1971
(January - May)

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

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[US Senate Subcommittee reports that Thai troops are being training at Camp Saritsana (Pitts Camp), a 50-acre site that lies 15 miles east of the district capital of Phitsanulok in northern Thailand. These are mainly northern Thai who speak a dialect similar to the Hmong [sic] and are easily integrated into Vang Pao's forces. They are being trained by US Special Forces under CIA supervision. The CIA designed the program along the lines of the one for the Hmongs. The CIA pays for training, provides salaries, allowances, death benefits, etc. for troops.]

Ingham, Jan. 7, 1993: Perhaps the Thai troops initially brought into the program were northern Thai, but not later on. "As I remember it they came from all over Thailand." There was no attempt to integrate the Thais into VP's forces. "The Thai formations were entirely separate and included no Hmong. The program was only loosely designed along the lines of the Hmong program - at least as far as the TO&E went. The Thais were organized into larger battalions (550 men) and were more heavily equipped than were the Hmongs."

Hugh Tovar, March 13, 1992: The first use of the Thai irregulars came in January 1971 when two battalions were sent in to hold a road junction along Route 23 in MR IV. The NVA launched a night frontal assault and lost 137 KIA to a single Thai fatality.
Ingham: The first two battalions were BC 601 and BC 602. This first action took place on the Bolovens Plateau. "The one Thai who got killed got so excited in the action that he jumped up on top of his bunker and was firing his rifle from the hip just like he had seen John Wayne do in the movies."

Major John R. Spey, ETR, 22 April 1971: Spey was AOC commander at Pakse from 5 Dec 70 to 22 Apr 71. He notes that the enemy's dry season offensive got off to a slow start in MR IV. In December, there was an assault on PS22. The enemy's next effort came in January. "On 8 Jan 71, the NVA launched a three pronged attack against the camp supported by heavy mortar and possibly 2 ineffective armed vehicles. US and RLAf gunships were present. The garrison held and counted 139 KIA the following day. Best intel indicates that 2 enemy battalions were decimated in that effort with a third also suffering heavily. With these initial setbacks the [dry season] offensive never reached the level expected.

[Lofgren & Sexton, Air War in Northern Laos, April-November 1971:

Background: By presidential directive, the US ambassador to Laos was responsible for "overall direction, coordination and supervision" of military operations in the country. He consulted with his country team: air attaché (ARMA), army attaché (ARMA), CIA, and Requirements Office of USAID. The ambassador, in consultation with his country team and the Royal Lao government, developed overall political and military objectives and parameters. He had to give final approval to all large scale plans before they could be implemented. "Although all plans for military operations in Laos had to be approved by the Ambassador, his approval did not guarantee their full implementation."

There were five Air Operations Centers (AOC) in Laos under ARMA, one for each military region. They were manned by 21 personnel on TDY from Eglin. The code name for the AOC's was Palace Dog. Actual control of airstrike was by 21 Raven FACs and by Lao/Thai Forward Air Guides (given six days of training at Udorn and assigned to each of Vang Pao's battalions).

The CIA organized, trained, equipped, paid, and controlled the irregular forces. CIA staff planned and directed the employment of these forces and coordinated their operations with regional commanders. The staff was composed largely of former military men. The USAF considered these people "weak in air operations." CIA "for all intents and purposes controlled the ground war." CIA
developed ground plan with occasional [Glerum: "Very occasional."] input from ARMA and AIRA. CIA "placed almost unlimited confidence in the Ambassador’s ability to get the necessary air support." [Glerum: "Yes."] This confidence usually was justified. The ambassador could - and did on occasion - go directly to CINCPAC, JCS, and State to bring pressure on 7AF for the necessary resources.

In 1969, irregular forces totalled 33,000: MRI, 5,000; MRII, 16,000; MRIII, 5,000, MRIV, 7,000. (In addition, 37,000 FAN/FAR and 58,000 NVA/PL). The irregulars bore the brunt of the fighting. In 1969, the Hmong were reorganized into Guerrilla Battalions of approximately 300 men (three companies of 100 men) and Mobile Groups (GM) of three to six battalions. There also were smaller, independent units. The Hmong fought the NVA in these larger, conventional units for the first time in 1969 and were decimated. Regular Thai units were sent to Laos in 1969 to stem the NVA drive on Muong Soi and Long Tieng. They were replaced by volunteers recruited from the Royal Thai Army. The US provided all equipment. Also, equipment was supplied to Thailand to replace troops serving in Laos on a one-to-one basis. The volunteers were sent to the CIA training center at Koke Kathiem, where they were organized into battalions and GMs. By April 1971, there were 12 Thai battalions serving in Laos (one battalion took over 60 percent casualties defending Long Tieng). [Glerum, 2/15/93, says that he doesn’t recall any casualties that high.]

[Ingham: "There Thai volunteers were not all recruited from the Thai Army. The officers and NCOs were from the Army but the troops came from all kinds of places. A few came from the army as they were being discharged from their obligated service but most were off the street. At the beginning of the program the officer and NCO supply was plentiful and there was no problem getting them to volunteer for the program. As time went on and it became clear that one could get killed in this business, the supply and the quality really tailed off. The higher numbered battalions - those over BC 609 - had noticeably weaker cadres of officers and NCOs.

I am wondering which battalion took over 60% casualties at Long Tieng??? One of the early ones went on a sweep north and west of 20A and really got their butt kicked. Maybe it was them? It was at that point that we began to realize that the Thais were not going to be capable of much in the way of offensive operations in the mountains of Laos."

CIA/Embassy plan passes via AIRA to 7/13AF. 7/13AF then prepared air support package for 7AF.
TACAIR for Laos was under the operational control of 7AF. TACAIR had responsibility both for the interdiction of enemy supply routes and direct support of indigenous forces. 7AF tended to view direct air support in terms of the war in Vietnam and to emphasize interdiction. The link between the embassy and 7AF was the deputy commander 7/13. MGEN Andrew J. Evans was deputy commander 7/13 from October 1970 to June 1971. MGEN DeWitt R. Searles was 7/13 from July 1971 to September 1972. GEN Lucius D. Clay, Jr., commanded 7AF from September 1970 to July 1971. GEN John D. Lavelle commanded 7AF from August 1971 to April 1972.

Evans had a "firm set of relationships" with Ambassador Godley and GEN Clay, and he exercised considerable influence over the conduct of the war in northern Laos. "During the tenure of General Evans, 7/13AF tended to make recommendations in consonance with 7AF views. As Commander of 7AF, General Clay gave General Evans considerable latitude in his advisory role."

GEN Lavelle (August 1971) exercised more direct control over Barrel Roll, reducing Searles' freedom of action. Searles saw his role as accepting CIA/AIRAF plans and translating requirements into specific proposals acceptable to 7AF (although he had his own view about proper use of airpower in Laos). He had frequent contacts with Godley and tried to attend the ambassador's weekly staff meeting in Vientiane, which was a forum for the informal exchange of views. There also was a Tuesday afternoon tactical briefing conducted by the CIA Udorn.

During the 1970-71 enemy dry season offensive, 10-12,000 NVA from two divisions had driven the Hmong into 20A and held positions along Skyline Ridge. The February 1971 the offensive was halted by intensive air support and the arrival of reinforcements, including 12 Thai irregular battalions (one of which took over 60 percent casualties). USAF sorties during the height of the siege reached 60 per day. Normally, sorties consisted of 40 F-4s and 4 A-1s fraged to Ravens to be used against TIC and troops concentrations with the "Raven Box" (a geographical area 15 to 30 kms north and east of Long Tieng). At night, 4 AC-119s were fraged for air support, with occasional AC-130s diverted. The enemy also had Ban Na (LS-15) under siege. The fighting stabilized in early April 1971, as the weather closed in.

In April 1971, the mood in Washington was "one of withdrawal and disengagement." "Any offensive operations which might appear to be dragging the United States deeper into the war were viewed with the greatest concern. The NVA was "stronger than ever." Since 1969, the NVA had been
developing supply bases inside Laos and were now able to maintain larger forces in the field during the wet season. (Major, well-defended supply bases at Ban Ban and Xieng Khouangville.)

Also, there had been a political/financial decision in 1971 to limited US air support for Southeast Asia to 10,000 TACAIR (including Navy), 1,000 B-52, and 750 gunship sorties a month (effective at the beginning of the new fiscal year on July 1, 1971). These represented a reduction of 50 percent from the previous fiscal year. Under OPLAN 730, 70 percent of these sorties would go to Steel Tiger, and 10 percent each to Barrel Roll, Cambodia, and Vietnam. For Barrel Roll, this amounted to 32 sorties a day (down from 60 a day).

Washington's objective in Laos in 1971 was to maintain a neutral buffer state between Thailand and Vietnam/China. There would be no major wet season offensive beyond clearing the approaches to Luang Prabang and Long Tieng. The remaining effort would go to preparing strong defensive positions southeast of the PDJ. However, the Prime Minister and the King wanted more positive action, causing a gulf between US and Laotian national policy. In any event, "For both emotional and military reasons, Vang Pao was determined to conduct an offensive." He planned to sweep across the PDJ and establish strong positions in the high ground north and east of the PDJ, then raid the enemy supply depot at Ban Ban. And he wanted to do this before air support dropped off on July 1. General Evans favored using USAF assets in an air campaign against enemy supply areas, but his recommendation was not followed. "The Embassy was in an awkward position. On the one hand, it reflected the Washington policy of no offensive; but on the other, it approved Vang Pao's plan to launch an offensive." As VP intended to carry out his plans with or without US support, Godley believed that under the circumstances it would be best to support him. There followed a difference of view over TACAIR. The Embassy/CIA wanted to "dedicate" sorties to Raven FACs, allowing them to select targets. However, this would violate the Air Force doctrine of "centralized command and control." 7AF was reluctant to issue a "blank check" for a war over which it had no control. (Evans tended to lean toward 7AF view; Searles support Embassy.)

April 15: VP launches counterattack to clear Skyline Ridge.
April 18: Single raider battalion airlifted to Pha Phai (LS-65), east of PDJ. The group then moved overland to interdict Route 4 between Xieng Khouangville and the PDJ. The battalion stages several spectacular ambushes at first, then launches occasional raids.
Late April: Although there are still some 3,000 NVA in the area, Long Tieng is sufficiently secure for the Ravens to remain overnight.

May 20: NVA attack Bouam Long (LS-32). VP sends in reinforcements by air. USAF introduces PAVE MACE - a device that enable gunships to locate enemy positions through the use of ground beacons. The NVA eventually withdraws after heavy fighting.

June 1: First phase of major offensive to secure PDJ. 700-man Hmong forces moves out of LS-204 and reaches the southern tip of the PDJ by June 4, then move up the western edge of the Plain toward Phou Seu. The Hmong capture 800 tons of supplies during the first week. On June 11, 150 reinforcements arrive by air. The CIA summarizes on June 15: "Overall objective is to get the enemy back from the doorstep of Long Tieng before the next enemy dry season offensive."

June 22: Enemy begins to withdraw from Long Tieng area, then abandons Ban Na and remaining positions in southwest of PDJ. Seige of LS-32 lifted in early July. Enemy gradually withdraws to east toward well-defended supply bases at Ban Ban and Xiang Khouangville. "Vang Pao’s success had been due largely to the continued high level of air support and to the mobility afforded him by the use of helicopters, both Air America and USAF."

July 1: VP begins second phase of offensive. He brings artillery forward and establishes Mustang battery of 2,105mm and 4 155mm guns just forward of Finger Ridge. VP drive reaches its zenith in early August, when it secures the airfield at Xiang Khouangville. By this time, the NVA had sent two regiments to defend its strategic areas. The enemy counterattacks on August 12 and drives back VP’s forces. The Hmong offensive stalls in the middle of the PDJ.

August 28: Message from JCS requiring Washington’s approval for any multi-battalion operation. Plans must be submitted 10 days in advance. The concern is that offensive operations might "embarrass the Administration’s disengagement policy."

As the wet season ends, VP has 10 irregular battalions (5,129 men), 10 Thai battalions (8 infantry and 2 artillery - 3,095 men), 4 battalions of FAR infantry (645 men), plus a company of commando raiders at Long Tieng.

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. Around April 1971, the responsibilities of 7/13
"changed suddenly." 7/13 became more concerned with monitoring and supervising operations and logistics in Thailand. However, 7/13 maintained target responsibility in BARREL ROLL and provided support for ground actions in that area. "We worked very closely with the Air Attache's people in Vientiane and not only attempting to get 7th Air Force to provide tactical air support to hit enemy ground forces but also in obtaining targets that would hit enemy supplies or suspected storage areas."

Targets in BARREL ROLL nominated by 7/13AF intelligence, director of operations, or by air attache's staff in VTE (which also had intelligence and operations sections). Any target nominated in northern Laos had to be approved by the ambassador (to ensure no damage to civilian population and structures). 7/13 would then nominate target to 7AF. "7th Air Force Intelligence would make their assessment of it, sometime agreeing and sometime not, although very infrequent they did not agree with us. Their problem with the allocation of air power over the whole broad spectrum, that is, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. There was just so much of the pie and that pie could be cut in so many ways to send sorties, so they would assign priorities. And they, in the final analysis, must, in my opinion at least, be the one who determine which target would be struck." For example, a request to 7AF for 30 F-4 sorties might include a request for 20 sorties to be given to Ravens to support ground action; 4 sorties for hard targets (a cave or supply cache); and 6 sorties with laser or optically guided bombs to hit roads. "But 7th Air Force allocated the sorties." With respect to priorities, approximately 60 to 80 percent of total air resources were directed at interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Gallacher notes that total air resources were inadequate in 1971. USAF had withdrawn the F-100s and UC-123 flare ships, and was "making adjustments" in F-4 strength. Also, withdrawal of B-57s was being considered. "Our whole total inventory of aircraft platforms was decreasing at a time when our activity was increasing." RLAF provided support in MR II that was "extremely good and extremely effective," but their resources consisted of approximately 33 flyable T-28s which could carry only four 250-pound bombs. "Back during February and March 1970 when Vang Pao was about to be overrun around Long Tieng, the Royal Lao 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. USAF because of withdrawal and because of emphasis on trail interdiction would allocate only limited number of sorties in MR II.

"However, back in February and March [1971], at the same
time again when Vang Pao was about to be overrun, they increased the sortie rate up to between forty to sixty aircraft a day. These were F-4s going into that area and Vang Pao had been driven so far back, by this time to practically his headquarters at Long Tieng, that they established TFR boxes where they could drop night and day and these was a tremendous amount of ordnance dropped in these areas. In my opinion, U.S. tactical air power saved the day.

Gallacher concerned with "too heavy a fascination with killing trucks along the trails in Laos." During the period January-March 1971, trucks kills by AC-130s, AC-119s, B-57, and fighters were approached an estimated 10,000, with 10,000 damaged. Yet sensors still detecting the movement of 2,000 to 2,500 trucks a night. "Well, there just aren't that many trucks." "But I personally felt that more air should have been provided for protection of the ground forces in northern Laos. I feel that we are obligated to those people and I feel that we must lend them every help that we can, but I feel that the people down in Saigon, the 7th Air Force, are so far removed from this particular area that they do not see the problems. If we do not improve or increase our assistance by providing more tac air up in Laos, I don't really see how General Vang Pao could hold off much longer."

[Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos": During December 1970, PAVN easily able to reoccupy PDJ with elements of 312 and 316 Divisions. By March 1971, PAVN had greatest number of troops to date around PDJ: 148 and 174 Regiments of 316 Division around Long Tieng; 165 and 209 Regiments of 312 Division along western rim of PDJ; 866 Independent Regiment west of PDJ; 766 Independent Regiment along northeastern corner of PDJ. "Again, Hanoi had ordered the capture of Long Tieng, but again the government defenders were able to hold back the Vietnamese." During April, anticipating rainy season, PAVN withdraw bulk of forces northeast of PDJ, leaving only 148 Regiment in vicinity of Long Tieng. With onset of rainy season, government decided that unlike previous years it would heavily defend PDJ. "Several dozen 105mm and 155mm howitzers were airlifted onto the plain, along with eight light infantry battalions and an equipment number of irregular Groupement Mobiles."]

[Laos: April 1971: James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, visit Laos from April 22 to May 4, 1971. "Most observers in Laos say that from the military point of view the situation there is growing steadily worse and the initiative seems clearly in the hands of the enemy." There are no plans for retaking the two-thirds of the country now under enemy control; there is only a hope "not
too firmly held in some quarters" that the one-third under
government control can be held. (1)

"The war in Lao is run in most respects by the Embassy in Vientiane." This consumes a considerable portion of the
time of senior officers of the Mission. A daily "Operations Meeting" at the Embassy last generally from 9 A.M. to
10:30 A.M. The ambassador presides. This meeting in
devoted in large part "to detailed briefings by the Army and
Air Attaches and the CIA Station Chief which cover
practically every military engagement of the preceding 24
hours. Air operations are followed very closely, even down
to the types of ordnance employed, as are the details of the
deployment and support of Royal Lao Army and irregular
forces." (2)

Since July 1970, the enemy in the north has extended
his control to the western edge of the PDJ, past Muong Soui
and San Thong. In the south, the enemy has pushed further
west following Lam Son 719 [Feb. 8 - April 6, 1971], taking
Muong Phalane and constructing a new network of trails. NVA
now holds entire Bolovens Plateau, with the few remaining
Lao towns on the western edge captured in the past few days.
"In sun, over 60 percent of Laos is no longer under Lao
Government control." (4) In the weeks preceding our visit,
Luang Prabang was under virtual seige, but the enemy now has
pulled back. Also, during our visit, Long Tieng was under
rocket attack, receiving an average of 30 per week. Both US
and Lao officials told us "they would consider the loss of
Long Tieng to be a disastrous psychological blow and hence
had determined it should be defended." Vang Pao was
"adamant on the point" as Long Tieng represents "virtually
the last foothold of the Meo people in northern Laos." (5)

[They note developments reported in the press May 4 -
August 3: NVA surface-to-air missiles appear in southern
Laos; enemy has developed road system into the PDJ which
will enable them to operate during the rainy season; MiGs
have been sighted over Lao territory for the first time.
Friendly forces number between 95,150 and 97,650, with
enemy forces between 115,000 and 139,000. It has been
increasingly difficult during the past year to maintain
adequate levels of manpower in the FAR, as there are few
enlistments and no national conscription. From time to
time, manpower requirements are set by royal decree and
quotas levied on the provinces. "What follows is said by
some to resemble a press gang operation in which only those
without political connections end up in the Army." (5)

Estimate of enemy as of April 20 (using 139,000):
100,000 NVA and 39,000 PL. This compares to March 1968
estimate of 40,045 NVA and 51,645 PL. NVA has increased in
forces in the south by three regiments (15,000 men) since
Lam Son 719. About 80 percent of NVA are in the south in
MRs III and IV. The NVA is "carrying the brunt of the
fighting and taking most of the casualties."
Between January 1968 and the end of April 1971, irregular forces lost 8,020 KIA (6,873 in MRs I and II), while accounting for 22,726 enemy losses. FAR suffered 3,664 KIA, while killing 8,522 enemy. The brunt of irregular losses have fallen on tribal groups such as Meo. (Vang Pao’s forces have suffered 3,272 KIA and 5,426 WIA since 1967. As a result, 40 percent of his forces are now Lao Thung and not Meo. (16)) This is one of the main reasons why Thai irregulars have been brought into MR II. (6)

The sortie rate of 7/13 AF provides a rough index to intensity of the air war. From a peak rate of 14,000 in January 1970, it has declined steadily, especially in northern Laos, to 8,299 in April 1971.

Irregular troops are the most effective military force in Laos. Previously known as Arme Clandestine, then Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs), now Bataillons Guerriers (BGs), they are trained, equipped, supported, advised, and to the great extent organized by the CIA. They are "the cutting edge" of Lao military forces. (14) The irregular forces provide needed flexibility and can be moved from region to region. They are better disciplined. They do most of the patrolling, ambushing, and attacking. The men receive regular pay and rations (unlike the FAR), and they are evacuated by Air America when wounded. "CIA ‘Case Officers’ supervise the training and advise on operations of these irregular units, but we were told that they do not accompany them on operations." (15) The program began first with the Meo in MR II. It now exists in all MRs except V. Total number of irregulars in fiscal 1967 was 37,800; in fiscal 1968, 39,800. The number have since been reduced "because of attrition, principally desertion, heavy casualties, and the financial restraints incurred by budgetary limitations." (15)

[Dan Gamalin had arrived in Southeast Asia in June 1968. He was stationed at VTE with a majority of the kickers (there were 2 or 3 men at Udorn and Saigon). They tended to be divided between ex-smoke jumpers and ex-Special Forces. AAM wanted ex-paratroopers with a minimum of 25 jumps. At first, he flew C-123s and Caribous, hailing mainly rice, and with more landed loads than airdrops (depending on situation and weather). He flew many night drops in the Caribou. Strobe lights were used to mark the drop area. He received $50 for the first drop of the night and $20 for each additional drop (they usually made three). He was trained by Bailey. He later took C-130 training on Okinawa and flew air drops out of Takhli into Laos. At Nuggent was an excellent C-130 pilot; he could tell by one look if the load was wrong. They dropped using 4’ x 8’ plywood pallets, each pallet holding about 8000 pounds. The]
January 20, 1971

“Report of Accident Investigation,” UH-34D, H-78,” CIA Corporate Files, Box 60, UTD

Capt. Foster, F/M Cruz, and trainee F/M Boston were working out of 20A. They had made 23 flights/shuttles, carrying cargo and passengers. On the 24th flight, they were unloading cargo when an explosion occurred, followed by fire and a secondary explosion. The pilot and f/m Cruz managed to evacuate the aircraft, suffering serious burns. F/M Boston and four locals were killed. The pad was on the south side of a ridgeline at an altitude of 4,000 feet. The cause of the explosion is undetermined.
C-130 had two tracks and could carry about 40,000 pounds. They usually dropped a pallet at a time, but could drop the entire track if under fire. A nylon strap held the load just before drop. It would stretch and was easy to cut. He dropped on intercom message: Standby. Standby. DROP!

The situation was hazardous from late 1971 to early 1973. They carried more and more ammo. The situation was especially bad around LS-32 in late 1972; the position was surrounded and they often received antiaircraft fire.

There was a labor dispute in 1973. Dick Smith represented the kickers during a strike. Huster handled the situation poorly. Gamelin, Lechtman, and others were fired. The guys on vacation (Hasenfaus and Jacobson) were retained. The company hired a few other Americans after this, but most of the time they used Thais and Lao. The firing left a good deal of bitterness.

January 8, 1971
E. H. Richmond to VFPO: Re FEPA discussions - "C-123 special project is causing crew scheduling problems, disgruntled crews, and thereby highlighting a sensitive area. Unfortunately, true nature of mission is now widespread subject of conversation."

January 18, 1971
Casterlin to parents: We are in the process of putting twin turbine engines in the H-34s. "Double Muscle."

January 20, 1971
UH-34 H78 on ground at Tango Victor Pad, 4 kms south of Sam Thong. About one minute after arrival, while offloading supplies, explosion caused aircraft to fall on its side. Pilot W.L. Foster, T/FM R. G. Boston (serious injuries), and FM E. M. Cruz.

January 26, 1971
Washington Post reports that Vince Shields, in charge of CIA operations at Long Tieng, and Station Chief Larry Devlin have both recently been transferred. [Transfer took place in October 1970.]

February 1971
John D. Ford replaces Philip C. Goddard as CP R/W UTH.

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

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.

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 overloading. 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.

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 Pakee got a dedicated crew. Ed Reid was there for a long time. [Knight: Reid was at Savannahet.]

[O'Dell, Jan. 5, 1993: "John Ford was a good guy. Danny Carson was simply outstanding; he was one of the few pilot that were 'project oriented pilots.' I don't remember anything about weight restrictions. Most of the case officers were not well enough acquainted with the a helo could and couldn't do to argue with the pilots about weight."

[Elder, 2/5/92: Elder was assistant to Ford. He had a good relationship with Pat Landry and would often visit Landry in the evening to iron out problems between pilots and case officers. Elder found Glerum a bit stand-offish.]

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 would 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. Glorim 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 as 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 o put them below the ridgeline for part of the trip outbound. It was somewhat unusual 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 15 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. Rhyne 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.

[Weitz, March 28, 1992: The S-58T program began with a small group of pilots. They flew deep infil/exfil missions past Dien Bien Phu and sometimes into China. They also placed electronic counters on the Trail. One missions involving taking out prisoners, including a high ranking NVA officer. The people involved at first included Ford, Knight, Kanach, Pearson, Reid, and Higgins. Two of the S-58T were painted black in the beginning (with Loran C and IR gear), but this was changed when it was decided that the black paint drew too much attention to the aircraft.]

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). [Glerum: May be talking about Ken Weber, who died of a heart attack some years later. He was a team member, not head.] 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 brief crews after the mission. The system worked well. Ford would like to believe that the missions were worth the risk.

[Glerum, 2/15/93, on Knight's comment about Abadie's lack of interest in operational matters: "Abadie had a huge operation to run. He kept himself well informed but usually deferred to Rhyne and Ford on operations."]

February 11, 1971
XOXO: C-123K, 5543124, PIC J. H. Ackley, nose gear collapsed and penetrated fuselage upon landing at Ban La Tee (c.60 miles east of Pakse on the Bolovens), causing extensive damage.
Stan Wilson was assigned to head a recovery team of seven maintenance personnel to repair aircraft. The area was in danger of enemy attack.
Neil Hansen to FEPA, "Captain's Trip Report," February 17, 1971: Hansen deadheaded to PS-22 on February 14 to fly out the damaged aircraft. "While enroute I held serious doubts that the aircraft would be ready due to the extensive on site repair that was required. Since having been involved in a number of aircraft recoveries with Air America, and experience as a wrench bender myself I would have bet money we wouldn't recover the aircraft that day so I was prepared to RON at L11. Upon arriving at the site my suspicions were confirmed that amount of work remaining to be done would make recovery impossible that day. Recovery the next day would be doubtful since the customer at PS-22 was quite certain the enemy would try to destroy the aircraft that night." Conditions "unbelievably dusty, hot, and under constant threat of enemy action." Nonetheless, the team went to work and did "one of the finest jobs of innovating, and field repair I have ever seen." The plane was ready to fly just before sunset. Early the next morning, the customer at PS-22 reported that the field had been hit that night by enemy fire, and the aircraft surely would have been destroyed. "The maint. recovery team undoubtedly saved this aircraft from destruction through outstanding professional abilities and a lot of good old fashioned sweat."

J. A. Peasall, manager, technical services, Laos, to Wilson, March 29, 1971: Recovery of C-123 accomplished under "hazardous and primitive conditions." "The swift professional manner in which the recovery was made undoubtedly saved the aircraft from loss by unfriendly action."

February 12, 1971 (m)
Rhyne and King complete DHC-6 ground school at deHavilland/Canada; they will do their flight training in Arizona.

February 14, 1971
USAF fighter-bomber accidentally bombs Long Tieng during enemy attack. {see Robbins} PL/NVA attacks beaten off in March with intense B-52/fighter-bomber strikes.

[Bangkok World reports mortar attack and ground probe of Long Tieng began at 3 a.m., February 14. A Thailand-based F-4 mistakenly bombed Long Tieng, causing heavy casualties. Bombs dropped on CIA compound, burning down barracks, and wounding at least one CIA agent. NVA have seized the ridgeline on the south side of the valley. Dozens of wounded at hospital at Ban Son (LS-272), 12 miles south of Long Tieng. Air America STOL planes, each carrying a half dozen stretchers, are shuttling between 20A and 272. Vang Pao has made urgent plea to VTE for reinforcements. Elements of 2 NVA divisions (6,000 men) has surrounded Long
Tieng. -- Later report erroneously says bomb error caused 200 casualties and destroyed Air America club and restaurant.

Dan Williams: Robbins account of incident is generally accurate. There were no US casualties except Shep Johnson who picked up a piece of shrapnel. Williams drove the water tanker to the Customer area the next morning and helped to put out the fires.

Mike Ingham: "I arrived in 20A for the first time the morning after the accidental bombing by the Air Force. I must admit to some second thoughts as I walked up the road from the main ramp into the smoking wreckage of the compound. This had all the earmarks of another 'What did I get myself into now?' scenario. The Bangkok World rendition of the action is highly fanciful. As I think you know, a few CBU pellets in the butt of Shep Johnson was the extent of the American casualties and I do not think that there were many among the locals either."

Project CHECO, "Short Rounds," 15 July 1972 [courtesy Tim Castle]: "On a schedule night escort mission for an AC-130 gunship, Koller 01 and another F-4D aircraft from the 8 Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW), Ubon RTAFB, Thailand, were diverted to the enemy attack at Lima Site 20A. Koller 01 had been flying approximately four hours and 45 minutes prior to the incident." Airstrike controlled by FAC from ground position within HQ compound. Poor radio communications. Target located in area of high ground approximately 800 meters southwest of compound, marked by tracers from .50 caliber machine gun. Ordnance landed approximately 800 meters short of target at 0610H: 2 CBU-24 bombs. 20A under heavy enemy attack for several hours prior to incident, receiving incoming rounds from B-40, 40mm and 107mm rockets. One killed and 7 wounded as result of CBU. Major James E. McSharrow, assistant army attaché: "Suddenly without warning there were multiple explosions all around the bunker area - on top of it - everywhere. Someone yelled, 'CBU - get back to the bunkers,' and for the next 30 minutes CBU bombs exploded throughout our position. I saw one MEQ soldier killed about 50 yards away by the CBU."

Report concludes that pilot likely selected wrong target; dawn, poor visibility in haze, several fires burning, poor communications, fatigue, lack of complete target briefing - all contributed to mistake.

O'Dell, Jan. 5, 1993: O'Dell arrived in Long Tieng the morning after the attack. The army officer at Long Tieng for most of this period was LTC Charlie Brewington. He never heard of McSharrow.
New York Times, February 16: Reports reinforcements and supplies flown into Long Tieng on February 15. Several hundred NVA attacked before dawn behind barrages of rocket and mortar fire, reaching a base area near the airfield. NVA commandos withdrew shortly after 6 a.m. At least 21 enemy killed.

February 17, 1971
XOXO: UH34D H-71 PIC Richard P. Caron, Fred P. Frahm, F/M V. T. Champanil. Aircraft declared MAYDAY. Next report that aircraft down due unfriendly action. Crew and one passenger picked up. Vicinity LS-203 [Nam Bac]. Caron received minor injuries with abrasions on nose and bruises on body. Frahm received cuts and bruises. Flight mechanic serious: "Puncture wound with retained projectile left upper chest and lacerated wound above left knee." Aircraft received minor battle damage. "Unfriendly action during hover landing resulted in power plant failure about 30 feet altitude and forced landing on pad edge. Flight mechanic believed injured prior landing."

Caron to WML, May 10 and 28 1992: Caron arrived Luang Prabang on February 15 and became senior pilot on station. On February 16, Caron accompanied a CASI Beech Baron pilot to the Nam Bac area, and they spoke on the radio to people who were going to be picked up in an exfil mission. "I recall like it was yesterday, he was so calm! Too calm for me for someone who was supposed to be on the run! I said to [the Baron pilot], 'He is too calm, almost like he is already captured and has a gun to his head.'" They identified an approximate pickup point for the next day, then returned to Luang Prabang.
(There were 5-6 people to be picked up. The team had been put in to take a look at the road the Chinese were building. According to Fred Costs, the team had been discovered but had gotten away and were on the run. The only danger expected was if the "bad guys" were in the area at pickup time. "Hence the need for speed when contact was finally made for pick up.")
(Re cover: Whenever possible, there was cover for infil/exfil, either T-28s or A-1s. "But if the 'cover' failed to show the 'monkey' was always on our back to 'abort' or proceed with the mission. Most guys would not abort - figuring all the effort already expended plus it made them look 'chicken."

Two helicopters were involved on February 17. Caron/Frahm/Champanil and an interpreter were on Hotel 71 and would make the pickup; Frank Stergar/John Ferris [sic] would fly SAR. "Now let me make one point clear. The ONLY mission for the SAR bird is to pick up crew if anything goes wrong! The chopped is empty! His job is ultimately and potentially the most important of all!"
As Caron approached the DZ, he saw smoke and made radio contact. The DZ was in the middle of elephant grass. "We were about 30-40 feet above ground level when I saw half a dozen people suddenly jump up and the small LZ burst into smoke from gun-fire (couldn't hear too much due to engine noise). I recall saying 'Son of a Bitch.'" Caron called for the SAR chopper. "However, with the engine out and rotor not turning, in order to get radio power, the switch must be moved from the ON/G GENERATOR position to BTRY (to get battery power). Hence, no one heard me. However, had the SAR pilot been doing his job properly, he would have descended about me during my approach, and maintained 1500 feet above ground level or so, circling to keep our aircraft in sight at all time. Had he done this, he would have undoubtedly seen the crew depart our helicopter."

("I lost power immediately due to the amount of fire power directed at us. To understand why we survived you must understand that as the helicopter slows, or decelerates, the nose comes up! In this case, the nose was a 600-pound mass of metal - the engine! The aircraft came down about 75 feet from the LZ.)"

"The next thing I recall with any clarity was standing outside the helicopter with my right shoulder hurting like hell (I think I dived out the window, which was about 15 feet above the ground), looking at Fred, who was bleeding above the left eye. A bullet had hit his helmet causing a piece of the plastic helmet to fly off and cut his eyebrow. Fred gave me his Uzi since he could not see clearly. We all looked up for our SAR bird, in this case we REALLY had to look up! He was still at 8000' (or whatever it was) and had not come down at all! It was then I realized we were in trouble. About that time several bullets whistled over our heads! I saw then the the flight mechanic, Champani, had a shoulder wound (later we found out that it severed the nerve), and perhaps a small thigh wound - I'm not sure about that - but he was mobile."

With bullets cracking over their heads, the crew took off into the elephant grass. They soon came across a trail. "That scared the hell out of me; it meant people." Caron moved off the path into the elephant grass. "You sort of jump up on it to knick it down as you fall forward. Your measure progress about three feet at a time. All the time you are 'eating' dust and the sharp edged grass is cutting your face and hands."

(Caron had not put his emergency radio in his survival vest. "A mistake I never made again, I assure you!") Caron thought that the other three people were behind him, but when he reached a clearing, he was alone (they had turned and went down the trail). He also realized that he had lost the clip for the Uzi. He reached a small hill, about a quarter-mile away, took off his blue AAM shirt, then used his white tee shirt to try and attract attention.
one saw him, perhaps because they were looking at H-71, which was sitting on a hilltop about 1/2 mile away. There were now an A-1E and several F-4s overhead, hitting targets to the east and north. The F-4s were taking advantage of "confusing coordinates" to hit the Chinese road along the Lao-Chinese border. Shortly after this, a Raven came over. "He perhaps more than anyone else identified the four of us on the ground." The Raven then assisted in the pickup. The fire had died down by now, and Caron began to work his way back to H-71.

As Caron headed toward the downed chopper, the Raven flew low over him, and Caron knew that he had been spotted. An H-34 came by and picked him up in the rescue sling. The flight mechanic, Bill Long, told him that Hal Miller had flown from LS-272, south of 20A, after refuelling. "They had come direct, over enemy territory and all, something we almost never did!" Caron spoke with Miller over the headset. Miller said that Ted Cash had come from 20A in a UH-1H and picked up Fred Frahm and the interpreter. About this time, Miller spotted smoke from a fire than Champasak had started and picked him up.

"Thus was the SAR pick-up completed, some 3 1/2 hours later than it should have been if Frank Stergar had showed any guts and done his job!"

Caron has nothing but praise for Cash and especially Miller. A short time later, Miller pickup up a downed USAF pilot late a night with weather closing in after a USAF CH-53 had declined to go in. (See 22 April 1972) However, his anger toward Stergar lingers through the years.

(Caron was USMA 1956. He served two tours in Vietnam. He elected to resign in December 1967 - he was a major at the time. He had about 100 hours in Chinooks in Vietnam. Hal Miller arrived in the 147th just as Caron left in late 1966. He came to Air America in February 1968 with 2500 F/W and 1500 R/W hours. He flew Volpars in Saigon 1968-69 before going to Udorn in August 1969.)

Frank Stergar to WML (tape), May 25, 1992:

Around February 10, 1971, on a previous tour of L-54, I inserted a team of six men into a helicopter landing site at TJ-5827. The area was known to the team leader but there was no cleared space to set down. Stergar selected a spot on a slope of an overgrown slash/burn area with new bamboo about 10 feet high. He hovered at 2700 RPM while his blades nicked the top of the foliage. The team members dropped 4-5 feet to the ground. This was a single-pilot mission without cover. It had been brief and dispatched by Fred Costs, the air operations customer at Luang Prabang.

During the next week, Costs had become suspicious of the radio contacts with the team and suspected that they might be under the influence of unfriendlies. An extraction mission had been briefed several days prior to February 17
but then had been postponed several times. A Baron had made several recon flights over the area.

About noon on February 17, Costs ordered the mission to go ahead. There would be two Lao-piloted T-28s to provide cover. Caron, as senior, would make the pickup. LaShomb was to accomplish a related mission at LS-186 (due north of L-54), then accompany the flight to the pickup area. Stergar and training captain T. A. "Tex" Richie were to be SAR.

The three helicopter took off in trail to LS-186, then flew northeast up the Nam Bac Valley to TJ-5827. Caron must have seen the appropriate signal as he went down without hesitation. He had no sooner got into a hover when the grey smoke of enemy fire could be seen on both side of H-71. The rotor slowed, then stopped as the aircraft went down. Stergar circled but could not see any activity due to trees and foliage. Tango leader called on the radio and said that he had the helicopter in sight. Stergar told him to drop his ordnance between the ridgeline and a village to the south (in the vicinity of LS-188), then to hold low as Stergar went in to take a close look. Unfortunately, the two T-28 proceeded to drop their bombs from high altitude. They landed far off the target. The leader then cried out, "I Bingo!" - and left the area. [On two previous occasions, Stergar had had good experiences with Lao-piloted T-28; they performed aggressively in the past, but not this time.]

While this was happening LaShomb was reporting the downed aircraft; however, he inadvertently gave the coordinates for LS-186. H left as his fuel was getting low. Stergar, circling at 1500 feet above the ground, tried to raise the downed crew on the survival radio while Richie looked for smoke, mirrors, or flares; but the downed crew was neither heard nor seen. He did manage to raise a Raven who was en route L-54. The Raven said that he would refuel, then return in about an hour (TP-5827 was 85 SM on a direct line from Luang Prabang).

Stergar continued his search until the Raven arrived. Stergar directed him to the location of the downed helicopter. The Raven went down and was immediately hit by small arms fire. The Raven said that he expected F-4s to arrive on station in about 30 minutes. About this time, Stergar raised on the radio Casterlin in a Bell 205 and Hal Miller in a H-34, who were en route from 20A (about 140 SM away). There still was no visual or radio contact with the downed crew. Stergar was forced to leave when his fuel ran low. He landed at L-54 at about 6 P.M. As it turned out, he landed with enough fuel for another 15-20 minutes of loiter.

Afterthoughts: Would I have done things differently if I had to do the mission again? "Absolutely not!" Although he might have remained in the area another 15 minutes. H-71 clearly was ambushed, and it would have been foolish to have
February 17, 1971

"Report of Aircraft Accident/Incident, UH-34D, H-71," CIA Corporate Files, Box 60, UTD

Caron statement: Upon arrived L-54, customer Fred Costs said to recon two LZs. Three helicopters were involved. When he arrived over the LZ, he found four people with their hands in the air (as instructed). But as he landed, they scattered and the aircraft received automatic fire. The crew dove out. Caron later was picked up by Hal Miller: “A man among men.” F/M Champanil suffered bullet wounds in the shoulder and knee.
flown into the same ambush. He feels strongly that the crew of H-71 made a major error in not wearing their survival vests (he later learned that they had been stored under the flight mechanic's seat).

[Several weeks later, the Raven - Frank Burke - contacted him and asked for a report. Burke apparently was having some problem with his superiors.]

[See Fred Frahm's account of this incident and assessment.]

[See Hal Miller's report on F/M Long.]

Harry R. Casterlin to WML (phone), June 1, 1992:
Casterlin arrived in the area as Stergar was leaving. For a time, he was the only helicopter on site. The Raven went down and could not see anyone in the H-71, which was intact on the ground. As the Raven did not draw any fire, Casterlin went down to take a closer look. He hovered near the helicopter, and it appeared that no one was inside. (Stergar had said that he believed that the crew were either dead or captured). With fuel running low, Casterlin had to leave. He landed at Luang Prabang with the red "low fuel" light on.

February 19, 1971
New York Times article, datelined Vientiane,
February 18: Laotian military sources reported that US has asked Thailand for more troops to shore up defenses on Long Tieng. Recently, 1,600 Thai troops had arrived at Long Tieng to reinforce Thai artillery groups and a security company already there.

February - April 1971
Interview with COL Robert K. McCutchen, 21 Dec 71
[assigned to C-130 Airborne Command and Control Center]: McCutchen recalls that between February and April, the majority of FAC air support went into the Long Tieng area. The hospital at Udorn "looked like a takeoff on MASH." VP is "still hanging in." "I think the only thing that saved him was our air power." [Glerum, 2/12/93, states that air power and Thai ground troops were both critical.]

[McCutchen arrived in Udorn in June 1970 and stayed until March 1971. He was assigned to the 7th Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC), that was concerned primarily with the war in Laos. Air ops in the north were called BARREL ROLL and in the south steel tiger. ABCCC did day and night orbits with the call sign CRICKET during the day and ALLEYCAT at night. They used modified C-130Es. It carried a capsule (made by Ling Temco) that slid in and out of the aircraft. There were 6 to 8 aircraft involved. The]
capsule had 20 radios: UHF/UHF/HF. The C-130 had antennas on the wings that looked like refueling probes on a helicopter. On the bottom, the plane looked like a porcupine. McCutchen often spoke to Forward Air Guides (FAGs). They usually were Lao, but sometimes "you'll talk to a round eyed FAG and I'm sure he's the CIA man out there." "If the situation gets real tight, we wind up talking to an English-speaking FAG." [O'Dell, Jan. 5, 1993: "He's correct about the 'round eyed FAGs.' When it got tight, the case officer was always talking to Cricket or the Raven and was usually the one running the airstrikes. I spoke to Cricket daily."]

There were two operations officers on every flight. One was called the Director of Airborne Battle Staff (DABS) and was a LTC or higher. The other officer, usually a captain or major, was called the Battle Staff Operations Officer (BSOO); he usually had a fighter background. There were four air traffic controllers, with two on duty at one time, and two intelligence specialists who were in constant contract with the FAGs. The FAGs usually needed more rice or ammo. These requests were relayed to Vang Pao’s headquarters at Long Tieng.

ABCCC would handle 4 to 500 sorties in a twelve-hour period during the day. Most missions came out of the 7th Air Force frag shop. Vang Pao had authority to validate targets. "The south was a truck-killing war... In the north it was a people war."

ABCCC was important in SAR and was responsible for most rescues in northern Laos. They monitored 119.1, the Air America frequency. "We monitor Air America and if a pilot went down, the faster you got them out the better our chances were. Very few of us got after he spent a night or two out there."

"The sky was full of Air American helicopters up there and most of the rescues made in BARREL ROLL were made by Air America. . . . Some people badmouthed Air America that they’re overpaid but they earn every penny they get — or in my books — and they did a fine job. The rescued most of our people and they got nothing extra for rescuing a pilot. That’s part of their duty and they zigged in to those hot areas and do it. When they zigged in, they usually zigged in without A-1s. They come in, get them and get out fast. That was our best rescue system."

[O'Dell, Jan. 5, 1993: "One day I was riding with Ed Reid and a F-4 went down somewhere near us. I wanted us to go over and get the pilot. Ed said that all rescues were controlled by KING who was the USAF coordination cell. Ed said that before the air force took over 'we got every USAF pilot we went after!' After KING came about my impression was that everything had to be cleared through him. AAM still got a lot a downed pilots but not like the old days. The pilot in this case was killed by the NVA by the
time the USAF got all their package together and up to the area. We could've gotten him out if they'd let us."

[Ingram, Jan. 7, 1993: "Air Force people were very scarce in 20A other than the Ravens. At this point, I might reveal one of my prejudices from this war - the US Air Force. Aside from the Ravens, they were useless. I would concur with the colonel in his comments that AAM was the best SAR that the AF had in Laos. The official AF SAR operation was too far from the action, too slow to react, and too cautious to be effective. Most of use could not understand why the AF did not station the Jolly Greens out of 20A (at least when it was not under attack) so that they could respond faster to their own pilots in trouble???"]

February 8 - April 6, 1971

Operation Lam Son 719: South Vietnamese troops cross into Laos and attack Ho Chi Minh Trail, aiming at Tchepone (major supply center). Operation bogs down after 16 miles across border. After ARVN withdraws, NVA expands efforts in southern Laos and attempt to secure entire Bolovens Plateau.

Soutchay Vongsavanh, RLG Military Operations, p. 62:
"While Lam Son 719 may have interrupted the Communist supply flow temporarily, it strengthened the North Vietnamese resolve to further expand in southern Laos and remove any possible threat to a constant flow of supplies. This resulted in significant losses to the RLG when the province capital of Khong Sedone and the key Bolovens Plateau town of Pakson were overrun by the North Vietnamese.

...shortly following Lam Son 719, the North Vietnamese significantly upgraded their combat capability in southern Laos, reverting to conventional warfare utilizing regular NVA combat units in regimental attacks supported by long range (122-mm and 130-mm field gun) artillery and, for the first time, armor units in attacks against Lao population centers near the Thai border (Kong Sedone). While it is not certain that Lam Son 719 caused the North Vietnamese leadership to decide on this strategy it certainly must have reinforced their favorable consideration of this course of action. . . .

The year 1970 was thus the turning point in the nature of the war in the Laos panhandle. Concurrent with the greatly increased demand placed on its logistical and replacement system by the expanded and intensified conventional combat in South Vietnam, the NVA faced serious threats to the continued operation of the Ho Chi Minh trail complex in the panhandle. And not only was the trail under constant attack by American air power, but access to South Vietnam by sea - that is, across the beaches of South Vietnam and through the Cambodian ports - was being denied by US-Vietnamese "Market Time" operations by the new Cambodian
government of Lon Nol. Consequently, to avoid as much US air interdiction as possible, to increase the number of available routes and storage areas in the panhandle, and to develop a greater capability to move supplies through Cambodia, the NVA pushed westward in the panhandle, seizing Attopeu and Saravane in the process. Then, in early 1971, the South Vietnamese attack on Tchepone gave even more urgent impetus to the NVA westward expansion. Conventional combat had come to the panhandle."

March 1971
PL/NVA attack Bouam Long (LS-32), northwest of PDJ with 130mm artillery. Ground assault beaten off. 32 Hmong/Thai dead; 100+ PL/NVA.

Castle, "Alliance in a Secret War." p. 84: "In March 1971, the North Vietnamese, supported by Pathet Lao units, attacked Bouam Long... The communists fired twenty rounds of 130-mm shells into the site before launching a tremendous ground assault. They were beaten off by the Hmong and Thai defenders who detonated strategically placed claymore mines and threw hand grenades at the enemy. American jet aircraft, called in by three trapped U.S. advisors at Bouam Long, succeeded in breaking the attack. Thirty-two Hmong and Thai soldiers were killed along with about one hundred Vietnamese and Pathet Lao."

February – March 1971
Sustained enemy attack on Ban Na (LS-15), a hilltop Thai artillery base some ten miles northeast of Long Tieng, prior to attack on 20A.

Marius Burke: Burke returned from an 18-month leave of absence to find himself in the middle of the siege of Ban Na [see also McShane]. This was a firebase, manned by 1200 Thai troops, that was surrounded by the enemy. Twice a day, AAM helicopters flew supplies in, and they always picked up heavy enemy fire. The enemy had registered mortars to cover all the pads, so it was necessary to fake a landing at one pad before setting down on another. Ground time was limited, with dead and wounded pulled out by cargo net.

Burke found a whole bunch of new people with Air America. There was more risk taking with good reason. After a few months, the enemy allowed the Thais to walk out of Ban Na. Some of the newer customers blamed Air America pilots for the loss. "That kind of bothered me." The customers seemed to have the attitude that the pilots were expendable; that they should obey orders without question. This was different from the earlier period; Tony Po would never place anyone at risk without explaining the need and making the situation clear.
O'Dell, Jan. 5, 1993: "I don't remember anyone blaming the pilots for the loss of Site 15 nor do I think that anyone thought the pilots were expendable. The war in Laos didn't really get intense until about 1969. I'm not sure what kind of war they had before we got there but apparently most of the senior pilots had not flown in anything like this before. That's probably the basis for Marius's comments about the earlier period and Tony Poe. It was a different war with different problems. There were probably a few who had no combat experience at all. Therefore the expanding war, with increasing risks, was not something they were expecting or ready for. By this time [1970-71] all the 20A case officers had been in Vietnam in combat. Psychologically, after you've been working with military pilots, it is hard to get used to working with civilian pilots - particularly when you are under the impression that they are getting a lot of money to do risky flying. The guys on the ground were getting shot at a lot, for much less money [O'Dell, a fairly senior GS-10, made $10,000 and paid taxes; an Air America pilot told him that he made $65,000 and paid no taxes - and that some pilots made even more.] I think the real stress between the pilots and the customers grew from what the case officer was going through (for less money on which he paid taxes) and what the pilots were doing or not willing to do. There's a bond between the men on the ground that is rarely formed between the man on the ground and the man in the air. As Dick Elder told me, 'You guys work for peanuts!' Of course I thought some of the AAM pilots would've flown for the North Vietnamese if they could've made more money doing it.

Casterlin notes: A fire base with a Thai artillery battalion was set up at Ban Na (LS-15) near the edge of the PDJ. The enemy attacked with 130mm rockets and mortars. At first, there were numerous LZs scattered throughout the area and you could rotate landings and confuse enemy observers. The situation grew worse as the "safe" areas contracted. Usually, only two supply runs a day could be squeezed in as the situation deteriorated. You made a low level approach, popped into the LZ for a few seconds, then departed. George Bacon ("Kayak") would ride along to boost morale. The customer was desperately attempting to supply the ridges and outposts surrounding Ban Na. Fixed-wing aircraft dropped supplies by parachute through the clouds, using Loran coordinates of local friendly positions.

On March 27, Casterlin and Dick Elder (double crew) took a ranking Thai general and Kayak into the position. They landed during a lull in the first, they left for 20A. They returned later in the day for the pickup. They landed but attracted heavy fire. Casterlin fired wildly into the jungle with a carbine ("It made me feel better.") "I have
never seen a man so happy to be leaving a place as that General."

At the end, pilots refused to supply the base due to the danger. The remnants of the battalion pulled out at night and walked through a clear path that had been left by the enemy. Casterlin picked up the commander the next morning near LS-72. Casterlin later heard that Jerry Daniels ("Hog") had blamed the helicopter pilots for the loss of Ban Na. This marked the beginning of strained relationships with the Customer. (Casterlin, Elder, and Noble received special commendation from Thai government for their flight into Ban Na.)

Elder to WML, 19 Aug 91: "The siege of Ba Na didn’t just happen over night. The Thais were brought in to help hold Sam Tong and Long Chiang. The airstrip a Ba Na is just off the southwest edge of the PDJ and is on the main trail to Sam Thong. It’s in a small bowl with a ridge to the northeast. We could go in and out with air without exposing the aircraft to direct enemy fire. The idea was fine until the enemy got into the bowl and tunneled to within a few hundred yards of the strip. We held the ridge and the strip but flying into the pads, the enemy would come out of spider holes with automatic fire and 82mm mortars. The helicopter mission was to remove the dead and wounded which became more and more precarious the closer the enemy came to the strip until it was like running the gauntlet every trip. The basic theme never changed however; it was always voluntary. We all knew what was involved and the risks. I also heard that we were blamed for not supporting them. I’m not sure who was to blame, perhaps no one. It may have been that they accomplished the mission and pulled out." [Knight: "Elder never did believe that Ban Na situation to be as bad as most other pilots."]

Fonburg to WML, 9 Aug 1991: "It was a daily affair to hear a call to all Bell aircraft to report to the ramp at LS-20A for a briefing by Kayak. He would have us go into Ba Na to evacuate wounded. We had air cover but the place was surrounded and the mortars were registered in on the area surrounding the strip. We would vary our landing spots around the runway but how they ever kept from hitting us in the air I’ll never know. It was like flying through the target area of a bombing range while operations were being conducted and hoping no one will get lucky. As we started our landings the mortars would rain on the strip. We would pick up the wound first then the last plane or whatever it took would hook on a slingload of dead bodies in a net and take them to the ramp at LS-20A for sorting out."

Weitz, March 28, 1992: Weitz recalls the arguments with Bacon about Ban Na. Weitz tried to convince Bacon that
creating a new emergency would not solve the existing emergency, but Bacon was concerned about the welfare of his team and would not listen.

Malon and Brown, Marc: Bacon was born on 4 August 1946. He attended Georgetown University for two years, then joined the army in 1966. He volunteered for the Special Forces and was trained as a medic. He went to Vietnam and was with MACV-SOG (CCN). After an 18-month tour, he returned to the US, was discharged, and enrolled in the U of Massachusetts. Contacted by the CIA, he trained at Camp Peary, then was assigned to Laos. A case officer friend of Bacon's recalled him as "a hard charger." The case officer continued: "I remember George had a problem with the Air America pilots. He was more aggressive than they were. George was in charge of Site 15, which was manned by one of two battalions of Thai mercenaries. It was surrounded for several months and it was very difficult to get him in and out of there. Both George and his supplies had to fly in and fly out; same with the wounded. The enemy had the site ringed with 12.7mm antiaircraft guns which, of course, made it a little uncomfortable for the chopper pilots. George was constantly at odds with the chopper pilots because he felt they were very highly paid and they should be more aggressive; at least as aggressive as he was. Most of the pilots didn't agree with him." He recalls Bacon: "George was superenergetic; he used to run all the time. He couldn't wait to get going. He was always one of the first guys up in the morning, and one of the last guys back."

Glerum, Feb. 15, 1993: "In retrospect, [Bacon] should have been pulled out - but no one at the time questioned his commitment or his courage."

O'Dell, Jan. 5, 1993: "Ban Na, Site 15: I'd forgotten all about this; it was a shitty deal. My GM was operating somewhere else but everyone knew about site 15 and what a tough deal it was. You could hear the radio transmissions and see the bodies being carried out by the cargo nets. I also remember some of the confrontations between the pilots and Kayak. I remember the pilots did not want to fly into site 15 due to heavy ground fire and mortar fire. It was a very bad situation for everyone.

Casterlin's comments: his description of site 15 sounds right. I'm not sure that Hog blamed the pilots for the loss of Ban Na. However, Hog was one of those guys who had been in Laos for several years. There's no doubt that relationships were strained between the pilots and the customers. Fonburg and Welsz's comments sound accurate.

My impressions of George "Kayak" Bacon: He was an immature asshole! We went through training together and I always wondered how he got in the outfit and why he wasn't
fired before he went overseas. George was borderline
defiant about most company policies. He had some deplorable
personal habits. He used to carry a toothbrush with him in
his pocket and would be brushing his teeth in the middle of
an ops meeting. I remember him doing that at one of the
night meetings at Vientiane when the ambassador was there.
The next day we got a message of 'odious' behavior at the
nightly meeting. He was also one of the tightest people
I've ever known. When George went out to dinner with you he
would literally try to eat the food off your plate as well
as him own.

George was an aggressive case officer and, had we been
allowed to, he would have been in the thick of combat with
him troops. He was very devoted to the people he worked
with and didn't think much of the AAM pilots. He wasn't
alone there, the difference was that most of the case
officers were able to maintain some sort of working
relationship with the pilots. George let his personal
feelings get in the way.

Although I liked George in many respects, I can agree
with the pilots that he probably pushed the edge where their
safety was concerned."

Mike Ingham, Jan. 7, 1993: "The two battalions of Thai
troops at Ban Na were Royal Thai Army (RTA) regulars. They
were not volunteers. I am not sure of the number of troops
but 1,200 sounds high. If I had to guess, I would say more
like 600-800.

KAYAK (George Bacon) was the case officer for the Thais
at Ba Na and he was certainly at odds with the AAM guys by
the time I got there (which was toward the tail end of the
Ba Na saga). I sat in on a number of the briefings that
Kayak gave for missions to Ba Na and it was clear that the
AAM folks were very suspicious of Kayak's enthusiasm for the
project. That friction created a good deal of hostility on
both sides and it colored the opinion not only of the case
officers (mostly "old hand" case officers like Digger and
Ringo) but the AAM guys who were forever more suspicious of
the customers' motives. This was particularly true of the
older guys like Ted Cash, Frenchy Smith, etc.

After I saw this, I became more cautious in how I
treated the AAM crews and in what I asked them to do. As
time went on, the suspicion abated somewhat as some of the
younger AAM pilots and newer case officers moved up in HR2.

It is worth noting that the war at this stage was
making a change from the low intensity, guerrilla effort put
on with the Hmong troops to the more traditional, massed
formation effort as it was conducted by the Thais. Ba Na
was fixed position warfare not the guerrilla warfare that
the AAM guys had seen previously. The war had escalated
with the introduction of the Thais (which was in response to
the NVA taking over from the Pathet Lao) and the risks
escalated with it. Some of the friction was caused by a change in the makeup of the case officers assigned to 20A. Younger guys like myself all had VN experience, with the chopper as an integral part of the exercise. We were used to the chopper pilots being told to do something risky, saluting and marching off to do it - just like the groundpounders. Neither the older case officers nor the older AAM pilots had firsthand, military experience, with the chopper as an integral part of the war effort.

Kayak was from Attleboro, MA. While in VN he had been shot in the upper chest by an AK-47. For some reason, he had an almost pathological hatred for communists - maybe because of the wound. That translated itself into the aggressiveness that caused him problems with the AAM folks and later got him killed as a mercenary in Angola. George’s father tracked me down after George was killed and tried to enlist me in an effort to prove that George had been sent to Angola by the Agency. I tried to help him establish that this was not the case (because I knew it not to be) but he just did not want to hear it and bugged me for months."

Glerum to WML, February 15, 1993:

"On the whole, the case officers and the pilots got along well, developed good working relationships, and (in many instances) strong personal bonds. Nevertheless, the case officer/pilot interface was a major (or at least most recurrent) source of friction between customer and contractor, particularly as the war heated up and, at the same time, more younger case officers were added to the units. Most of these new officers were U.S. military special operations trained, Vietnam experienced, and further trained for up to a year by the Agency. However, in earlier project years, they still would have spent a period of time under the direct supervision of a more senior, more experienced case officer before they were assigned their own irregular units. As we were forced to forego this ‘luxury,’ the conflicts did increase. Thus, in the middle of an inherently hazardous situation, a pilot could question the new case officer’s knowledge of the ground situation and/or his judgment/integrity as it affected the pilot’s well being. A case officer could believe that the overpaid (by his standards) pilot was being at best lazy or at worst cowardly. At time, and to varying degrees, there was truth on both sides. Discussions on this subject with the successive AAM rotary wing chiefs were not infrequent. Most of the time we were able to resolve the issue. Having been so close to AAM for so long, I like to believe that I was able to understand their problems and we also were blessed with an exceptionally fair-minded group of chief pilots in Abadie, Knight, Goddard, and Ford. However, on occasion it did become necessary to reassign one or both of the protagonists. Interestingly, most of the case officers
reassigned to Udorn, sent home, or read the riot act over the year were guilty of too much courage (or inadequate common sense), or too much courage in relation to their abilities.

[In my previous comments, I do not mean to give the impression that the project ran in a continuing atmosphere of sweetness-and-light.] Personalities were strong to say the least and there obviously were conflicts, misunderstandings, hard feelings, and even distrust. (There were several AAM pilots whom I tried to avoid flying with.) However, virtually everyone (customer and contractor) alike was a volunteer. And, particularly in retrospect, I can recall very few whom I do not believe were trying to do their best. Virtually everyone worked seven days a week, pressures were enormous, and most decisions drastically affected human lives. Thus, perhaps it is difficult for me to be completely objective in my assessments and/or I am too forgiving. However, as a historian, this hardly is a new phenomenon to you and I am confident you will have no difficulty putting my views into the proper perspective."

March 1971


"In March pressure against LP and Long Tieng forced the deployment of 3 FAR battalions from MR IV to Northern Laos. PAR relinquished the defense of PS22 to the SGU. This was a wise decision since the subsequent loss of PS22 was not a 'great' defeat for the PAR/RLG and the psychological damage to RLG was minimized. PS22 fell after 2 days of heavy fighting with the enemy suffering unknown casualties. Estimates run high due to the large amount of air applied. The PS22 garrison withdrew to the L56 area with surprising few casualties. LS165 had been abandoned the day before under a heavy mortar barrage.

With a change in key personnel in the SGU structure, the method of operations started to change in MR IV during Mar 71 the policy of large unit operation and static defense is giving way to a more productive program of small unit action and harrassment of the enemy. This method will tie up greater numbers of the enemy in self defense and security forcing an increased burden on their already strained logistical system.

The dry season offensive was not aggressive due to early defeats, however, the military situation remains serious in MR IV. If L-05 falls to the NVA Paksong would be the last major positions on the Bolevans plateau. The loss of the Bolevans would give the NVA access to two new routes south to Cambodia. RLG influence in south Laos would be confined to populated areas along route 13/MeKong River."
March 17, 1971

First flight by S-58T XW-PHA, converted from UH-34D. Four other UH-34 (all former Navy aircraft; not from AAM current inventory) being converted to the twin-turbine S-58T model. Captain R. D. Davis is project manager.

March 21, 1971

Benjamin A. Franklin and two indigenous kickers killed in Porter XW-PCB at Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72). Aircraft stalled on climb and crashed into steep mountain slope en route to mountaintop landing area. Accident report blames pilot error.

April 1971

Gary Gentz returns to Southeast Asia. He became a flight mechanic on a S-58T. The S-58Ts had a number of maintenance problems, especially with cracks in the fuselage, but the performance was a lot better that the UH-34s. Air America had just received 12-14 UH-1Ds from the Army and was flying 8 of them, using the rest for spare parts. There was a new group of pilots (he had left in August 1970).

Gentz flew on special projects. There were two types of mission. One involved inserting trailwatchers into the other side of the Ho Chih Minh Trail, then picking them up a few days later. This was done at night. The S-58T had special navigational equipment, and the crew wore night vision glasses (depth perception was hard to get used to). A second program involved placing relay stations (solar-powered transmitters) in the tops of large trees. They would pick up and transmit information from counters on the ground. After weeks of practice, they flew two nighttime missions. The enemy promptly cut down the trees.

[Knight, 1/5/92: "Not true. After one early mission near Ban Ban, we returned to Udorn in time to listen to radio traffic from tap installed that night."]

Gentz has great respect for Jack Forney. John Aspinwall, later Steve Nichols, was in charge of helicopter maintenance, but there never was any question that Forney was the boss. You always were apprehensive when he met the aircraft. He wanted the facts, never excuses.

April 29, 1971

Harry E. Mulholland, Porter PC-6C N180K killed. Making normal departure from LS-63 (Moung Nham) with three passengers when struck by FAC U-17. Both aircraft crashed and burned. FAC airplane at fault.

May 16, 1971

Paksong falls to NVA. Americans pull out of Paksse for a few days, then return. The families of the affluent are beginning to leave Paksse.
[Soutchay, RLG Military Operations: In March 1971, the RLG decided to retake Saravane (captured by NVA in May 1970), using GM 32 from MR III. The troops were landed on the Saravane airstrip by USAF CH-53s without NVA resistance. However, the NVA retook Saravane in April 1971 and began to push on to the Bolovens Plateau. On May 15, the NVA attacked Paksong, which fell within hours, and threatened Pakse. The only defensible position between Paksong and Pakse along Route 23 was at kilometer 28 (28 kilometers east of Pakse). This became the site for numerous bloody battles. On June 11, the NVA overran the positions at KM 28 and headed toward Pakse but were stopped by airstrikes.]

May 20, 1971
NVA force of 2,500 attack Bouam Long (LS-32) in bad weather. In response to pleas for assistance, a newly trained Hmong FALG with "off-set beacon" dropped into position. As weather further deteriorated, enemy began assault up slopes. FALG turned on battery powered beacon, used by orbiting gunships. Gunships worked off beacon and directions of FALG. JHM: "When the firing ceased, Hmong looked down the slopes to see hundred of bodies hanging in barbed wire coils. Bouam Long had survived the attack due to the off-set beacon bombing technology which now allowed aircraft to accurately hit targets in bad weather and in darkness."

May 24, 1971
XOXO: Edward D. Rudolphs, flight mechanic R. Ueda, 204B N8535F near LS-99 (Phu Houot). Aircraft en route to second HLZ after making cargo drop at LS-132 when it received ground fire and was hit in right hand windshield, lower right hand fuselage, and tail booms. Flight mechanic Ueda received one round of small arms in upper right arm (no bone damage). Aircraft diverted to 20A.
1971
(June - December)

June 2, 1971
Herbert W. Clark and Trikit Thuttanon (CP) killed in C-46 XW-PFL at Bouam Long. Aircraft received wing/engine damage on fourth pass over DZ. Incoming rounds reported to Clark by AFDS on first three passes. Three AFDS bailed out when aircraft caught fire. Accident report faults pilot for continuing flight, with a non-standard drop pattern, into a known hostile area while receiving ground fire.

June-July 1971
About Face II begins in June. VP offensive, with air support, recaptures PDJ in mid-July. NVA retreat in orderly fashion. VP builds artillery support bases with Thai volunteers. Four guerrilla regiments hold blocking positions along northern and eastern edges of PDJ.

JHM: RLG orders Vang Pao to gain as much territory as possible before July 1, when Barrel Roll sorties to be reduced by 60 to 32 per day. Despite the fact that he had only Long Tieng and Bouam Long as forwarding operating bases, he complied. "On June 11, 1971, in a bold move, Vang Pao airlifted his irregulars to the southern tip of the Plaine des Jarres in an attempt to once again take the entire PDJ, now rich with enemy supplies. Since his 8,900 irregulars were outnumbered by an estimated 20,000 enemy soldiers on the PDJ, he supplemented his hit and run strikes with his favorite twist - air. Helicopters airlifted his forces to an enemy location where his men flushed out the enemy. Once exposed, his T-28's finished them off. His mobile troops wold then be airlifted to yet another area to flush out the enemy for 'air' to annihilate. Vang Pao had returned to guerrilla warfare with T-28 close support as he had done earlier at Lima Lima." VP captured nearly 800 tons of supplies, enough to support the enemy for three months.

Operation About Face 2 was designed to recapture the PDJ and lasted from July to September. GM 21 moved from Padoung to the southern PDJ; GM 22 was a blocking force at Phou Pha Sai; GM 26 moved into Xiangkhouang Ville; GM 24 moved from Bouam Long to the Khang Khai area; GM 25 was a blocking force at Moung Moc. (GM 23 was retraining; four Thai battalions moved onto the PDJ after the SGUs captured their objectives.

Defensive positions, October-December:
GM-23: North of PDJ
GM-24: Northeast of PDJ in Khang Khay area
GM-21: Operating with GM 24
GM-22: East of Xiengkhouangville
GM-26: Blocking force in Khang Kho area

Thai artillery bases:
ZEBRA - Phou Khong
COBRA - Between Padoung and Phou Pha Sai
KING KONG - Phou Seu
MUSTANG - Phou Theung
SINGHA - south of Long Tieng

July 7, 1971
Washington Star reports a two-pronged offensive against the PDJ. Six battalions of Hmong troops have seized the southern rim of the PDJ, while Air America helicopters have carried commando teams to the center of the PDJ.

July 8, 1971
New York Times reports secret operation involving commando raiders, some led by CIA employees, is underway against Communists on the PDJ. Air America C-123s are landing on the PDJ; one was stranded overnight. One commando unit has penetrated as far as Lima 22 on the east central portion of the Plain. There are two Thai and six Moa battalions involved. * 25 JULY 71 - RAID on Dien Bien Phu (see Combat & Gunship interview)

July 1971
Operation Sayasila to recapture Bolovens Plateau. Pakson main target (held by NVA regiment). Following air assault, Pakson captured on September 15. Thai artillery bases established around town.

[Southay Vongsavanh, RLG Military Operations: On July 1, 1971, Southay became commander of MR IV. He immediately began working on a plan for the recapture of Pakson. On September 15, GM 32 from MR III conducted an airmobile assault east of Pakson (USAF helicopters). The attack succeeded, although the NVA returned in December when GM 32 withdrew. Southay argues, however, that the operation bought time to strengthen the defense of Pakse. (In 1970, he had begun to reorganize the irregular forces from Special Guerrilla Unit - Battalion [SG-BN], which had five companies [550 men], into Groupement Mobiles, comprised of four battalions and a weapons company [1200 men]. The training camp for MR IV was at PS-18; MR III camp was at Savannakhet.

Bolovens Campaign: Shortly after loss of Bolovens in May 1971, Souvanna ordered government forces to retake area. Operation Phiboonpol was launched on June 9. It lasted only two days and left the government forces in disarray.
Air America Rescue - McGrath
8/9/1999 11:00 PM

By Chuck McGrath

An Air America H-34 crew rescued me on 21 July 1971. Location: Some distance north of the PDJ. We were tasked as a single Jolly Green (HH-53) crew to recover a drone, and ended up going down during the effort just as we were picking the #1 PJ by hoist. We rolled over a couple times and ended up against some trees. The loss was later determined to be from ground fire in the area. The crews involved in the rescue saw the Jolly upside down against some trees on the down slope side of a small clearing. The drone was in middle of the clearing. The tip tanks were jettisoned in the area of the drone. The drone parachute was in the in trees at the upper end of clearing. Three crewmembers (pilot, copilot, and FE) were at the lower end of the slope. Two others (PJs) were located about the middle of the clearing. A Huey came in first. Picked up the FE, suffering from severe back pains, (later learned he had ruptured disc in spine), by having him grab the skids so they could hover taxi with him further up the slope to where I was with the other PJ, who had extensive facial injuries. A rotor blade hit my partner as the helicopter went down. We got the FE in the Huey, I passed Jon's IV bottle up to someone in the Huey, and then we got Jon in. I got in to help treat them. I guess there wasn't enough lift to get us out of there, because one of the Air America crew tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to get out. Just what I needed!
Out I go. Huey spins around, comes close to giving me a crewcut with the tail rotor, and exits successfully. About 10 minutes later an H-34 comes in and picks up the pilot and copilot with hoist and horse collar. The hoist breaks with me about 10 feet up and I’m back on the ground again with the hoist operator reeling in the cable by hand as they exit the area. I heard some periodic ground fire while taking stock of the situation. I guess it was about 10 or 15 minutes later - who kept track? Another H-34 came in and picked me up by horse collar. We were all taken to Lima 54 where the pilot, copilot, and I got a hop on an Air America C-130 to Udorn. The three of us were bruised up, nothing serious, but they stuck us in the hospital there for the night. I still don’t know how the injured FE and my partner got back to Udorn, but they were there in the hospital when we woke up the next morning. The flight the next day to determine whether helicopter was recoverable was greeted by so much ground fire that the Sandies were directed to destroy the Jolly. Please pass this through your association. I want to give a more meaningful thanks to those men and welcome any e-mail. A handshake was all we had time for that day.
Godley believed that recapture of Bolovens was necessary to force enemy to negotiate a compromise peace settlement. "The Ambassador instructed his Controlled American Source (CAS) elements to plan, in conjunction with the Laotian general staff, a campaign which would successfully bring the Bolovens back under RLG control." Wet season impeding enemy resupply efforts, which would give RLG forces the advantage. Operation Sayasila: (1) capture and hold provincial capital of Saravane for short period; (2) interdict route 16/23 west of Saravane; (3) destroy enemy logistics base south of Se Don River; (4) recapture Paksong and clear Route 23 west and north of town.

July 19, 1971

Casterlin to parents: With peace talks, pilots and airplanes being cut. We have a major portion of the FDJ again.

July 22, 1971

U. Alexis Johnson, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and Ambassador Godley testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee during hearings for FY1972 appropriations. The budget for FY program is $138.5 million; $221.2 million required. Johnson says that the failure to support efforts in Laos would lead to military and political collapse. "Such a collapse would not only release North Vietnamese divisions now fighting in North Laos, but would also release the larger part of the North Vietnamese Security forces guarding the western approaches to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Thus, the effects on the program of Vietnamization could be very significant." (4268) Given the Geneva agreements of 1962, "CIA is really the only other instrumentality that we have" to conduct war (4293).

Godley (4269-94): CIA trains, equips, and "gives certain advice" to approx. 30,000 Lao irregular forces. Following the signing of the Geneva accords on July 23, 1962, 666 US military personnel left the country; only 40 NVA departed through ICC checkpoints. By late 1962/early 1963 it had become apparent that Hanoi would not respect the agreements. The CIA was asked to assist covertly Lao irregular forces. In the beginning, these were mainly Hmong, but later expanded to other parts of the country. The initial concept was to provide a guerrilla capability to harrass enemy lines of communication (regular Lao forces would bear the main defensive burden). Some 1,000 Hmong were broken down into small teams. With increasing enemy presence, 330-man Special Guerrilla Units were formed. In 1963, there were 6,000 NVA in Laos; there are now 80,000. The presence of Thai irregular forces is "essential if the collapse can be avoided in Laos." "These operations that the CIA are conducting in Laos were not initiated by them." (4278) The task was assigned by the President. The CIA in
Laos is rendering "a great service to our Government."
(4279)

August 1971
Enemy forces: 39,000 Pathet Lao; 100,000 NVA; 22,000 Chinese involved in building and guarding road in northwestern Laos.
Since 1968, Hmongs have suffered twice as many casualties as Royal Lao Army and killed three times as many enemy as regular troops.

August 10, 1971
In response to US pressure, the Lao government passes anti-narcotics legislation (effective November 15, 1971).

August 15, 1971
XOXO: CASI Porter XW-PEK on flight from LS-272 to 20A: "Pilot apparently flew into clouds during descent into a valley, thinking he would break out into the clear, according to CASI operations manager Fred Bell. Pilot and Lao kicker killed. Cargo was 10 bags of rice, and aircraft was preparing for drop near 20A. Pilot was Prince Pethsarat, nephew of Lao prime minister.

Ingham: I remember this as occurring on the north side of Skyline Ridge.

August 20 - September 15, 1971
VTE experiences worst flood since 1966.

August 28, 1971
JCS directive that any involvement of US forces in support of an operation had to be approved by the JCS at least 10 days in advance. [Slay ETR]

September 1971
Asia Magazine reports tens of thousands of Meo refugees at LS-272. An estimated 50 percent of Meo men have died in the war. Visits to Meo villages: only males in village are very old and very young. Children as young as 10 are now serving in the army.

[Thomas H. Sullivan to WML, 23 Aug 88: Air America establishes FIC at Long Tieng in September.]

September 2, 1971
Two crew members from aircraft of 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron, Udorn, ejected after aircraft hit. Both injured and incapacitated. Hostile forces in area. Two AAM helicopters landed in open field under enemy fire and picked them up. Bell 205: Ted Cash, Wayne Lannin, and Willie J. Parker rescued Capt. Ron Fitzgerald, Weapons officer. H-
34: Don Henthorn and Ernie Cortez picked up pilots, Major Jim Compton. Aircraft took off in hail of enemy fire.


"On 2 September 1971, one of the aircrews of the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) "Panther Pack" received battle damage to their aircraft and crashed in a ball of flames. Fortunately, both crew members were able to eject prior to impact, but they were both injured. Incapacitated and helpless on the ground, in Indochina, they were in imminent danger of capture or death from hostile forces surrounding them. Two Air America helicopter crews saved their lives by landing in the open field to pick them up, even though under enemy fire."

Lannin and Parker "risked their lives by exposing themselves directly to enemy fire to hoist the injured Captain Fitzgerald aboard the helicopter." Cortez risked his life to lift Compton into the helicopter. [Ford says that Henthorn positioned helicopter between Fitzgerald and enemy fire so that Cortez could get the injured airman.] The two helicopters took off "in a hail of enemy fire."

"The deep gratitude felt by the 13th TFS toward the valiant Air America crews who saved our comrades is difficult to express. There is no doubt that their prompt, heroic action saved two lives that day. We will long remember and be grateful for their actions."

Panther Pack invites crew to "Sawadee Party" at Udorn Officers' Open Mess on 18 September.

Parker: They were flying a resupply mission when they noticed an F-4 in the area. Later, they saw a ball of flame. Lannin remarked that it must have been a napalm drop. However, a short time later they heard an emergency beeper. Parker later learned that a bomb had hung up on the wing of the F-4. It dropped late and the F-4 was hit by the bomb blast. The two crew were able to eject. Don Henthorn was also in the area, so the two helicopters headed toward the smoke. Henthorn picked up the pilot; Cash went for the weapons officer, who had been injured. Parker jumped out to get him (he was conscious but incoherent) but he was too heavy to carry. Lannin got out to help, and the two of them managed to carry him into the helicopter. They were taking fire but were not hit. They were on the ground for no more than three minutes. The prompt response did not give the enemy time to get organized. [Parker is now in the USAF reserves, called to active duty and flying as flight engineer on a C-5 out of Travis to the Middle East.]
September-December 1971

In September 1971, the NVA’s 19th regiment occupied Saravane. The new irregular GM 41 and GM 42 and completed their organization and training and were used for Operation Black Lion to retake Saravane. On October 16, GM 42 air-assaulted from USAF CH-53s west of Saravane and attacked toward the southeast. On October 18, GM 41 air-assaulted on the northern edge of town, surprising the NVA. The two GMs gained control of the Saravane area within a week. Three NVA regiments counterattacked. The two GMs withdrew after a month of heavy combat.

September 1971

LTCol Keypol G. Light, ETR, 15 Nov 71. Light was AOC commander at 20A from May 21 to September 7. "The FACs for the most part were quite good - as airborne FACs. Otherwise, they tended to be non-professional, immature, and inexperienced. They tended to have little empathy with the ground troops and their observers. One FAC that was assigned to 20A had had only three solo FAC mission in SEA prior to arriving in Laos. Fortunately, his case was not the rule. Somewhere, the FACs had been briefed, as an enticement to volunteer for the job, that this program was completely free from all military restraints and that they were assured of outstanding OERs and plenty of medals. In-country briefings apparently did not quell this information. The change in the OER system will give the AOC commander more 'teeth' to handle this situation."

September 3, 1971

UH-34 H99 A.R. Byrne, Frank Stergar, and F.M. Sickler with 8 passengers near Ban Saphat (LS175) received battle damage and lost both primary and auxiliary hydraulic systems. Made forced landing in jungle. "Security of area is doubtful."

Stergar: Although hit often during his years with Air America, the events of September 3 represented his closest call. Stergar was assigned to the call officer at L5-447 (Ban Koutlamphong). A Lao army unit, isolated in the vicinity of PS-11 (on a line directly between Pakse and Saravane) had wounded to be evacuated. A CASI Porter had located the unit, established radio contact, and reported the area to be safe. Stergar made contact, then landed in stumped down elephant grass and picked up eight wounded. He took off at maximum power and made a climbing right turn, intending to spiral above 1500 feet in the safe area to avoid possible gunfire. However, at about 500 feet, the aircraft began taking hits. The auxiliary hydraulic system and automatic stabilization equipment went out. F/M Steve Sickler repotted hydraulic fluid coming down on him. Stergar decided to continue his climb and head for PS-10,
the nearest safe area. Meanwhile, Bryne contacted Harold Thompson, who was in the area, and explained their plight. At this point, the primary hydraulic needle dropped to zero. Stergar was lifted up to the limit of his lap belt and shoulder harness as the collective came up. The instrument panel became a blur, and the helicopter made a shaking, climbing left turn. Using all his strength, he pushed forward and right on the cyclic while stiff-arming the collective, trying to force it down. The aircraft had no soon reached a level position when the cycle started again. This happened three times. "We all thought we were dead."
It was hearsay among the pilots that no one had ever lived through a dual hydraulic failure. Stergar never expected to recover. After he managed to bring the aircraft level for the third time, he gained enough control to head east in a shallow descent. Pitch and roll remained uncontrollable, but he did have yaw control with the pedals. Approaching a small clearing, he decided to det down in the surrounding trees to avoid rolling over. As Byrne cut off the ignition and turned off the fuel, Stergar relaxed his arm and allowed the collective to come to the full upright position. The aircraft landed hard into the trees. The landing gear collapsed and the struts broke loose from the fuselage. Byrne, Sickler, and the passengers all received back injuries. Thompson landed in the clearing and managed to get everyone out, which was quite a feat in light of the load. The helicopter was later destroyed by T-28s on orders of the customer. He had picked it up new in Bangkok two years before.

October 31, 1971
Casterlin to parents: There have been program cutbacks all over the system with VTE being especially hard hit.

November 7, 1971
Frahm to WML, 1 Aug 92: Frahm left Pakse with Jim Rausch, heading east across rice paddies. Rausch in command and at the controls. "When we were about 5 miles from the airport, and still only a little over a thousand feet above the deck, I looked at him and said, 'You know, Jim, I'd feel a whole lot better if we were a whole lot higher,' and a few minutes later we were level at 4000 feet above the ground. We hadn't gone far, however, when I heard a soft, 'pop.' And with a quizzical expression on my face that asked, "what the hell was that," I looked over at Jim, who was staring back at me wearing a look of surprise, as he calmly stated, "I've been shot." I immediately took the controls and turned back toward Pakse, but he stopped by saying,"No, I'm all right - the bullet's right here," and removed a slug from the gauze packet in the front of his survival vest. The 'pop' I'd heard was the sound of the bullet penetrating
the Plexiglass window at his side - the spent round then ended its flight right in his vest pocket."

November 13, 1971 {m}
Manager, Air Support Branch to Base Manager, AAM, Udorn: It is important "for security reasons" tha the Twin Otter N5662 (MSN 326) not be treated differently from any other aircraft. We do not want to draw attention to it. TFR installation should be treated casually. The only equipment that should be removed prior to regular operations in the HF radio burst transmitting digital control attachment box. [AAM Log in 1972 reports that three DHC-6 Series 300 Twin Otters are now based at VTE.]

[662 was modified at Texas Instruments, Dallas, then ferried to Bangkok by Intermountain. It cost CAN$535,860 delivered to BKK (excluding special electronic equipment). The Teledyne Loran C was installed later.]

Romes: Romes returned to Laos in 1971 after two years in Tachikawa, flying DC-4s. He became involved in classified special project involving the Twin Otters. Jim Rhyne ran the program, assisted by Berl King. The pilots were Romes and James D. Pearson, Jr. Eventually there were two airplanes that were equipped with sophisticated electronic gear, including terrain following radar and a prototype of Loran C. They flew a number of nighttime missions out of Pakse, serving as the communication link for helicopters involved with infil and exfil. They were in radio contact with the people on the ground. The program was set back by Ben Coleman’s accident in July 1972. He was flying the first specially equipped Twin Otter, which was also used for regular missions during the day. Coleman had transferred from Tachikawa. An excellent DC-6 pilot, he had trouble making the transition to STOL airplanes (as people who moved down often did). Yet he was highly competitive and took risks that caused a number of copilot to refuse to fly with him. The day he was killed, they had reports from Bob Clark of CAS that the weather near the outpost on the side of a hill near Sam Teng was too bad for a free rice drop. Coleman went in anyway. He ran into bad weather, tried to turn around in a narrow valley, and crashed into the side of a peak. The kicker survived. His copilot, who also was killed, had recently told Romes that he knew about Coleman but would fly with anyone the company assigned him to. [See Rhyne comments.]

Ted Mauldin: Mauldin transferred from Saigon on November 1970 and flew Porters out of Vientiane. He got on the Otter Special project in November 1971. Other pilots involved were Jimmy Pearson, Pete Parker, and Don Romes. Initially, the Otters carried two pilots; later, they carried three. Pearson became more-or-less in charge of the
project; Mauldin ended up instructing in the navigational gear.

There were lots of planning involved in Otter special project missions. There was about 10 hours of planning for every hour of flight. They would fly up to Udorn for a special briefing at AB-1. Buddy Rodger, an ex-smoke jumper, often conducted the briefings. Sometimes, they would be briefed by agency photointerpreters. They were given detailed intelligence on enemy positions, best routes to DZ, etc. The Loran "C" usually worked extremely well, although it was effected by sunspots and by B-52 ECM. They used 1:250,000 scale maps with a Loran overlay. They would plot the position for the DZ and take the Loran coordinate off the chart. The Otters carried two kickers, as some pallets had a load of 500-600 pounds and it was hard for one person to move in along the track and out the side door. Depending on fuel, the Otter would carry 3,600-4,200 pounds, usually on six pallets. On missions deep into enemy territory, the load would usually be carried on one pallet. Most of the drops were made in the southern part of Laos in the Bolovens Plateau area. They flew out of Pakse.

TFR was used on missions when it was necessary to avoid enemy radar. There were four settings: 188 feet, 250 feet, 500 feet, and 1,000 feet. 500 feet was comfortable, but you could be picked up by radar in some areas at that altitude. Mauldin experimented with the TFR during the day to learn the limitations of the equipment. It worked OK if you planned carefully. You had to know where you were, so a lot of time was spent on plotting courses on the map.

You could bid the Twin Otter, but you could not bid into a project. The chief pilots had to extend an invitation (consulting with Customer). The attempt was made to keep the numbers low for reasons of security.

On special projects, you received an extra $50 for the first DZ and $30 for each additional DZ. Some night flights received an extra $50 a hour.

Mauldin recalls one night flight over the Trail near the Cambodian border on the southern edge of the Bolovens Plateau. Pete Parker was flying and he was navigating. The airplane had a detector that picked up fire control radar. It was divided into four quadrants. A spike of light would appear if fire control radar was turned on, showing the general direction of the radar. This night the sky 100 feet in front of the airplane suddenly was filled with tracers. All four quadrants lit up. This was "about as close as I came to being shot down."

Mauldin remained on the Otter special project until Udorn closed at the end of June 1974. He recalls a meeting with Velte, attending by 20+ pilots (R/W and F/M) who flew special projects. Velte said that this type of flying would continue after "Air America" closed. However, this later was cancelled.
Mauldin also flew Volpars. Most of these flights were for passengers but there was one program that involved 12-hour flights over Cambodia to monitor enemy communications.

November 17, 1971
Symington amendment, Section 505 of Military Procurement Authorization Act, comes into force. It puts a ceiling of $350 million on MAP aid to Laos in FY1972. Money is saved by decreasing the number of RLAF combat sorties to 3000 tacair and 200 gunship per month. Project LGC (Thai) and ZAE (Vang Pao) to be financed through DEPCH after July 1, 1972. (See Peter A. W. Liebchen, "CHIECO Report: MAP Aid to Laos, 1959-1972," June 25, 1973, USAFRHC)

November 20, 1971
Bell 204B, A.E. Cates, W.B. Phillips, W. Parker, attempted landing at pad FB995832, near (LS 274); received small arms fire; minor injury to Phillips; aborted landing and took evasive action. Aircraft hit several times.

November 21, 1971

Sullivan to Larry Sall, 19 May 1992: "Assault on hilltop for artillery position. Me and Don Felder - Dick Lister and Jerry Toman - 10 troops each. SAR bird takes fire on low pass, so we pull off for another hour while F-4s clobber hilltop. We go in and get blasted on touchdown. All four pilots hit. We get out of LZ to bottom of hill where other H-34 expires. Toman shot through throat and bleeding very badly. We all wrap T-shirts around his neck. I fly (limp) back to Pakse."

[NVA recapture Paksong in December and start down Route 23 toward Pakse. They are stopped at KM 28 by GM 42.]

Bolovens Campaign: Operation Thao La designed to drive enemy out of eastern Bolovens by interdicting them at Ban Phon on Route 16 and securing Thateng (large supply base for NVA 9th regiment). Operation began on November 21. Air America helicopters and CH-53s airlifted battalion from Saravane on November 23 to position southwest of Thateng. Air America helicopter hit during insertion. Thateng captured on November 26. Following fall of Saravane on December 5, four irregular battalions left Thateng on December 16. "The eastern Bolovens Plateau was not secure, Saravane was lost, and the enemy continued to bring in
reinforcements at will. In short, the government hold on the Bolovens was precarious."

December 1971 - June 1972

Major Jesse E. Scott returns to Laos for second tour and was assigned as site commander of the AOC at Long Tieng. The military situation was quiet in early December. In 1969-70, VP's forces had deployed on the PDJ and occupied forward bases on the mountains surrounding the PDJ. On December 19, however, the enemy attacked these bases. The attack was timed to coincide with bad weather. Also, it happened that US air was diverted to a major SAR operation. The NVA/PL opened with an artillery barrage from 130 mm guns. They the infantry moved in and surrounded the Meo outposts. They took the bases under mortar fire, then overran them. "It was a pretty ghastly thing to watch. As they moved in and pinned these people down, there was no way to get air resupply into them." Two T-28s were shot down the first day. Within 4-5 days, all the outposts had fallen.

There was a sapper attack on Long Tieng on the night of December 20. The sappers blew up two O-1s and damaged another. A Lao AC-47 managed to drop flares despite a 300 foot overcast and the attack was broken up around 3 a.m. One sapper was killed in front of a T-28. The guards, 10-13 year old Meo boys who were "excellent soldiers" had drained gas out of the T-28 and were preparing to cremate the body when Scott appeared on the scene. He had to talk them out of it, in the interest of safety for the T-28. Following their attack, Scott and two other Americans moved in with VP for a few nights. Afterwards, they shuttled to Long Tieng daily.

After the Meo outposts were overrun, the NVA moved their 130mm guns to the southwestern edge of the PDJ. They started to fire into the Long Tieng valley on December 31. Air America landed between rounds and did "a fantastic job" of evacuating personnel.

By the end of December, air operations moved to VTE. T-28s flew out of VTE, while O-1s staged out of Ban Xon, about 18 miles south and west of Long Tieng (3500 foot dirt strip). Scott and CIA chief of unit work out of Ban Xon (LS-272). Scott would shuttle in to Long Tieng every day. The enemy eventually got into the valley and shot up VP's house but they never forced him completely out of the valley. Air America landed or airdropped supplies and did medevac.

When Scott returned to Laos in early December, two of the original five Meo pilots were still flying, plus five additional pilots. By June 1972, when he left, one of the original pilots were still there, flying as FAC. There were 12 pilots flying sorties in T-28s, six Meo and six Lao.
Long Tieng was a hazardous base for the T-28s due to the small size of strip, surrounding terrain, and limited ramp space. There were 12 T-28s and six O-1s. Six Mee pilots, six Lao, and ten American FACs. USAF personnel consisted of radio operator, intelligence officer, intelligence sergeant, line chief, and three enlisted technicians. CIA controlled the Air America operation, which provided most of the airlift. There also were two RLAF H-34s. Long Tieng had a miniature "country team," with Scott, CIA chief of unit, and others. CIA had an air operations specialist for the movement of troops and supplies.

Scott used to have dinner every night with VP and the CIA chief of unit. VP’s house was just across the runway from Scott’s office. There usually was a RAVEN at dinner. "The general liked the RAVENS. He really through they were great." Every evening after dinner, at about 7:30 p.m., there was an all-American briefing session, including all CIA officers from each unit, FACs, etc., to discuss problems.

"Vang Pao was the best source of contact and control over the military effort in Region II." He had no staff. He ran just about everything himself. "He liked to get out there and mix it up." "He is very, very active." He was always bouncing around. On more than one occasion, he would drive his jeep to the AOC, report enemy a few ridges over, and request an air strike. VP often would help load bombs personally on the T-28s. He liked to be in the field with his troops, giving advice, adjusting motor fire, etc. Scott says that VP just about ran himself into the ground during the winter of 1971-72. Living in a cold, damp bunker, he came down with pneumonia and had to evacuated to Thailand.

In late February, at VP’s insistence, the T-28s returned to Long Tieng; this followed the destruction of several 130mm guns. However, the artillery fire continued. In late April, VP proposed a counterattack on the PDJ to sever the enemy’s LOC. Air America airlifted his troops into the PDJ but they met heavy resistance and had to retreat to high ground. Fortunately, the onset of the rainy season in May eased the pressure on Long Tieng, as roads were washed out, slowing the NVA advance. VP launched a limited offense in June and recaptured Sam Thong. This was the situation when Scott returned to the US.

[Scott, ETR, 26 July 72: "The enemy offensive forced a withdrawal of all Air Operations from Site 98 (Long Tieng). As a result the AOC was divided between three separate operating locations. The AT-28 strike force operates solely from Vientiane. The FAC and AOC operation is conducted from Ban Xon (Site 272). All personnel and aircraft return to Vientiane each evening. The Military Region Commander, Gen. Vang Pao, maintains a command post and headquarters at Long]
Tieng. All USAFSOF personnel assigned to MR II live in Vientiane and commute daily via Air America aircraft. A second factor influencing indigenous air activity was the rigid control of US Foreign Aid Monies to Laos. The ensuing sortie reduction forced tighter control of missions and a decrease in available munitions. Lastly, a reduction of USAF personnel was completed and essentially only USAFSOF Teams man the Air Operations Centers.

November-December 1971

James E. Parker, Jr., arrived in Udorn in early November 1971, following one year of training. A contract employee, he reported to a two-story block building off the airfield's tarmac. He was met by Jim Glerum, deputy chief of base. Neatly dressed and well-mannered, "He greeted us in a rather formal manner and escorted us inside." They went to the first office off the reception area and were introduced to Pat Landry, the base chief. He was known as "the Stick," as he carried a wide variety of sticks. "As a boss he had a reputation of being blunt and having the capability to make hard decisions and sticking to them." Outside Landry's office there was a constant movement of people going from room to room in the mostly windowless building; radio blared in the background. There was a center room with maps hinged on boards that were moved back and forth by men and women who plotted positions and posted overhead photographs. Parker had the general impression that "things were happening."

Parker was next introduced to "George M." - chief of operations - who was standing in front of the main map board. He explained that the CIA had two main jobs in Laos: (1) to engage as many as possible of the 70,000 NVA in the country and keep them from South Vietnam; (2) to protect the sovereignty of Laos. There were four military regions. MR I had several battalion-size GMs of irregulars who were fights local Pathet Lao and monitoring the Chinese road; CIA officers had just lost their base camp and had pulled back close to Luang Prabang. MR III and IV were in the south; the job there was to fight the PL/NVA and watch the trail; in the dry season, CIA forces were in the forward area, near the border with Vietnam, but they pulled back in the rainy season (due to supply problems), leaving road watch teams; things were mostly quiet in the south except during the change of seasons. MR II was "the big show." There were six GMS of Hmongs in MR II, plus Thai mercenaries (since 1969). The Hmongs patrol and maneuver while the Thai sit in fixed positions and hold ground. The NVA currently was bringing in troops and supplies down Route 6 for a assault on the Thai positions on the PDJ. Intelligence sources indicated the the NVA had assigned one of its most senior officers to direct the attack. There were a couple of dozen
Agency officers currently in MR II to work with the Hmong, Thais, USAF, and Air America to defend the PDJ.

Parker was assigned to the desk officer for MR II. He was to collect and collate current information on the situation in the region and to disseminate it to VTE, BRK, and Washington. He had to insure that the maps and boards were current and act as a briefer when called upon. (He replaced "Buck.") VIPS usually were briefed by Jim Glerum. He was an excellent briefer. "His briefings were comprehensive and erudite."

On 10 December 1971, "Buck" took Parker on a familiarization tour of the PDJ. He went first to Long Tieng. Vang Pao had a stone house surrounded by barbed wire on the south side of the runway. Scattered throughout the valley were the thatched shacks that housed some 20,000 Hmong. The Thais were on the east end of the valley with several batteries of 105mm and 155mm guns. The Sky compound was on the west end of the airstrip, hard against the kharst. You first came to the Air Ops and the rigging shed. Sky headquarters was behind Air Ops. You passed through gates made of cast iron fencing and barbed wire. There was a two story block building on the right past the gate which served as sleeping quarters. The mess hall was on the left. Beyond the mess hall was the bomb proof, concrete headquarters building. The front and side entrances were large bank vault doors. Entering through the front vault door, Parker met TINY - 260+ pounds of muscle. BAMBOO, DIGGER, and RINGO also were there. All the Sky officers were in their late 20/early 30s. They wore mismatched civilian/military clothing, jungle boots, 9mm pistols with E&E bags and canteens on their pistols belts. Many had strings on their wrists, tied by Hmong for good luck.

HOG was the most impressive of the group. "He had the dark handsome looks of a Valentino movie star and like the others he was weathered." All SOGers heard about HOG shortly after arriving. He had come to Laos from Montana in his late teens as a kicker for Air America. He then returned as a CIA contract employee. His first job was to monitor the entire MR II. He would spend weeksin the field with the Hmong. This had led to criticism that he was "going native," was "a little crazy," and had "divided loyalties." However, when assigned to 20A, "his unassuming nature, clear thinking and devotion to the Sky mission became obvious. He had no pretensions. No rancor. He was intimidated by no man." His manner was taciturn. He never got excited and always got the job done. "He was the definitive SOGer." Daniels was chief of operations under Dick Johnson. "He knew every mile of the area, every commander." He had a special rapport with the Hmong. He knew their capabilities
and their limitations. Alone among the Sky officers, he slept in Vang Pao’s house. He rarely left MR II, although every couple of months he would go to BKK and stay drunk for a couple of days, then go to Udorn and dry out.

Dick Johnson was chief of unit. He was an older man, a career officer who had a paramilitary assigned during the Korean War. He was trusted by headquarters “to make sure the Long Tieng operation did not turn into a rogue elephant.” As Parker later learned, Johnson was in a difficult position, especially with respect to Vang Pao. “He was between HOGE and Long Tieng, who was revered by VP, and the Stick at Udorn, who had seniority and influence. Not everything that Dick tried to accomplish got off the ground.” However, he was popular with the Sky officers. He demanded propriety and accountability from the agency officers at 20A.

BAG was HOGE’s deputy. Shep Johnson ran the rigging shop and was tremendously conscientious.

Parker left 20A in a S-58T for the PDJ. It was “an incredible sight amongst the mountains.” Thai 105/155mm gun emplacements were on the south side of the plateau. The firebases were well protected with networks of trenches and bunkers, surrounded by barbed wires and mines. Each base was situated so that it could be protected by two or three adjacent positions. Parker landed at the northmost position and was met by GREEK, a former USMC helicopter pilot who worked with CAL at Sky air ops. (COBRA/Doug Swanson worked exclusively with the Thais.) Air America helicopters were ferrying ammunition to positions on the PDJ. Parker met the Thai commander of the position. He termed the position “impregnable,” with three inter-connected rings of firing positions, well fortified mortar pits, barbed and concertina wire, and mines. Local artillery was available within seconds; flares and gunships were on call.

Parker returned to Long Tieng, impressed with the Thai positions. KAYAK, usually the last man off the PDJ, came in a while later, with toothbrush in mouth. He was “lean and hard,” a “high energy” individual. He wanted to go out with the Hmongs on a patrol, but Johnson said: “We don’t do that here.” Another Hmong patrol has reported the NVA, wearing new uniforms, moving along the west side of the PDJ. There was a general discussion of the NVA buildup and impending attack. BAG suggested that the Hmong move north of the NVA and put pressure on their rear and flanks, pushing them into the Thai defensive positions. HOGE said that Vang Pao had discussed a similar plan last night but had decided that there would be too many Hmong casualties. Also, VP was convinced that the Thais would be able to hold off any
attack. BAG countered that road watch teams had reported the presence of tanks. He said that he would talk to VP.

At this point, DUTCH came in and asked for "good coordinates." He was responsible to developing target information for the B-52s. The Sky officers read coordinates off the palms of their hands or from dog-eared notebooks. They then discussed the plots, as DUTCH drew strike boxes on a map. DUTCH later would pass the information to the USAF.

On December 11, Parker visited LS-32/Bouam Long, flying in the S-58T with DIGGER (who was to replace REDCOAT for a couple of weeks). DIGGER was an ex-Marine who had led long-range patrols in Vietnam. He also had an M.A. in phychology. He was a clear, objective voice about tactics in MR II. He was not a sympathetic as HOG about the Hmong’s failings. He thought that the Hmong should be more aggressive. "He was one of the toughest officers in Long Tieng, going up to work with the toughest Hmong.

LS-32 sat in the middle of enemy-controlled territory, 25 kilometers north of the PDJ. Cher Pao Moua, Vang Pao’s father-in-law lived there. The outpost was in a valley at the top of the highest mountain in the area. Air was the only way in. The helicopter got overhead the position and descended in a tight spiral. (Clouds often prevented flights into LS-32.) The Hmong position was under constant attack. The villagers lived in bunkers, and food and water was rationed.

Parker’s general impression of Sky officers following his tour: "The Agency had good men working in the program. There was no womanizing. No one had rigid attitudes, the whole work force was intelligent, adaptive, dedicated, with strong work ethic. Everyone was involved, felt that they were making a contribution. People tended to stay year after year. There was no bureaucracy."

Parker found the people at Udorn confident about the ability of the Thais to defend the PDJ. They could soak up North Vietnamese resources and work to the advantage of U.S. position in Southeast Asia.

December 14: Overhead photography showed large covered trailers coming down the road toward the PDJ. B-52s and fast movers were targeted against the road that night and next day.

December 15 & 16: There was light ground activity. STICK often would come into the center ops room and stand in front of the map of the PDJ for long periods, occasionally
slapping the side of his leg with one of his sticks. Late in the afternoon of December 16, after staring at the map for 15 minutes, he said, "Come on, come on, you dirty commie bastards. Come on."

December 17: Resupply efforts during the day were cut short when the area was enveloped in smoke. GREEK was the last American off the PDJ. The attack began that night. All Thai positions simultaneously came under ground and artillery attack. The background noise on the radio was deafening. The Thai commander of the northern-most position reported tanks outside the wire. Gunships were ineffective due to cloud cover. The northern-most position was overrun. Someone in the ops room put an X over the position. Within five hours, all the Thai positions were covered with Xs.

December 18: A reserve force of Thai/Hmong were lifted by helicopter to the ridgeline below the PDJ where the Thais were regrouping. B-52s carpetbombed the old Thai positions that night.

December 20: Vang Pao visited Udorn. He argued that neither the Hmong nor the Thais could defend the ridgeline south of the PDJ. The next stand had to be made at Skyline. Landry was reluctant to surrender so much territory. He went over to Thai headquarters after VP left. The Thais said that they would facilitate recruitment of training of additional personnel. (They preferred to stop the NVA before they reached the Mekong.) The NVA big guns soon made the decision about were to stand an academic one, as they blew apart the new positions along the first ridgeline. By December 25, the decision had been made to stop the NVA at Skyline.

December 16, 1971
Thomas H. Sullivan, 20A, to PIC UTH VTE: PDJ throughout period 0700-1700L had numerous troops-in-contact; also incoming ordinance with numerous WIs. "The build up continues and the enemy is slowly applying pressure."

December 18-21, 1971
NVA launch full scale attack on Thai artillery bases on PDJ, using tanks and 130mm guns (which outranges Thai artillery). PDJ falls after three days of heavy fighting; more than 1000 Hmong/Thai killed. VP's forces pushed off PDJ for last time.

Rhine: Theory was to supply overlapping fire but NVA attacked all bases simultaneously.]

Conboy, "Vietnam and Laos": With the end of the rainy season, PAVN began planning for major offensive against PDJ.
"Because of the increased government defenses on the plain, Hanoi appointed Major-General Le Truong Tan to head the operation. General Tan had been PAVN chief-of-staff and was in charge of the Route 9 defenses during the South Vietnamese incursion into southern Laos in early 1971, giving him ample experience in heading multi-divisional campaigns." "Taking advantage of the superior range of its 130mm artillery pieces, PAVN shelled the government position with impunity." Tan next ordered attack by PT-76 amphibious tanks, T-34 medium tanks, and Chinese-made armored personnel carriers. "Within three days, the elaborate government defenses on the plain were in ruins and the PAVN were knocking on the doors of Long Tieng."

New York Times, December 21 and 22, 1971: In late October/early November 1971, the Communists began to improve airfields in the southern part of North Vietnam. In late November, MIG-21s began to cross the border into Laos and harass USAF aircraft attacking the Ho Chi Minh Trail. One MIG fired at a B-52 but missed.

(At a news conference on November 12, Nixon announced that the US would withdraw 45,000 troops in December and January, leaving 139,500 US troops in Vietnam on February 1, 1972. The US would use its airpower (1) to aid South Vietnam until a negotiated settlement was achieved and US POWs brought home, and (2) to protect remaining American troops.)

On December 10, an F-105 was brought down by a SAM-2 launched from the Mugia Pass area. An F-4 was shot down by a SAM on December 17.

At 3 P.M. on December 18, an F-4 supporting ground troops on the PDJ was shot down by a MIG-21. Two F-4s engaged the MIG but ran out of fuel during the course of the dogfight. Both crews ejected. One is missing; the other was picked up on December 19. This was the first air-to-air loss in Laos. The three aircraft lost over a two-hour period was the heaviest single-day losses since December 1967, at the height of the air campaign against North Vietnam. It caused a major SAR operation.

On December 19, an F-4 was shot down by AAA along the Laos/North Vietnam border, east of the PDJ.

These actions led to major air attacks on North Vietnam by the end of the month - and sparked anti-war protests.

December 18, 1971

Sullivan, 20A, to PIC UTH VTE: "All stations of PDJ are mostly unsettled. The pads started taking incoming at 1835L/17 DEC and by 0630L/18 DEC the entire PDJ was subject to both incoming and troops contact. Casualty counts are sketchy and poor communications hamper accurate compilation as to numbers and locations." Entire NE PDJ has been lost as well as portion of SE PDJ. Tanks were reported in
support of enemy forces on NE PDJ. XWPHP received small arms fire at UG 065423, receiving one hit in forward fuel cell; aircraft landed at 20A for emergency repairs. A 12.7mm reported at UC108470 with English speaking person using the call sign POPPY tried unsuccessfully to lure XWPGU into the area. "LS-20A is not overly secure from a repeat of last season."

Dearborn: NVA attacked fire base Tom Tom on the night of December 17. On the morning of December 18, three CAS Otters (Taylor, Cloud, and Clark) sent to 20A per usual schedule. Upon arrival, they were briefed about attack, although extent of damage not known. Aircraft dispatched with emergency ammo and rations for bases under attack. Aircraft encountered intense ground fire. XW-PHP (Dan Cloud) took hit through forward fuel cell while attempting to drop at Fox-Bravo. Although only Cloud hit, all aircraft took continuous fire.

December 19, 1971

Sullivan, 20A, to FIC UTH VTE: L-108 [Moung Soi] and all positions were overrun by unfriendlys, supported by five tanks. Reports of many WIA/KIA. The PDJ lost most ground to enemy forces, supported by tanks. KING KONG is surrounded by enemy ground forces, as are MUSTANG, LION, and COBRA. STINGRAY has taken incoming; there are enemy forces just west of PANTHER.

Dearborn: Douglas, Cloud, and Dearborn flew Otters to 20A in the morning. CRICKET gave account of previous night’s activities while they were en route. "All very grim." Main fire bases at King Kong, Rossini, Mustang, Tom Tom, Sting Ray, and Cobra still active, with Mustang and Tom Tom taking severe pounding from 130mm guns. Three CAS Otters and one AAM Otter (Romes) worked PDJ during the day. Romes "did an outstanding job."

First mission of day to get 155mm ammo to King Kong. Three CAS Otters assigned to job. Drops from 7,000 to 10,000 feet, using impact chutes. Douglas made first drop. As Dearborn set up for drop, he saw three 12.7mm guns positions open fire from 400 yards west of King Kong. "They were firing so rapidly that a dust cloud was raised out of the trees giving their position away." They discontinued drop and called for fire support to silence the guns, but neither counter-battery fire nor air cover available. NVA had ringed King Kong and Rossini with anti-aircraft, and T-28 refused to engage them. Drops at these two fire bases were abandoned.

The next mission was to drop to Mustang and DZs Fox-Bravo and Fox-Echo, both of which were about to be overrun. Again, 3 CAS Otters involved. Cloud made first drop on Fox-Echo; 12.7mm and 37mm opened up during pass, and he took a
hit in left wing. A 37mm exploded inboard of his right wing, putting a hole in the flap. "Cloud discontinued the drop and made a hasty exit to safer territory with 37 MM exploding all around the aircraft very accurately." The other two Otters did not attempt drop.

Third mission of day was drop at Hotel-Delta and Hotel-Yankee pads at the base of Tom Tom. Dearborn and Romes assigned mission. Tom Tom being pounded by 130mm fire; NVA soldiers on hill, breeching barbed wire. T-28s using CBU against the position after advising Thais to stay down in bunkers. Dearborn made first drop into Hotel-Delta with impact chute from 2,000 feet above ground. Only one out of seven opened. Little ground fire. Romes then dropped at Hotel-Yankee and took two 37mm bursts some distance from aircraft. "Through the whole drop, Tom Tom was taking heavy incoming and the Thai controller's voice was strained and quivering as he asked for help and re-supply. He said over half his battery was dead and wounded and the NVA were breeching the perimeter defenses. They could not hold out much longer."

One more attempt was made to re-supply Fox-Bravo and Fox-Echo, this time with T-28s to suppress ground fire. Six T-28s and two CAS Otters for mission. Halfway into DZ, all aircraft came under heavy fire and Cloud hit for second time (blowing right main tire). Drop discontinued at that point.

The Otters made several more drops during day with only scattered small arms fire. NVA shot down one F-4, two T-28s, and one chopper.

[O'Dell, Jan. 5, 1993: "GM 21 was the northeastern most unit and was overrun by tanks following 130mm arty fire. All the case officers left 20A early with Hog, who was the ops boss, and flew to one of the positions on the rim of the PDJ. I got on a helo and flew down to the major airstrip on the PDJ. It was a rout, troops were just streaming by and heading for 20A. I tried to find anyone from GM 21 and then tried to get one of the GM or SGU commanders to form some defensive positions so we could counterattack. All the Thai arty positions were still firing and I thought we could get something going. No way; they just left me out there. So I headed south until I got to a safe area and, I think, Billy Peason picked me up in a twin pac."

I remember Bob Clark trying desperately to resupply one of the Thai positions. I remember those exact words, '. . . a dust cloud was raised around the 12.7mm . . .' about that particular position. All those Otter pilots really gave it their best shot in trying to get ammo, etc., into the Thais."
December 20, 1971

Sullivan, 20A, to FIC UTH, VTE, situation 1700/19 DEC - 1700/20 DEC

"More ground was lost on the PDJ. All big gun batteries as well as the FAC positions were lost overnight. LIMA-106 [Moung Phanh], L-108 [Moung Soui], LS-343 [Ban Na Thom], LS-347 [Moung Phanh North], LS-348 [Ban Ha], LS-350 [Ban Hasi], LS-275 [Ban Thang], and L-22 [Xiang Khouang] were all either overrun or friendly control was abandoned throughout the reporting period. Numerous reports of enemy tanks were passing through the daylight hours in the vicinity of the KING KONG battery. The tanks were further reported to be moving in a southerly direction toward the LS-275 area. Six tanks were reported at 2143L/19 DEC to have overrun the MUSTANG and LION gun positions. The majority of the friendly troops that have been able to walk out of their positions are enroute to both the LS-15 (Ban Na) and LS-20A stations. Enemy big guns were reported on the eastern part of the PDJ being pulled by trucks. The calibre was reported to be in excess of 100mm. The PANTHER and STINGRAY gun positions were put out of operation at midnight 20 DEC with the PANTHER position being abandoned and the troops reported to be fleeing southwestward, possibly to LS-15 area. XW-PHB shot down at UG 009325 by ground fire. Crew rescued, no injuries. A/C left at scene. Oil line was hit."

Dearborn: Tom Tom and Mustang overrun during night. Lion was lost; survivors heading south with NVA and P7-76 tanks in hot pursuit. Weather is bad, so no fighter support. Three CAS Otters (Douglas, Adolph, and Dearborn) attempt to re-supply survivors and stragglers from Tom Tom, Mustang, and Lion. Dearborn made drop at Cobra battery, which had not been hit as hard as others. Lots of small arms fire but inaccurate. Then Dearborn and Douglas dropped at Panther. Situation there "tense" as tanks rapidly moving west toward fire base. Dearborn discontinued dropping as Thai's begin to abandon position. "We only worked till noon ... because by noon everything was lost except King Kong and Rossini. They were both completely surrounded with no chance of escape. . ." "By 1300 local, our efforts were confined to picking up the wounded and survivors of the fire bases. Most of them were working their way back to LS-15. A pitiful sight from two weeks before. The majority were shell shocked and most were suffering from wounds, exposure, or shock in one form or another."

[Casterlin: "This was an eventful day for me as I was finally shot down after all these years in harm's way."
Casterlin had been removing dead and wounded all day from
Phou Seu. The weather was too bad for friendly air. Later in the afternoon, he was "trolling for Thai F4G stragglers" on the southern portion of the PDJ (the northern portion was already lost), but he could see only columns of enemy advancing in a westerly direction. Only one friendly position left where he was flying. It was located on a semi-circular series of low hills southeast of Phou Seu. "I had felt apprehensive all day and had a feeling of impending doom." He had a radio call from a F4G for evacuation. The eight wounded and tired Thais, mostly F4G controllers, were located on a grassy knoll, surrounded by tree lines. He landed and they piled into the helicopter. On takeoff, however, AK-47 fire began raking the aircraft. Chuck Low, the crew chief, replied with counterfire, silencing the incoming. About this time, first officer Dick Graham decided that he wanted to turn left ("This often happened when things got tough") while Casterlin was trying to turn right toward the last friendly position, as the angle gearbox pressure gauge had just indicated zero pressure. He wanted to land ASAP (if the gearbox seized, he could not autorotate). Graham was trying to return to 20A, using the cover of trees and mountains. "It didn't take long to convince him, with the aid of a few choice and well chosen words, that I was right." Casterlin landed and the crew chief reported hits in the aft fuel cell, blades and fuselage. The worst damage was a severed oil line. At this point, the local Hmong commander asked if they were going to be there long, as he was planning to leave in the morning. Jack Knotts, who had covered Casterlin with a Huey, landed and ferried the crew, together with some of the Thais, to 20A. Casterlin wanted to retrieve the S-58T as AAM only had five of the aircraft. He scavenged an oil line from a similar machine at 20A. Graham, a Porter pilot who recently had transferred to VTE, insisted upon returning with Casterlin. "My respect and admiration for the man increased enormously about that time." Knotts returned them to the downed helicopter and returned to loiter position while the repairs were made. Casterlin then ferried the ship to 20A. "I felt good. I had brought back my machine and crew mostly intact. I felt that I had done my job."

Telephone interview with Richard Graham, June 23, 1990: Graham retired from the Navy on 1 July 1967 and joined Air America on July 26 (DOB: 26 November 1924). He flew Caribous and Porters, then transferred to R/W as company scaled down. On December 20, they took hits right over position. No question about landing as red light was on. They had passed over position about 10 minutes earlier that looked friendly. They approached it with caution.
December 21-22, 1971

Sullivan, 20A, to PIC UTH VTE, report for 1700/20 DEC - 1700/22 DEC: PDJ, L108 [Mounj So1], and all airstrips have either fallen into enemy hands or are unusable. Sam Thong still friendly, with a small number of security troops there. Aircraft 521L took two small arms hit in left wing at TG 925500; no injuries to crew. XW-PHF took 37mm burst at TG 930440; no damage to aircraft. 20A under ground attack between 2030/21 and 0630/22; enemy withdrew. LS-15 and LS-72 remain in friendly control and are centers of rally and resupply. Enemy concentrations mostly 4-5 kms east of 20A. 20A hit by rockets and mortars 0300-0500/21. Enemy sapper attack 0300-0500/21 destroyed two OF-1s and minor damage to two O-1Fs. Three enemy KIA. Refugee evacuation took place throughout daylight hours on 21/22 DEC, with majority of refugees evacuated by PM/22 DEC. "At this time there is no accurate estimate of enemy strength or equipment available. Report of PT-76 tanks (total number unknown) and field guns larger than 100mm in caliber have been observed by recon. The movement appears toward the southern PDJ using inclement weather conditions to maximum advantage. Air activities on 21 DEC were curtailed due to low ceilings and visibilities. Weather improved late AM 22 DEC and air operations resumed normal ops. FIC/LS20A will continue to function until station becomes untenable as declared by customer. Crews now receive general local briefing which changes constantly by the hour."

December 22, 1971

Report from VTE: Neo/Thai abandoned last two fire bases (Stingray and Cobra). Hospital at Long Tieng filled to overflowing with wounded.

[Dearborn wrote a report about the fighting. It was negative about Air America's contribution. Most of the airdrops were done by CAS's twin-Otters. He and Don Romes (Air America) were the last two airplanes dropping to the artillery positions, using impact chutes at the end. He recalls "Cowboy" yelling that NVA tanks were rolling over his bunker.

CAS, he says, was doing most of the infil/exfil by the early 1970s and got along better with the Customers. Jerrod B. "Hog" Daniels, an ex-smoke jumper, was chief of unit at Long Tieng. Charles Gabler, air ops at Vientiane, was "a jerk." Doug Swanson, at Pakse and Long Tieng, was "nuttier than a fruitcake." George Bacon ("Kayak") was a glory hunter. SOF Magazine ran an article on Bacon with lots of pictures of Bacon with Vang Pao; he later was killed in Angola.

Air America had the best helicopters and pilots but CAS had better Porters and pilots. The CAS Porter had a Pratt &
powerful gun which not only fired twice as far as the 155mm guns we had but had a much more lethal projectile.

I agree with Dearborn's comments that CASI had better Twin Otter pilots than AAM. I did not know about the engine difference but I did see a much more aggressive activity from CASI, particularly during the fall of the PDJ. I vividly recall watching one of the CASI Twin Otters trying to drop to BC 609 (FAC: Pingo) by flying up the south side of the mountain that the battalion was sitting on and trying to loop the bundles (which contained most hand grenades, as the Thais and the NVA were playing hand grenade baseball from positions on either side of the chopper pad) up onto the position while staying away from the 37mm AAA that was on the north side of the mountain and which had already been active enough to scare away the T28s and (I think) had already shot down the F4."

December 24, 1971
Sullivan, 20A, to FIC UTH VTE, reports for 1700/23 DEC – 1700/24 DEC: 20A, LS-32, LS-63 areas quiet overnight. Two aircraft (613 and 95X) destroyed at 20A when 95X struck a fuel drum with its prop. No injuries, but both aircraft totally destroyed. 1300 new FR troops at LS-20 to be deployed throughout area.

December 24, 1971
XOXO: Porter 197X (F. R. Griscom) and C-123 54613 (A. J. Rischman, B. E. Heidt, E. J. Weissenback, H. Khamborg). "After the PIC of N197X had been briefed by the customer, he taxied out between two parked C-123s. As he swung slightly to the right for better vision, the propeller struck a seal drum of JP-1 fuel which had been off loaded for a C-123. The burst drum ignited almost instantaneously and the PIC evacuated the Porter immediately thru the cargo door. The burning aircraft, due to the slope of the ramp, rolled tail first into the right rear side of 54613 which was about to be off loaded. The burning Porter plus the burning JP-1 flowing down slope under the C-123K caused the latter to start burning. The PIC and F/O in the cockpit and the AFD in the cabin evacuated via the read door. The AFs (Weissenback) was on the ramp, clear of the scene. The PIC of C-123K sustained slight scratches on his hand and knees when he fell to the ground after evacuating the aircraft."

December 25, 1971
Sullivan, 20A, to FIC UTH VTE, report for 1700/24 DEC to 1700/25 DEC: 20A took 5 rounds of 107mm rocket at 0815/25. No damage.

December 25-27, 1971
Frahm to WML, 1 Aug 92: Frahm flew out of 20A with Joe Lopes F/M Fred Alor for these three days, rounding up troops
Whitney engine, which was superior to Air America’s Garrett engine. CAS had twin-Otters before Air America.]  

[Tovar, March 13, 1992: Vang Pao and the Thais complained bitterly about the lack of TACAIR. The embassy tried to get TACAIR from 7AF but were told that available TACAIR assets were committed to three SAR operations in southern Laos.]  

Mike Ingham to WML, Jan. 7, 1993: “The PDJ was heavily fortified by the Thais (an activity that not everyone thought a good idea) and was populated with a series of interlocking fire bases. The Hmong were supposed to screen the outskirts of the PDJ to keep an eye out for any encroachment by the NVA. As a general rule, all static positions were garrisoned by the Thai, who were not very good at mobil warfare (and were too heavily equipped anyway), and the more mobil and lightly armed Hmong did the patrolling and screening. The Hmong also knew the country a great deal better than the Thais and were better at humping the mountains than the mostly lowland Thai. 

The whole loss of the PDJ is a story in itself. From an air activity point of view, the CASI Twin Otter guys distinguished themselves, the AAM guys tried; and the Air Force was criminally unavailable for duty. This was conventional, fixed position warfare with thousands of troops, tanks, heavy artillery – the works. It was well beyond the capability of our operation and, in my judgement, should not have been attempted by the Agency. Even if we had had Air Force support on the PDJ, I think that we would have lost it, as we did not have the kind of troops or support infrastructure required to conduct that kind of operation. This was conventional warfare; there was nothing guerrilla about it. 

I was out on the PDJ and really felt for the Thais who we had put in a very tough position and were now unable to support. All the Thai FAGs worked for me, and I had some real heart-wrenching radio conversations who some who were in the final throes of being overrun. The worst part was that there was little I could do. The situation was much too tough to expend much out of AAM and CASI, and the USAF was invisible. 

This was the first time that he had seen the 130mm artillery from the NVA. There had been intelligence that these guns were being brought in to the war but we had not seen them. I remember being shown very large craters in some of the Thai positions on the PDJ prior to its loss. In retrospect, what I was look at was craters from the impact of 130mm shells that were fire by the NVA only enough to get the firing data on each Thai position. When the attack started, they just blew the positions away with this very
"hot-footing it away from the PDJ when the NVA ran them off the Plain."

"A fairly senior pilot had recently been transferred from Saigon to the S-58T program in Udorn, and was leading a mixed group of H-34s, Bells, and 58Ts on a search and recovery mission. We were in the area we were meant to be searching and couldn’t see anyone. The leader (can’t remember his name) decided to descent to around 500 feet AGL to have a better. Joe descended along with him, but remained 500 feet above him. No sooner did we level off when we all drew fire that shot out one of the leader’s engines, and a single round damaged the main spar and the leading edge of one of our main rotor blades. Of course, we had to abort the mission, and returned to Long Tieng.

Like Jess [Hagerman], I felt that the man leading the flight didn’t have enough experience in country to realize the danger to which he was exposing us when he decided to go trolling in the area. Had he lost both engines we’d have had three men on the ground for whom the rest of us would have made very attempt to rescue - and who would then have been put at serious risk that wasn’t necessary to incur in the first place. I’d become sensitive to this sort of scenario, having already been cast in the role of rescuee, as well as having almost gotten myself, and 11 others killed because I’d failed to acquire sufficient knowledge of the situation on the ground before descending into the effective range of enemy fire.

Having said all that, FEPA did a lot to improve our circumstance - and for that I’m very grateful to those who put their jobs on the line to see that it became a reality.

Ingham, Jan. 7, 1993: "I was in the S58T. I think that we were on our way back to 20A after a 6-8 helicopter mission to pick up FAG Rossini (now living in Chicago) and the command groups of the Thai artillery and infantry battalions that had been run out of the northernmost firebase on the PDJ. I had located them in a riverbed northwest of the PDJ and had orgnized the mission to get them out. The mission itself went well and we were on our way back to 20A when someone spotted a smoke grenade going off in the trees. I think our pilot was Brian Johnson and since we had been the SAR bird and were empty, he decided to go down to take a look at the smoke. No doubt that it was risky but you have to remember that we had been devoting all our time to finding and extracting Thai troops who had fled the PDJ and it was not unusual to have them try whatever means they had at their disposal to flag down the airplanes that were looking for them. As we descended, we all heard the ground fire but the flight mech said that he thought that the noise was the door on the chopper banging. Very shortly thereafter Johnson issued the epitet that I had learned meant trouble when issued by a pilot - "Oh, shit!" -
followed by "Now we will find out whether these things fly on one engine." It did, although without much power we had to fly in the valleys and around the hills to get back to 20A. I guess I feel Frahm’s criticism of Johnson’s actions on this mission are a little too harsh."

**December 27, 1971**

NVA attack Paksong, last government stronghold on the Bolovens Plateau. Defenders routed. Reinforcements stabilize position halfway between Paksong and Pakse. [GM 42 halts advance at KM 28.]

**Bolovens Campaign:** North Vietnamese entered and burned Paksong on December 28. This ended the RLG campaign in MR IV. There had been no gain; NVA still controlled Bolovens and strategic towns of Paksong and Saravane. In this final phase, few TACAIR resources available for Paksong. Situation in northern Laos "desperate," requiring majority of TACAIR. The few additional sorties available for MR IV allocated to attempt to retake Saravane on December 22-23.

**December 27, 1971**

George L. Ritter, Roy F. Townley, Eugene J. Weissenback, and Khamphon Saysongkham reported missing in C-123K 576293 while enroute Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69) for arms drop. Wreckage later found; crew MIA.

**December 27, 1971**

Sullivan, 20A, to PIC UTH VTE, report for 1700/26 DEC to 1700/27 DEC: Fixed wing operations will be at LS-272 [Ban Xon] while R/W will be at 20A.

**December 28, 1971**

C-123K, H.H. Boyles, D.E. Morris and 3 AFS/AFD - searching for Ritter, northeast of Ban Xieng Lom, when they took small arms fire. One round glanced off left windshield; hits on right elevator, stabilizer, leading edge of right wing, fuselage. Substantial damage to aircraft but crew OK.

**December 28, 1971**

Bell 204B N8535F, D.L. Carson, R.R. Zappardino, F.R. Barrow - on medevac near LS274 (Xieng Lom) - received heavy small arms fire - tail boom and engine hit.

**December 29, 1971**

Sullivan 20A to PIC UTH VTE, report for 1700/28 DEC to 1700/29 DEC: "As it stands, air operations will continue at LS-20A until either the runway becomes unusable and/or the enemy denies us access on occupation. It is strongly recommended that only personnel assigned on a High Priority
business be given transport into 20A as seats/space for rides out is at a premium and becoming worse."

December 31, 1971

Washington Post reports on January 21 that 24 Air America aircraft were hit by ground fire in December, with 3 shot down. [Pilots described record in January 1972 as worst ever.]

[Major General Alton D. Slay, ETR, August 1972: Slay was assistant deputy chief of staff for operations at 7th Air Force from August 1971 to November 1971, then chief of staff for operations from December 1971 to August 1972. He cited a JCS directive of August 28, 1971; it stated that any involvement of US forces in support of an operation had to receive JCS approval a minimum of 10 days in advance.

The Fall of the PDJ: "During the night of 17 December 1971, the North Vietnamese Army launched a new offensive against General Vang Pao’s positions on the Plain of Jars (PDJ). This offensive started at the beginning of a five day period of bad weather which precluded visual air strikes. Tactical Air support was limited to Loran and Combat Sky Spot bombing against enemy positions which were constantly changing. In less than four days the Plain was overrun with casualties to friendly forces.

This activity preceded by only one week the evacuation of Paksong in the Bolovens by friendly forces. During this time period, friendly ground forces in both northern and southern Laos were in extremely vulnerable positions and the major weight of US air effort, which was being devoted to the interdiction campaign in Steel Tiger, was shifted to the embattled areas.

As the ground situation deteriorated, the flexibility of US airpower was demonstrated with a rapid reallocation of resources to stem the enemy drive. In northern Laos the daily allocation of strike sorties was almost doubled; between 17 and 26 December, US aircraft flew 33 gunship sorties and 522 TAC AIR sorties in support of the Laotians on the PDJ. Simultaneously, B-52s were diverted from the interdiction effort to strike the enemy advancing on Long Tieng.

During the early days of the enemy offensive, the friendly forces were under heavy fire and were forced to abandon several fire bases on the PDJ. As five NVA regiments pressed the attack, friendly forces conducted a disorderly withdrawal in the direction of Long Tieng. The intervention of allied air power and the subsequent slowdown of the enemy drive, allowed the friendly forces the much needed time to receive reinforcements, regroup and establish a line of defense to protect Long Tieng. The total air
effort was credited with having turned the tide of the enemy offensive in favor of allied forces.

During the months that followed, some of the lost ground was regained by friendly forces, but the PDJ has remained in enemy hands, giving the enemy a significant advantage in Western Laos at the start of the next dry season.

Noteeworthy problems were encountered involving the use of air power in support of the Royal Laoian Government. One of the problems encountered in the many individual air strikes was the shortage of English speaking Forward Air Guides. Close air support without adequate air-ground communications significantly reduced the potential effectiveness of tactical air.

Another problem involved the fact that while all US military operations in Laos were the responsibility of the US Ambassador, no formal relationship existed between the American Embassy in Vientiane and Seventh Air Force. Embassy/Royal Laoian Government plans, which required US air support, were formulated and implemented without being integrated into the total plan for employment of air resources on Southeast Asia. Through the Deputy Commander of 7/13 AF at Udorn RTAFB, Seventh Air Force maintained liaison with the Embassy; this relationship was purely advisory in nature. Of those occasions when the US Ambassador had requirements for airpower which Seventh Air Force could not support without adverse effects on other areas of Southern Asia, political pressure was brought to bear which culminated in last minute changes in Seventh Air Force sortie allocations. Consequently, Seventh Air Force was often placed into a reactive role, providing support which was sometimes completely unanticipated.

T. J. Thompson to WML, February 16, 1993:

Thompson was in charge of aerial delivery/resupply in MR II in the early 1970s. During the battle for Skyline, 1971-72, he was airdropping from 100,000 to 300,000 pounds of cargo daily, and slingloading by helicopter another 60,000 to 115,000 pounds. He daily utilized from 10 to 14 fixed-wing aircraft, and 5 to 7 helicopters. "This is not including drops or aircraft working out of Vientiane or Udorn." Skyline was "very hot," with small arms fire, 12.7mm, and other AAA. "All sites were bad but "CC" sites stick out in my mind more than the rest." Thompson flew over the sites numerous times in CASI Otters PGO, PHF, and PHP, with Captains Weaver, Taylor, Douglas, Dearborn, and others. "It was not uncommon to have over two hundred rounds shot at you per pass; you could see the NVA and you could hear the rounds going off and see the tracers."
"I used predominantly TWOTTERS to drop air cargo to the smaller sites for the following reasons, versus C-7A: You could load Otter faster and get a quicker turn around; Otters could carry 3,000 to 3,500 pounds, while a C-7A would carry 4,000 to 4,500 pounds; Otters could get to the Drop Zones and back faster, were more accurate with the drop, stayed in closer to the site while droppings, and took less hits; and last, Otters had few maintenance problems due to Turboprop engine as opposed to the old reciprocating engines on the C-7A."

The C-7A was "a great drop aircraft flown by outstanding crew. I have no complaint on bigger drop zones." But "when a person was so intensely involved in such a massive and demanding task as I was at the time, you have to go with what get the most cargo on the sites in the best shape and to minimize the loss of aircraft and crews."

"I wrote up the plan to change from predominantly C-7As to TWotter in summer of 71. It was approved by COU Dick Johnson after much scrutiny. At the end of each day, the TROTTER would consistently deliver more cargo than C-7A."

Interview with T. J. Thompson, June 8, 1993, San Antonio:

T. J. was activated by the agency in January 1961. He worked a good deal at Marina. The impact chute was developed at Intermountain (it opened at 200 feet, which the foot contacted the ground); also HALO.

Shep Johnson was the key to the aerial delivery system at Long Tieng, which had been organized by Shep in 1969/70. He had trained over 100 locals to load airplanes, retrieve chutes, etc. He also developed a system to drop POL barrels that saved thousands of dollars; he received a $750 award for the idea. No one had paid much attention to aerial delivery at Long Tieng before Shep.

Thompson was dropping an average of 100,000 pounds daily. His highpoint was 300,000 pounds, dropped mainly on Skyline positions. He dropped 6,000,000 pounds of cargo in one month (4 million by parachute and 2 million by helicopter; he used 16,000 parachutes a month at one point.

Dick Mann was out of the IUJEWEL program. T.J. met him while taking paramilitary training at the Farm. Mann was highly intelligent. He loved Heinkel beer, which was shipped to Long Tieng on forklift pallets. He also thinks highly of George Bacon.

Jerry Daniels had four brothers. He graduated from the University of Montana. He played chess and wrestled. His oldest brother Jack won silver and bronze medals in the Olympics for the pentathlon (he now works with Nike in New Jersey). Jerry could see further than most people with respect to the Hmong. He spoke the language. He insisted
on accurate reporting. He was respected by the Hmong and the pilots. (See Tragic Mountains, p. 470)

James Glerum to WML, February 20, 1993:

"I am afraid I can add only general comments about the 7th AF during the winter of 71/72. There is no question that they played a major role in Laos events from that period through the very end in early 1973. The availability of tacair sorties was of considerable importance to the local and Thai troops, at least from the moral and motivation standpoint. And there was considerable evidence that they had the opposite effect on the NVA - at the very least forcing them to modify battle plans and resupply efforts to compensate for the threat from the air. How much actual damage the 7th did to the NVA probably will never be known. Secondaries (fires, explosions) generally were rare and BDA against troops always is difficult to obtain.

The impact of air power after the retreat back to Long Tieng also is difficult to measure. It is possible that the NVA were prevented from immediately capitalizing on their gains, but equally possible that (as was frequently the case) they paused to regroup and resupply.

With respect to Slay’s reference to the order for prior JCS approval of tacair support, it did exist but I do not recall that early a date. However, as we attracted more policy level interest and inexorably were forced out of the guerrilla mode, we ultimately reached the point where all operations involving more than one battalion required Washington approval. George Morton became extremely adept at firing up a military-type five paragraph field order and, as best I can recall, we never had an operation disapproved. Of course, any resemblance to the field order and what actually happened usually was purely coincidental. Weather, NVA reaction, and (most of all) Vang Pao and other local commander on-the-scene decisions were factors not fully under our control. For us, this was business as usual - but with a lot more paperwork."

[Joseph M. Glasgow to WML, February 17, 1993:

"My position vis-a-vis the USAF performance over Laos is one of gratitude and respect. They did not always perform up to my expectations but when you are of a relatively few Americans surrounded by and dependent on unreliable locals, on the ground, the F-4, A1E, F-111 were welcomed sights. Having said that, I share my colleagues frustrations when we could not get the numbers of USAF
fighter/bombers we thought could be spared from support to the rapidly diminishing ground forces in the main battle area - SVN.

I recall being with [Hugh Tovar] on a helicopter pick-up pad in South Laos (when the Thais were being choppered into Pakson) and the Jolly Greens from Ubon (I think) made their first lift and we got word they were aborting and returning to base. (As you know, using the USAF choppers operationally in Laos was an international violation and pilots were strictly enjoined not to allow themselves or their birds to become targets of the press.) Needless to say, Hugh was livid. Here we were with only a small contingent of troops on the target HLZ near Pakson and the Air Force was throwing in the towel. As we watched in anger, we saw the formation of big bids flopping towards Thailand. Suddenly, the formation swung around and started back toward our position. Hugh proclaimed, as I recall, 'I didn't think they would just pick-up and leave us; here they come back.' As they flew over our position, the lead pilot radioed us he was indeed going home. And they did. I will leave Hugh's disposition to your imagination.

It was such acts that really caused us to be disenchanted with the Air Force. Their major assessment of us civilians on the ground was we didn't understand and appreciate air force resources, tactics and ROE. We did. General Slay was probably accurate in his end-of-tour report. They did play a major role, if not the most effective, in holding off the NVA near Long Tieng. Without the B-52s and daily USAF frags we would have been forced out (my personal opinion) in December of 1971. (You must recall I was not not officially assigned to MR II until March 1971.) On Christmas Day, 1971, my wife and son and I were on the beach at the Kahala Hilton. In fact before I left Udorn, the Stick [Landry] instructed me to get up to the PDJ as soon as I returned from leave and note what Swanson and friends had accomplished in constructing the artillery positions on the PDJ. Of course they were overrun quickly but only after allowing time for most of the other troops to get away. On the positive side, the NVA had to mass their people for those attacks, providing great targets for the air force. And that, in my opinion, was the single most effective tactic we had: deploy large troops units to forward positions where they built bunkers, put up shelters, prepared chopper pads and drop zones, patrolled less than aggressively, and waited for the enemy to mass and we could attack air and artillery on them. Now, our own Muong T-28 pilots were more than a match for the air force. In a nutshell, we, the men on the ground and closest to the enemy, were not considered qualified to direct/control USAF
high performance aircraft unless we were in actual contact with the hostiles or could see them.

One more anecdotal experience: Lumberjack (Norm Gardner) recalls seeing enemy troops take refuge in a tree line and asked the Raven to hit them. Reluctantly, the Raven called Cricket (the ABCCC) and got a pair of F-4s. Raven told the fighter to hit his smoke in the trees, and after the strike the pilot asked what he had killed. The Raven replied: 'Just another bunch of trees.' What do you think Lumberjack felt? Because the Raven did not actually see the enemy, he couldn't believe the case officer right there on the ground. As you can see, the Air Force was helpful to us but it was like pulling hen's teeth often.

[Glasgow notes that the F-111 unit employed in Laos, the 474th TFW, has an annual reunion at Nellis AFB (Las Vegas) every September. Also, there is a unit history at Maxwell. "Many of the crew members sent gifts up to Long Tieng for the Red Dog radio operators and asked for any souvenirs they (the Muong guys) could send to them at Takhli. VP and I got together and located a recently found AK-47, twisted, covered with rust, fractured stock, and then wrote a letter over VP's signature to the CO of the 474th. In the letter we said we recovered the AK after an F-111 strike (and it's possible that's how the rifle was abandoned) and told the CO how much we appreciated his help and professionalism and told him we learned the NVA around Long Tieng called the F-111 'Whispering Death' because they couldn't hear the plane and the bombs fell night or day, bad weather or good. (Usually, no bombs fell on the enemy at night - B-52s excepted -or during heavy weather when the Raven couldn't see the enemy.)