OUTLINE - AIR AMERICA IN LAOS

[Arthur J. Dommen: "Laos is less a nation state than a conglomeration of tribes and languages." Lao live in lowlands and constitute half the population; Kha live on middle slopes of mountains, especially in south; Yao live on lower mountain slopes; Thai tribes occupy upper valleys; Meo live on the highest crests and ridges, with villages not normally found below 3500 feet. The Meo came from southern China in the mid-19th century. They are most numerous in Xieng Khouang province, with smaller numbers in Luang Prabang, Sam Neua, Phong Saly, and Nam Tha. They number between 300,000 and 500,000. Known to be fiercely independent, they are sometimes compared to the Gurkhas of Nepal.]

Late 1954

Neesee Hicks and Dale Williamson fly Doole and party of c.15 to Vientiane after COGNAC to set up operations in Laos

January 1955

US establishes operations mission (USOM) in VTE with primary mission of assisting RLG attain stability and maintain internal security. USOM administered US economic assistance. In December, the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) was established within USOM to handle military aid. PEO staffed by retired or reserve Army officers.

Stevenson: Laos was part of U.S. containment policy and was seen as the first line of defense against China and North Vietnam. "Laos was one of President Eisenhower's dominoes, although the one least valuable in terms of raw materials or size of population." Cold War attitudes were "at the root of American policy toward Laos since 1954." "The Communist threat is a primary reality for officials in Washington." Stevenson stresses the "incongruities between American images and Laotian realities." While U.S. policy toward Laos may seem to be a series of mistakes, men responsible for policy saw it as "a series of difficult choices among generally undesirable alternatives." "American policy toward Laos between 1954 and 1957 was much more the product of [Walter] Robertson's vigorous anticommunism than any of the traits or attitudes of Eisenhower or Dulles."

In September 1954, Ambassador Charles W. Yost moved into a residence "with leaking roofs and hordes of rats." On 1 January 1955, a small United States Operations Mission (USOM), in charge of administering aid program, set up home and office in a Royal Government pasture in Vientiane. The
mission grew to 45 people by autumn 1955; 82 in August 1956; 100+ in December 1957. Program Evaluation Office (PEO) — "in practice, a MAAG" — was established at the end of 1955 to administer the military air program. It began with policy training in 1955; civic action programs in 1957; tactical training and field operations in July 1959. In order to avoid overt contravention of the Geneva Accords, PEO personnel officially retired from U.S. military.

Oden Meeker was assigned to Laos at the end of 1954 as CARE representative. He remained there for about a year. There were about a dozen Americans in Vientiane when he arrived and over a hundred when he left. He saw the appearance of first traffic policeman. There was new money in circulation. Vientiane had a "boom town" atmosphere, with a new American prefab compound ("silver city").

He flew from Saigon to VTE in the government's weekly courier plane, a CAT DC-3 on charter to the US government. "We were on the milk run: forty-five minutes west by northwest over the rich, flat rice lands to Phnom-Penh . . . then another hour and a half to Bangkok . . . and then a couple of hours north up through Thailand to . . . Vientiane." The airplane had bucket seats. Passengers were secretaries, economic mission people, State Department courier, a correspondent from CBS, a couple of French civil servants, Chinese and Vietnamese domestics, a handful of Lao officials and their wives, and a Vietnamese girl "who looked as though she were on parole from a dance hall." "Facing the passengers who were flying sideways was the cargo, case of condensed milk, a woman's green bicycle, two bright red electric generators, a chemical toilet, a Siamese cat in a wicker cage, all lashed together in a criss-cross of rope secured to rings on the deck and bulkheads. There were canvas sacks, string bags, tin footlockers, and whale-backed trunk."

"Vientiane is a wandering village and a few lines of weathered one-story wooden shops selling pressure lamps, cotton goods, tinned French delicacies, and a scattering of notions. Here and there on one of the three parallel main streets which make up the center of town there are a few two-story buildings. Most of the houses are built of wood and thatch and plaited bamboo, on stilts high off the ground, set back in clumps of thin bamboo and pole-green, oar-bladed banana trees. Everywhere there are pagodas. In the streets there are chickens and questing small black pigs, angular and with heads like wild boar. There are a number or pedicabs but few automobiles. This is the capital of Laos, Vientiane, the Place of Sandalwood."

Actually, VTE was a collection of related villages with a population of 25-30,000, some 15,000 living in the center of the city. "It was tranquility just this side of Rip Van Winkle." The people were unambitious, unmechanical, gentle,
and courteous, always smiling. A foreigner soon learns the phrase "bo pen nyan." "Bo pen nyan can make manana sound dynamic."

Meeker’s office and home was in a long, screened bungalow on stilts. It also was the home of Alex Moore, deputy director of USOM. Settha Palace Hotel ("The Bungalow") was an old French colonial guesthouse that had crumbled into a state of "almost theatrical decay," with overhead fans and limited bath and toilet facilities.

VTE was full of Polish, Canadian, and Indian officers, members of the ICC. They drove around town in white jeeps. Each Tuesday and Friday morning, the courier plane would arrive from Saigon and dump a new cargo of electric generators, agricultural experts, and other tools of US aid at the airfield at Van T'ay. VTE had the scent of new money in the air.

February 25, 1955
"Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between Mr. Doole and Mr. Gundy" (m): memo details lengthy conversation, with Grundy keeping Doole informed down to the smallest detail. Doole’s approval was required for even the most minor matters. For example, Newell wanted to increased the salaries for Barnam and Mitchell from $833 to $958 a month and to designate them as assistant controllers. This required Doole’s approval.

September-December 1955
U.S. Operations Mission contracts with CAT to airdrop 1,000 tons of emergency food (rice and salt) - more than 200 flights from Udorn to 25 receiving areas throughout Laos.

News of a severe food shortage learned during summer 1955 - rice at Udorn railhead in mid-September and CAT began airdrops with three C-46s - DZ market by fires and panels of white cloth - average three hours rountrip from Udorn - two drops daily by each plane - operating from tents at Udorn - water buffalo had to be driven from airstrips for takeoffs and landings.

Brogersma made initial survey flight, then served as coordinator - W.B. McCarthy, BKK Ops Mgr, planned drops (he was evacuated to US for medical treatment that day drops began) - Stubs in charge of maintenance. Three C-46s used. Flown by Fred Walker, Bill Welk, and Art Wilson. Project lasted about a month. Copilot Dale Williamson flew 155 hours during month.

Stevenson: There was a large famine relief program in 1955, with the first air drops into Phong Saly province in September.
RICE DROP OVER LAOS

CAT's Know-how Makes Operation a "Piece of Cake"

Civil Air Transport again has fulfilled an emergency mission in a most praiseworthy manner. This time, dropping rice and salt to Laos was driven by the need to feed the people of northern Laos. CAT had planned to deliver food to Udorn, in northern Thailand, to 25 receiving areas, some of which were only five miles from Communist China, and with delivery over two million pounds of emergency foodstuffs. On behalf of the Royal Government of Lao, the United States, through the U.S. Operations Mission, purchased in Thailand some 2 million tons of rice and contracted with CAT to airlift an additional 1,000 tons.

When news of the approaching disaster was received, CAT's pilot, Wilson, dropped rice over Attapeu in southern Laos (M. McCallum). A local Laotian girl watching bags of rice being dropped from the air (USIS).

Loading of rice on to CAT planes at Udorn (M. McCallum). A CAT plane cruises over the target area as the cargo is discharged. Bags of rice being released by "kickers." A Laotian family enjoys their first meal for a long time (USIS).

The rice was loaded with their first cargoes of rice and again were airbornes, this time winging across the Mekong River, made famous during World War II, to deliver their tons of rice to the people of Laos.

For drops of this type, preliminary procedures are the same. The rice is packaged and, with the rice, packed tightly in a burlap bag. The bag is weighed and a sample of rice drawn from each bag to make certain that the quality is unsullied. The first bag then is placed in a loosely tied second burlap bag to insure against loss in case the first bag should burst on impact with the ground.

Based on daily reports from various areas, those in which rice was most needed, the USOM representative briefs the pilot on the area to be served by that flight, with an alternate area so the plane won't have to return its cargo to Udorn in case of bad weather over the primary area.

Of course, the feature of the airlift air-drop itself is that it is skillfully handled by pilots; the pilot's arm from four to "kickers" is to the bags which drop the rice. The pilot's arm is to the bags which drop the rice. The pilot's arm is to the bags which drop the rice. The pilot's arm from four to "kickers" is sensitive to the amount of rice that is dropped.

A "Well Done" cable "Please express my appreciation and thanks to USOM staff, Lao officials, CAT pilots and others whose ingenuity and hard work are responsible for initial success in rice air-dropping." Dr. RAYMOND T. MOYER Office of Far East Operations JCA/Washington, D.C.
area.

Of course, the most spectacular feature of the whole operation is the air-drop itself. Riding with the pilot is a Laotian who is thoroughly familiar with the receiving area, and from four to five well-trained "kickers" whose job it is to kick out the bags when over the area.

The air-drops are made in some wildly improbable places—one of those is at Pattli, a tiny village perched on a mountain top only 55 miles from Dien Bien Phu. Another is only five miles from Red China.

Because of the ruggedness of the terrains, and the sometimes poor visibility, the receiving parties build fires and lay panels of white cloth to mark the receiving area.

CAT pilots spiral down over this rugged terrain from an altitude of approximately 8,000 feet to the usual dropping altitude of 500 to 1,000 feet. To mix the drop by as much as fifty feet would plummet the precious cargo over a cliff and into oblivion.

Kickers are so expert that they can nearly always anticipate the pilot's signal from the electrical bell system to make the drop, and in most cases actually are dropped on their own; their judgment is best illustrated by their consistent accuracy in "hitting the target."

Carefully trained, these men worked their "kicking" technique to such a degree that they can unload an entire plane in nine minutes. The planes usually make about six passes at their targets before the rice is unloaded.

Invariably, the crew is warned by the universal sign from the plane on the ground that everything is okay—clap hands held overhead.

Flying time from Udorn field to the receiving area averages about three hours round trip. The usual schedule is two drops daily by each plane, averaging 50,000 pounds of cargo per trip, five or six kickers and assigned Laotian liaison officers and personnel participating as observers and kickers to identify the receiving areas.

To borrow a favorite expression of CAT's legendary pilot, the late "Earthquake" McGovern, the operation is a "piece of cake."

The big factor in making it a "piece of cake" is the many similar flights and air-drop operations participated in by CAT since its inception nine years ago. Although this operation is not to be compared in size or in scope with the more famous drops at Dien Bien Phu, or any of several others, those were the ones that gave the training to the air and ground personnel that makes this operation appear simple.

After an initial survey flight with R. L. "Dutch" Brougereama, Bob Rousselot, Director of Operations, named Dutch as "coordinator" of this operation. Dutch has an outstanding record of such successful operations.

In addition to "Dutch" and the flight crews, orchids are given freely to W. R. "Mac" McCarthy, Bangkok Operations Manager, who spent hours planning the drops only to have to be evacuated to the States for medical treatment the day the drops commenced; to George Stubbs of TNN, who set up the supply and maintenance facilities; Chief Mechanic "Abe" Rivera, who keeps the planes in tip-top condition; T. C. Chu from TNN and R. I. from TPE, who keep the ground radio and navigational aids working; and to William Wu, Communications, Flight Radio Operator.

USOM officials who assisted in preparations for Operation Rice Drop included M. Carter D'Pa, Alex Moore, G. Ag Ferregaux, Harry Horrach, and Chris Ostergaard.

Heading the Laos part of the operation was Signaresh of the Department of Social Welfare, and heading preparations in Thailand was Nitesha Ratanakosol.

If we are to hand out bouquets, we could begin with the Regional Director and include everyone from the Director of Operations to the men who loaded the rice aboard the planes. The operation is that smooth. It is a "piece of cake."
航空投送，遇到恶劣天气时，农民们在山中等待运输牲畜。

Carabao roam the Udorn, Thailand airfield. They have to be driven from the airstrip for landings and take-offs.

前向话题的工作人员，刘昌文

(Right) A supply of rice for the drop mission is loaded on a Civil Air Transport C-46 at Udorn, where the rice was stored, and carried to one of the twenty drop zones in Laos which had been designated as “critical” by the Laotian Bureau of Social Welfare.

(Left) The symbol of Royal Laos appeared on each of the sacks of rice which were air-dropped to famine-threatened villages. Each sack contained a message from King Sisavang Vong: “From the Royal Government of Laos this rice is freely given to our unfortunate people who are victims of drought and the Vietnamese invasion.”
1956

In 1956 the National Security Council considered whether the air proprietary should be retained. Houston testified that Dulles "proposed that we continue the ownership and control of the assets . . . including the subsidy as needed." Houston noted that subsidy had been required since 1949, reaching $1.2 million at its highpoint. According to the CIA History, the proprietary went off subsidy in 1957.

March 1956
Var Green regional manager for SEAsia - J. Tate, asst - J.R. Kelly station mgr SGN - W.B. McCarthy station mgr BKK - Forte, Shaver, and Williamson at BKK (Shaver assigned BKK since April 1955) - Pope at SGN

June 1956
CAT opens new office at 46/48 Patpong Road, BKK - Sea Supply: Walt Kuzmak (mgr), Frank Sherno, Hugh McCaffrey

July 1956
Amb. J. Graham Parsons takes up post in VTE (remains until February 1958), replacing Yost. North Vietnam supporting insurgency in Laos. Pathet Lao have bases in Sam Neua and Phony Saly provinces, being supported by North Vietnam. US aid program had to be developed quickly lest army disintegrate.

Comments on personalities:
Souvanna Phouma: genial, courteous - speaks beautiful French - training as a civil engineer - most cosmopolitan of senior leaders but Parsons found it difficult to persuade him that Souphanouvong gave first loyalty to Hanoi.
Poumi: energetic, ambitious - worked and played hard - one of the most dynamic of Lao leaders - strongly anticommunist.
Desmond FitzGerald: able and devoted intelligence officer who was "very active in a great many matters relating to the Far East."

Stevenson: CIA did not begin to play a major policy in Laos until well into 1957; CIA, however, was first in arranging arms deliveries. U.S. spent $10.7 million in economic aid, 1955-59, with half of the money used for transportation projects (build, improve, and maintain roads and airfields). During the same period, $184 million was spent for military assistance.

November 23, 1956
Fred Walker flies weapons from Kadena to Vientiane via Clark and Taipei. [JHM]
December 1956
Charles R. Pearcy appointed station mgr BKK; Dave Garber at SGN (replaced by Clyde Bauer in 1957).

1957

March 1957
John E. Lee, hired in February, sent to Bangkok as vacation relief for Bill Shaver and Dale Williamson. CAT had a single C-47 in Thailand (a C-46 later was added), which was used for two contracts: one with the PEO and one with Sea Supply for the Border Police. PEO flying was routine, with twice a week flights to Vientiane, carrying supplies and personnel. Sea Supply flying was much more varied, involving work with the Police Aerial Supply Unit (PARU), an elite organization of paratroopers, similar to the Green Berets. Lee worked with the training program at the PARU base at Hua Hin. He made two-day resupply flights, one south and one north, dropping supplies and rotation teams at outposts along the border from Burma to Laos and Cambodia. During the rainy season, some 40 of the 100+ platoons could only be resupplied by air, and the roads and trails became impassible. He usually received a rough schedule from the CAT station manager, detailing him to Hua Hin. There, he worked for Bill Lair, who was in charge of the PARU program. Lee enjoyed working with this elite unit, which had a high esprit d’corps. It was interesting flying.

July 1, 1957
Bruce Blevins arrived in VTE on June 30 to be in place with C-47 B-817 for beginning of new contract with Embassy. When he arrived, he found that the customer had arranged for a crew house. This was a square two-story building close to the airport. It had a screened porch and no air conditioning. There were three bedrooms upstairs. Blevins had one, his Chinese copilot and radio operator shared another, with two Filipino mechanics (Frigilani and Rocke) in the third. After two years, mainly through the efforts of the customer, he was allowed to bring his wife to VTE.

The main customer was Jack Mathews. He also dealt with [J. William] Bill Foley (who now runs a print shop in McLean). Mathews was supporting Kong Le, and Blevins spent a good deal of time providing logistical support for Kong Le’s forces. Mathews, a graduate of the University of Montana, was considerate, smart, and honest. He and Blevins used to make ship models for entertainment.

Flying conditions were primitive. The airport at VTE had a PSP runway and the only control tower in Laos.
Blevins had to use French topography maps as no aeronautical charts were available. There were no radio aids to navigation expect for a 25-watt beacon that Air Laos would turn on as it suited them. Navigation was by pilotage. Blevins landed mostly on old Japanese fighter strips. He flew into Luang Prabang, Xieng Khoung, Attapeu, Savannakhet, Pakse, and Mongtsing (where Tom Dooley was located).

In addition to flying in support of Kong Le, he also did a lot of work with Operation Brotherhood. This involved Filipino medical and dental personnel. It was a good program that gained the support of the people. A good deal less successful were the leaflet drops, as most Lao were illiterate. He also provided some logistical support for Dr. Tom Dooley. He never became involved with clandestine "Mickey Mouse" flying.

Blevins did a little bit of everything. In addition to flying, he was in charge of the crew house and acted as station manager. He would communicate daily with Taipei via the aircraft's CW, reporting flying time and activities. He also wrote a monthly report to Rousselet passed around. Despite the paperwork, he received only his regular pilot's pay. At Blevin's suggestion, the CAT markings were removed from B-417 at its first servicing; thereafter, it flown only with the tail number.

Blevins had to live off the local economy. There were no medical or dental facilities. The "Green Latrine" was a popular hangout; a combination of Laotian dancehall and Chinese restaurant. However, a big night out usually meant a bowl of French onion soup in a downtown restaurant. He took up photography as a hobby, and built a dark room with his Chinese copilot.

During 1958, Blevins began to do a lot of airdrops. These consisted to rice drops to outlying Lao Army posts. He used Lao army personnel as kickers for the most part, with an American (Andy Anderson) along every now and then. At Rousselet's request, he took pictures of the DZs and sent them to Taipei. By 1960, activity in Laos had increased a great deal, with frequent TDY crews in VTE for airdrops. McCann took over as station manager as business increased, relieved Blevins of the paperwork. He transferred to Tachikawa in summer 1960. Shortly after he left, Kong Le dumped Mathews and changed sides. He attacked VTE. One Filipino mechanic was shot and Frigilania was captured. He later was released.

There was a lot of drug traffic in Laos, but Air America was never involved. Blevins once was approached by a drug dealer who wanted to charter the airplane to make an opium drop in the Gulf of Siam. Blevins reported the contact to the Embassy. He never heard from the individual again.
November 1957
Establishment of coalition government, including Pathet Lao, alarms Eisenhower administration.

November 16, 1957
Allen Dulles to James M. Douglas, Secretary of the Air Force:
"Since 1950 the Central Intelligence Agency had held the position that the Civil Air Transport Airline should be supported and maintained as a facility important to U.S. interests in the Far East. The Operations Coordinating Board has concurred in this position. This airline, which operates out of Taiwan under the authority of the Chinese Nationalist Government, is important not only in the furtherance of U.S. policy in ordinary times, but its usefulness under emergency conditions has been demonstrated repeatedly. For this reason its flight capabilities and equipment are maintained at a higher level than would be required by its normal commercial operations.

The airline maintains its own maintenance facilities through the principal operating company, the Asiatic Aeronautical Company, Ltd., a Chinee corporation incorporated under the foreign investment laws of the Chinese Nationalist Government on Formosa and wholly owned by American investors. Its maintenance activity is capable of maintaining the Civil Air Transport fleet and in addition has capacity for customer maintenance which at present runs in the neighborhood of 115,000 skilled man-hours per month. This customer maintenance capacity has been filled mainly by work under contracts with the U.S. Air Force.

While such a maintenance capacity is excess to the company's own needs, this Agency believes that it is important to the national interest to maintain this capacity against current as well as emergency requirements. The trained work force of skilled technicians produced by this operation is considered an important factor in the economy of Formosa and is an asset in war planning. The continuance of this facility, toward the establishment of which the Air Force has already been a major contributor, is believed to be in accord with our national interest and that of the Chinese Nationalist Government.

The need for development of long-range plans now requires valid estimates of the capacity at which maintenance operations should be maintained. From the point of view of this Agency, it is felt desirable that the shop capacity be kept in the neighborhood of 100,000 skilled man-hours per month for customer maintenance over and above the maintenance needs of the airline itself. While every effort is being made to develop commercial maintenance work, only if the company obtains a substantial amount of Air Force work can it hope to attain this level of shop utilization. It is recognized that as the United States withdraws
equipment for the Far East the opportunity to enter into contracts with the Air Force lessens and, furthermore, this agency realizes that the airline can seek Air Force contracts only on a strictly competitive basis, both as to price and quality of work. The quality of work is known to the Air Force to be high and the price can be competitive with any reasonable price set to others in the area. Therefore, if granted a degree of preferential treatment in obtaining contracts on a negotiated basis at not above competitive prices, the Agency believes that Civil Air Transport can obtain sufficient Air Force business to keep maintenance facilities at the desired level.

It is requested, therefore, that the Air Force take appropriate action within established policies to assure that Civil Air Transport has the opportunity to negotiate for servicing the maintenance requirements of the Air Force in the Far East. The Agency will assure that Civil Air Transport, through its maintenance facilities in Asiatic Aeronautical Company, Ltd., will meet competitive terms in price and quality of work offered by other maintenance facilities.

Representatives of this Agency have already discussed the foregoing with Major General A. G. Hewitt, Director of Maintenance Engineering (Materiel). However, our interest in the airline has extremely sensitive security implications and we would appreciate your circulating this letter on a limited need-to-know basis."

Church committee: "The CIA has requested that the Air Force consider the interests of the Agency in awarding commercial contracts to proprietaries. Initially this was done in the mid-1950s on the basis of a policy decision by the Operations Coordination Board that Air America was an instrument of value to national security. Air America was then operating at a deficit, and the Agency was able to maintain a standby capability without budget subsidies if it could obtain enough business to support large commercial aircraft. Finally, the United States Forest Service was advised of the ownership of the proprietary and asked to award contracts to the proprietary to assist the development of a commercial posture." [248]
March 1958

Horace Smith replaced Graham Parsons as ambassador; he will remain until July 1960 (and be replaced by Brown).

Stevenson: Smith got along well with the military but had problems with the CIA. Henry Hecksher became station chief in the summer of 1957, replacing Milton Clark, who had set up staff and intelligence network. "Hecksher was considered arrogant and resourceful." Hecksher considered Smith inexperienced and tired to run CIA operations without interference from the ambassador. He disagreed with Smith about which faction to support and worked at cross-purposes. Hecksher reported to Colby and Fitzgerald, who favored active CIA role in Laos. "The CIA had achieved a virtual coup d'état in Vietiane." Hecksher was replaced by Gordon Jorgenson in 1960 (who got along well with Ambassador Brown).

March 1958

Bowers: Operation BOOSTERSHOT lasted from March 31 to April 27. It was an attempt to influence voters in remote regions. Two C-130s flew from Japan to BKK, each carrying bulldozers rigged for airdrop. The two planes made seven drops inside Laos, delivering bulldozers, compressors, and other equipment. They returned to Ashiya on April 3.

C-119s and (in the latter stages) two C-123s were stationed at BKK (later, VTE), and continued the airdrops. By the time the operation ended on April 27, 1100 tons of supplies had been delivered.

John Lee, BKK, recalls that the pattern of flying changed in March. He took a routine commissary flight to VTE on March 14. Upon arrival, he was told that Ambassador Smith wanted to see him. The ambassador wanted Lee to fly on airdrops. He dropped rice and salt the next day in B-136. This was the beginning of a major project, and Lee's logbooks record 19 drops between March 15 and 29. The project continued for most of April.

In April, Lee and Bill Shaver flew as navigators on two USAF C-130s that were going to drop bulldozers. They were onboard to identify the drop zone and insure that the aircraft did not stray over the border into North Vietnam. Two drops were made: at Nam Tha on April 27, and at Nam Bac on May 13.

Shaver had a problem with his drop using the new C-130s. They were carrying a eight-ton Caterpillar D-6 Bulldozer, which would be used to lengthen a STOL strip. The aircraft was about an hour out of BKK, flying at 20,000
feet at 400 mph, when the pilot made a slight correction to his vertical trim tab. Suddenly, the aircraft nosed over into a steep dive. Shaver was glued to the cockpit ceiling, watching as the two pilots strained to bring the aircraft under control. The right wheel well door ripped off as the fought with the controls. Finally, they managed to level out at 1000 feet. Arriving at Don Muong, they found that the wings had pushed back, the two-ton wheel well door ripped off, and part of the horizontal stabilizer gone. The airplane never flew again. The problem was in the booster system. One of the two system had failed, locking the tabs into position and resulting in the dive. By the time the pilots had diagnosed the problem and switched off the systems, the plane was all but out of control.

Airdrops continued during the rest of 1958 and 1959. With more help needed, C-46s and crews were sent to VTE on TOY. Drops were mainly rice. Later, a few pilots (not Lee) flew arms drops from Takhli (Forte and Shaver were the first).

[Fred Walker flew 127 hours in March, dropping rice and salt to Moung Sai, Sam Naua, Ban Na, Phong Saly, and other locations. JHM]

May 4, 1958
Elections in Laos. [See Fall for election and for BOOSTER SHOT]
Hilsman: In November 1957, all sides agreed on elections, to be held on May 4, 1958. Alarmed by the strength of the communists, the new ambassador launched a "crash program" of more than 90 projects aimed at villages (wells, irrigation, schools, roads, airfield, hospitals), plus airdrop of 1,300 tons of food, medical and construction supplies. However, "it was all to little and much, much too late" as the Communists showed strength in election.

July 1958 - December 1959
Pro-western government of Phoui Sananikone - Hilsman: "the high water period of the policy of 'pro-western' neutrality."

August 1958
US increases assistance to Lao government. This includes efforts to improve line of communications. In March 1959 Navy Seabee Detachment works on new 6,500-foot runway at Wattay Airfield (half completed by end of 1959).

October 1958
24 people at SGN (4 US); 7 at VTE (1 US: Blevins); 1 at Phnom Penh (US).
October 22, 1958
Clyde S. Carter to VP T & S: CAT Incorporated and
associated companies employ approx. 3,000 people;
maintenance plant performs IRAN, rehabilitation, and other
major and minor repair work for a variety of aircraft,
including C-47, C-46, F-86, C-54, and PBY.

November 1958
B/Gen John A. Heintges survey situation in Laos. In
December he presents training plan for joint French-US
training of FAR.

1959

March 26, 1959
Air America, Inc. created by change of name of CAT
Incorporated (which dates to July 10, 1950).

"Minutes of Meeting on Name Change," April 4, 1959: Grundy explained that the name was being changed because of
the confusion between CAT Incorporated and CATCL. This was
especially serious in Japan where CAT Incorporated, as a
certified contractor under Artice XIV of Administrative
Agreement, receives certain benefits which CATCL doesn't." Efforts to overcome this problem by education have been
"wholly unsatisfactory." Grundy also noted that Admiral
Stump recently has been elected to the Board to replace
Chennault.

March - June 1959
Hearings before Subcommittee of the House Committee on
Government Operations on United States Air Operations in
Laos. Asst Secy of State For Far Eastern Affairs Walter S.
Robertson tells committee members to look at the map:
"Laos is a finger thrust right down into the heart of
Southeast Asia. And Southeast Asia is one of the prime
objectives of international Communists in Asia because it is
rich in raw materials and has excess food. If they can add
Southeast Asia with its raw materials and excess food to the
manpower of China, and to the industrial capacity of Japan -
and they are working terribly hard, without ceasing, to get
Japan - we will really have to pull up stakes and come home,
because the battle will be lost." "We very much feared when
they took the Communists into the Government that the same
thing would happen to Laos as happened to Czechoslovakia."

B/Gen Rothwell H. Brown (USA, Ret.), chief of PEO Feb.
1957 - Feb. 1959. After Brown retired in 1956, he was asked
by Admirals Stump and Radford to go to Laos and survey conditions there. He spent November and December 1956 in the country. He recommended a reorganization of the Programs Evaluation Office. When he took over PEO, he asked for a staff of 40 but his average strength was 18. Four people were engaged in housekeeping and four were female secretaries. "... the rest of us were just too thin to do a proper job. I make no excuses for it. I did the best I could." There have been major changes over the past ten months. "I feel that this is due to Ambassador Horace Smith." There is now a completely pro-Western government in Laos. Laos "is the buffer for the protection of every investment we have in all of Southeast Asia. Those mountains up there are worth their weight in gold against an invader. And someday they are going to come down through those mountains."

May 1959

Heintges training plan approved by US and French govts.

May 1959

Almanac: At 15th plenum of the Central Committee, North Vietnam’s leaders formally decided to take control of growing insurgency in south. Tempo of war speeds up as more southern cadre members infiltrate back to south along improved Ho Chi Minh Trail. Infiltration from north began in 1955; however, not until 1959 does CIA pick up evidence of large-scale infiltration. Hanoi’s decisions of this month along with troop movements in preparation for an October offensive are viewed by intelligence in Washington as the beginnings of North Vietnamese intervention.

July 1959


[Fighting breaks out in summer. Ambassador Brown supports direct US action. He writes in September: "Like Quemoy or Berlin, I think the time is now come when we have to take our stand." (USN:29-30)] Preparations for military action ease in early October as the crisis passes. Pathet Lao dissolve into jungle. By March 1960, government reestablishes control over half of districts lost of PL. Government pro-western. This is period of optimism.]

Stevenson: Fighting broke out between the Pathet Lao and Royal government during the summer (CIA had good network
among Meo tribes; did not become worried until the end of the August when the PDJ was threatened). On July 23, there was an agreement calling for U.S. military advisers to begin training Lao combat troops. By early August, over 100 additional U.S. advisers had arrived. The French remained in nominal command but were ineffective; they were the only advisers that could accompany Lao on tactical operations. CIA increased logistical support for Royal Army in mid-August by "chartering" Air America planes; however, there were no plans for U.S. military intervention.

August 22, 1959

Two CAT transports arrive VTE to support Royal Lao Army

[Fighting between Pathet Lao and Royal govt broke out in summer 1959 - US did not become worried until the end of August, when PDJ threatened - CIA increased logistical support for Royal Lao army in mid-August by "chartering" CAT planes]

Eddie Sims informed Dale Williamson in late August that he had been selected for helicopter training. Williamson was at the Kawasaki facility outside of Kobe for training in Bell 47G-2 (manufactured by Kawasaki under license) from August 31 to September 10. Gordon Smith had preceded him to Japan; Art Wilson followed shortly thereafter. Williamson found the transition to R/W difficult. "It was strange to watch the airspeed go down to zero." Also, there was a tendency to revert to early F/W training in an emergency, and this could be dangerous. The company tended to view the helicopter as just another aircraft and expected pilots to be checked out in a few weeks. The course consisted of ground school and 30 hours of flying.

CAT purchased a Bell 47 and brought it to Tainan. On October 23, Rousselot asked Williamson if he could train Herb Liu; he referred to the "urgency" of the program. Williamson, who was the most experienced helicopter pilot with 60 hours, agreed.

In early November, the four pilots were sent to Johnson AB, Japan on Project Grasshopper to check out on H-19B. They flew about 15-20 hours. They then were sent to Clark AB, where CAT had arranged to acquire four H-19As from the USAF. Upon arrival, they learned that the USAF had selected four "hangar queens" for transfer, none of which was in flying condition. After this was straightened out, they went to Baguio, flying out of the parade ground of the Philippine Military Academy. They were supposed to be getting training at the higher altitudes they would be using in Southeast Asia, but the training was not very realistic because the helicopters always were lightly loaded.
Rousselot: One day, "out of the blue sky," Grundy called Rousselot in and showed him a message from CIA headquarters that instructed them to send two pilots to Osaka to get qualified in helicopters. Rousselot assumed that there would be an operation - a "one time deal" - that called for the use of helicopters. He had no idea that the program would grow to such a large size. The decision to employ helicopters was made by the Agency.

September 4, 1959
Stevenson: Laos appeals to UN for emergency force to repel invasion by North Vietnam, but U.S. policy remained unchanged: increased aid and multilateral search for solution.

September 26, 1959
Almanac: VC ambush two companies of Saigon’s 23rd Division killing 12. Attack brings home Hanoi’s decision to switch from "political struggle" to "armed struggle."

October 6, 1959
John Lee flies 3:55 in Helio #833. There was only one airplane. Eddie Sims was checked out first, then he came to VTE to check out Blevins and Lee. After flying the airplane, Lee decided that he would not make a very good light plane pilot and decided to stay with transports. The decision did not sit well with Rousselot. Sutphin later came down. He and Sims cracked up the airplane at Phong Saly and it had to be carried out in piece to the airfield at Nam Bac.

October 1959
Pathet Lao forces withdraw into North Vietnam instead of continuing push into Sam Neua.

December 31, 1959
Bloodless coup by Phoumi Nosavan. ||

1960

February 1960
Fred Walker arrives in Laos - recalls flying Major Vang Pao around country in Helio for next year. Sutphin recalls that he arrived VTE the same time as Walker. Walker was supposed to fly the DC-3 and Sutphin the Helio. Walker began flying the Helio in June 1960 (#835).
Lee: By 1960 operations had grown to the point that Fred Walker was assigned as chief pilot at VTE. Walker was a strict chief pilot, especially hard on young pilots who lacked experience. Among the pilots, he was known as "Thunderfred" Walker for his reluctance to flying into thunderstorms.

Sutphin to WML: Sut was testing F-100s coming out of overhaul at Tainan when he was sent to Okinawa to report to Aderholt. Aderholt gave his a one-day checkout on the Helio. [March 20, 1960: Sutphin had a landing accident with B-835 at Okuma Airfield, Okinawa during training. He groundlooped to the right on landing; the left gear main strut failed. Both Sutphin and S. M. Hilberg received extensive training from manufacturer representative.] Sut then returned to Taiwan. Some time later, Aderholt brought the Helio to Taiwan and he and Sutphin had another ride in it. Sutphin was flying on the C-130s out of Takhli to Tibet (and was on the Judkins/Stiles flight that nearly ended up in Burma) when he was transferred to VTE in February 1960. Rousselet wanted him to set up the Helio program. (He arrived in VTE the same time as Fred Walker. Walker was to fly the DC-3 and Sut the Helio.) Sims said that he would give him a check ride. They did a little local flying, then loaded two customers for a trip to an airfield in northern Laos. Enroute, the engine heated up, they stopped as they were over Phong Saly. Some 200 people were building a Helio strip there, but it was not finished. They crashed landed. Sutphin suffered minor injuries to his leg and ended up in the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital in BKK.

After a few days in the hospital, he returned to VTE to find that another Helio had been brought in. Shortly thereafter, he met Bill Lair for the first time. Bill told him to start landing at different places throughout Laos. He began numbering this as sites, borrowed from the system of "K" fields during the Korean War (Sut had been stationed at K-16.) In all, he opened close to 100 sites.

He had a lot of trouble with the Helio at first. The biggest problem was vapor locks when starting. Stubb's moved the fuel pump aft of the first wall, correcting the problem. Stubb's replaced the wheel pants with smaller sized ones. The X-Wind gear was blocked off because of mud, rocks, and gravel. The tail rudder was modified so that it wouldn't jam. Bollinger put an extra doubler in mid-fuselage to give extra strength. The problem of a small main landing gear tires and tail wheel never were solved.

Sutphin first encountered Vang Pao when it took Stu Methven to Ban Ban for a meeting with him. VP wanted to make a recon flight to Nong Het (LS03) on the Vietnamese border. Sutphin and Methven flew him there, where they landed. VP then asked them to take the local commander on
the recon flight across the border. They did so, spending about two hours taking pictures. They then returned to Nong Het and spent the night. The next day they took VP and a load of chickens (a gift from the Nong Het commander) back to Ban Ban. Again they spent the night, enjoying a meal with the chickens. The next morning, he flew VP and Methven to Phoung Savon (L21), where he dropped them off.

Sutphin was living with Fred Walker when Kong Le overran VTE. They had to remain in the house for about two months before they resumed flying.

During the fighting at Padoung, Sutphin used the Hello as a bomber. They removed the back door of the Hello, loaded up with mortar shells that had been rigged to be dropped from the air, and flew missions on the PDJ. Sutphin and his "bombardier" made six drops a day for eleven days straight.

Sutphin transferred to B-26 photo recon work after White landed wheels up at Takhli in front of Rousselot.

Interview with Eddie Sims: The USAF/CIA had a Hello at Kadena that they were ready to write off following an accident. [This must have been 1959 - see Lee entry for October 1959] Grundy obtained it and had it rebuilt at Tainan. Sims flew it a couple of times before it was sent to VTE for use by Blevins on a new contract. There were problems with the engine, causing frequent cancellations and complaints by the customer. Sims and Aderholt went to VTE, where Aderholt gave Sims a real checkout in the airplane. (Aderholt was "a good pilot" - "a real shot guy."). Together with Stubbs, they identified the problem: an oil scavenger tube was crimped, causing the engine to run rough. Sims flew the Hello while waiting for Sutphin to arrive. Sut had a lot of single engine time. Sims conducted training with Sutphin while operating the contract. On one flight, the oil pressure dropped. They made a landing at Phong Saly just as the pressure reached zero. When workers ran out on the strip, Sims had to stand on the brakes, causing the aircraft to nose over. Sutphin injured his leg, and the Hello was a write off. Grundy insisted that the pieces be brought to Taiwan, where the aircraft was again rebuilt.

Interview with Aderholt: Aderholt had supervised development of Hello in Washington in 1959. Doole tried to destroy the project and had a fight with Bollinger at the Agency. Aderholt took the Hello to Laos and asked Sims to identify the worst field so that he could demonstrate the capability of the aircraft. Sims picked Phong Saly. Doole later bought Porters. It was a good aircraft but underpowered with piston engine and several people got killed. It was OK with the turbine engine. Aderholt surveyed Lima sites while in Laos. [Between January 1960 and August 1962, Aderholt was assigned to the 1045th
Operations Evaluation Training Group, Detachment 2, Kadena Air Base, Okinawa. He was responsible for planning covert and paramilitary operations in Asia.]

Interview with Bruce Blevins: Around 1959, Blevins became involved in the Helio program. John Lee and Doc Johnson refused to fly it, so Blevins got stuck with the job. There was one airplane (B-833). He does not recall who checked him out, but it may have been Sims. In any event, he did not receive much in the way of instruction. He operated into small strips, often flying customers to outlying areas for discussion with local personnel. As the fighting intensified, he also flew out a number of prisoners. He vividly recalls the strip at Phong Saly. The Meos had cut a strip into the side of a mountain, just below the ridgeline. There was a 20 degree bend in the runway. You could only land one way. The turbulence on the ridgeline made the approach especially hazardous. Later, Sims and Sutphin lost an engine on approach to Phong Saly and wiped out the airplane. George Stubbins brought out the parts on a bicycle.

Interview with Rousselot: Like the helicopters, one day the word came down that Air America would be getting a Helio. Apparently, Dr. Bollinger had sold the Agency on its capability. The aircraft got off to "a very bad start." Sims took it to Laos and cracked it up at Phong Saly; it was not his fault. It appeared for a time that Air America was incapable of operating the aircraft. Although Doole was opposed to the Helio, Rousselot was convinced that if Bird & Son got it, they would make it work. Brongersma, Fowler, and Tedder were skilled bush pilots. As the Agency was insisting on a STOL capability, Rousselot made a determined effort to develop it into a vital program. This meant bringing in new pilots to replace the old hands, who were having difficulty with the aircraft.

March 1960

Four H-19s flown from Clark to Seno in C-124, where they were assembled under the direction of Abe Rivero. Williamson, chief pilot of project, ferried the first one to VTE in April. It was the hottest month of the year. With full fuel load and 300 pounds of spare parts, the helicopter could not get above 800 feet at first. After burning off fuel, it eventually reached 3,000 feet before arriving at VTE.

Three helicopters were used for operations and one for spare parts. Smith left the program early. Liu was used mainly for ferry flight because of his lack of experience. Williamson and Wilson did most of the flying. They stayed at low elevations, flying mostly out of Pakse and Savannakhet. They carried CIA case officers to meetings in
an enthusiastic supporter of the concept of using Asian personnel. He was the key to Agency approval of the project. He also has saved the PARU program during the 1950s. [JIM says that arms were airdropped on January 11 and 13, 1961.]

After his first contact with Vang Pao, Lair realized that communications was the key to effective operations. Arm/training took place during a three-day program.

Lair recalls that Abadie took him to one of the early meeting with the Hmong and that the helicopter crashed after falling to clear a ridgeline. He remembers Abadie sitting by the damaged helicopter, crying and telling Lair: "They'll fire me."

[JIM dates this to the end of 1960. Abadie landed at Khang Kho, a Hmong mountain village [later, LS-204]. There was a meeting between local Hmong officials and Lair (together with a Thai). Lair said that he wanted to find Vang Pao to ask him if he would fight the communists; if so, 500 guns would be provided within eight days. A Hmong leader boarded the helicopter with Lair and the Thai to go look for VP. The blades of the main rotor, however, hit the tops of some tall trees, causing the aircraft to crash. Fortunately, no one was hurt. The next day, another helicopter landed and picked up Lair. The Thai colonel remained behind to look for VP.

Methven was involved in the political program in Laos (getting out the vote); intelligence was a by-product.

Vint Lawrence arrived in 1961 and remained until 1964. He was 21 years old, and he grew a beard to appear more mature. He was an excellent man.

During the early 1960s, it was a small operation, supervised by Lair from a small shack alongside the runway at Udorn. Later, headquarters types insisted on a larger building and expanded personnel, on the theory that bigger was better. Pat Landry was Lair's deputy. Air America provided the essential logistical support for the program. Washington later greatly expanded the project with the Hmong. Lair opposed this. The operation deep into Pathet Lair territory was a disaster.

Vang Pao was a brilliant military leader.
The project worked well when small, but not later. There was a clash between field and headquarters personnel over this unwise expansion.

Lair stresses the coincidence of interest between the U.S. and the Hmong.

December 21, 1960

Soviets shift airlift to Vang Vieng as Kong Le retreats. Airlift accelerated after seizure of PDJ at end of December. [PDJ fell on New Year's Eve.]

December 25, 1960
MAAG was established under Deputy Chief of PEO Col. Albert Brownfield at Savannakhet, 200 miles downriver from VTE. Special Forces personnel begin to serve as operational advisers to Phoumi's units.

September 28, 1960
Sam Neua falls to Communists.

October 1960
Admiral Harry D. Felt, CINCPAC, writes: "Phoumi is no George Washington. However, he is anti-communist which is what counts most in the sad Laos situation."

Parsons had a mission to Laos in October, with Admiral Herbert D. Riley and Asst Secy John H. Irwin. The situation was confusing. The mission suffered from poor timing and inadequate preparation. The idea was to get the contending factions together. It was unsuccessful. [Parsons interview]

November 1960
John Lee: There was a major operation in November. His logbook shows numerous flights between Bangkok and the PDJ. Dexheimer had been newly hired. The company had been reluctant to hire new pilots, as they did not know how long the increased requirement would last. As a result, the veteran pilots did a lot of flying. Lee often flew 200 hours in a month. He flew nearly 2,000 hours in 1960.

November 25, 1960
Phoumi begins drive on VTE. Special Forces personnel are with the forward units. Pakse captured despite heavy resistance.

November 26, 1960
Dexheimer crashes on PDJ in C-46, killing copilot S. L. Tong and R/O K. S. Wong. Dexheimer was ferrying arms from Bangkok to the PDJ. He lost power on takeoff.

November 27, 1960
Fred Walker flies rice, carbines, and 57mm shells to Xieng Khouang airstrip. [JHM]

Late November 1960
Eisenhower administration agreed to support advance of Phoumi's forces in southern Laos to VTE with material assistance and air transportation for troops and supplies in "Central Intelligence Agency piloted aircraft."

Stevenson: Emergency Soviet airlift to VTE began on December 4 ("too little and too late"). Phoumi attacks VTE, Kong Le withdraws on December 16, following three days of
bloody fighting. Soviet airlift continues: between December 15 and January 2, Soviet and North Vietnamese aircraft fly 184 sorties to Kong Le and PL forces. Kong Le retreats to the PDJ and captures vital airfield complex at Xiang Khouang on December 31. US reluctant for direct military intervention. Washington agrees to supply six AT-6s and 400 Special Forces White Star Mobile Training Teams to organize Meo tribes, but prefer diplomatic solution. Eisenhower termed Laos the most dangerous "mess" that was passing along to Kennedy when he briefed JFK on January 19.

December 4, 1960
Soviets begin airlift to Kong Le in VTE. After survey on Dec. 3, five IL-14 arrive on the 4th with food and petroleum. This is quickly followed by military supplies. On December 11, they fly in six 105mm howitzers.

December 9, 1960
Embassy in Laos to Department of State: "Still feel it vital we continue protect US international position by keeping CAT aircraft out of Vientiane picture as long as possible. Quite a case of interference being built up against us as is. But most of this we can answer. US airlift of troops to Vientiane could not be answered." US could help Phoumi by using CAT to lift reinforcements from Savannakhet to Luang Prabang, to replace forces he has sent from there to VTE, thus releasing aircraft for VTE operation. [FRUS, XVI: 1001]

December 13, 1960
Two Phoumi parachute battalions jump into critical communications crossroads of Ban Tha Deua. VTE surrounded by December 15.

December 14, 1960
Phoumi's forces overrun VTE airstrip bringing an end to Soviet airlift there.

December 16, 1960
Mechanics Frigillano and Ciferino B. Nabung taken prisoner at VTE by PL. Nabung was killed on 11 January 1961; Frigillano was released in 1962.

December 17, 1960
VTE falls to Phoumi. His troops pursue Kong Le, who is retreating north along Route 13.

December 20, 1960
Four USMC H-34s from HMR 163 delivered to Air America at BKK (Fonburg one of pilots). Picked up by Abadie, Charles Bade, Michael Weinberg, and Moher. Aircraft flown
off Bennington. JCS had directed CNO to provide aircraft and USMC maintenance personnel and mobile training team to assist AAM in operating and maintaining aircraft.

Rousselot: This decision to bring in the Marines was made by the Agency. [Noher, Bade, and Weinberg hired in June; Abadie in July.] He found Abadie, in charge of the group, to be "outstanding." He was "quiet," "bright," "a good listener," "firm," and an excellent administrator. He got along well with Ben Moore and Jack Forney (who did an excellent job with technical services.) Grundy made a wise decision to build a facility at Udorn to support the helicopter operation. VTE, in contrast, never was a comfortable maintenance base; it was dominated by Bird & Son, which had a good support facility there. (Rousselot once challenged the existence of Bird & Son. He was told by FitzGerald, Jorgenson, and others that the Agency wanted a supplemental entity in Southeast Asia. Local agency people were interested only in getting the job done, and Bird & Son often was easier to deal with than Air America. Bird & Son introduced the Porter, filling a demand for added STOL capability. The people in the field obviously wanted more capability, as witnessed by the ill-fated Beaver program, a decision made at CIA headquarters. Bird & Son also got a good financial deal on the Porters. Andresevic was head of the STOL program, and Abadie was head of the helicopter program, as far as Rousselot was concerned. Fred Walker nominally was chief pilot in VTE. Although intelligent, he was not a man of command presence (a recognized leader). He hated the Helio, as he hated to fly in thunderstorms.

Rousselot to Williamson, December 27: just received four H-34s "so we are real happy, especially the Chopper pilots. Will commence operating them any day now. H-19s have been doing "a remarkable job." Roussel has released Weinberg (bright red hair; carried Colt six-shooter on hip): good pilot but "not quite mature enough for such an outpost and unsupervised assignment."

Lair: Lair arrived in Thailand in the early 1950s to initiate the Border Police project. The idea was to have a trained non-American force available for use in the area. There were Thai Border Police advisers with General Phoumi during his advance on Vietiane. Lair made contact with Vang Pao in late December/early January, using one of the four USMC helicopters that had just arrived in Udorn that take him to a meeting in the jungle. Vang Pao wanted arms to defend against the Pathet Lao. Arrangements were made to arm and train VP's forces. Training was done by Border Police. No US Special Forces were involved. Lair recalls a meeting with Des FitzGerald in January 1961. FitzGerald was
said: "Laos is a very confused situation." Washington policy makers could not agree on which faction to support; however, they were unanimous in warning against intervention by other outside parties. In Laos, the US military and CIA tended to support General Phoumi Nosavan, with Air America carrying supplies from Bangkok to Phoumi's forces in the field. In mid-October, CIA field officers won allegiance of Meo tribesmen by promising supplies and Special Forces cadres.

Brown: Brown does not believe that Kong Le was a communist or that his coup was inspired by communists. "He was at best gullible and at worst, no venal but subject to Communist influence." This was not Washington's view. They only saw that Kong Le has overthrown a pro-western government and had immediately established contract with the Pathet Lao. Brown believes that Washington misjudged Souvanna, Kong Le, and Phoumi, and that policy was based on this misjudgment.

Following the coup, Kong Le called on Souvanna to form a government. Souvanna agreed. Brown, with the full support of the country team, strongly recommended that the US come out with a strong declaration of support for the Souvanna government. This recommendation was not accepted. Phoumi was in Savannakhet. Brown sent people to persuade him to join the government. He refused. On September 10, Phoumi and Prince Boum Oum declared the new government illegal. "From the time on, things began to deteriorate seriously."

Instructions from Washington were frequently "masterpieces of double-talk." Brown was asked to do contradictory things. This reflected the policy divisions in Washington. The problem was solved by a unique method: Brown went to Souvanna and asked if he wanted to see the Laotian army fade away and the Pathet Lao take more territory by force. He said no. Brown then proposed that Souvanna allow the US to directly supply the army with military equipment despite the fact that Phoumi was in command. Souvanna agreed, provided the equipment was no used against him. US was "supplying the rebels with arms with the permission of the government against which they were in rebellion."

US had military advisers in Savannakhet. CIA "character" John Hasey was criticized by some for breaching the unanimity of the mission and going against instructions. "I personally don't believe it." He may have been sympathetic with Phoumi but he was "a good soldier." (After Phoumi took VTE, Brown appointed Hasey as direct liaison officer with Phoumi. Harriman later removed Hasey. Brown believes that Harriman was wrong but he went along because he had no choice.)
Souvanna asked Brown for US assistance when Thailand cut off rice and oil. Brown supported the request but it was turned down. Souvanna then turned to the Soviet Union.

Hilsman: The Kong Le coup produced a political struggle between the new ambassador, who supported Souvanna Phouma, and Asst. Secy of State for Far Eastern Affairs Parson, who supported Phoumi.

August 12, 1960
Allen Dulles at meeting of NSC: "In summarizing the situation in Laos, Mr. Dulles said it would be almost a miracle if we can hold on there and expressed the view that the cards were stacked against us. He pointed to the threat from neighboring North Viet Nam and Communist China and from the Pathet Lao. He concluded by saying the situation was difficult but not hopeless." [FRUS, XVI:789]

August 18, 1960
Dulles at NSC meeting: "Mr. Dulles indicated that the situation in Laos was still confused." [FRUS, XVI:808]

August 20, 1960
Air America employees evacuated to Thailand.

August 30, 1960
Air America personnel return to Vientiane; they are ordered to keep a low profile until the situation is clarified.

September 1960
Air America begins airlift to General Phoumi at Savannakhet; Phoumi sends supplies to outlying supporters, including Hoo at Xieng Khouang

[Domain: "It is plain that General Phoumi was rapidly building up his materiel and manpower for a march on Vientiane. From mid-September, Savannakhet was the scene of an increased number of landings and takeoffs by unmarked C-46 and C-47 transports" that belonged to Air America. "The aircraft, giving the Phoumists forces a badly needed logistical supply system, ferried military supplied from Bangkok to Savannakhet, the headquarters of the Revolutionary Committee, and shuttled between Savannakhet and outlying garrisons loyal to General Phoumi."]

Bowers: AMM flew into Laos approx. 1,000 tons of month from BKK in support of Phoumi.

Stanton: While the PEO in Vientiane retained a relationship with the legal government of Lao, a "rebel
outlying areas. They also did electioneering work, with CIA case officer tossing out leaflets.

Williamson had CAT/AAM first helicopter accident in June. Working out of Savannakhet, he had a full fuel load and a cargo of leaflets when the mission was changed to an emergency medevac. A Lao soldier at a small outpost 40 miles northeast of Senc had cut his leg with a machete and gangrene had set in. Williamson took off with a Lao captain and a medic. He landed at the outpost and picked up the injured man and his family (who would look after him in the hospital), took off, and circled over the field to gain altitude. Reaching 1000 feet, his engine quit. As he neared the ground, over a rice paddy, he instinctively hauled back on the stick. This heavily damaged the tail rudder. There were no injuries. They walked back to the outpost, about a mile away, where Williamson spent an uneasy night, having learned that a price had been offered for him. Sutphin came over the next morning in a Hello and dropped a can of grapefruit juice with a chewed up cigar taped to the side, and a note that read: "For breakfast." A little later, Art Wilson picked him up.

By this time, Wilson had recommended to Rousselot that the job could only be done with better equipment and properly trained pilots. The "customer" had reached the same conclusion. Shortly thereafter, three USMC pilots from Kadena, who had been given immediate discharges, showed up in VTE: Tom Moher, Red Weinberg, and Charles Bade [Moher hired on June 6]. A little later, Abadie hired to run project [hired July 28]. Williamson gave the three a quick checkout on the H-19.

Later in the year, Moher and Weinberg were flying formation when their rotors became entwined. Weinberg departed shortly thereafter. Bade remained for about a year; he ended up on Taiwan selling mutual funds.

April 26, 1960

Bowers: USAF C-130 was sent to Udorn, rigged to drop 2 trucks and a D-4 bullzoner at Phong Saly for airstrip construction. The Hmong were carving at 600-foot, with two 20 degree turns, into the side of a mountain at 6,000 feet elevation.

May 31, 1960

Letter to Doole refers to contact with ICA for Helio service in Laos. The contract was dated May 31.

June 1960


Stuart E. Methven: Methven [b. 3 Sept 27; graduated from Amherst 1951; joined CIA] was assigned to Laos in
summer 1959. Rufus Phillips had been working with civil action programs since 1956 and was leaving the country. Methven took over the civic action work, which included a paramilitary capability. He had close ties with Operation Brotherhood, a Filipino group working in this area. Hecksher was COS when he arrived. [Stevenson: "Hecksher was considered arrogant and resourceful."] He was replaced by Jorgeson in 1960, who was an excellent COS: very easy to work with.

Methven made a trip to Ban Ban in 1959/60 to start a civic action program with the Hmong. He had been told that Vang Pao was the Hmong military leader. Vang Pao came to Ban Ban from his base at Nong Het for discussions. Methven asked VP what he needed. He said that he could use an anvil. While securing the anvil, Methven read a cable from Okinawa that gave information on surplus items from CIA stores. He overed several thousand OD sweaters, then arranged for Air America to airdrop them at Nong Het. He went along on the drop and has a member of the valley carpeted with OD as the bundles burst open on impact. He later went to Ban Ban, where VP provided a Hmong guide for a two-day walk to Nong Het. As he approached the village, hundreds of Hmong lined the route - all dressed in OD sweaters. Methven became VP's first CIA case officer.

Methven flew throughout Laos in an Air America Helio. He developed a close relationship with the pilots, based on mutual trust and confidence. "Air America pilots were personally dedicated to the people they were flying and even to the cargo they were delivering. They rarely questioned the risk involved in any mission, asking only what it was that was needed. They would make recommendations as to how to carry out the mission, but would listen to reasons that overrode the pilot's recommendation, even if it would make the risks greater. Often they would remain with a single officer for days at a time with virtually no communication with their Headquarters, living as we did in not too comfortable circumstances, making their lives part of ours. At the 'end of the line,' it was reassuring to have someone willing to share the hard times and isolation. When the pilots was not these with you, it was also reassuring to know that he would always come back and take you out, regardless of what the situation might be. I have seen Air America pilots stay on runways under attack waiting until they had all the people on board that were supposed to get out, delaying take-off at considerable risk to themselves. They have made drops under hostile conditions when the normal thing to do would have been to return and try again later. No military service excelled this group of people in dedication or loyalty or valor." 

{see Methven for December 1960}
William Von Platen: Von Platen arrived Saigon as assistant air attache; LTC Butler B. Toland was air attache, and Armand E. Reiser was his most experienced assistant. The situation in Laos was "chaotic" following Kong Le coup. Brown was new ambassador; Heintges was head of PED. Heintges had stomach trouble and was replaced by B/Gen Andrew J. Boyle. Brown "really didn't know the background of the politics there and there didn't appear to be any individual American foreign policy thrust." US policy seemed dictated by the French. Colonel Cheston was head of Army attache office, while LTC James Sheer worked with White Star and Pine Tree (communications). "The whole T-6 thing was sort of a fiasco." The CIA ran things in Southeast Asia. "The CIA called the tune and we did what they said." Colby was COS in Saigon; he was "extremely effective." C-130s out of Okinawa were under the control of the CIA. Von Platen left in June 1962.

WEATHER PATTERNS:

October to mid-January: A strong cold high pressure is established over central China and produces a northeasterly wind flow over Southeast Asia. This is the dry season. There is little rain and generally good flying weather, with good visibility and few clouds.

Mid-January to April: The cold high over China moves eastward and decreases in intensity. The wind flow over Southeast Asia shifts to the east/southeast and weakens. Smoke and haze build up. There is little rain. Clouds at the end of the period give notice of the coming monsoon.

May to September: The time of the southwest monsoon or rainy season. A thermal low develops over southern China, producing a south/soutwesterly air flow over Southeast Asia. Rainfall tends to be shower/cumulus in nature. Flying weather is good outside the showers, but there are problems on the windward side of the high mountains north of Vientiane.

July 1960

Udorn radio station begins operation with one flight radio operator on temporary assignment. He is replaced in October 1960 by L. C. Chu, assigned to run station on permanent basis. There are two voice (HF/VHF) and CW (with Taipei) circuits. [Shane Tang, "Udorn Communications Center," April 23, 1970, AAM Archives]
July 4, 1960
W. R. MacCormick, station manager, VTE, to President,
Monthly report, 14 June - 30 June:
MacCormick arrived VTE June 9, replacing "Mr. Smith"
who had been temporary station manager. "The situation is
neither in crisis nor organized for maximum utilization of
personnel... Morale is neither high nor low, being
mainly affected by somewhat excessive climatic and sanitary
conditions." {m}

July 13, 1960
Fred Walker, flying Helio, carries "Major Pao" for
first time, along with CIA officer Ralph Johnson. [JHM]

July 18, 1960
Rousselot to Abadie: Contract for employment as flight
office at monthly salary of $650, based upon minimum of 70
hours per month; $5.50 per hour for flying time in excess of
70 hours. $1.25 per hour additional for hours flown from 30
minutes before sunset to 30 minutes before sunrise.

July 29, 1960
Contract for temporary 14/32 PSP runway at VTE – work
commenced February 1960. 4000 feet of PSP available on
July 29. Work suspended due coup in August; resumed March
1961 on concrete runway (William Bird & Son contractor).
Japanese runway 4/22 to become parallel taxiway under
completion of 2000 meter concrete runway.

Late July 1960
Winthrop G. Brown arrives as ambassador.
Before leaving Washington, Brown had been told that
there had been differences of opinion between the CIA
station chief and his predecessor. Station chief had been
changed prior to Brown's arrival. Before leaving for Laos,
Brown went to the CIA and had a conference with Dulles,
Cabell, Bissell, and Fitzgerald "Who were the people
primarily concerned with Laos." At the start of the
meeting, Dulles told Brown that he had Dulles' authority to
send home any member of the CIA staff on 24 hours notice if
Brown felt that he was not loyally carrying out Brown's
instructions or working harmoniously in the country team.
Brown went to Laos "with considerable peace of mind on the
that subject." Also, Gordon Jorgensen, the new station
chief, was "a man of exceptionally moral character, of very
great professional ability, and a very wise person. I had
nothing but the most harmonious professional and personal
relationships with him and his staff." He relied on
Jorgensen as political adviser more heavily than on the
State Department staff. Jorgensen deputy, Clifton R.
Strathern, also was a "first rate person."
During his two years as ambassador, the country team saw "eye to eye" on fundamental policy. This included General Heintges and the military attache, Col. Joel M. Hollis, despite being criticized by the Pentagon for support the "Communist Ambassador."

When he arrived in Laos at the end of July, the situation was quiet. Brown called on Prince Souvanna Phouma a few days after arriving and was "very impressed." Souvanna stressed that he was a "sincere and vigorous" anti-communist. The only role for Laos was to be "completely neutral." He was confident that Laos could maintain its neutrality. An overt pro-western alliance would attract reprisals from the other side. He did not believe that his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, was really a communist. "He had a great deal of confidence in his ability personally to reconcile the conflicting factions in the country. Brown said that he took this "with substantial grains of salt." The communists were not likely to be so accommodating as he thought. Brown expressed "serious qualms" about his positive view of Souvanna as it was his first experience in Asia and first as ambassador. He was aware that his superiors in Washington did not agree with him above either Souvanna's sincerity or ability.

During the first week of August, the entire cabinet went to Luang Prabang to confer with the king over funeral arrangement for his father. During their absence, Kong Le executed his coup.

August 9, 1960

Kong Le seized VTE. Civil war breaks out between neutralist forces of Kong Le, supported by Pathet Lao, and US-supported General Phoumi Nosavan. [Phoumi initially successful.]

Stanton: Kong Le commanded the 774-man 2d Bataillon de Parachutists, which was stationed outside Vientiane after hard fighting in Sam Neua province. It was considered the best unit in the army. Kong Le was a graduate of the CIA-sponsored Philippine Scout and Ranger School. He demanded the establishment of a coalition government under Souvanna Phouma and a return to strict neutrality. Souvanna was installed by royal assent but civil war breaks out. Kong Le raises 10 battalions by December. In December, he receives supplies by Soviet airlift, including a battery of NVA artillery.

Stevenson: Ambassador Brown, who arrived in July 1960, considered Kong Le a sincere nationalist. The CIA took a "benign view": "They saw him as a lone wolf, friendly to Americans and hostile to the Communists." Washington, however, saw him as another Castro and called for his removal. At a press conference on August 17, Eisenhower
Aderholt on Okinawa receives authority to arm Vang Pao
[see Robbins]

[In late December 1960/early January 1961, Bill Lair
recalls that he made contact with Vang Pao. Four USMC
helicopters had just arrived in Udorn. Lair used one to
rendezvous with VP in jungle. VP wanted arms to defend
against Pathet Lao. Arrangements were made to arm and train
VP's forces. Training was done by Thai Border Police
(Dhouri had Border Police advisers during his advance on VTE
in 1960.) No Special Forces involved in training. Lair met
with Des FitzGerald in January 1961. FitzGerald was an
enthusiastic supporter of the concept of using Asian
personnel. Arming/training took place during "three-day"
program. After first contact with VP, Lair realized that
communications was the key to effective ops. The project
worked well when it was small, but not later. There was a
clash between field and HQ over expansion of program in
later 1960s. There was one operation deep into PL territory
in 1968 that was approved by Shackley and turned into a
disaster.]

[Methven: The decision for a major military operation
with the Meo was made following Kong Le's coup. Methven
introduced Vang Pao to Bill Lair on the PDJ at the start of
the program. VP wanted assurance that the Americans would
not run out on him, as the French had. Methven assured VP
that he was dealing with Americans; there was no possibility
that the United States would let him down.]

[Vang Pao: born in 1928. Assisted French against Viet
Minh in Xieng Khouang province at the end of World War II.
Selected to attend officers' training school at Dong Hene in
southern Laos. Graduated 7th in class of 56. First Hmong
commissioned in Forces Arme de Royale (FAR). Returned to
Xieng Khouang and organized guerrilla forces that were used
against Viet Minh operating around PDJ. In 1960, now a
Lieutenant Colonel, who was appointed the commander of
Military Region II. He moved 200 Hmong villages to seven
strategic mountaintops surrounding the PDJ, with
headquarters at Padong, a 4000-foot mountain that was 12
miles south of the PDJ. Mission to harass Communist supply
routes.]

[Hilsman: "The job of arming and training the Meo was
well and efficiently done." During periods of tension in
1962 and 1963, "It was useful to have the Meo blow up a
bridge or occupy a mountaintop as a move in the deadly game
of 'signaling' that the United States had to play to deter
the Communists for adventuring with the Geneva Accords. But
arming the tribesmen engendered an obligation not only to
feed them when they were driven from their traditional

29
homelands but also to protect them from vengeance. This was
an obligation that in some circumstances could never really
be discharged . . ."

"Arming tribesmen sounds like a tough and realistic
policy, even a generous one of helping brave fighters defend
themselves. But it might in fact be not only unwise but
unfair to the tribesmen themselves, those to whom it was
seemingly designed to help."]

December 31, 1960

Emergency mobilization of Task Force 70.4 at Subic Bay.
USMC HMR 163, assigned to USS Bennington (CVA-20) rounded up
by SPs. Aircraft and stores loaded and departed early hours
of January 1. Interviewed by civilians and asked to take
off uniforms and go TDY. HMR 163 personnel: Major Charles
Benton Chambers (CO - did not go with Air America), Lts. Ted
Cash, John Fonburg, Wayne Knight, and Don Babitz; crew
chiefs W.D. Wilson, J.D. Williams, T.D. Mays, and C. J.
Carl.

Admiral Felt cabled JCS following attack of government
outposts on PDJ on December 29: "With full realization of
the seriousness of a decision to intervene, I believe
strongly that we must intervene now or give up northern
Laos."

Memorandum of Conference with President at White House,
December 31, 1960: "The President then expressed the need
for a detailed reconnaissance scheme to find out the exact
nature of the military operations being conducted in
northwest Laos. The aerial reconnaissance capabilities which
were mentioned by the various members present included some
C-46s as part of the CAT airline, some T-33s belonging to
the Thais, which might be available tomorrow, and some U-2s
presently located at Subic Bay. General Lemnitzer mentioned
that the Lexington has a reconnaissance capability which
could be exercised without overflight of North Viet-nam. He
pointed out that our best results thus far have come from
the attaché plane which is accredited to the Laotian
government, although it had been hit by gunfire a couple of
days ago. This plane had actually secured pictures of the
Soviets airdropping supplies. The President remarked
humorously that for the first time in 50 years he had
discovered the usefulness of an attaché. After some
discussion, the President authorized the use of Thai
aircraft and CAT aircraft for close-in tactical and photo
reconnaissance. He stated no objection to strategic
reconnaissance but withheld permission for overflights of
China.

The President . . . stressed the need for coordinated
and decisive action. At this state of the game, since we are
not in war, the State Department should chair our overall
planning. Most important is to legitimize Boun Om and
solidify our allies on our side. We should then see if we are faced with going into war. If war is necessary, we will do so with our allies or unilaterally, since we cannot sit by and see Laos go down without a fight. . . .

As the group left, the President reemphasized that we must not allow Laos to fall to the Communists, even if it involves war in which the U.S. acts with allies or unilaterally." [FRUS, XVI:1024-29]

CNO Admiral Burke to JCS on December 31: "If we lose Laos, we will probably lose Thailand and the rest of SE Asia. We will have demonstrated to the world that we cannot or will not stand when challenged. The effect will quickly show up in Asia, Africa, and Latin America." Eisenhower, was cautious to make such a commitment. The battlefield situation became static by January 6, 1961.

Eisenhower, at an NSC meeting on December 31: "We cannot let Laos fall to the Communists, even if we have to fight, with our allies or without them." Memoirs, p. 609.

Almanac: An estimated 4500 former South Vietnamese living in the North have infiltrated back to South Vietnam during the year. US forces in Vietnam now number 900.
C. J. Abadie, Jr., to WML, June 10, 1990:

The H-19A helicopters were introduced into Laos in 1959 and several AAM/CAT/SAT pilots . . . were taken out of Tachikawa and given a few hours training before they were sent to fly these old, underpowered machines in Laos. Needless to say, they had some difficulties. Rousselot hired Tom Moher, Charlie Bade and Mike Weinberg from HMR-261; the squadron was rotating from Okinawa to Cherry Point on the East Coast. After they proved that experienced helicopter pilots could successfully fly the H-19A in Laos (at low levels), I was hired out of HMR-362 just prior to the squadron’s rotation back to Santa Anna, Calif. The H-19s were operating from Vientiane at that time and we were living in a house provided by AID in their compound located several [kilometers] out of Vientiane to the north. Of the 4 H-19s, we flew 2 at a time with the other 2 in maintenance. One helicopter usually operated south (Pakse, Savannakhet, Takhlet, Paksane) and the other one operated around Vientiane and north (Van Vieng, etc.). We alternated pilots as scheduled would allow. Although some areas were "hot," there was no PROJECT PAY (HAZARD PAY) at that time -- co-pilot pay was $600 and Capt. pay was $1,200 a month -- we were not paid for hours flown or worked and while we were out in the field we flew from sun up to sun down and occasionally returned home after dark.

When Capt. Kong Lee took over the Lao government in Vientiane, we were moved to Bangkok and operated into southern Laos from the airport in Bangkok. We flew to Pakse at the beginning of the week and returned to Bangkok for maintenance and crew change at the end of that week. Operating days were 12 to 14 hours with flight times from 8 to 12 hours. We supported the Special Forces (Jim Ipson and his team and others) as they helped the loyal Lao troops push back to Vientiane from Savannakhet, Thakhet, Paksane, etc. We also operated to Saravane, the Plateau and Attapeu from the base at Pakse. Our Filippino flight mechanics and ground crews were outstanding and worked longer hours. They got the helicopters ready to go in the morning, flew with us all day, loaded and unloaded cargo/wounded/bodies, pumped fuel with a hand pump and checked & greased the helicopters at the end of the day’s flying. The Chinese radio operators who manned the ground stations (HF & VHF) kept track of us with our infrequent contacts - the HF radios in the H-19s were poor at best. I flew Gen. Poumi from Paksane to the feery landing in Laos which is opposite Nong Khai in Thailand when he returned to Vientiane - he drove from that point to Vientiane in a Lao army jeep for the effect it would have on his troops and the Lao people in Vientiane.
After dropping him off, I flew back to Paksane but about half way back (over Thailand), the H-19 engine began running rough and I could not climb to get out a radio call. I made a call in the blind on VHF and Ron Sutphin answered - he was over Savannakhet in a Helio Courier on a high altitude test flight. Since it was almost dark, he stayed up and in contact with me until I reached the river at Paksane. The C-46s, C-47s, and Helios relayed our positions most the time since we were usually too low for VHF reports to the ground stations at long distances and we were too close for HF. Working with Gen. Phoumi's troops on their drive into Vientiane, I did not take a shower for 3 days - we slept in temporary quarters at the Paksane airfield - it was too cold to take a dip in the river at night.

When "the good guys" secured Vientiane once again and Capt. Khong Lee moved out to the north, we returned to Vientiane with our operations. By that time the value of the helicopter in Laos was established and the H-19s were replaced with 4 Marine UH-34D helicopters. Because our mechanics had no training on the H-34, we were augmented with several active duty Marine mechanics and several pilots who were assigned to fly with us as co-pilots - we were flying as solo pilot up to that point - the H-34 could carry the extra weight. We were also told the USMC wanted to get some first hand experience in Laos and this was the best way to give some of their helicopter crew that experience (some of the pilots were Sly, Babbits, Meixner, Crafts, Haver, Byrd). They didn't stay long and we went back to flying single pilot with flight mechanic in the H-34s. By this time and before we got the H-34s Mike Weinberg left us. After the Marine crews left Vientiane we were joined by J. J. McCauley. At about that time I was made Chief Pilot and since I had flown quite a bit with J.J. in HMR-362, I gave him a quick orientation in the area and checked him out as Captain - we needed 4 pilots to keep things going.

It was just before J.J. arrived that I had flown Bill Lair to meet Vang Pao. I don't remember the location of the first meeting but the second trip we located him on a narrow ridge south of the PDJ (drawing attached) and moved him across the valley to another site just over the south rim of the PDJ - that is were we hit the trees on take off after VP visited with him troops. We were going to move more troops across the valley that day but the accident delayed the move. (On take off from a hole in the tree, [1] got into a downdraft over the trees before reaching 15 Kts airspeed and settled upright into the tall trees. Aircraft tail # was H-D.)

I do not have my log books here and the above is what I can remember of the period. When in the company of others who were there during the period, I am sure more details would come out.
We moved to Udorn about March/April on 1961 and Joe Madison gave a good account of the flight of 20-24 UH-34 helicopters from Bangkok to Udorn in one of the AAM Logs.
I heard about the AA operation while I was still in the Marine Corps and getting ready to rotate out of Okinawa with Charlie Weitz, Jack Leisten, Barry Cox, J.J. McCauley and Ed Subotzky, among others, to return to the States. I had no compelling reason to return to the States and had an offer of employment with AA so, in August of 1960, I processed out of the squadron, off the island, and out of the Marine Corps, all at the same time. My first stop was Taipei, for a short orientation, then directly to Laos to fly the H-19. The other five guys, mentioned above, did not get out of the Marine Corps at that time but went back to the US with the rotating squadron and came out a year or more later.

There were four CAT/SAT pilots who started the H-19 program. Art Wilson, Herbert Liu, Gordon V. Smith, and Dan Williamsen were given minimal training. Gordon has this to offer. "We four helicopter trainers were give 18 hours training in B's in Japan, and about 14 hours more in B's, in the Philippines. I had, earlier in the year checked out and flown about 30 hours in the little Bell (47-2) in Japan. It was great fun. I loved choppers because you could do so much more with them than with fixed wing. The strange deal of training in B's and then being given these old A's in Laos caused my feelings about the intended operations to become rather less than enthusiastic. This made my resignation easy."

The aircraft had come out of mothballs at Clark AFB and were shipped to Vientiane by C-124 aircraft. Because of this, it is reasonable to assume that they had some bugs and the initial flights got to experience these first hand. I am sure some of the problems were related directly to lack of experience in those machines but they can't be faulted for that. It must have scared the hell out of them (one engine, no wings, vibrating and unstable even when there was no turbulence, flying within rifle range from the ground, poor IFR cockpit, etc.). In addition to the CAT/SAT pilots, Charlie Bade, Tom Moher and Mike Weinberg, were already in Laos. They were from USMC HMR-261 which rotated from Okinawa ahead of HMR-362 and they were hired before me. They had been flying in Laos for several months before I arrived; the hottest and wettest months for the H-19's poor performance. Charlie Bade was the senior pilot at that time reporting to Fred Walker.

The aircraft were designated H-A, H-B, H-C, and H-D as we recall and only two were operated at any one time. The fixed wing guys tried their best to operate them but they were not fast enough and the helicopter's inherent instability and marginal power factors had them leaving the machine in rice paddies and they had no confidence in them. Not that they were the only ones to leave a machine in a rice paddy.

As we, the first four Marine pilots, were told when we were hired, the program was on its last leg and if we could show that the helicopter was able to be operated effectively and could be used for LAO, then we might get better machines. Ray Shouers, Asst. Station Manager at Bangkok, remembered that the H-19 required a 60-hour maintenance check. The flying time from Vientiane to Bangkok was about 7 hours one way which meant 14 hours of its allotted time between checks was spent getting those helicopters to and from Laos. He also remembered that the wheels always looked funny to him: like an old iron bed. Another time he remembered seeing Tom Moher off for his return flight to Vientiane. Ray was back in his office which looked onto the parking lot. Before long one of the old Austin Taxi's pulled up and Tom got out. He had an unscheduled landing someplace north of Don Muang.

G.V. Smith pointed out that it was Art Wilson who crash landed in May of 1960, close enough to walk, in his "shower shoes," in a main North-South road where he hitch-hiked back to base.

While flying the H-19A, following the road was a necessary safety factor. It increased the flight time form Bangkok to Vientiane, via Korat, or Bangkok to Korat then Ubon and Pakse, but we could always get help in case of an emergency. Korat and Ubon were refueling stops going east and Korat and Udom going north.

As it happened, the old H-19 was a good ship even though it was not really suitable for the altitudes and temperatures encountered in Laos. The A model was the original with a straight tail boom, a 900 hp engine and a very weak nose gear. I could only carry two bags (200 lb. each) of rice with a full load and had to roll it off from most take off locations such as Attopeau (L-10). The political situation was unstable and civil war was the order of the day. It was not long after my arrival that Kong Le, a former ally (trained by our Special Forces in the U.S.) turned "neutralist," staged his coup de tat and the whole AA operation moved south to Bangkok. We operated out of there and would go to southern Laos for our week of work "in country." A few mechanics were positioned in Pakse (L-11) to handle our daily maintenance needs and to support the fixed wing aircraft as well.

It was in the south, around Pakse, Attopeau and Saravane (L-44) that we worked the H-19 to good advantage and often flew payroll from Pakse and Savannakhet (L-39) to the troops as far east as the Vietnam border and south to Klong Island (L-07). On one of those flights I landed a Paymaster at an outpost due east of Thakhet (L-40) on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was just before that area was completely overrun. General Phoumi Novason, the Royal Lao forces top man, was trying to hold that area and all southern outposts while also working to run Kong Le out of Vientiane. As the Royal Lao forces were successful in beating Kong Le's troops back toward Vientiane, we moved north with them.

On one occasion, Kong Le's troops were halfway between Pakse (L-35) and Thakhet, when the Royal Lao forces, aided by Thai Army troops with heavy guns, began the push. I carried a US Army Major, West Point Graduate, who was working directly with the Thai troops, up the Thai side of the Mekong River to see where Kong Le's troops were located so he could "spot" for the big guns. This particular time he had me land on the Thai side, just one tree line from the river, in a rice paddy. I shut down and we began walking toward the river. All hell broke loose. The gunboats on the Lao side of the river started shooting recoilless rifles at the spot where they saw us disappear behind the trees. It was the dry season, December I think, and the rice hicks were blown up into the air, by the rotor wash, pin pointing our location. Several rounds hit in the trees on the far side of the rice paddy just behind the helicopter. We ran for the helicopter and got it started. I knew they had us zerosed in and I knew that the gunboats had 50 caliber machine guns and if I lifted straight up they would have us in their sights. So, to put some confusion in the game, I hovered low, to the down river end of the rice paddy. I hovered there long enough to have the rice chaff blow up into the air above the trees. When one round came our way, and hit in a treetop.
The H-19 Continued:

to our left, I started a low hovering takeoff toward the north. The rice paddies were bordered on all four sides by tall trees. I stayed just off the ground, and left the chaff behind, and was able to gain flying speed before reaching the tree line on the north end.

At the last moment I pulled up to clear the trees and as we got to treetop level I could hear the 50 caliber machine guns vibrating the sides of the gunboats where they were mounted. I hadn’t taken time to strap in or put on my helmet so I heard that sound very clearly and won’t forget it for a very long time. I knew it would not be long before they would swing the guns in our direction.

Just on the other side of the tree line there was another rice paddy so I nosed the helicopter down and made it back near the ground and behind the trees before they could track us. I continued to gain speed to the end of that paddy and pulled up again. This time I turned west to go deeper into Thailand, away from the river, and just at treetop level which put us beyond reach of those guns.

We continued to climb to about 1500 feet and turned south so we could still see the river but from a safe distance. We were on our way back to Thakhek when we saw a group of Royal Lao forces battling it out with more of Kong Le’s men from gunboats in the middle of the Mekong River. We could see flashes in the water but did not see any direct hits.

On yet another occasion, an in about the same location in Laos, I was sent to make a resupply run for the “Thai’s.” They had cleared a landing zone for me on the side of the road using a technique they learned from their US advisors. They did it with C-4. That usually left stumps and debris all around but that was not the problem this time. It seemed they had misjudged the approach path and left two tall trees standing too close to the LZ. There was just room to get through (since that was the “approach of choice” into the wind) by turning the helicopter on its side at 45 degrees and thereby reducing the effective width of the clearance needed to pass through while also sinking to the LZ at a steep angle. I managed to perform that maneuver OK, with the help of God, and made a controlled crash landing on the LZ.

The H-19 had difficulty hoovering with a load and high-density altitude (temperature and humidity) conditions. The main gear was strong and took the shock well. Luckily, I didn’t put undue forces on the nose gear.

As was often the case, I was alone since carrying a mechanic or even a full load of fuel meant limiting the cargo. I much preferred to refuel at the LZ for the return trip rather than leave cargo behind at home base. We did our own refueling with a hand pump from drums that were either carried in by truck or dropped by C-46 at the LZ’s. We used a chamois to filter the fuel before it went into the tanks.

We followed the troops up the road as they pushed Kong Le’s troops north toward Vientiane. I think it was mid December 1960 when the Royal Lao forces retook Vientiane and I flew General Phoumi from Pakse to the ThaBeua ferry landing. From there he went by jeep into Vientiane after his troops had retaken the city.

It was on my way back to Pakse, after leaving the General, that I lost a map over Thailand. It was getting dark when I contacted Ron Sutphin over Savannakhet where he was testing a Helio, out of maintenance. He was at high altitude and talked with me on VHF. He stayed up while I limped into the airfield at Pakse where Bienvenido “Ben” Sabin, the flight mechanic, and I spent the night.

I tried to take Ben with me as often as possible and over the months I managed to give him some stick time. He got a US pilot’s license in 1970.

There was a serious problem for me with the instrument panel warning lights in the H-19A. I was on route from Pakse to Bangkok via Ubol and Korat when, about 30 minutes out of Korat, I had an engine failure while descending through clouds and autorelated to a rice paddy dive. I had run the forward tank dry and didn’t see the warning light. The instrument panel has a glass shield at the top which obstructs the pilots view if, his seat is fully up and, he’s over 3 feet tall. No excuse, just the facts! This was not the first time I had a problem with the fuel warning lights. The H-19 has two fuel tanks and a warning light for each. Those lights are located on the instrument panel above the other instruments. Since I always flew with the seat full up, for better visibility, I had asked for the lights to be relocated but nothing had been done.

The autorelation was successful and the helicopter wheels just fit on top of the flat marsh dive. When I put it down, following autorelation, it rolled (turned) to the left as the nose wheels had no locking pins and torque was being reduced as I lowered the collective. I immediately applied the brakes but the left nose gear had already gone over the crest and the nose continued to turn left until the right nose wheel had also rolled down the dike and the lower part of the engine was in water. I knew immediately what had happened and told the passengers below to get out and away from the helicopter. After making a quick visual inspection of the machine and finding that the nose gears were both bent over, I climbed back in, switched fuel tanks and started it up again. It was nose down at a 40-degree angle so when the rotor blades started turning the tips were very close to the water. I was concerned about that fact since in order to get the blades away from the water required that the stick be moved backward which would put the blades dangerously close to the tail boom in the rear. The engine exhaust was in the water and made it sound like a boat. I got up rpm and jocked it up to a hover with collective and not too much back stick and turned it so it was again straight over the paddy dike. I couldn’t set it down because both nose wheels were bent under the engine and fuselage. I told the flight mechanic to get the passengers back inside while I held the nose up with the main wheels on the dike. We were off again to Bangkok.

During this mishap the radio antennas, which were mounted on the bottom of the helicopter, were pulled off so I had no radio contact with the tower at Don Muang in Bangkok. I flew low on the approach and kept in the middle, between the two active runways, until I was near the tower and could move to the grass area near the taxiway. I put the main gear on the ground and unloaded the passengers while the flight mechanic ran for some head to make a platform under the nose. Shutdown was normal.

REUNION PHOTOGRAPHS

Duane & Peggy Keele need more photos from reunion 1997. Please send any that you have. Duane & Peggy have been keeping our memories together for many years and their albums are always a big hit at all of our gatherings. They are now looking for someone to take over the task of curating these albums and to continue forward. Please contact Duane or Peggy if interested.
The Tapes of Thomas A. Moher (courtesy of Anthony R. Byrne)

[Moher was hired on 6 June 1960]

Moher recalls taking the H-19s to Pakse, a quiet sleepy town with a French military mission. He worked for a White Star team. The White Stars wore khaki shirts, khaki shorts, and blue baseball caps. "They were about the wildest looking characters that I have ever seen in my life." Pete Orr was in charge. Moher lived in the team house with the White Stars. "Most of the missions involved monitoring activity in the countryside. He would bring in teams for training. He also took medical teams to the local villages, where they held sick call; they would use this opportunity to gage information about the situation in the area. He also dropped pamphlets from 500 feet over various villages. Orr spoke fluent Lao. The White Star also were training a "Tiger Battalion" of Lao troops, who "looked pretty good."

Abadie was a pleasant individual, quiet, soft-spoken, and friendly. He was an excellent pilot and check out in the H-19 in about 2:30.

There was a crisis in Vientiane. Kong Le had wounded that needed attention. His troops were wearing sneakers when you could buy boots on the black market. People were making "a killing" on construction contracts, USAID work, etc. Moher, Weinberg, and Bade were in a cottage when word came to evacuate due to a coup in town. The initial reaction of the pilots was favorable: it would get rid of some of the crooks. However, the crooks had the ear of the Embassy. They took the H-19s to Bangkok.

Phoumi came out against Kong Le. "At that time, we didn't realize just how naive we were." The policy of the U.S. government dictated who were friends and enemies, not what was right and wrong. The H-19s were sent to Savanakhet, where the operated for Phoumi. His troops looked good. U.S. Special Forces were now in the open, wearing green fatigues and doing training. Captain "Ding Dong" McKong was in charge of the team. Moher constantly told the Customer that if Air America was going to support Phoumi's troops for an advance on Vientiane, better equipment than the H-19s would be required. He the H-19s: "They were damned near useless." They had no hauling capacity. If they had to operate out of Thakhek to outflank Kong Le's forces, they would have to fly in mountainous terrain. Phoumi suffered heavy casualties during the assault on Vientiane, and Moher would pick up 40 to 50 KIA and WIA daily.
After Vientiane fell to Phoumi’s troops [on 17 December 1960], Moher went to Bangkok to pick up the H-34s from the USMC [on 20 December 1960]. Each Air America pilots had a USMC pilot assigned them him while he transitioned on the aircraft. Moher had a Major Ryan, who flew with him for about 20-30 hours. The H-34s “were like a dream after the H-19s. We felt like we could haul the whole world.” During this transition period, he and Ryan were hit by ground fire while operating out of Attapeu. The aircraft took 15-20 hits of small arms fire. When they returned to Pakse, Ryan said, “You’re check out,” then hopped on a plane and left.

Weinberg and Abadie had a mid-air collision after Weinberg decided to join up with Abadie and fly formation. He managed to chop off five feet from the rotor blades. When they got on the ground, he said to Abadie: “How’s that for a join-up!” It wasn’t too long after this that Weinberg was fired for tearing up too many aircraft.

Early in 1961, J. J. McCauley and Pat Sullivan joined Air America. Sullivan was “a real clown,” decked out in red beret and survival kit. The were operating now out of Vientiane, flying to the Moung Kassy road junction [Highway 13]. Heavy fighting was taking place as the Pathet Lao joined up with Kong Le’s Neutralists. Peter Kalisher of NBC, Grant W. and one other reporter were covering the story and flew extensively with Air America. “They had the whole world pegged.” “They acted as though they had top priority on all the flights; they had top priority on the war.” They were abusive and insulting to the local commanders, and insensitive to the suffering of the Lao.

About the time Phoumi took the road junction, Air America started to support the Meo. A number of military “temporaries” came in to fill slots until permanent employees could be hired. A few of these people were outstanding: Weitz, Sass, Crafts (“Dirty Dick”). They were operating out of Udorn with about 18 H-34s. Pat Sullivan by this time was living on Coca Cola and cigarettes and had become a dangerous pilot. Special Forces was now a big operation, especially in the south. Tony Po was with the Meo at LS-14 [Pha Khao]. Air America’s pilots had little mountain flying experience. Some went home; some learned from their mistakes and became “damn good mountain pilots.”

When Kong Le was at Vang Vieng, there were plans to lift Pete Orr’s old Tiger Battalion to an area west of Vang Vieng, from where they would launch a flank attack on Kong Le’s forces. Helicopters picked up the troops north of Vientiane. They looked good, with new fatigues, M-1s, and they seemed disciplined. First, the pathfinder team, with
several Americans and Lao, was taken in. The first wave then landed and were directed toward Kong Le’s troops. They promptly took off in the opposite direction, heading south as the pathfinders screamed on the radio. They same thing happened with the second and third waves. The pathfinders then left in disgust. So much for the first large vertical envelopment!

Another large operation took place out of Luang Prabang. Two C-46s were to drop the pathfinders, then helicopters would bring in the troops. As it turned out, only the people on one C-46 decided to jump. No one told these people that their parachutes had to be secured before the helicopters arrived. As a result, there were parachutes all over the LZ. The team had suffered about 30 percent casualties when they landed in rocks under 12 to 14-foot grass. Buffington’s helicopter came in and parachute wrapped around his rotor blades. Another helicopter hit a rock. McCauley, who was flight leader, salvaged what he could and returned to Luang Prabang. This was an example of MAAG’s totally unrealistic planning.

On 13 August 1961, Moher was watching as Woody Forte came in for a drop. There were clouds on the mountain tops. Forte made two passes in this bad weather. “We thought he was really nuts, coming in that low.” He started a 180 degree turn on the third pass when his wingtip caught the top of a mountain and the wing tore off. The aircraft cartwheeled in the air and hit nose down. The aircraft was demolished.

LS-14 was in a valley “surrounded by peaks on all sides. We were watching an airdrop from a C-46 – old Woody Forte was coming up, making low passes. The cloud cover was right down on the mountains. There was only one really tiny hole he could get into, make his pass down the valley, and at the other end of the valley he had to do a sharp 180 degree turn and come back down the valley to get out that hole. We watched him on two passes; we thought that he was really nuts coming in and dropping that low. On his third pass, he turned, he started his 180, he banked it up and banked it up, and he just seemed to slide down into the side of this hill. His wingtip caught on it and just tore the wing off the aircraft. The aircraft cartwheeled in the air and went nose down and crashed right into the ground.”

Colonel Little was in charge of operations at LS-14. “We called him ‘the Shark.’” He was a tough character. “We all respected him.”
Moher first met Tony Po at LS-14, when he hauled Po and a mortar team from mountain top to mountain top. "Where the hell did this guy come from?" That evening, he met Vang Pao. Moher was impressed with the Meo.

Moher spent several months feeling his way around the mountains. At first, he did not know where the good guys and bad guys were located. He soon developed a feel for the area. Landing pads were often at 6 to 9,000-feet elevation. You quickly learned the limitations of the H-34.

Moher flew SAR after Fosmire was shot down [on 9 August 1961]. He spotted the small group on a hill [on August 12]. When they got back to LS-14, Colonel Little produced several bottles of champagne. Later, the company threatened to bill the pilots for the survival kits that they had left behind in the aircraft until Fosmire intervened. This was part of an unrealistic approach by management. At one point, Moher damaged the rotors of his aircraft after flying through bamboo. The aircraft was heavily loaded and he was under fire; he had no choice. Taipei sent a critical message telling him not to fly through bamboo. Management became completely oblivious to the realities of field operations. This caused a great deal of resentment, especially among the temporary employees.

One of the most dangerous aspects of the operation involved people storming the helicopters. Moher recalls operating out of Pakse, resuppling a Special Forces team at Tha Thom that was under attack by the Pathet Lao. He flew into Tha Thom with copilot John Smoot and F/M Centino. With the site being overrun, they had to land in some rice paddies. Immediately, 70 to 80 Lao panicked and tried to board the helicopter. Smoot threw several off. He ended up shooting one armed Lao. Two Special Forces men piled into the helicopter. They were for three others. They soon appeared, running toward the helicopter and firing at the enemy. As they lifted off, the Lao on the ground fired at the helicopter.

Father Bouchard, skinny as a rail, was in excellent shape and could walk 15-20 miles a day in the mountains. He was quiet and soft spoken. Pop Buell was just the opposite. A belligerent individual, he used to rail against the stupidities of officials in Vientiane in treating the Meo. There was a close bond between Buell and "his people." He used to talk a lot about his farm days in Indiana.

Howard Estes was a real "magnet ass" and would get shot at in places where no one else took fire.
There was lots of flying and lots of accidents. Once, Abadie took off from Padong to land at LS-104. He became caught in a strong downdraft and crashed, the helicopter rolling over. McCauley was caught in the same downdraft and landed on top of Abadie's machine.

Herb Baker saved a helicopter during a fire at the refueling pit at Pakse.

Bill Cook, a Southerner, had trouble with Hooker Hagens, a black flight mechanic. After a "boy" incident, Hagens took out his .25-caliber pistol and shot Cook, hitting him in the finger and foot (no real damage). Hagens was terminated. Cook quit shortly thereafter.
Interview (tape) with Thomas G. Fosmire, Florence, SC, December 28, 1992

Fosmire, a high school graduate, was an enlisted man with the 82nd Airborne Division when the Korean War broke out in 1950. A member of the recon unit, he packed his bag and was ready to go – but nothing happened. In 1952, he volunteered for Korea. He was in Japan, in the pipeline to be assigned to an infantry unit, when he volunteered for duty with Singlaub’s operation. (Most of the people that Singlaub picked were Rangers.) He worked under Walt Hoffman, an ex-Ranger who had been in the Army since before Pearl Harbor.

[Singlaub, Hazardous Duty, pp. 181-85: Singlaub was called to CIA Headquarters in December 1951 and interviewed by Bill Depuy and Dick Stilwell for a CIA/OPC operation in Korea. The government had decided to step up pressure on the Chinese by supporting guerrilla movements on the mainland, especially along their line of communication to Korea. He arrived in Korea in January 1952. The cover was Joining Advisory Commission, Korea (JACK). “I became the CIA deputy station chief in Korea with the mission of deploying military intelligence, espionage, and resistance agents in North Korea.” He remained until December 1952.]

After Korea, Fosmire taught a course for the air branch at the Farm with Bob Brewer. He later took the basic operations course. He was with Sea Supply in Bangkok, working with the Border Police and PARUs, from May 1954 to April 1957. He was involved in the Indonesian operation in 1958 (dropping cargo out of airplanes and with Cartwright at Menado). Later, he was the first case officer with the Tibetans, and was with the first group at the Farm (before Camp Hale). Tony Po and Zeke Zillitis joined the program at bit later.

[Tibet: Fosmire credited Gar Thorburn with convincing the USAF to use C-130Es for the mission. Doole wanted to use DC-7s, which were available at Southern Air Transport. They ran a profile mission with the DC-7 (Welk and Johnson); the problem was unreliable engines. Gar also was on some of the airdrops in Indonesia. There were about 90 Tibetans dropped in all – a few dropped twice. Fitzgerald once told Fosmire that the intelligence brought out by one of the teams that had ambushed some Chinese was extremely valuable and made the whole program worthwhile.]

Fosmire was at CIA headquarters in 1960 and badly wanted to return to the field when a request came in for an air operations officer in Laos. Pat Landry (who Fosmire had been in Korea and Indochina) also wanted the assignment, but
Fosmire had better qualifications. In any event, Landry came over a short time later.

Fosmire was on Okinawa to check on supplies for airdrops when he ran in Bob Brewer at Det 2. He persuaded Brewer to join him in Laos. They took over a house in Vientiane in January 1961, shortly after the battle for the city. Fosmire was involved in scheduling aircraft at the airport during the day. In the evening, they would invite pilots to their house for a beer and a survival briefing. These were mainly the older CAT pilots (Johnson, Welk, Wilson, Forte) who were flying transports.

Later in 1961, Fosmire went to Pha Khao as Vang Pao’s case officer. He replaced Joe Hudarachuck ("explosive" personality - always mad at something - military orientation). He stayed with VP for several months. There was also a Special Forces team with VP, led at first by Billy Chance and later by Carl Nagle (an artillery officer who had joined special forces - he later made general). In late 1961/early 1962, he was replaced by Hugh McCaffrey, on TDY from Manila. McCaffrey was there for only a short time, as he suffered a collapsed lung. In 1962, Fosmire went to Hua Hin. From 1963 to 1965 he was at Pitts Camp.

On August 9, 1961, Fosmire [then, VP's case officer] ordered a trip from Pha Kao to Ban Na, 20 miles NNW, to visit a new case officer just assigned there. He was accompanied by a Thai PARU captain and Carl Nagle, who wanted to see the country. They had not gone too far when Fosmire realized that the helicopter was off course. He took the headset from the flight mechanic and informed the pilot of his concern. The pilot told him not to worry; that he would be approaching Ban Na from a different direction. Another 10-15 minutes found the helicopter over rice fields: "We didn’t own any rice fields." Fosmire took the headset again and informed the pilot that he was over an unfriendly area. A few minutes later, the helicopter began to take hits in the engine compartment. It landed near a clump of trees. The quick check revealed that the aircraft was not flyable. As they had seen the unfriendlies moving toward the aircraft as it went down, they quickly departed the site.

The normal survival rule is to head downstream, towards water, because this is where you will find people. The problem in this case was that the people were not friendly. Instead, they headed north. Fosmire soon took command of the party, driving them to the point of exhaustion. They rested briefly and they set out again. The group made about five of these "leaps" in an effort to clear the area. Finally, the voices of the pursuers faded. They kept going
for a while longer, then settled in for the night. They continued to head north on August 10, trying to maintain a compass course through the jungle ("a bear") and avoiding trails. Fosmire and the Thai PARU would exchange the lead. There was lots of bamboo, steep slopes, and razor-sharp vines. On August 11, Fosmire finally managed to establish radio contact with a transport flying overhead. He directed a Helic to the site, flown by Gary Malmberg. As Malmberg flew over them, one shot was fired from a short distance away. It hit the aircraft. Malmberg gave them a compass course to a cleared area, then departed. They spent another night in the jungle.

The next day, August 12, they reached a river, with the clear area on the other side. They had to wade through shoulder-deep water. By this time, several helicopters had arrived, together with Malmberg. As they reached the clearing, Fosmire heard explosions which sounded like incoming mortars and warned off the helicopters. It turned out that Malmberg was tossing charges out to scare off any enemy that might be nearby.

After the rescue, Fosmire flew to Vientiane, where he was met at the airfield by COS Gordon L. Jorgensen and the girl from the CIA station to whom he was engaged. Jorgensen took him to see Ambassador Brown. Captain Nagle came on a later aircraft and was interviewed by the press.
Vang Pao and Touby agreed that the Hmong living on the edges of the PDJ would be organized in advance to abandon their villages en masse if the Neutralists threatened to take over the PDJ. They would then move to seven base areas in the high ground overlooking the PDJ. General Phoumi accepted the idea of Hmong forces, to be armed by the U.S. He believed that the operation could be kept under control as Vang Pao was a officer in the royal army; also, Thai PARUs (with the approval of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat) would be used for training. (Sarit, head of the Thai government, was a relative and ally of Phoumi's.) 

"There was therefore a rather intricate network of understandings involving three governments as well as the Meo leadership proceeding the bold stroke of January 1961." (141)

By the end of the December 1960, Kong Le took the PDJ airfield, while the Pathet Lao closed in on Xieng Khouangville to the south. The garrison at Xieng Khouangville was commanded by Vang Pao. He gave the signal for the Hmong to abandon their villages and move to the seven concentration points. VP moved to the Hmong village of Padong, southwest of the PDJ. Some 70,000 Hmong left 200 villages. Everyone involved in this saw the movement as a short term one and not the beginning of a long term resistance and counterinsurgency program.

The new Kennedy administration had as it aim the defense of the Mekong Valley, a critical buffer for Thailand, by holding the enemy on the PDJ. White Star teams were assigned to work with the FAR and Hmong. In March, the Neutralists attacked the FAR and drove them toward Vientiane. This "humiliating failure" meant the end of the U.S. hope of a military stand-off. There followed a shift in U.S. policy toward the neutralization of Laos under a coalition government (143). There was a cease fire on May 3, but attacks on the Hmong at Padong continued. VP was forced to move to Pha Khao. Hmong forces continued to grow, reaching 9,000 by July. Meanwhile, Buell brought order to the program to support the relocated Hmong villages through airdrops of food and other essentials.

The U.S. decided to support the Hmong as a military option. The role was given to the CIA "because of the desire of the U.S. to minimize any violations of the Geneva Accords and later because of the State Department's conviction that U.S. military management of the resistance support effort would bring increasing difficulties of political control and very possibly would inevitably lead to pressures to commit American combat forces. . . . The task was not asked for nor particularly welcome, nor was it kept secret from key members of Congress." (147) Souvanna Phouma, prime minister of the coalition government, was

Hmong were called "Miao" or "savages" by Chinese in the earliest records. The Hmong Kingdom lasted from 400 to 900 A.D. and was at the zenith of its power in the last half of the sixth century, with defacto control over much of Hupeh, Hunan, and Kwangsi provinces. This period is viewed by Hmong as the "golden age." The Hmong dispersed, mainly migrating west to Kweichow and Szechwan, with clan affiliation growing in importance. As time passed, the Chinese pushed the Hmong further west. Beginning in the late 1700s, the Hmong crossed the mountains to the south and entered Indochina. The pace of migration increased during the period 1850-1900, with settlements in North Vietnam.

The Hmong first settled in Laos between 1815-1818 near Nong Het. Within a short time, there were ten villages in this area. The Hmong grew opium, their only cash crop.

Laos fell to the French in 1893 (Vietnam fell in 1884; Cambodia in 1863).

By 1900, there was some 40,000 to 60,000 Hmong in Southeast Asia, mainly in highland areas above 3,000 feet in northern Vietnam and Laos.

The Hmong practiced swidden (slash and burn) farming. The fields were prepared for planting in February, March, and April. Piles of trees and underbrush were burned in March, with planting in April. Corn, mainly, was planted at this time, then harvested in August. Opium poppies were then planted in the same field. Their sap was harvested the following January. Sap collection was labor intensive, requiring the efforts of the entire family. It took an adult one month to cut and scrape one-half acre of poppies. The milky white sap solidified into an amber mass. This was then scraped, and the scrapings were pounded into bricks. The bricks were sold to Chinese middlemen. The Hmong always were paid in silver, first with silver bars, then (after the French came) in silver piasters. A small amount of the crop was kept and processed into smoking opium for medicinal use.

The Hmong have always been passionate hunters.

Deaths of family members were announced by three shots fired in slow succession, waiting for each echo to fall away.

Tooby Lyfouna assumed the leadership of the Hmong in the 1940s. He came from a Nong Het family, was educated in French schools in Xieng Khouangville, and attended the
School of Law and Administration in Vientiane. He spoke fluent French. He planned to use French patronage to support the Hmong against the ethnic Lao (50 percent) part of the population, which monopolized power. Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua were the prime opium-growing provinces. Touby increased the production of opium with the idea of increasing French dependence. After 1946, the French opium monopoly went underground. By 1950, the French needed the Hmong for the war. They planned to finance operations from opium revenues. "Operation X" of 1951-1954: G.C.N.A. forces in early 1950 recruit Hmong. Col. Roger Trinquier in charge.

With declining French presence after 1950, the Laotian Communist party (Neo Lao Hak Sat or NLHS) struggled with Royalists for control of Laos (Pathet Lao was military arm of party). There was a stalemate until 1957, when the Communists - over U.S. protests - joined a coalition government. This last eight months, until the pro-U.S. rightists took control of the government and imprisoned the NLHS representatives. In mid-1959, fighting broke out between the FAR and Pathet Lao. In late 1960, Kong Le declared himself a neutralist and took control on Vientiane. Ousted by U.S. backed rightist forces, Kong Le was forced into an uneasy alliance with the Pathet Lao. There was a new coalition government in July 1962. The Communists soon pulled out and the civil war resumed. In late 1972, the U.S. informed Souvanna Phouma to come to terms before the Americans pulled out. A ceasefire was declared on February 22, 1973. Fighting broke out again in 1974. The Communists captured Vientiane at the end of August 1975.

Laos would have fallen to the Communists earlier had it not been for the Hmong, who did most of the fighting - and dying. Approximately one-third of the Laotian Hmong perished during the war, including nearly half of all males over the age of 15.

Vang Pao was 14 years old when the Japanese invaded Laos. With Touby's help, he became a messenger and interpreter for the French. In 1947, he joined the provincial police, a paramilitary organization. He was promoted to corporal in March 1948 and was sent to non-commissioned officers' school at Luang Prabang a month later. He graduated first in his class. In January 1949 he was promoted to chief-corporal. He was sent to the National Gendarmerie school, and again graduated first in his class. He was promoted to sergeant-major. He reached the rank of adjutant in October 1950.

Vang Pao fought with distinction against the Vietminh and Pathet Lao. He spent 14 months (January 1951-March
1952 at the Officer Training School at Dong Hene, near Savannakhet. He graduated seventh in his class. He was assigned to the 14 Infantry Company (the gendarmerie had been absorbed into the Royal Lao Army). He recruited Hmong into the unit. In March 1953, the Vietminh invaded Laos with 7,000 regular troops. Vang Pao was given command of the special commando unit (c. 70 men) and conducted guerrilla operations around Nong Het. Later, there were reports that he had led a relief force to Dien Bien Phu, but these reports were not true: Vang Pao was assigned as a rearguard for guerrilla operations to assist survivors, but he had just entered Sam Neua province from his base in Xieng Khouang with Dien Bien Phu fell.

In December 1954, he was promoted to captain. He became a battalion commander. In June 1958, he was director of the non-commissioned officers' school at Khang Khay. In 1959, he took command of the 10th Infantry Battalion on the PDJ.

In July 1960, the Vietminh launched a major offensive in Sam Neua and along the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Kong Le coup took place on August 9, 1960. The rightists sought Vang Pao as an ally. Vang Pao was concerned that the Pathet Lao/NVA would push onto the PDJ. The communists likely was "reeducate" the Hmong because of their close ties with the French. With the blessing of the rightists, Vang Pao began organizing a Hmong army at Lat Houang on the southeastern edge of the PDJ. This was the first step in building a network of 70,000 Hmong in more than 200 villages in the highlands surrounding the PDJ. When the Communists tried to occupy the PDJ, the Hmong would relocate to seven strategic mountaintops.

In 1961, the U.S. decided to assist Vang Pao, who was recruiting a large Hmong force. There was an attempt to reestablish the coalition government in mid-1961 after a ceasefire was declared on May 3. This was promptly violated by the Pathet Lao and Neutralists who launched an all-out assault on Padong. Vang Pao relocated to Pha Khao. Early in 1962, he moved to Long Tieng - "an immense high plateau ringed by limestone mountains" some 35 miles southwest of Xieng Khouangville. The size of the plateau was a good location for an airstrip; also, the limestone mountains provided good defensive positions.

Phou Pha Thii, a 5,680-foot limestone mountain known as "the rock." Radar construction on the site began at the end of 1964.

By late 1964, Vang Pao controlled nearly all of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. In December 1964, Souvanna Phouma formally gave Vang Pao commander of MR II and promoted him to general. His forward headquarters was a Na Khang in Sam Neua province.


Importance of PDJ: Route 7 runs through PDJ in an east-west direction, connection the Vietnamese border to north-south Route 13 (Vientiane-Luang Prabang). Route 7 meets Route 6 (to Sam Neua and North Vietnam) at Ban Ban, on the eastern edge of the PDJ. "The Plain thus has a dominant position in the area, both for its airfields and for the roads which meet there. It is a terrain feature of importance to anyone seeking military control of north Laos." (130)

The year 1960 was "a watershed in the brief history of independent Laos." (135) Four governments succeeded each other in Vientiane. The national election of April 1960 was rigged with covert U.S. support to insure an overwhelming victory for the right. Kong Le staged his coup in September, repudiates the right wing and invested Souvanna Phouma to form a government. There followed months of "enormous confusion" both in Laos and in Washington. The U.S. seemed to support both Souvanna and his right wing opponents, General Phoumi Nosavan and Prince Boun Oum (anti-communist southerns with ties to the Thai government). Phoumi used U.S. aid to set up a rival government at Savannakhet. He then marched on Vientiane, capturing the city in December. The Soviets organized an airlift to Kong Le, who retreated toward the PDJ.

"It was some time during these turbulent months that the concept took shape of an irregular armed force of Meo tribesmen fighting for its own and the rightist government's cause and enjoyed, with the RLG's consent, the direct support of the United States." (138) There had been Hmong anti-PL guerrilla activity in Sam Neua and Phong Saly in 1956-58, with assistance from FAR officers in adjoining regions. CIA learned about the resistance movement — and about Vang Pao — from these FAR officers and began to obtain intelligence about the conditions and military activity in the PL areas. This resistance died out during the period 1958-1960, when the PL were formally part of the Vientiane government, but when the PL (with the help of the North Vietnamese) retook Sam Neua and Phong Saly in 1960, spontaneous Hmong resistance again broke out, centered in the area around Sam Neua town. The Hmong sent emissaries south to seek help. This coincided with the threat to Xieng Khouang. Touby and VP turned to General Phoumi for help. There was a commonality of interests, as Phoumi, the Hmong, and the U.S. feared PL/Neutralist control of the strategic PDJ.
informed about the essentials of the program during his visit to the U.S. in August 1961.

Buell played a major role over the next year. "Edgar M. Buell took much of the initiative and displayed his particular talents for improvisation and for bridging the cultural gap between the hill-tribe villages in Xiang Khouang and the U.S. government establishment in Vientiane." (148) Establishing his headquarters at Sam Thong, he initiated school and public health programs. The heart of the health program was the hospital run by Dr. Charles Weldon and his wife, Dr. Patricia McCreedy. Also, there were improvements in agriculture. The Hmong continued to grow opium as a cash crop, although the turmoil of war and the movement of population sharply reduced production. "The policy of the American agencies working with the Meo was to turn a blind eye to the Meo involvement with opium and, to the extent that they could control the contacts of their personnel, to have nothing to do with the growth and procurement of the product." (153) (The Hmong remained primary producers, selling to Chinese middlemen.) In January 1966, the King paid a formal visit to Sam Thong. In many ways, this represented the highpoint of the program.

"Vang Pao's leadership was certainly the critical ingredient in maintaining the aggressiveness and spirit of the movement in spite of many setbacks that eventually befell it." (153) VP was "open, direct, and volatile, but also firm." He shared the dangers of battle and seemed entirely fearless. "Generous and incorrupt" Money was paid to the troops and rolls were not padded; death benefits were distributed and families cared for. His honesty and faithfulness to his commitments made him "an entirely unusual military figure in Southeast Asia." (154) He punished cowardice, desertion, and betrayal severely. He could cut off rice supply to villages that failed to meet their commitments, especially with respect to supplying manpower to fight the war. VP never united the Hmong. He faced continued opposition, which grew as the war became more bloody.

As the fighting resumed in 1963, VP created Special Guerrilla Units, battalions with three line companies and a headquarters unit. They were under his direct control. They eventually numbered 10,000 out of the 30,000-man force. The PL/NVA moved against the Hmong positions in 1964 with considerable success in the the area south of Route 7. VP managed to exploit their weakness in Sam Neua and captured the high ground overlooking Sam Neua city. This success was partly due to the efforts of Colonel Thong.
In May 1964, the cease-fire completely broke down. (In August, General Phoumi attempted a coup; VP supported the government of Souvanna Phouma.) The communists drove Kong Le off the PDJ. A government offensive during the rainy season (June-November) took advantage of air mobility and retook the junction of Routes 7 and 13 with little opposition. This began a pattern following for the next four years: PL/NVA offensives in the dry seasons, following by FAR/Hmong offensives during the wet months. "In effect, the war was largely confined to marginal areas between the heartland of the opposing sides, which, in some cases, changed hands twice annually." (159)

In 1968, NVA/PL offensive dealt heavy blow to Hmong and U.S., with the loss of Phou Pha Thi and outposts in Sam Neua. Some positions were retaken in the rainy season but were held only briefly. 1969 saw the NVA bring in the entire 316th Division, which pressed across the PDJ and attacked the neutralist position at Muong Soul — "symbolic of the neutralist claim to their former position of primacy on the Plain." (163) The NVA pressed their attack through the start of the rainy season. VP countered with About Face: "The last great military success of the irregulars." (163) NVA responded by bringing in the major part of the 312th Division to support the 316th. They retook the PDJ and Muong Soul in an offensive that began in February 1970. They then moved against Sam Thong, forcing a tragic exodus of some 110,000 people to Ban Xon.

Whatever the Hmong gained, "it certainly was not worth the high price they paid." (165) U.S. saw resistance as part of a larger battle against North Vietnam, one the U.S. expected to win. The miscalculation re the Hmong was part of a much larger miscalculation. Hmong resistance was "a popular insurgency movement which, in the context of a war of large dimensions, could not prevail against its enemies without greater help than the United States was prepared to offer." To say it should not have been undertaken by the U.S. is "to apply a lavish hindsight without regard to the realities of the time it was undertaken." (168)