieng on October 16, 1970. Vince Shields was chief of base (being replaced by Dick Johnson—a Marine Raider at 17 in World War II and recalled for Korea); Howie Freeman (one of O'Dell's instructors at the Farm) was his deputy; Will Green was chief of operations (he was reassigned to Savannakhet early in 1971 and replaced by Jerry Daniels, transferred from LS-32). Either the day he arrived, or shortly thereafter, Vang Pao held a bassi for the departing Shields. Devlin, who also was leaving, was there for the ceremony.

"As far as I could tell, Tovar was a "hands off" boss, he didn't interfere with Dick Johnson as chief of base. Devlin apparently was very much a "hands on" guy. When we were run out of Long Tieng one time, or some other such major event, the word was passed to Tovar over the radio that night. Apparently he said something about keeping him posted; call early the next day, etc. One of the old timers said 'if that'd been Devlin he would be up here in the morning, M-16 in hand!'"

"Godley was quite a guy. We called him the Field Marshall, some said the Mad Bomber. I think he'd been a Marine in WW II. He pretty well called the shots when it came to B-52 strikes. Once when he were under siege at 20A we were commuting each night to Vientiane; we'd have our ops meeting at the airport in a room loaned to us by Continental Air Services. Godley was there every night for the briefing and knew exactly what was going on. He certainly had a 'zest' for the job."

O'Dell served as a case officer with GM 21 from October 1970 to September 1972, then was assigned to LS-32 for two months. GM 21 had most of the original and best of Vang Pao's troops. It had an authorized strength of 1,200, but put fewer men into the field. Case officers with the GMs had five major duties:

1. Responsible for supervising the assisting the logistical support of approximately 800-1500 irregular
troops. This involves the timely supply of ordnance, weapons, quartermaster items and food to these troops.

2. Arrange for and provide general supervision over the tactical and support air resources necessary for combat operations in his area of responsibility. Frequently run tactical air traffic med. evacs.

3. Report on enemy and friendly activities in his zone of responsibility to include a daily SITREP of his area. Brief supervisor, other officers and pilots on area of operations. Report will include enemy & friendly activity, enemy and friendly OB, flight path and other operational recommendations for logistical & tactical support for area of responsibility.

4. Prepare monthly report on irregular dispositions; weapons lost; equipment lost, etc. Include all items necessary to keep units effectively operational.

5. Conduct liaison with battalion and higher commanders. Have liaison contacts with other US agencies necessary to the performance of his duties."

October 26, 1970
Pilot R. W. Petersen and indigenous kicker injured in crash of Porter N360F near LS-216. Aircraft at 600 feet over DZ with flap down when engine failed. DZ on hill top. Aircraft crashed into trees one mile down steep ridge line at 3500 feet elevation. Pilot suffered minor head lacerations.

November 1970
Two Hmong regiments helicoptered south of Ban Ban for a month of harassing operations. This helped to sap the momentum of the NVA. No major push toward 20A during 1970-71 dry season. [See Operation Leapfrog, July 1970]

November 1, 1970

The enemy completed the building of new roads. Route 7 was easily interdicted, so the NVA build a bypass that ran directly from a point out of North Vietnam to Xieng Khouangville (Route 723, renamed Route 72). Also, Route 73 was completed, offering a bypass for Route 7 around major interdiction points between Ban Ban and the PDJ. Most supplies entering the PDJ moved down Route 73 from major storage facilities in the Ban Ban valley.

November and December typically were repair and resupply months for the NVA. However, as early as November 1, 1970, the enemy took the strategic mountaintop of Phou Seu, northeast of Ban Na. Enemy pressure continued,
especially around Luang Prabang and Long Tieng. Long Tieng was the key to northeastern Laos. The capture of Long Tieng would enable the enemy to dominate the entire area. By February 1971, Vang Pao had 6,000 troops facing an estimated 8,000 to 10,500 enemy (15,500 enemy in MR II). Although fewer sorties were available, USAF tacair was better controlled. As the situation as Long Tieng became critical, tacair concentrated on close air support. The Embassy approved target boxes, allowing 24-hour, all-weather strikes against staging areas. Also, the RLAF T-28 sortie rate increased.

In mid-November 1970, Vang Pao, Godley, and the CIA developed a plan for COUNTERPUNCH II, aimed at the Ban Ban area. VPAF forces were to move from LS-32 on the north side, while helilifted forces moved into San Tiou (LS-2) on the south side to pinch off Route 7 east of Ban Ban. This aim was to destroy supplies in the Ban Ban valley. The operation began on November 26, with the USAF lifting 40 commando raiders and F4D BADMAN into the LS-2 area to secure HLZ for the main force. Ground fire and marginal weather delayed the operation. [2 pages missing from report]

Enemy action against the heart of VPAF's defensive position - LS-15, LS-72, LS-20, LS-20A - became critical in early February 1971. On the night of February 5-6, NVA sappers destroyed the low frequency beacon on Skyline between 20 and 20A. Long Tieng received five 122mm rockets at dawn, February 13, killing two. The enemy silenced the 105mm howitzer south of 20A and set up mortar positions to cover the valley on February 13-14.

By April 1, 1971, 8,500 enemy were in close proximity to 20, 20A, and 72. LS-15 was being shelled daily and the situation was increasingly acute with the enemy hindering air resupply and medevac efforts. Vang Pao now had a force of 12,000, which was less than 50 percent Meo (remainder composed of PAR and guerrilla battalions from MR III).

November 13, 1970
Keele: Keele, with new copilot B. J. Ruck (hired on September 23) were returning to Luang Prabang after dropping off a team to watch the Chinese road when one of the escorting T-28s was shot down while attacking his secondary target. Keele got to the area and let down the hoist for the uninjured pilot. However, the pilot put the hoscollar on incorrectly and when he was about 40 feet off the ground, he fell out. As the mechanic had to direct the hoist and run the hoist, this left only Ruck to get the pilot. He didn't like the idea, as the people who shot down the T-28 could be expected to go after the helicopter, but he didn't hesitate. He went down into the jungle canopy and retrieved
the pilot who had been injured by the fall. When he returned to the cockpit, Keele spent some time trying to reassure him "that this wasn't always the way we made pick ups."

Telephone interview with Byron R. Ruck, April 7, 1991

Ruck was an experienced H-34 pilot who had flown the helicopter in Vietnam; he retired as a major in the USMC. He spoke only with Red Dawson in Washington before being hired by Air America. Dawson was a bit vague about the nature of flying in Laos. When he arrived there, he was a bit surprised about the extent of the combat role that the airline was playing. The operation was the same as in Vietnam, when Ruck supported Marines with medevac, resupply, troop movements, etc.

One his first operational flights took place on November 13, 1970. Duane Keele and Ruck were returning to Luang Prabang after dropping off trail watchers. The two T-28s that were flying escort (Lao pilots) went off to strike a secondary target when one was shot down. Ruck heard the frantic radio call from the wingman. Keele/Ruck and an escorting helicopter responded to the call. They located the pilot, who had parachuted into tall trees. The Filipino flight mechanic lowered the harness and the downed pilot put in on. He was being pulled up through the trees when he fell out and lay motionless on the ground. Ruck went down after him. He was unconscious and bleeding from the nose and mouth. Ruck held on to him as they were pulled up through the trees - it was "a long, slow trip." The trees in the area were 100-150 feet tall. They took the Lao pilot back to Luang Prabang, from where he was medevaced by a C-130 to an American military hospital. Ruck later visited him. He had suffered broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a concussion. He told Ruck that he had decided to give up flying and intended to serve for a time as a monk.

Ruck was a bit surprised about the need to go down in the hoist. He thought, "Maybe they do this all the time." When he returned from the mission, the older helicopter pilots (Cash, Hunter) were not impressed and seemed mainly intent on telling him how one of the Air America pilots had done a similar thing several years before.

The older Air America helicopter pilots were a tight knit group and not at all friendly toward the newcomers. Ruck felt that they had a chip on their shoulder and that they had a need to be recognized. They never allowed the new pilots to become part of their group.
Ruck has a high regard for Jess Hagerman - an excellent pilot and an individual of great integrity. Hagerman told him that at one point two new case officers decided to raid an opium refinery in the hills north of Ban Houi Sai. Hagerman flew them in. He was impressed with the quality of the equipment, chemicals, etc. This clearly was not a local operation. The rumor was that it was run by the Lao government. The case officers were quickly removed from the area.

Ruck never carried opium and never heard of anyone who did (except perhaps for small amounts on individuals).

November 21, 1970
Sontay raid.

November 25, 1970
French Smith does infil mission with troops dressed up like NVA.

December 4, 1970
John R. Spey, ETR, 22 Apr 71: "December traditionally marks the start of the enemy's dry season offensive in Laos. In December of 1970 the enemy got off to a slow start in MR IV. On 4 Dec 70, the NVA mounted a large assault on PS22. After three days of fighting a large amount of air support the garrison at PS22 held with the enemy suffering heavy casualties (500 estimated).

December 24, 1970
UH-34 H79 pilot B. A. Van Etten hit by more than 40 rounds of small arms fire while half mile ENE of Moung Soui. VanEtten wounded in right thigh. F/M C. F. Brigham.

Rich logbook: AAM Porter hit fuel drum at 20A, caught fire and rolled into C-123. Both aircraft destroyed; no injuries.

December 28, 1970
Bouy Vongachak (AFD) hit in back by round while C-7A over DZ at San Tiau (LS-2) at 6,500 feet. Pilot Utterback.

Utterback: He was dropping at site 2, east of the PDJ, with Cliff Hamilton and Bouy Vongachak as kickers, when they took ground fire. Bouy was shot through the lungs by two rounds of AK-47 fire. Porter Hough was the copilot ("He had quite an imagination.") They landed at 20A and transferred him to a C-123 with a medic onboard, but he died on route to Udorn. Utterback attended the funeral at a wat and gave the family some money. He hated to lose a crew member and often thinks of this incident.
December 1970

AAM moved 46 million pounds of foodstuffs (mainly rice) during 1970. Most rice airdropped. [C-46s carried 13 plywood pallets - 9 bags (40 kilos per bag) per pallet. [See Christian description of rice drop in AAM Log.]

Bowers: By late 1970, AAM was flying 170 C-130 hours per month. In 1971, the number increased to 270 hours a month.
Interview with John D. Ford, Green Cove Springs, FL, April 26, 1991:

Shortly after Ford became chief pilot, Dan Carson ("a super pilot") came to him and complained that Air America was losing too many airplanes due to overload. Ford at first ignored him, commenting that he had a war to run. But Carson was persistent ("a bulldog"). Finally, Ford said, "Prove it." Carson went out and got statistics to show that Air America had a horrible safety record. Pilots were competing to see who could carry the most weight. Abadie backed Ford in his attempts to deal with the situation, as did Jim Glerum. Ford then put out a memo to all pilots that said anyone carrying an overload would be fired. Glerum gave Ford the job of explaining the situations to the Customers in the field. They were not too happy about the weight restrictions but generally accepted the need. The safety record improved dramatically as a result.

After being offered the chief pilot's job, Ford had to go back to Washington to meet Doole. He spent two weeks across the desk from Doole, "watching him open his mail." Doole would pick him up at the hotel in the morning, each lunch with him, then dinner together "for two solid weeks." Going back through Taipei, Grundy insisted on "a full debriefing." "he wanted to know everything that went on." Doole apparently had sent a cable, strongly endorsing Ford's appointment. Ford thought that this was all rather unusual, as Goddard had not had to go through this process when he became chief pilot.

Relations with the Customers generally was good. However, a new, younger group of Customers tended to be resentful about the higher pay and better living conditions of the pilots. A lot of problems stemmed from this attitude. Ford heard complaints about Jim Butler (The Grey Fox), but he considers Butler's bad reputation as mostly undeserved. The locals often misled Butler, and it was this erroneous information that he passed along. The situation improved when Pakse got a dedicated crew. Ed Reid was there for a long time.

Management had made the decision that Thai pilots would have to serve one year in the left seat before being considered for upgrade to captain. The Bells flew mainly out of 20A for the customer, while the H-34s were used mainly for USAID and RO projects. As a consequence, the Bells took most of the hits in the late 1960s. The war in the south was not too bad until the 1970s. Thereafter, the H-34s began to take hits on the RO missions. This partially explains why the Thai pilots began to take hits in the 1970s (and not due to pressure from the Customers).
After he became chief pilot, Ford was involved in S-58T special projects. There were several S-58T, with Lao registry, that flew normal missions. On several occasions, two S-58Ts were pulled off for special projects. Ford was "drafted" by the Customer for the project. He then made the crew selection. He looked for people who might like this kind of "above and beyond" mission and who could be counted on to do a good job. He then conducted individual interviews. No one refused. The crews were Ford/Kanach and Lloyd Higgins with a young pilot who had experience in electronics. The two flight mechanics were Charles F. Brigham and ? They flew about a half dozen missions.

Glerum supplied night vision glasses, but there was no special training. Ford and Kanach did the preliminary testing of the glasses in a UH-34. Kanach flew without goggles and maintained power and instrument settings while Ford looked outside. This was all trial-and-error. They had to overcome the problem of cockpit lights. Also, they discovered that the glasses only worked at low altitudes. They did not use the glasses on the early missions. They went in at dusk, then departed after dark, flying low altitude and using Loran C. They had the courses laid out so that they were below the ridgeline for part of the trip outbound. It was somewhat usual for the chief pilot to be used for these missions after he had been formally briefed on airline ownership by the customer.

He recalls one "dirty tricks" special mission with the S-58T. The two aircraft departed Luang Prabang at dusk with three troops each and equipment for a mission over the border into North Vietnam, near the limit of their three hour range. They were about fifteen minutes out and at low altitude when they took heavy gunfire. After determining that there was no critical damage, they decided to continue. Reaching the area for the mission (exact location was crucial), they searched for the drop off point but could not locate it. They decided to abort the mission. It was now dark. The critical part of the return flight was going from low to high altitude, above small arms fire. Ford spotted a fog bank ahead and began to climb. However, he flew right over an enemy camp, the fire from which had burned a hole in the fog. They opened up on the helicopters and Higgins was hit numerous times. He had to jetison his cargo. A storm was over Luang Prabang when they got back, but they had no choice except to land.

They tried the mission again a few days later. This time Kanach insisted that they go in high despite the threat of MiGs if picked up on radar. Rhyme was in a Twin Otter, monitoring the enemy radar system. They got in OK and accomplished their mission. On the return, MiGs came out.
Kanach dumped the nose of the helicopter and they tested the speed limits of the S-58T. That night, they did not manage to have the usual post-mission party at the Wolverine.

Special projects was structured under Abadie. He was not always directly involved but he always knew what was going on. Abadie and Ford made daily after-lunch visits to Glerum's office, usually just to sit and chat. When a project came up, there was a more formalized discussion with the planning team in Glerum's office (headed by an ex-Korean War POW who died of a heart attack on the way back to the US). The planning team did the intelligence gathering and analysis of the enemy situation. After they proposed the flight plan, Ford would work with the planners to iron out any problems. The crews would then be brought in and formally briefed in Ford's presence. The planning team also would immediately debrief crews after the mission. The system worked well. Ford would like to believe that the missions were worth the risk.