Air America in Laos I – humanitarian work
by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

Part I

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A) At the times of Civil Air Transport

Humanitarian work in Laos goes back to the times of Civil Air Transport. Already in 1950, the United States had signed an agreement to supply economic and military aid to Laos. Since 1951, CAT had one aircraft and often a second aircraft under charter to ICA (International Cooperation Administration): CAT planes were the principal means of communications between ICA missions in Saigon, Phnom Penh, Vientiane and Bangkok. The aircraft involved were apparently the Saigon-based C-47 and maybe the Bangkok-based C-47. After the Geneva Accords, which had given the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly to the Pathet Lao pending integration into the central regime, Washington decided to expand the aid program. So, in December 1954, a United States Operations Mission (USOM) office was established in Vientiane to organize economic assistance. The size of USOM Laos increased from a “dozen or so at the end of 1954 to […] over one hundred in December 1957.” Over the year of 1955, USOM funded 11 non-military projects at a cost of about $1.4 million, including improvements in the areas of agriculture, public health, civil administration, and education, and in 1956 and 1957, the sum of economic aid increased to $ 48.7 million and $ 44.5 million respectively. But the main purpose of USOM was defense related, and so in December 1955, the Program Evaluation Office (PEO) was set up within USOM to handle military aid. The ratio of funds devoted to military purposes as compared to the amounts devoted to economic assistance was about 4 to 1.

As to Military Region I, the Houa Khong Province, “the period from 1957-1960 was generally characterized by military advisory assistance at Luang Nam Tha, the provincial capital. A few small civic action community development programs were concentrated in Nam Tha itself with no assistance extending beyond that of Nam Tha Village.” In Military Region III, “the first A.I.D. office was opened in Savannakhet City in 1960 and […] rural development advisors were stationed in Thakhek, the capital of Khammouane Province, and in the four development clusters of Kengkok, Dong Hene, Lahanam and Nong Bok. […] The Regional Headquarters, headed by the Area Coordinator, had a Field Support Officer and expertise in agriculture, irrigation, education, refugee relief, public health, public works, well drilling, road and bridge construction, heavy equipment maintenance, and public safety.” Already “in 1956, the Mission assigned one American and one local employee to Pakse. […] By 1968 there were approximately 18 officers of USAID assigned to MR IV.”

In late 1954, after the end of Operation Cognac, CAT’s Neese Hicks and Dale

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1 Leary, Manuscript, chap. IV, p. 368, in: UTD/Leary/B19F2.
2 For more details, see my file Working in remote countries within this e-book.
4 Castle, At war, pp. 9-16 plus p. 146 notes 9 and 10.
5 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 205.
6 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 219. “By the time of the cease-fire, the Region had only two rural development personnel and had already lost its agriculture, irrigation, public health, education, well drilling and public safety advisors” (p. 220).
7 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 236.
8 See my file Working in Remote Countries within this e-book.
Williamson\(^9\) flew CAT’s Managing Director George A. Doole\(^10\) and a party of about 15 people to Vientiane to set up operations in Laos. But there was not much going on in the 1955-59 period – initially, there were just 2 Bangkok-based C-46s that hauled material to Vientiane for the USOM compound.\(^11\) As USOM officials had learned in July 55 that several mountain provinces of Laos were threatened by famine, it was decided to airdrop rice and salt to these people. So, from mid-August to mid-October 55, three CAT C-46s arrived at Udorn, Thailand, which, by the end of the month, delivered 1,000 tons of emergency food to 25 reception areas in Laos.\(^12\) The CAT Captains were Fred Walker, Bill Welk, and Art Wilson.\(^13\) Those flights originated at Udorn airfield, which at that time was still so rustic that roaming Carabaos had to be driven from the airstrip for landings and take-offs.\(^14\) In September and October 55, CAT Captain Fred Walker, flying one of those C-46s, air-dropped rice bags along the Lao-China border and the Lao-North Vietnam border at remote places like Ban Ban or Phou Pha Thi, but he also dropped propaganda leaflets over communist territory.\(^15\) Two years later, CAT returned to Laos on a permanent basis: As, due to the political development, the US Embassy was alarmed, fearing that under the Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong as future Minister of Economic Planning, the Communists would have control of the distribution of US aid, which, at that time, was at more than two-thirds devoted to the defense support program,\(^16\) the US Ambassador organized his own distribution of US aid: And so, on 30 June 1957, the arrival of CAT C-47 B-817 at Vientiane to begin a new contract with the American

![CAT C-47 B-817 at Attopeu in 1958, taken by Bruce Blevins (former photo no.1-WL1-28-26-PB404, now preserved at UTD/Leary/B77F2)](image)

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\(^9\) Williamson arrived in the Far East in the summer of 1954, flew on Operation Cognac and then was assigned to Taipei (Dale D. Williamson, interview made by William M. Leary at Bellevue, WA, on 13 July 1987; Professor Leary’s notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5).

\(^10\) Already in mid-July 53, General Charles P. Cabell, Deputy Director of the CIA, had asked George A. Doole to become a permanent CIA employee and to take charge of looking after CAT (Leary, Perilous missions, p. 173).

\(^11\) Dale D. Williamson, telephone interview made by William M. Leary on 25 September 1985; Professor Leary’s notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.

\(^12\) Leary, Manuscript, chap. IV, p. 369, in: UTD/Leary/B19F2.

\(^13\) Dale Williamson was one of the First Officers during those missions, logging 155 hours in one month (Dale D. Williamson, interview made by William M. Leary at Bellevue, WA, on 13 July 1987; Professor Leary’s notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5).


\(^15\) Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 71.

\(^16\) Kirk, Wider war, pp.203/4; Castle, At war, p.16.
Embassy marked the first permanent presence of Civil Air Transport in Laos. As to Bruce Blevins’ flights in 1957/58, he also flew a lot for CIA man Jack Mathews, who supported Kong Le and other Royal Lao Army officers. “In addition to flying for 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 leaflet drops: most Lao were illiterate. He also provided some logistical support for Dr. Tom Dooley.” On at least two occasions, CAT’s supply drops also had the political implication to support the Royal Lao Government side in forthcoming elections – during the months preceding the elections of December 55 and in Operation Booster Shot between 8 March and 27 April 58. And on at least three occasions, CAT captain Fred Walker hauled military supplies to Vientiane: on 23 November 56, on 19 July 57, and in September 57. When North Vietnamese troops attacked Royal Lao Government positions in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces in July 1959, Air America pilots flew US military advisers and intelligence experts throughout Laos so that they could get a first-hand impression of the situation.

But the political situation in Laos became very unstable: In the elections of 4 May 1958, the Communists obtained 9 of the 21 Government seats. On 30 June 1958, the American aid to Laos was suspended, because the US Congress had criticized that the Lao Government was unable to see that aid funds were used for the purposes intended, and on 22 July 58, Prince Souvanna Phouma was forced out of office. On 18 August 1958, the right-wing Phoumi Sananikone came to power, and in late 1958, the Pathet Lao withdrew to the Plain of Jars in

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17 Leary, CIA air operations in Laos, p. 54. Bruce Blevins, with his C-47, was the first CAT pilot to be based at Vientiane (Dale D. Williamson, telephone interview made by William M. Leary on 25 September 1985; Professor Leary’s notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5).

18 Interview conducted with Bruce Blevins by Prof. William Leary at Elliston, MT on 11 July 1987, written summary at: UTD/Leary/B43F2.

19 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp. 28 (note 34) and 18; during that period, Fred Walker not only flew medical supplies to the bush hospitals of Operation Brotherhood in his C-46, but he also air-dropped rice and salt at places like Muong Sai, Sam Chiau, Sam Neua, Ban Na, and Phong Saly, and occasionally he airlifted Royal Lao troops (Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp. 72/3).

20 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 71; in September 57, a number of CIA personnel was also on board.

21 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 73.
the Xieng Khouang province and reopened its guerrilla operations. This political instability in Laos led to a growing US presence in Laos and to an increasing amount of goods delivered to support the Royal Lao Army. So, CAT’s C-47s and C-46s made more and more urgent airdrops – mostly rice – to the civil population as well as to isolated Royal Lao Army outposts, and since late 58, CAT planes also flew around CIA case officers. During this period of Air America’s operations it is impossible to clearly distinguish between purely humanitarian work and military supplies.

B) The new name: Air America and Laos

As has been noted in the file entitled CAT, Air Asia, Air America – the Company on Taiwan I, one of the reasons why the Company adopted its new name “Air America”, had been in order to emphasize the American nature of the Company, which – according to the official explanation – was especially necessary in Japan. However it may have been even more important in Laos: On 11 February 1959, the Lao Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone declared that Laos was no longer bound by the provisions of the Geneva Agreements. Indeed, at that time the International Control Commission (ICC) had already halted their operations in Laos, and so some US newspapers interpreted Phoui’s statement as a prelude to sending additional US military aid to the Royal Laotian Government. And that political situation sheds another new light on CAT’s name change, as “Air America” then clearly underlined US American presence in Laos. For during the fifties, the activities of Civil Air Transport had been mainly concentrated on two bases – Taipei on Taiwan for scheduled flights and Tachikawa in Japan for contract flights –, whereas the South East Asian theater had not yet attracted much attention apart from occasional projects. But by mid-1959, the civil war had re-ignited in Laos. In mid-1960, the situation became even more complicated and more dramatic: With the coup d’état by Kong Le, the Kingdom of Laos, which had been supported by regular CAT services since 1957, became a new big theater of activities, and with the outbreak of the war in Vietnam in the sixties, Air America’s presence spread all over South East Asia. However, the political situation in the Kingdom of Laos does not allow to strictly separate Air America’s activities in that country from those conducted out of certain airports of Thailand, because as will be seen, quite a lot of supply flights to Laos originated at Bangkok, Takhli, or Udorn.

C) The early contracts covering operations in Laos from 1959 to 1962:

The political instability that characterized the situation in Laos since 1959, also meant an increasing demand of aircraft, to be used for political negotiations and other liaison duties, for hauling supplies to misplaced refugees and for building up a secret army. At that time, Air America had several contracts with USOM/Laos for flying services and flight personnel services, the most important of which were probably contracts no. 57-08 and 57-060. Under the provisions of contract 57-08 Air America C-47s and C-46s carried cargo and passengers from Vientiane (L-08) to places like Luang Prabang (L-54) or Paksane (L-35). For example,

22 Kirk, Wider war, p.204; Castle, At war, p.17.
23 Leary, CIA air operations in Laos, p. 55.
24 Castle, At war, pp. 147/8 (note 24) and  p. 17.
25 Castle, At war, p. 17.
26 A Memorandum dated 27 July 62 (in: UTD/Fink/B2F16) lists up contracts nos. 57-08 (flying services), 58-046 (flight personnel service), 60-009 (flying services), and ICA-39-257 (flying services), concluded with the US International Cooperation Agency (ICA). USOM was the country-level of ICA (Castle, At war, p.145, note 72).
27 This is documented by the “Vientiane Daily Flight Operations Log” plus the “Aircraft utilization” document of 29 May 61 (both in: UTD/Lewis/B2F6) that show that that day, C-47 “815” and C-46s “156” and “910” (which had arrived from Bangkok in the morning) shuttled between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, while C-47 “827” and Helio “833” shuttled between Vientiane and Paksane all day long. At the same time, other Air America C-46s (“146” and “154”) made rice drops under the provisions of contract no. 57-08.
on 13 August 61, Ed Eckholdt flew C-46 B-138 several times between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, before para-dropping gas drums on flights out of Vientiane, between 20 and 24 October 61, he flew C-46s B-146 and B-138 on rice drop missions out of Vientiane, on 15 November 61, he shuttled gas drums from Vientiane to Luang Prabang in C-46 B-914, and on 13 and 14 December 61 he flew rice drop missions out of Vientiane in C-46 B-148. The aircraft assigned to contract 57-060 were apparently based at Bangkok, but also operated into Laos.

According to the log book of Tom Jenny, the same C-46s also shuttled between Bangkok, “Korat” (standing for Takhli), Vientiane, and an unnamed drop zone at least between 21 March 61 and 29 April 61. These Air America C-46s of USOM contract 57-060 seem to have been those C-46s that – as has been noted quite often – since the fall of 1960 moved thousands of tons of arms and supplies from Bangkok and from the secret base at Takhli (T-05) in Thailand to General Phoumi Nosavan at Savannakhet and then at Vientiane, and since January 61 Air America aircraft also delivered supplies to a drop zone near Vang Pao’s headquarters at Pa Doung in Laos. These supplies could be arms and ammunition or rice bags and elephant-skin containers filled with water, and Air America aircraft also carried royalist paratroops to jump zones near Vientiane in operations leading to the flight of Kong

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29 Vientiane Daily Flight Operations Log of 29 May 61 plus the “Aircraft utilization” document of that day (both in: UTD/Lewis/B2F6) list 4 C-46s that were assigned to contract no. 57-060 on 29 May 61: “136”, “858”, “156”, and “910”); all of them came from Bangkok and seem to have delivered supplies from Bangkok to Luang Prabang directly (“136” and “858”) or via Vientiane (“156” and “910”).
31 For 1 April 61, Tom Jenny later corrected his entry “Korat” to “Takhli”, but Tom Jenny also confirmed (interview dated 1 June 2006) that whenever “Korat” was noted in the log book, all of those flights passed thru the “Ranch” at Takhli. Another name given to Takhli was “Romeo” (William A. “Al” White, interview with William M. Leary, 7-16 February 1988, written version, preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5).
32 In his log book, Tom Jenny notes the following Air America C-46s for the Bangkok-“Korat”/Takhli-Vientiane-Bangkok run, sometimes limited to the “Korat”-Vientiane-“Korat”/Takhli segments: “154” on 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, and 29 March 61, then Bangkok-Saigon-“Korat”/Takhli on 29/30 March, “Korat” to “Korat” (apparently via a DZ) on 31 March, and “Korat”-Vientiane-Udorn-“Korat”/Takhli on 1 April 61; it was again used on 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16 April 61, sometimes apparently directly operating from “Korat”/Takhli to the Drop zone and back to “Korat”/Takhli; other C-46s used on those flights by Tom Jenny were “138” on 28 March and 10 April 61, “136” on 28 and 29 April 61, and “156” on 9 April 61 (taken from the photocopies of his log book kindly sent to the author by Tom Jenny on 22 October 2004).
33 Prados, President’s secret wars, p. 269; Castle, At war, p. 23; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp. 36-39.
34 On 10 October 60, Air America planes began flying supplies (mostly parachutes at the beginning) to Pakse and Savannakhet (Conboy/Morrison, Shadow war, p. 36).
35 Leary, CIA air operations in Laos, p. 58; Trest, Air Commando One, pp. 109 and 116.
Le’s forces northward.\textsuperscript{36} Two C-46s were destroyed while operating under the provisions of contract no. 57-060: B-130 made an emergency landing in the Plain of Jars, Laos, caused by elevator control loss, and crashed on 26 November 60,\textsuperscript{37} and B-136 was destroyed at Pha Khao (LS-14) near Vientiane on 13 August 61, when it struck a mountain while dropping supplies.\textsuperscript{38} Contract no. 57-060 expired on 9 April 62 and was replaced by contract no. AF62(351)-1683 effective 10 April 62, which “provides for the provision by the Company of C-46, C-45, C-47 and DC-4 flying services in Laos for MAAG. […] The Department of Defense provides appropriate indemnity. This is the first time that such contracting has been arranged with the U.S. Government”\textsuperscript{39} – indeed, up to then US military aid to Laos had been hidden in USOM contracts made with the PEO.

However Air America’s C-46s of contract no. 57-060 were not only used for the purposes of the uniformed Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Laos, which had replaced the old, ostensibly civilian Program Evaluation Advisory Office (PEO) in April 1961,\textsuperscript{40} but they were also used for civic and purely humanitarian work in Laos: In anticipation of the April 1960 elections village chiefs were flown to talk to government officials who would ask the headmen to rally the vote for government candidates, and on some of those flights, Fred Walker’s C-46, that theoretically held 38 passengers, carried up to 70 people. But in March 60, Fred Walker not only flew village chiefs, but also salt, soldiers, rice, an assistant US Air Attaché, supplies for \textit{Operation Brotherhood} (a medical operation that ran several bush hospitals, including one at Phong Saly, and was largely staffed by Filipino people),\textsuperscript{41} leaflets, and Father Lucien Bouchard. In April and May 60, Walker carried sweaters to Luang Prabang, medical supplies for \textit{Operation Brotherhood}, sheet roofing, shovels, fuel drums, gas, wheelbarrow frames, empty bottles, rice, salt, lumber, Coca Cola, and visiting celebrity TV man Arthur Godfrey.\textsuperscript{42} So again, a contract that Air America had with USOM included humanitarian work, but also reveals its military implications.

As to Air America’s contract no. 57-08 with USOM, later Supplemental Agreements to that contract added aircraft services to be operated by other Air America aircraft types like the Helio Courier, the Bell 47G helicopter, Dornier Do-28s, Fairchild C-123s, DHC-4 Caribous, and even DC-4s and DC-6s if requested,\textsuperscript{43} extended the number of bases from Vientiane to “points in Laos and Thailand […] as directed by the Contracting Officer”, and postponed its expiration date to 30 June 1962.\textsuperscript{44} But already at that time, it sometimes becomes difficult to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Bowers, \textit{The USAF in South-East Asia}, p. 441.
\item Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 13 March 62, p. 5 (in: UTD/CIA/B7F1).
\item Castle, \textit{At war}, p. 32.
\item Hamilton-Merritt, \textit{Tragic mountains}, p. 73.
\item Hamilton-Merritt, \textit{Tragic mountains}, pp. 76f/7.
\item The original contract no. 57-08 between Air America and the International Cooperation Agency (ICA), represented by the US Operations Mission to Laos (USOM/Laos), was concluded on 13 July 57. Supplemental Agreement no.4 dated 24 May 61 (in: UTD/Lewis/B2F5) included one or more C-47s, one or more C-46s, two or more Helio Couriers, a Bell 47G Helicopter, as well as DC-4s and DC-6s on request, while Supplemental Agreement no.6 to contract no. 57-08 (draft dated 3 March 62, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16) added five C-123s, one Caribou, as well as an unspecified number of Do-28s as requested.
\item As to the bases, Supplemental Agreement no.4 of 24 May 61 still notes (p. 1): “The aircraft shall be based at Vientiane, Laos, and, except for necessary maintenance, shall be available for flight operations from Vientiane for transporting passengers and cargo at such time and to such points as directed by the Contracting Officer” (ib: UTD/Lewis/B2F5). The text speaking of “points in Laos and Thailand” is taken from Supplemental Agreement no. 6 (draft of 3 March 62, p. 2, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16). The expiration date of 30 June 62 is noted in S.A. no.4, p. 8.
\end{thebibliography}
clearly distinguish between humanitarian work and military support, because both types of activities used the same aircraft like, for example, the Helio Courier, because humanitarian programs like the construction of Lima Sites also had a military background, and because some civil contracts had direct military implications. This is particularly evident by the fact that the Program Evaluation Office (PEO), which had been created by the end of 1955, had been set up within USOM to handle military aid, and so, contract no. ICA-39-007 of 14 January 60, covering helicopter flights, maintenance, and training within Laos, was openly concluded between Air America and “the Program Evaluation Office of the United States Operations Mission in Laos (hereinafter referred to as ‘PEO/USOM/LAOS’)”. This explains why certain aspects of Air America’s activities are described in the section dealing with humanitarian work, although they also had military or paramilitary implications.

One of these original contracts, namely 57-08, was notorious for its dangerous missions: “I do remember when I flew the C-46 out of Vientiane that the company wrote the contract customers number on the flight log sheets we were issued for each flight. I can remember the 57-08 contract as it was the one you always got shot at while flying and you could always tell the planes from the number of patches all over them”, Jim Pearson recalls. Indeed 7 out of 26 accidents that happened to all Air America aircraft between 1 January 1960 and 31 July 1962 affected aircraft that were assigned to contract no. 57-08, and 4 out of those 7 accidents had been caused by ground fire, resulting in no less than 3 aircraft crashes. The other 3 accidents involving aircraft assigned to contract 57-08 resulted from engine failure or Hmong tribesmen walking into the idling propeller. Most of the remaining 19 accidents of that period resulted from technical failures that very often struck the UH-34Ds assigned to contract no. ICA-39-007 and later to contract AF62(531)-1674, although on several occasions, the helicopters assigned to that contract were also hit by ground fire during that period.

The reason seems to be evident: It is known for contract no. ICA-39-007 openly concluded with the PEO and it can be assumed for contract 57-08: The aircraft assigned to those contracts delivered military supplies to pro-Western forces. The type of cargo an aircraft carried can be guessed by looking at the airport it came from. As Ed Eckholdt states for mid-1961: “Air America was doing ‘legitimate’ flying out of VTE, carrying rice, furniture, and miscellaneous supplies to the Royal Lao Army and Meos. Special flights, carrying weapons and ammunition, operated out of Takhli (‘the Ranch’).”

The introduction of the Helio Courier and other STOL aircraft:

Already on 1 August 59, USOM/Laos asked to add small aircraft to Air America’s contracts, that is 2 Beech C-45s. To meet the increased requirements of air transportation in Laos, on 23 September 59, Air America’s first Helio Courier, B-833, was chartered to USOM

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45 Castle, At war, pp. 15-17.
47 E-mail dated 4 December 2004, kindly sent to the author by Jim Pearson.
52 Ed Eckholdt, interview made by William M. Leary on 24 September 1987; the notes of Prof. Leary are preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F13.
for trials and was operated mainly on flights to Phong Saly.\textsuperscript{54} As a member of the CIA’s Air Branch at Washington, Major Harry C. Aderholt had supervised the development of the Helio Courier, which was to be used for CIA infiltration missions, for exfiltrating downed aircrews from hostile territory, and as a light utility aircraft to support paramilitary activities in rugged, undeveloped areas of the world. The Helio Aircraft Corporation of Norwood, Massachusetts, had modified the CIA planes according to Aderholt’s specifications, including the installation of a more powerful engine, a three-bladed propeller, and greater fuel capacity for a longer range.\textsuperscript{55} Due to many technical problems the Helio Courier suffered at the beginning, Air America was nearly about to abandon it: In early 1960, B-833 had been sitting idle at Wattay airport for months, as the pilots did not like one-engined aircraft to be used over Laos, as the Agency had no air control center at Vientiane, and there were no search and rescue capabilities available to go to the assistance of downed aircrews. On 2 March 60, Eddie Sims flew B-833 with Ron Sutphin and had to make an emergency landing at Phong Saly because of engine failure, during which the aircraft nosed over.\textsuperscript{56} But the Helio was saved by Major Aderholt and by Robert E. Rousselot: As Aderholt had arranged for four additional Helio Couriers to be shipped to him in Thailand in 1960, he took B-833 to Takhli (T-05) to serve as his courier aircraft: And over the next two months, he personally logged one hundred hours in the Helio instructing other pilots and flying missions into Laos. When the 4 Helios arrived, they were also used to prepare the national elections in Laos held on 24 April 60. But as the pilots still did not like the Helio, Aderholt went to Vientiane in late April 60, and, together with Air America’s chief pilot Eddie Sims and USAID representative Jack Kennedy, Aderholt personally flew the Helio to and landed it at the strip considered to be the most difficult in the entire Kingdom of Laos: Phong Saly (L-15) up in the north. After having taken off and landed four or five times, the Helio was surrounded by rebels, and the group had to stay overnight with them. After returning to Vientiane the next day, the performance made by the Helio at Phong Saly convinced several Air America pilots, and Bob Rousselot, at that time Vice President Operations of Air America, stayed to it, as he did not want the CIA’s STOL program go to Air America’s competitor Bird & Sons. Shortly afterwards, Air America Helios ferried supplies to Luang Prabang and Boun Neua near Phong Saly, and delivered rice, wool

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Air America Helio H-391B Courier B-833 at Vientiane on 14 January 60 (UTD/Kirkpatrick/slide A 5194)}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{55} Trest, \textit{Air Commando One}, pp. 78-79.

sweaters, and blankets\textsuperscript{57} to Vang Pao’s troops at Nong Het. Other measures taken by Aderholt to convince Air America pilots to fly with the CIA’s STOL program were to bring in equipment to help them survive in a hostile environment and to set up a rudimentary air control counter at Vientiane.\textsuperscript{58} Like Air America’s C-46s assigned to contract 57-060, the Helios assigned to contract 57-08 had a double objective: humanitarian work and to support the military. For 13 July 1960, Air America pilot Fred Walker recorded in his logbook, what he carried in his Helio: “medical supplies for O.B., salt, three pigs, [CIA man] Ralph Johnson, and a Major Pao.” Walker made special note of the major (Vang Pao) because he seemed important to Johnson.\textsuperscript{59}

But the Helio program was not the only STOL program to be set up in Laos in 1960. Already in late 1959, upon request of the CIA, four Air America pilots were sent to Japan and to the Philippines to be trained as helicopter pilots on the Sikorsky H-19.\textsuperscript{60} On 16 March 60, the first two of four Sikorsky H-19s leased from the US Air Force were handed over to Air America at Seno (L-46) in southern Laos (H-1 and H-9), followed by two more on 7 April 60 (H-3 and H-8).\textsuperscript{61} These helicopters started operations from Vientiane in March 60, carrying CIA case officers to meetings in outlying areas and distributing leaflets during elections. Later in 1960, four former USMC pilots were hired,\textsuperscript{62} and four Sikorsky UH-34Ds arrived in December 60 to replace the underpowered H-19s.\textsuperscript{63} Other STOL aircraft put into service in Laos about the same time included two Beech C-45Gs (N7950C and N7951C), which had arrived in the summer of 1960, and two Piper PA-23 Apaches (N3183P and N3277P), which were later transferred to Saigon.

The construction of STOL Sites since 1961:

It looks very much like a humanitarian program, and indeed, the civilian population of Laos, especially the Hmong, took very much profit from it thru fast deliveries of medicine and other goods necessary to everyday life, thru medical evacuations when necessary, and also

\textsuperscript{57} Ahern, Undercover armies, p.12.
\textsuperscript{58} Trest, Air Commando One, pp. 104-7; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.26.
\textsuperscript{59} Fred Walker’s log book quoted by Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{60} Leary, CIA air operations in Laos, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{61} See Aircraft list of June 62, corrected to Sept.1963 in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1.
\textsuperscript{62} Leary, CIA air operations in Laos, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{63} Air America received UH-34Ds H-A, H-B, H-C, and H-D at Bangkok on 20 December 60 (Aircraft list of June 62, corrected to Sept.1963, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1).
thru the evacuation of the entire population, in case a place risked to be overrun by Communist forces. When a group of refugees had been resettled, they were assisted and urged to build such a STOL site as soon as possible, so that Helio Couriers or later Pilatus Porters could supply them with medicine, food, school supplies and the like. And indeed, all of these activities were part of USAID programs, as was the construction of STOL Sites, which belonged to USAID’s Public Works Division (PWD). Nevertheless, the construction of small landing sites allowing STOL aircraft to land on and to take off from mountain tops throughout Laos had originally been stimulated by the CIA: To facilitate the operations supporting General Vang Pao and his Hmong hill tribesmen defending against the Pathet Lao on the Plain of Jars, Major Aderholt of Detachment 2, 1045th Operational Evaluation & Training Group, working at Takhli (T-05) and reporting directly to CIA headquarters, teamed up with the CIA’s James “Bill” Lair, Air America pilot Ron Sutphin and Vang Pao in developing the initial rudimentary airfields throughout Laos. So, in early 1961, the CIA began to organize the construction of small STOL landing strips on mountainsides in northern Laos, initially called “Victor Sites” and later to become known as “Lima Sites” that could be

Building landing strips in Laos in 1961, photo taken by B.G. H. Aderholt
(photo no. 1-WL1-28-23-PB372)

Laos, initially called “Victor Sites” and later to become known as “Lima Sites” that could be

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64 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 176.
65 E-dated dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
66 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp. 74/5; Conboy/Morrison, Shadow war, pp. 25/6; Leary, CIA air operations in Laos, pp. 55/6; Trest, Air Commando One, p. 8.
68 A Notam dated 12 May 64 (in: UTD/Severson/B1F1) states: “With effect from 0000L, 16 May, 1964, all designators for stations, airports, and sites in Laos will be articulated with ‘L (Lima)’, instead of ‘V (Victor)’ as of previous practice. The respective designated numbers remain unchanged.” But even before the introduction of the “Victor” designators, there had been other systems: In the log book of William Andresevic, during April 1961, Vientiane is simply given as “M”, probably standing for main base, then, between 14 and 27 May 61, it appears as “L-59”, while since that day, Vientiane is always designated as “V-08” (Log book of William Andresevic, in: UTD/Leary/B43F9). It seems that for a certain period both systems existed at the same time, as
used by Air America aircraft – to fly in supplies and to evacuate the population, when necessary. Air America pilots surveyed the proposed site from the air and had Vang Pao sketch a rough plan for the Hmong villagers; then they put the plan into a canteen and flew over the village, dropping it to the villagers. The Hmong villagers scratched out the dirt strips with picks and shovels that were airdropped to them. They built a landing strip in the clearing, using very primitive tools like hoes, dirt drags and baskets. When the strip was ready, a week or so later, an Air America Helio would come and try to land on it. While this was the normal procedure, the landing strip at Sam Thong (LS-20) was even extended with the help of US Navy Seabees that had been sent in to Major Aderholt’s Detachment 2 at Takhli, causing some excitement with CINCPAC, as they were thought to be used in Thailand, not in neutral Laos. But this was an exception: Many Lima Sites were highly elevated, only three to six-hundred feet long and rarely straight. They could have a 20 degrees bend in it or an up-slope gradient of forty-five degrees, and in some cases, there were steep slopes at the end of it, where an aircraft would go down, if the brakes failed, and of course, there were no beacons to fly to nor any navigational aids whatsoever. But while these particularities were known in advance to the pilots, other obstacles could be a nice surprise to a pilot descending to land his aircraft like people, wild animals, or objects like carts standing around, and – maybe worse, because difficultly visible – fox-holes on the landing strip. Especially the fox-holes were treacherous traps to the tail wheels of many Helio Couriers and later Pilatus Porters, and more then one of these planes had to be flown back using bamboo sticks as runners.

PC-6C Porter N195X landing on a bamboo stick, probably at Vientiane in November 71 (UTD/Anthony/F9)

To protect the tail wheel, some Porters later had iron bars installed in front of it, known as the “Air America cow-catchers”. But, of course, they could do nothing against Communist troops sitting in the jungle at the end of a strip, waiting for a plane to come in, and then firing on to the landing plane. On 10 April 62, all Helio pilots were asked to terminate the day’s flying not later than sunset. In May 62, Air America officials noted that “this program is essential and of high priority.” By August 1962, there were about 40 of these STOL sites in the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 29 May 61 uses both of them: While in the Schedule itself Vientiane appears as “V-08” and the flights are given in Greenwich (Zebra) time, in the “Aircraft utilization” paper for the same day Vientiane appears as “L-59” and the flights are given in local time (both papers preserved at: UTD/Lewis/B2F6).

69 Trest, Air Commando One, p. 107.
70 Robbins, Air America, pp. 107 and 109-10; Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 103; Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.63/4.
72 “Small Airfield Improvement: The STOL air strips in Southeast Asia are currently undergoing intensive examination with dual objectives of up-dating the ‘STOL Site Manual’ and improving the strips. The newly
northern Laos. By April 1974, there were some 450 of them in the entire Kingdom of Laos, most of which had been overrun by unfriendly forces since the late sixties. In later years, landing strip construction, improvement and maintenance was basically performed by the customers at their expense, but Air America also maintained a staff of engineers and other personnel who evaluated and arranged for improvements and repair of some strips. In May 67, Air America’s Director of Safety Division Doug Dreifus and PENC0’s R.E. Fisher made a survey of existing and potential STOL sites in northern Laos. Based on Fisher’s report, a new STOL construction program was launched in Laos. Local village chiefs or military commanders provided the laborers, while Air America provided occasional engineering supervision. The construction of a new strip took 2-3 months, the repair and improvement of existing strips took from 3 to 30 days. The cost of such staff was recovered thru the flying hour rate.

MacAlan Thompson, who worked for the USAID Refugee Relief program, recalls that the Lima Sites were “built as necessary by the locals on the ground. LS-271 is a good example, I built that one, well, sort of. Spring of 1969 LS-50 went bad for a few days or so, I was in the area in an H-34 with a load of cooked sticky rice in small bags look for wandering groups of people to drop the trail rations to while they were moving along. We noticed a fairly large group of people on a bend in the Nam Khan River just southwest of LS-50, flew over them and didn’t get shot at, so we went in and landed. The H-34 took off to get out of the immediate area while Her Tou, my Hmong field assistant, and I were talking to the group. They were Lao Theung, not Hmong, fine. Asked the leader what was happening, he said they’d like to stay right where they were as it seemed like a good location, river there for water and fish, the semi flat bend in the river for a good C-46 DZ. He asked if this spot could be made into a Porter strip. I asked why, he had a good response. Said he knew that helicopters were expensive and in relatively short supply, so that if he had a STOL strip he’d get visited more often by a Porter or Helio!! I liked his thinking. We walked over the area, fixed a line of sight for the runway, decided what amount of dirt must be dug out and be moved to where and tamped down hard, which trees must be cut down. Only problem was one large tree at the west end of the strip. The LT leader said it was occupied by phi (spirits) so would be difficult for the villagers to cut down, he asked if I could get some explosives to do the job. I said probably could and I’d be back in a few days. As it turned out, it was a couple weeks before I got back. I was flying over in a CASI Porter when we spotted what looked like a decent strip there on the river, went down to check it out, looked fine, and no large tree on the west end. The CASI pilot noted that the strip didn’t have a site number and probably wasn’t official as yet, but he said OK, we’ll land […]. Talked to the leader who said that since I’d not returned as promised, and he still had the phi problem with the tree, he’d selected a few really old people to do the cutting job, figured the phi might not bother them, and in any case, they weren’t going to be around that long anyway. He was right about the strip, we took out some med-evacs on that initial trip, and came in there a bit more often. Many of the STOL strips were built, I expect, in this fashion. […] LS-36, Na Khang, one of the major strips north of the PDJ, was lengthened and rebuilt at one time by USAID / PWD employed construction engineer has reported for duty and is expected to be of material assistance in this respect. The consensus was that this program is essential and of high priority. It was further agreed that the performance criteria, on the basis of which such strips are constructed, should be reviewed with the intent of insuring that they are realistic from the standpoint of accident rates, structural failure rates, gross weights and frequency of use”

(Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd of 22 May 1962, pp. 1/2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1).

73 Leary, CIA Operations, p. 58; Trest, Air Commando One, pp. 118/9.
76 Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committees of Air Asia Co Ltd and Air America Inc. of 13 May 69, in: UTD/CIA/B8F3.
people. A small bulldozer was dismantled and flown in to 36 to do the job. But landing site maintenance continued to be a problem, and still in October 1970, “the Executive Committee discussed the matter of landing site maintenance. A report from the Field was reviewed for the Executive Committee which indicated that some affirmative action was being taken and work being done by the customers and the Company to improve landing site maintenance. However,” the report of 1970 concludes, “landing site maintenance continues to be a major problem and a continued effort must be made to improve the situation.”

Weather conditions

The rugged terrain was not the only problem that nature offered to pilots flying in Laos. Another one was the weather. Officially, there are 2 seasons in Laos, the rainy season running from May to September or October, and the dry season running from October or November to April. Air America pilots would say that Laos had 3 seasons: the rainy season, the windy season and the smoky season. Five or six months of intensive rain are followed by seven or six months of indifferent summer, but this summer meant high winds, thick dust clouds, and the smoke from the slash-and-burn method of agriculture used by the farmers in Laos. The

77 The super map scanning project of the 1:250,000 scale maps of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, done by Jim Henthorn, can be found at http://www.nexus.net/~911gfx/sea-ao.html.
78 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
79 Quoted from the Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committees of Air Asia Co Ltd and Air America Inc. of 27 October 70, in: UTD/CIA/B8F4.
wind always varied in intensity and direction and could mean gusts, drafts or the sudden lack of thermals. In bad weather, the greatest danger was not enemy fire, but flying into the side of a mountain. Of course there were no navigational aids or beacons to fly to, and especially in bad weather, a pilot had to dead reckon the time needed for a certain route, then look for a hole in the clouds and dive, hoping that he would recognize a certain rock formation or tree so that he knew where he was and hoping not to end in a small canyon that wouldn’t allow to come out. In the rainy season, landing strips could be very slippery.\textsuperscript{81}

During the summer monsoon, the Mekong River often rose in its bed and flooded Vientiane, the capital, and its Wattay airport. The 1966 flood, for which a detailed report is available, lasted from 29 August to 13 September, but concrete runways and taxiways could be used again only in October 66. Here are some extracts from that report: “On 29 August 1966 water was running very rapidly into the airport. All Air America, Inc. aircraft on 30 August 1966 were repaired and Capt. W.L. Blair flew the last aircraft, C-46 XW-PBW, off the almost completely water covered main Vientiane runway to Udorn, Thailand. Aircrews, maintenance and many ATOG personnel were transferred to Udorn, Thailand. Air America, Inc. helicopters were brought from Udorn to Vientiane (Wattay) Airport and positioned at That Luang (East Vientiane) for rescue and support operations. The Great House hostel in downtown Vientiane became the alternate control center for Administration, Supply and related operations. These operations at the Great House and That Luang continued until 23 September at which time these operations were phased out, except for offices of Personnel, Flight Surgeon, Finance and the Manager’s alternate office. The key to the success of the operations was communications, whereby maintaining the generators, receivers, transmitters and operators at Wattay and management having communications between the That Luang chopper pad, Great House, other site radio stations in Laos, Bangkok, Udorn, Nongkai, Thailand, the Main Maintenance Base, the President and Air America, Inc. head office staff, made it possible for all contract commitments of Air America, Inc. in Laos to be met under prolonged emergency flood conditions.”\textsuperscript{82}

![Photo of That Luang area during flood]

**UH-34Ds positioned at That Luang for rescue operations during the flood at Vientiane**

Air America’s H-37 in 1966

(UTD/Wharton/B2F2)

RLAF “4638” in 1971

(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

“On 26 August 1966 residents of Vientiane, Laos noted an alarming rise in the Mekong, which no doubt was reflecting the situation up north. On the 27\textsuperscript{th} early in the morning the Mekong spilled its banks and water began pouring across Wattay Road. […] The river

\textsuperscript{81} Robbins, \textit{Air America}, pp.111-13.

continued to rise and by the 29th water was pouring into the airport. [...] By the time personnel reported for work on the 30th, there was two or more feet of water in the Operations Building, the ramp was flooded and the runway and T-28 area were in immediate danger of being inundated. [...] By now chopper operations were established and Vientiane based aircrew, ATOG and support personnel were evacuated to Udorn to supplement personnel there engaged in contract operation. Auxiliary operations were set up at the Great House on the 31st. [...] Mr. Dunn maintained operational control at Wattay since communications with the President, Air America, all Company bases and contract activities were still functioning and he had a nucleus of key personnel to assist him. By now, 31 August 1966, the entire runway was inundated and water was rising rapidly near the main hangar and rice warehouse. [...] The water continued rising on the 2nd and six boats for use at Wattay were rented for shuttle between the T-28 pad, ATG, Operations Building and Vientiane. [...] On September 5th the river began to drop, although insignificantly, and as of September 11th had fallen only 34 centimeters. On the 12th, which began the second week of flood conditions, the river began dropping 20-25 centimeters a day and by the 13th had stopped coming across the road. Helio and Porter operations commenced at the Vientiane Race Track on the 10th, and on the 14th movement of shuttle buses was resumed via Wattay Road between the Great House and the airport. [...] Inspection and engineering checks of runway conditions began on the 16th, and on the 22nd operations were transferred from That Luang to a temporary old pierced steel plank strip at Wattay.Caribous, Helios and Porters shuttled between Vientiane, Udorn and sites in Laos utilizing a PSP extension of the taxiway. Engineering inspection and core drilling of the Vientiane (Wattay) Airport resulted in the Lao Government Director of Civil Aviation issuing a notice to all airlines and aircraft operators continuing the denial of use of concrete runways and taxiways until 4 October 1966 or later."^83

This is the only Vientiane flood, for which such a detailed description is available, but it was not the only one that struck Vientiane and its airport over the years. There was a similar flood in 1969. “Because of judicious planning and prompt execution, recently erected retaining walls plus [...] sand bags kept AAM property dry and allowed our aircraft to continue operations; the flood did not cause a single Air America aircraft to stand down at any time. To maintain round-the-clock operation [...] our planes had to taxi through little lakes of water.”^84


Once again, the weather proved to be an obstacle to Air America, when, on 11 August 70,
at 10:00 a.m., the Mekong River reached flood stage of eleven and one-half meters, continuing to rise, so that the Vientiane airfield was flooded. Previously, the area had been sandbagged, and all deliveries of rice to the warehouse had been stopped; 26 rice drop missions were flown on August 10 in an effort to reduce the rice stock level to manageable proportions, and there were even plans to move rice and POL to Udorn. Nevertheless, Air America managed the situation and was able to airdrop or land 46 million pounds of food-stuffs – mainly rice – in Laos during 1970. In 1970, the city of Udorn was also flooded for some time, and in order to make sure that key AAM personnel get to work, UH-34Ds served as air-taxies flying from centrally-located areas in Udorn, which were known to be high and dry, to Air America’s base. And, as the pictures below show, there was another big flood that struck Vientiane in 1971.

Vientiane’s Wattay Airport flooded in 1971, taken by Dan Gamelin (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

A documentation made by the US Mission to Laos shows that during the 1971 flood, Air America’s air drop and air delivery operations for feeding refugees in northern Laos were shifted from Wattay airport, Vientiane, to Udorn air base following a prearranged emergency plan – without a single day’s interruption, when Wattay came under water. At the same time, a chartered Bell 206 helicopter – XW-PHO – was based at the American Embassy’s compound to assure that the senior officers and emergency action personnel of the US

85 See Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committees of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Co Ltd of 11 August 70, in: UTD/CIA/B8F4.
86 Leary, CIA Air Operations, p.51.
Mission would have transportation for any urgent need. The following pictures are taken from that documentation:

The Vientiane flood of 1971 as documented by the US Mission to Laos (in: UTD/Dawson/B1F3)

A similar Vientiane flood was also recorded for late August and early September of 1973.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{88} XOXOs of 29 August and 7 September 73, in: UTD/Leary/B35F5.
Food drops: enter “Pop” Buell

A great part of the activities of Air America was, however, dedicated to food drops. Already in late 1955, CAT C-46s had airdropped rice and salt to the starving population of several Laotian mountain areas. Since late 1958, upon request of the US Embassy to Vientiane, C-47s and C-46s of CAT had made many urgent airdrops to the civilian population as well as to isolated Royal Lao Army outposts. “Active U.S. participation in refugee affairs began in early 1960 in response to military activity in Northern Laos. Irregular military units were formed in Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang Provinces, primarily among minority ethnic groups such as the various Lao Theung groups and the Meo. These groups operated initially in remote villages that were usually deeper in contested mountain areas than the RLG Army units (FAR) and were organized around villages or groups of villages rather than into a formal military structure. As a result, smaller isolated villages were vulnerable to prolonged communist thrusts and, in fact, one hill top was often evacuated in favor of another for strategic reasons. This meant that entire villages were moved rather than abandoned to the mercy of their adversaries. Thus deprived of their old villages or fields, the tribal refugees required immediate external support. It was in this context that the A.I.D. refugee program was developed. [...] Medicine, PL 480, salad oil, cornmeal, salt, school supplies, etc. were delivered by small aircraft. Rice was dropped by C-46 cargo planes.”

In June 1960, Edgar M. (“Pop”) Buell, an Indiana farmer, came to Laos to work with the International Voluntary Services (IVS). In late 1960, “Pop” Buell settled at Lat Houang, Sam Neua Province, with a small agricultural project funded by USAID and run by the IVS, intending to teach Lat Houang farmers modern agricultural methods. But on 31 December 1960, gunfire sent villagers, schoolchildren and their teachers to the hills; Buell and IVS workers fled to the nearby Phong Savan airport, where they boarded a C-47 sent to pick up US military advisers. So the IVS volunteers were safely evacuated to Thailand, but the Hmong who remained in the area were on their own. In early 1961, Pop Buell came back to Laos and gathered several young Hmong to locate lost refugees. After a 58-day trip around the Plain of Jars to inspect the situation of the Hmong mountain population, Buell started to organize a make-shift airlift of rice, blankets, clothing, cooking utensils and seeds to the starving people, using a Bird & Sons C-47 for about 3 months in accordance with USOM contracts, often to newly cleared drop zones. The situation of these villages was particularly bad, as, when the men had gone off to fight with Vang Pao, there was nobody left to feed the remaining people. So, after Vang Pao and his men were enrolled by the CIA in late 1960, Pop Buell soon arranged thru the CIA that the Hmong villages received scheduled airdrops of rice, salt, and medicine performed by Air America C-46s and C-47s, and in this way, in 1961, Pop became the coordinator for Air America rice and supplies drop missions on the Plain of Jars for many years. The situation became even more dramatic, when, in May 61, the Communists and the Neutralists attacked Vang Pao’s mountain headquarters at Pa Doung (Site 5): After two weeks of intense mortar fire, it was decided to abandon the base; Vang Pao led his troops to a new headquarters at Pha Khao (Site 14), followed by Pop Buell, leading thousands of civilians, hundreds of whom died during the jungle march. It was estimated that some 70,000 misplaced Hmong refugees were facing starvation in Laos, so Pop Buell organized the supply of rice and clothing.

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89 “The Lao live mostly in the plain and plateau areas where paddy rice cultivation is possible. The Lao Thung live in the middle areas on mountain sides between the elevations of 1,500 feet to 3,000 feet. The Meo or Hmong live in the high altitude areas mostly above 3,000 feet where they are not bothered by malarial mosquitoes” (Ramsey et.al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 208).
91 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp. 82 and 92/3.
92 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 99.
93 Officially, “Pop” Buell was the Area Coordinator of Xieng Khouang Province (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 176).
desperately needed by these people – supplies that were flown in by Air America and Bird & Sons C-46s and C-47s. In early 1962, Pop Buell looked for a relocation site for 6,000 Hmong refugees from Pha Khao and chose Long Tieng valley as a permanent new home for those people, bringing in concrete and other construction material. But beginning in May 62, more and more military and paramilitary teams also settled at Long Tieng so that on 18 September 62, Pop Buell left Long Tieng for nearby Sam Thong (Site 20), where he built a hospital in 1962/3, with his relocation costs borne by the CIA. Those humanitarian and of course military supplies were so urgently needed that in 1962, Air America introduced two new types of aircraft to be used for airdrops and for landing supplies: In March 62, five C-123Bs bailed from the USAF (N5003X, N5004X, N5005X, N5006X, and N5007X) arrived, and also in 1962, two Dornier Do-28As (N4224G and N4225G) were dry leased from Foreign Air Transport Development of Washington and commenced contract flying in Laos in January and June 1962 respectively. All of them were used under the provisions of contract no. 57-08, whose Supplemental Agreement no.6 of March 62 added 5 C-123s, one Caribou, as well as an unspecified number of Do-28s as requested. Although the C-123Bs were mostly used for dropping military supplies in northern and southern Laos, they also dropped rice when needed – as did C-123B “540” on 6 September 62. The Caribou mentioned in that contract referred to a US Army aircraft bailed for evaluation in the spring of 1962, because when Air America’s own two new Caribous (B-851 and B-853) were delivered from Canada in July 62, they were immediately put under the new USAID-contract to be dealt with in the next chapter of this file. Other STOL aircraft added in 1962 included seven DHC-2 or L-20 Beavers bailed from the USAF; but as they were exclusively used under a contract with the US Air Force, they are dealt with in the file about Air America’s contribution to military aid.

Do-28 N4224G and Pop Buell at Sam Thong, taken by Joe Hazen around June 62 (UTD/Leary/B74F17, formerly photo no. 1WL1-27-20-PB338)

94 Robbins, Air America, pp. 114-16; Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp. 81/2, 99; Castle, At war, pp. 83/4 and 166/7, note 35.
95 Already on 1 September 62, Ed Eckholdt shuttled between Long Tieng and Sam Thong with Caribou B-851, probably preparing Pop Buell’s move to Sam Thong (Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13).
96 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p. 91.
98 Supplemental Agreement no.6 to contract no. 57-08, draft dated 3 March 62, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16.
100 That is to Caribou “333” for details see the Caribou file of this database.
101 “Regarding the Do-28 photo, I believe it was taken shortly after Air America acquired it in March 1962. I would guess May or June. The reason I pick these months is that the rainy season started in May or June and the wheel pants/skirts filled with mud at the up-country sites and posed a problem with brakes and extra weight to haul around. The pants/skirts were removed for up-country operations, even though a few knots were lost due to the drag of the exposed gear. The photo was taken at LS-20, Sam Thong or Sam Tong, depending on which list you are reading” (E-mail dated 18 June 2006, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen).
Just a couple of days prior to the formal declaration of the Geneva Accords, that is on 14 July 62, Robert E. Rousselot, Air America’s Vice-President Operations, requested that the “B” Nationality Indicators should be removed from all Company-operated aircraft assigned to Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{102} There was no explanation in the Memorandum, but it seems that that memo was issued because the Nationalists were not the most popular people in Southeast Asia: In mid-1962, China and Laos broke off diplomatic relations.\textsuperscript{103} Interestingly, it was only in Laos that Air America aircraft that were registered in the Republic of China flew without the “B”, not in South Vietnam or in Thailand.

Memorandum dated 14 July 62, requesting to remove the “B” Nationality indicator
(formerly in: UTD/Leary/I B2F9)

\textbf{D) Humanitarian work in Laos after the Geneva Accords of July 1962:}

\textbf{The Facade of Neutrality:}

As the Geneva Conference had ended with a formal “Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos” on 23 July 1962, all foreign troops and paramilitary personnel had to leave by 7 October 62 and stay out of Laos. So the United States withdrew its entire 666-man Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) by that time, although the Communists broke the treaty by leaving their soldiers – probably some 7,000 men – in Laos. So, to encounter this situation, the United States moved military advisers and CIA personnel just across the border into Thailand.\textsuperscript{104} The CIA first moved to the small Thai town of Nong Khai on the banks of the River Mekong, until its 4802\textsuperscript{nd} Joint Liaison Detachment was established at the Royal


\textsuperscript{103} Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 25 September 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1; on 6 September 62, Vientiane and Peking exchanged diplomatic recognition, on 7 September 62, Taipei broke relations with Vientiane (Gibson/Chen, \textit{The secret army}, p.230).

\textsuperscript{104} Leary, \textit{CIA Air Operations in Laos}, p. 60.
Thai Air Force base at Udorn in late 1962.\textsuperscript{105} From now on, CIA people were flown in daily by Air America planes. The US Embassy declared that Air America flights were humanitarian, while CIA men took USAID posts as cover. As to the military, on 6 October 1962, Major General Reuben H. Tucker III, the Chief of MAAG Laos and 127 MAAG personnel formally departed the Kingdom of Laos, and the following day, he established and took command of Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Assistance Advisory Group, Thailand, also known as DEPCHIEF, which was to become a new covert military assistance program for Laos.\textsuperscript{106}

A Commission Internationale de Contrôle (CIC) was established, and six former Air America Sikorsky UH-34Ds,\textsuperscript{107} still serviced by Air America, were sold to the CIC in 1962 and 1963, where they were mostly flown by French pilots and used to supervise the observance to be paid to the Geneva Accords. Beginning in early 1964, the CIC even used several Boeing 307s for flights between Saigon and Hanoi that would pass thru Vientiane.\textsuperscript{108}

Two CIC aircraft in Laos in the mid sixties: Boeing 307 F-BELX at Vientiane (with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote) and UH-34D “CIC 6” (UTD/Hickler/B28)

Those Boeing 307s were flown by French crews, like the CIC UH-34Ds. But contrary to the Boeing 307s, the CIC UH-34Ds were sometimes also flown by Air America pilots, that is when they came to Udorn for maintenance.\textsuperscript{109} This was only one part of the reductions that Air America experienced in late 62 and early 63, when business was so low that many of its UH-34Ds of the first generation were transferred to the South Vietnamese Air Force.\textsuperscript{110} But while the United States had withdrawn its entire 666-man Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) by 7 October 62, had reduced its CIA personnel to only two men who should monitor the Communists’ behavior, and had restricted Air America’s operations to food resupply to the Hmong, strictly forbidding any arms drop, the Communists broke the treaty by leaving their soldiers – some 7,000 men – in the northern provinces (especially Phong Saly and Sam Neua) and extending their influences over the Lao villages and towns, never allowing the CIC in their territories to verify compliance to the treaty. At the same time, the Communists hoped to gain control over the Neutralists and embargoed Kong Le’s supplies in late 1962. This was the reason why, already in late 1962, Laos officially requested US support

\textsuperscript{105} Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp. 118-20; Castle, At war, pp. 60-61.

\textsuperscript{106} Kirk, Wider war, pp. 234-36; Castle, At war, pp. 50+53.

\textsuperscript{107} CIC-1 msn 58.1388; CIC-2 msn 58.1390; CIC-3 msn 58.1391; CIC-4 msn 58.1392; CIC-5, msn 58.578; and CIC-6 msn 58.572 (See “Helicopter identification”, in: UTD/Hickler/B26F19).

\textsuperscript{108} Davies, Airlines of Asia since 1920, p.233.

\textsuperscript{109} For example, Elmer Munsell notes in his log books (in: UTD/Munsell/B3F24) that he flew CIC-4 and CIC-5 on 29 July 63, CIC-5 and CIC-6 on 24 October 63, CIC-6 on 3 December 63, CIC-4 on 22 December 63, CIC-4 on 3 January 64, CIC-1 on 15 January 64, and CIC-5 on 16 May 64, all on test flights out of Udorn, and Richard B. Crafts test flew CIC-1 on 4 February as well as 2, 3, and 8 June 63, and CIC-2 on 5 and 8 March 63 (Log book of Richard B. Crafts, in: UTD/Leary/B44F6).

\textsuperscript{110} Lundh, Sikorsky H-34, pp. 123-25.
against the Communists: As Donald Kirk notes,111 “the original basis for US involvement in Laos after the Geneva conference was a formal request by Souvanna, dated September 10, 1962, for supplies, spare parts, petroleum, oils and lubricants, and other commodities to support the Lao armed forces, then recoiling under the first signs of pressure by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese on the Plain of Jars. The U.S. Ambassador to Laos, Leonard Unger, later Ambassador to Thailand, set up an office in the U.S. AID mission in Vientiane to handle the Lao Government’s requirements. On November 8, 1962, Ambassador Unger notified Souvanna of formal approval of his request.”

Building up secret bases:

Long Tieng (LS-98)

As has been shown above, beginning in May 62, more and more military and paramilitary teams, the CIA, and Major Vang Pao settled at Long Tieng. On 16 August 62, Long Tieng airstrip was checked out by Ed Eckholdt with Air America’s new Caribou B-853, and between 23 August and 22 September 62 and again after 15 October 62, Eckholdt made many shuttles to and from Long Tieng in one of the Caribous.112 Already on 18 September 62, Pop Buell had left Long Tieng for nearby Sam Thong (LS-20) in order to build there a refugee hospital.113 Long Tieng eventually became the largest CIA field headquarters, full of electronic equipment, and the only macadam airfield in north-eastern Laos capable of handling jet aircraft in trouble and one of the most secret spots on earth.114 And here again, USAID did a good job, because on behalf of their Public Works Division, Air America C-123s hauled “heavy equipment, lumber, cement, larger stuff to larger areas for construction. Even used the SKY CRANE sometimes for large items to small areas.”115

While the beginning of 1963 was so quiet that Air America mothballed many aircraft or gave them to other users – many of the first generation UH-34Ds went to the South Vietnamese Air Force in April 63 –, it became quite clear during the year that North Vietnam was leading new troops into Laos. So, in 1963, Anthony Poe, who was in charge of the CIA base of Long Tieng, organized expanded Hmong commando operations into Sam Neua province, which, since many years, had been dominated by the Pathet Lao. So, hundreds of trained Hmong guerrillas advanced from mountaintop to mountaintop in Air America UH-34Ds and Helio Couriers. As soon as a village was captured and the Pathet Lao eliminated, its inhabitants were put to work building a landing strip. Other Air America planes then flew in supplies, arms and ammunition. The CIA strategy was to concentrate on the population living on the mountains, while leaving the towns and villages in the valleys to the Pathet Lao.116 And already in 1965, Long Tieng was the main supply point for all places north; although still labeled LS-98, it was already called the “Alternate” at that time, that is LS-20A, because it had become an extension of LS-20.117

Nam Lieu (LS-118A)

At about the same time, that is in mid-1962, CIA man William Young set up a pan-tribal army of Shan and Lahu tribesmen in Nam Tha Province in north-western Laos, where he established a secret base at Nam Yu, i.e. Nam Lieu (LS-118A), which served as CIA headquarters for cross-border intelligence into southern China. At the same time, Young organized the construction of landing strips and built up an operational counter-guerrilla

111 Kirk, Wider War, p. 235.
113 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p. 91.
114 Robbins, Air America, pp. 118/9.
115 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
116 Robbins, Air America, p. 119.
117 Davis, Across the Mekong, pp. 25/6.
infrastructure. Close to LS-118A, at Nan Thouei, there was also a hospital, a school, and a station run by the International Voluntary Services (IVS), from where rice drops and the relocation of refugees were organized that were to be carried out by Air America.\(^{118}\)

**Air America in Laos: a new structure and new contracts:**

To maintain Laos’ “Façade of neutrality”, Air America not only reduced its operations, but also divided them: For after the Geneva Accords of 1962 had ordered all paramilitary forces to leave Laos, Vientiane, the capital of Laos, only remained the center of Air America’s humanitarian activities in Laos, while all US military aid to and all US covert activities in Laos originated in Northern Thailand – mainly at the Royal Thai Air Force Base at Takhli (T-05), located about 100 miles north of Bangkok, and at the Royal Thai Air Force Base at Udorn (T-08), located some 50 miles south of Vientiane. For its humanitarian activities, Air America also operated stations at Ban Houei Sai, Luang Prabang, Sam Thong, Savannakhet, and Pakse in addition to its main base at Vientiane.\(^{119}\) On the institutional side, US aid to Laos appeared under a new name. Contracts were no longer made between CAT or later Air America and the United States Operations Mission (USOM) or the US International Cooperation Agency (ICA), but between Air America Inc. and the United States Agency for International Development, whose abbreviation “USAID” sounded much more like purely humanitarian aid then the names of USOM or ICA had done. Like its predecessor USOM, USAID Laos was ostensibly a non-military agency that was involved in a lot of “nation-building” projects in areas such as education, health, and road construction.\(^{120}\) And as before the Geneva Agreements of 1962, one office within USOM had been responsible for military supplies to Laos, namely the PEO, there was also an agency within USAID that was responsible for handling military aid to Laos after the Geneva Agreements, and this was the Requirements Office (USAID/RO) established in October 62 to act, on the receiving side of Laos, as the “eyes and ears” of a highly classified, Thailand-based, joint US military assistance organization, whose “delivering” components were DEPCHIEF of Bangkok and Peppergrinder of Udorn, responsible for supplying and delivering to Laos the weapons and ammunitions that had been requested by USAID/RO.\(^{121}\) But this aspect is dealt with in the file about Air America’s military aid.

A visible sign of the new situation was a complete reshaping of Air America’s Southeast Asia contracting in October 1962. The clear distinction between Vientiane as Air America’s base for humanitarian work and Udorn as nominal base for Air America’s support of military and paramilitary activities is also reflected by the new type of contracts. On 9 October 62, the Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd considered in detail the following new developments:

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a) The following contracts remain essentially unchanged, except for the fact that APRFE [= USAF, Air Procurement Region, Far East] has designated Director USAID to replace Chief MAAG as the supervising agent:
   AF 62(531)-1674 Helicopter and L-20
   AF 62(531)-1683 Fix Wing – Laos
b) A draft proposal to consolidate existing USAID Contracts 57-08, 60-009 and ICA-39-257 under a new USAID-Laos Contract AID-439-342 was received in Taipei about 20 September 1962, from the Contracting Officer-USAID/Laos. […]
c) Part III of proposed contract AID-439-342 requires the contractor to provide, establish,
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\(^{120}\) Castle, *At war*, pp. 59-50.  
\(^{121}\) Castle, *At war*, pp. 52-54.
manage, operate and maintain an Air Transport Operations Group (ATOG), which, in essence, will be responsible for all operations and traffic services from the point of entry onto the originating airport in Laos to the point of delivery on the receiving airport. It is estimated that approximately 150 persons, in addition to flight crews, will be required in the ATOG.

d) The amount of flying under contract -342 is substantially lower than that of the three contracts being superseded. [...] Subject to receipt of final pricing and indemnification information, the Executive Committee approved signing of the proposed contract with an option to the Government to extend for three additional one year periods.”

The contract was signed effective 7 October 1962. USAID’s efforts in Laos are best described by the USAID Laos Termination Report of 9 January 1976: “Within the project portion of the A.I.D. program, the heaviest expenditures – particularly from the mid-1960’s onwards – were food, health care, relocation and related support costs for Lao refugees.”

The contract itself comprised a lot of different activities, whose diversity can best be perceived by studying the Daily Flights Schedules of Vientiane preserved at the Air America Archives at Dallas that give a very detailed picture of those activities because they always indicate the branch of USAID that was involved in a flight. As former Vientiane Flight Operations Manager Tom Krohn points out, “daily flight schedules were refined and improved over the years, but the basic purpose of the identifying codes always was to provide using customers with confirmation of requested airlift, along with tail numbers of assigned

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122 Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd of 9 October 1962, pp. 1-2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.
123 Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd of 30 October 1962, pp. 1-2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.
124 Ramsey / et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 5.
aircraft. The schedules were widely distributed at the embassy and the USAID compounds. Some of the codes also were used to identify flights which were cost-shared by the various U.S. government agencies operating in Laos. Most, if not all of these, as I recall, carried ASB codes, Air Support Branch being the USAID flight coordination center.”

The first available list of Air America aircraft flying in Laos is part of the “AAM Aircraft Availability” NOTAM for 1 July 63. It lists 20 aircraft assigned to contract AID-439-342, of which 19 were based at Vientiane. The 9 aircraft based at Udorn also flew in Laos, but mostly for the USAF (4 UH-34Ds assigned to the Madriver contract no. AF 62(531)-1758) and for the CIA (1 C-123, 1 C-46, and 3 Helio Couriers assigned to the CEECO contract no. 59-069). The list is self-explanatory:

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Extract from: AAM Aircraft Availability for 1 July 63 (NOTAM no. OF-N-63-09) (in: UTD/Walker/B25F8)

While the Madriver and the CEECO contracts are dealt with in my file Air America in Laos II – military aid, this file here focusses on contract no. AID-439-342.

**Air America’s operations under the provisions of contract AID-439-342:**

The following examples may illustrate the diversity and development of USAID activities in Laos over the years: On 8 September 64, Air America’s Daily Flight Schedule for Vientiane prepared by ATOG listed 13 aircraft – 2 Bird & Sons C-46s (N9760Z and N9473Z) shuttling rice to 3 drop zones all daily long, one Air America C-123B (N5003X)

125 E-mail dated 13 July 2005, kindly sent to the author by Tom Krohn.
126 Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 8 September 64, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8.
coming in from Udorn and ten departing Air America aircraft. Compared to the fleet of 19 aircraft assigned to contract no. AID-439-342 already in July 63, this seems to be a smaller number, but it isn’t. For many of the Air America aircraft flown in Laos – especially the Helios and Porters, but not only them – remained up-country for maybe a week or so. These aircraft do not appear in the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules except when they returned to Vientiane base. At least 9 out of the 10 departing flights listed in the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 8 September 64 were humanitarian: 1 C-123B (N5007X) and 2 C-46s (B-910 and B-156) shuttled rice to a total of 10 different drop zones with an equal number of alternative drop zones in case drops could not be made at the “regular” drop zones. 2 Caribous (“392” and “401”) shuttled to Sam Thong that day for ASB-035, that is they hauled aviation fuel for upcountry fuelling locations. Fuel drums were parachuted or landed, often by Caribous. C-47 B-817 made the “Milk Run South” Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Attopeu and the same way back to Vientiane for ASB-036, while C-47 “994” made the “Milk Run North” Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Sayaboury and the same way back to Vientiane, also for ASB-036. That day, there were also 2 Helios that flew to Sam Thong for USAID, XWPBY for ASB-038 standing for “upcountry USAID customers”, and B-861 for “PHD”, that is for USAID’s “Public Health Development” project, probably hauling medical supplies. As former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson notes: “We worked particularly closely with the upcountry PHD personnel, both Americans and locals. PHD hauled the normal medicines and medics, med-evacs, etc.” That day only one aircraft out of ten that were listed in the

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127 Definition of ASB-035 given by Tom Krohn in his e-mail dated 13 July 2005, kindly sent to the author.
129 Interview with Richard W. Byrne conducted by Prof. William Leary at Carmichael, CA on 4 August 87, written summary at UTD/Leary/B43F2.
130 According to Charles Davis, a “milk run” is “when a crew flies an aircraft on a series of hops to a certain destination, and then turns around and lands at the same places in reverse order, ending up where the crew started: normally this is a desirable trip as the crew returns home for the night” (*Across the Mekong*, p. 103).
131 Definition of ASB-038 given by Tom Krohn in his e-mail dated 13 July 2005, kindly sent to the author.
132 E-mail dates 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule did not fly for USAID: Caribou B-851 flew to Udorn and back to Vientiane “as soon as possible”; but this seems to have been a training flight, as like all the other Air America aircraft mentioned here for 8 September 64, Caribou B-851 was assigned to USAID contract no. AID-439-342 at that time.133

Other Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules form the same period of time conform this picture:134 There were rice drops for ASB-034 flown by Air America C-46s and by Bird & Son C-46s and crews, there were the Milk Runs South (ASB-36) from Vientiane to Pakse or Attopeu and – less often – the Milk Runs North (ASB-36) from Vientiane to Luang Prabang and Sayaboury flown by Air America C-47s or C-46s, and there were some flights to Bangkok – courier and commissary flights using a C-46 or C-47 (ASB-037) and VIP flights using a Helio. There were many flights for civilian customers like USAID’s Agriculture (AGR- and ADO-), Public Works (PWD-), Public Health (PHD- and ASB-038), Educational (ED-), and Rural Development programs (RD-), and the Lao government’s Social Welfare Department (SW-) and Bureau of Public Roads (BPR-), and others. The unknown customers (ADTS-, OEA-, SPR-) who flew to the border town of Ban Houei Sai and to the provincial capital of Sayaboury may have been institutions of the police or customs. On 30 October 64, for example, only 3 flights listed were clearly military: After Caribou “851” had brought medical and educational supplies to Sam Thong, it flew to Udorn, picking up military supplies – probably weapons and ammunition – and brought them to the Neutralists’ headquarters at Moung Soui, then returned to Udorn and Korat and few another shipment of military supplies to Moung Soui, before it returned to Vientiane. Another military flight listed that day was a C-123B (N5003X) flight from Vientiane to Moung Soui via Vang Vieng for the Requirements

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133 Availability of contract aircraft as of 1 October 64, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8.
134 Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 1 October 64 as well as 26, 28, 29, and 30 October 64, all in: UTD/Walker/B8F5+6.
Office (RO-816) – probably food and other non-military supplies from Vientiane’s ATOG warehouse. The third military mission that day was C-123B N5007X, which flew 2 trips between Udorn and Vang Vieng for the Requirements Office and then returned to Vientiane.

Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 30 October 64
(in: UTD/Walker/B8F5)

The following year, already 22 aircraft were listed on Air America’s Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 13 June 1965, but the overall situation was more or less the same as in 1964: No “Milk Runs” were made that day, but no less than 5 aircraft – C-47 B-817, C-46s B-910 and N1383N, C-123s N5007X and “538” – air-dropped “rice and other refugee relief supplies” for ASB-034 that day to a total of 15 drop zones with an equal number of alternative drop zones. Three Caribous (“389”, “392”, and “401”) hauled aviation fuel to Ban Nam Lieu, Na Khang, and Long Tieng that day, 7 Helios (“166”, “183”, “843”, “845”, “857”, “869”, and XW-PBX) worked for the ASB-038 customer at Sam Thong, believed to be “Pop” Buell’s hospital, and Caribou “393” flew to Long Tieng and Na Khang and back to Vientiane for USAID’s “Public Works Division”. Fuel drums were often used as construction material after they had been flattened. Former Air America pilot Joe Hazen recalls: “The last time I flew [Caribou] 392 was on 22 December 1965. I was bringing a load of sheet metal from LS-36 (flattened gasoline drums) to either LS-20 or 20A when the right engine failed and I had to shut it down. The load was quite heavy and we were losing altitude, so I had the load jettisoned and proceeded to Vientiane. When the load was jettisoned, the flattened sheet metal sailed through the air, twisting and turning and acting like a scythe when it hit the jungle. There never was a report of any damage from any of the villages, so I guess the area was

136 Original in the possession of Joe Hazen who kindly faxed it to the author on 5 September 2004.
137 Definition of ASB-034 given by Tom Krohn in his e-mail dated 13 July 2005, kindly sent to the author.
uninhabited.” As to the flights listed on Air America’s Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 13 June 1965, a total of 16 out of 22 aircraft were dedicated to clearly humanitarian work. Three aircraft arrived from Tainan (C-47 “147”, C-46 B-924) or flew there (C-46 “138”) for maintenance. Only 3 aircraft flew for unidentified customers that day: Do-28 N4224G flew to Long Tieng and back, and C-123s N5003X and “374” shuttled between Udorn and Na Khang most of the day. The Schedule does not say it, but those 2 C-123s probably hauled military supplies picked up at Peppergrinder or at AB-1. All of these aircraft were assigned to USAID contract no. AID-439-342, and only 2 or 3 of them were used for military or paramilitary purposes.

One year later, the picture has completely changed: On 24 May 66 Air America’s Daily Flight Schedule for Vientiane prepared by ATOG listed 26 aircraft, and a lot of those flights had clearly military implications or were made on behalf of the CIA. Only 12 out of those 26 aircraft were used on purely humanitarian flights that day: “Milk Run North” Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Sayaboury and back to Vientiane was flown by C-47 “147” that day, but “Milk Run South” Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Attopeu and the same way back to Vientiane by C-46 N1386N, both flights again for ASB-036. That day C-46 N1383N made a

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138 E-mail dated 29 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.
139 Aircraft status of 7 July 64 and of 1 November 65, both in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1.
140 Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 24 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B7F7A.
courier flight to Bangkok for ASB-037, and no less than 3 aircraft – C-46s N9458Z and B-924 as well as C-47 “994” – made drops of “rice and other refugee relief supplies” to places in Laos for ASB-034. Three Helios (“166”, “169”, and “183”) flew to Sam Thong, came back from there or still stayed there over night for ASB-038, that is “upcountry USAID customers” and for “PHD”, that is for USAID’s “Public Health Development” project. One Caribou (“389”) hauled aviation fuel to Sam Thong for ASB-035 in the morning and in the evening that day, and in between it flew to Sam Thong on flight “PWD 1791”, that is for USAID’s “Public Works Division”, and to Sayaboury and then 2 flights between Sayaboury to Xieng Lom for USAID’s “Rural Development Division”, before it returned to Vientiane. One of the C-123Bs (“293”) made rice and refugee relief supplies drops for ASB-034 as well as upcountry fuel drops for ASB-035 all day long, and one Helio (“865”) flew Vientiane-Viang Vieng-Moun Kassy-Sam Thong for the “Rural Development Division”. In addition to these 12 aircraft, 4 more were used for humanitarian work only on some of their flights, while the rest of the day they flew for military agencies: On 24 May 66, Caribou “430” flew to Sam Thong for USAID’s “Agriculture” program, possibly carrying vegetable seeds – a typical cargo for USAID’s “Agriculture” program – and then to Hong Sa and

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141 Definition of ASB-034 given by Tom Krohn in his e-mail dated 13 July 2005, kindly sent to the author.
142 Definition of ASB-038 given by Tom Krohn in his e-mail dated 13 July 2005, kindly sent to the author.
143 Definitions of ASB-035, PWD, and RD given by Tom Krohn in his e-mail dated 13 July 2005, kindly sent to the author. This aircraft may have carried “heavy equipment, lumber, cement, larger stuff to larger areas for construction” – a typical cargo carried for USAID’s Public Works Department by Air America’s larger aircraft (e-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).
144 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson. The USAID Laos Termination Report by Ramsey et. al. describes the activities as follows: “Agricultural seeds, fertilizers, insecticides and irrigation pumps were made available” (p. 6). There were also irrigation projects, prior to 1968 mostly numerous small widely scattered projects, but between 1968 and 1971 large projects like the Nam Tan irrigation project in Sayaboury province that provided enough water to grow rice and other crops even during the dry season and made residents and refugees from different ethnic group peacefully live together (ib., pp. 16/7). As the road to Nam Tan was completed only long after the irrigation project was completed, during the period of construction equipment, supplies, and materials had to be transported to Nam Tan by air (p. 127). Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “Any reference to flights to LS-268, Nam Tan? That was a pretty good sized dam constructed by USAID/PWD for irrigation purposes, main reason for flights into the place. C-123s, too” (e-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson). In MR I, a lot of wells were drilled and several small irrigation projects and dams was constructed in the 1964-1968 period (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 206). In the south, several agriculture, education and public health projects were created between 1965 and 1967 – two around Kengkok and Ban Houei Mun in MR III and the largest in Wapikhamthong Province in MR IV, nicknamed the Wapi project" (Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp. 141/2). In MR IV two of the original “cluster” projects were located, that is Houei Khong in Attopeu Province and Lakhongpheng in Wapikhamthong. “In 1967, the latter was expended into a multisector project

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Xieng Lom hauling “backlog”, that is supplies that had not yet been delivered; but during the rest of the day, Caribou “430” flew to Paksane and then 2 trips between Paksane and Ban Dong for the Requirements Office, evidently hauling military supplies, before returning to Vientiane. In the same way, C-123s “617” and “671” were used for humanitarian and for military purposes the same day: “617”, in addition to flying “backlog” to Long Tieng and Luang Prabang, carried military supplies to Moung Soui for the Requirements Office, but its last mission that day was to carry aviation fuel to Long Tieng for USAID’s ASB-035. “671” started its day flying to Udorn, where it picked up military supplies at Peppergrinder and then

The interior of a Fairchild C-123 was equipped with roller conveyors (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

delivered them “as directed [by] PPG”, but after that, C-123 “671” hauled rice and other refugee supplies to Ban Houei Sai for USAID’s ASB-034 and then aviation fuel to Ban Nam Lieu for ASB-035. Helio B-843 also had civilian and military customers that day, including 2 flights for USAID’s “Agriculture” program and 3 flights for the Requirements Office. As to the remaining 10 aircraft listed in the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 24 May 66, C-123 “655” and Helio XW-PCS flew for unspecified customers, and Helio “857” was used for

called the Sedone Valley Development Program. A third ‘cluster’ on the Done Talat area of Champassak Province was started in 1968. The Lao Ngam Forward Area Program, in Saravane Province, was begun in August 1967” (p. 239) “Two extensive irrigation projects were attempted in the Pakse area in support of the national rice program. One entailed construction of a dam and main canal east of Pakse. […] The second was northeast of Pakse and entailed creation of a cooperative to maintain gasoline pumps for irrigation” (p. 248). When in 1971, the Royal Lao Government enacted legislation prohibiting the commercial production and marketing of opium and its derivates, this affected the main cash crop and economical base of many hill tribes of Laos; so especially since that time, USAID’s agricultural assistance efforts got new priorities and objectives, among them to seek acceptable cash crop substitutes for opium, and, of course, to assist the Government with its objectives of increasing agricultural production. With the number of refugees increasing, USAID’s Agriculture program also assisted refugee communities to achieve basic subsistence levels of agricultural production; and this could also include the distribution of improved breeding animals to refugee villages (pp. 13-25).

In his e-mail dated 13 July 2005, Tom Krohn gives the following definition: “As for BL, that meant ‘backlog’ which covered any and all commodities backed up in the warehouse. They were moved on a space available basis, or until there was enough priority cargo on hand to justify dedicated airlift.”
training, but all of the remaining 7 aircraft were used for military or paramilitary missions: ARMA, the US Army Attaché of the American Embassy at Vientiane, used Beech Ten-Two N7951C for a flight from Vientiane via Udorn to Lopburi, where the Royal Thai Army trained Laotian troops and US Special Forces trained Laotian guerrillas, and then back to Vientiane and down to Saravane and Pakse; Helio “869” was for ARMA stand by all day. Helio “845” flew to Udorn and then back to Vientiane for the Requirements Office that day, and no less then 4 C-123s flew down to Udorn, where the crews received their missions to haul supplies for military or paramilitary operations at Peppergrinder (N5007X, “374”, and “613”) or at AB-1 (N5005X). So compared to the purely humanitarian work done by Air America’s Vientiane-based aircraft on 8 September 64, on 24 May 66, about half of their activities were dedicated to supporting military or paramilitary operations. Nevertheless, in May 1966, all aircraft listed in Air America’s Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 24 May 66 and discussed here were – without exception – assigned to USAID contract no. AID-439-342.

Another year later, on 7 July 67, Air America’s Daily Flight Schedule for Vientiane prepared by ATOG again listed 26 aircraft, and on 11 September 67, even 28 aircraft. Again, a number of aircraft was assigned to military or paramilitary operations. On the civilian side, we have again the Milk Run North (ASB-036) to Luang Prabang and back (by C-46 B-138) and the Milk Run South (ASB-036) to Pakse or Attopeu and back (by C-46 N1383N), rice drops for ASB-034, this time by 4 C-46s (Air America’s N9458Z and N1386N plus CASI’s N9760Z and N67961), and medical supplies for Sam Thong (ASB-038), this time 4 Air America Helios (“169”, XW-PBS, XWPBY, and XW-PCS) and one Air America PC-6C (N357F). Then we have PC-6 N195X and C-123 “671” used for local training and Caribou “401” on its way to Tainan for maintenance (ASB-042). There is one flight – Caribou “392” – whose nature (OD-51) is unknown, but as it was to land on Vientiane’s international ramp, it could be a civilian flight. For the first time, there was a special stand-by aircraft for med evac flights – Beech Ten-Two N7951C – and there was also a special Helio – XW-PBX – on stand-by for the US Army Attaché (ARMA).

That brings us to the military and paramilitary side of Air America’s operations out of Vientiane on 11 September 67: There were three mixed flights. Caribou “430” first brought rice (ASB-034) to Na Khang and then shuttled military supplies between Udorn and Na Khang for the Requirements Office. Caribou “393” first brought aviation fuel (ASB-035) to Na Khang and then also shuttled military supplies between Udorn and Na Khang for the Requirements Office. C-123 “613” arrived from Udorn with a load for the Requirements Office, then brought medical supplies (PHD-) to Ban Houe Sai (while CASI Porter XW-PCR flew for ASB-039, which may have been Customs or the Border Police), then shuttled aviation fuel (ASB-035) between Vientiane and Long Tieng (which was destined for paramilitary purposes, as Long Tieng was Vang Pao’s headquarters), and at the end flew back to Udorn for the Requirements Office. There were two or maybe 3 flights for the CIA: Porter N360F (C-100) and Helio XW-PBZ (C-100) both heading for Long Tieng, where they were to remain for a couple of days, and probably also Helio XW-PCS (ASB-041) heading for Pakse to stay there for some days. No less than 4 C-123s hauled military supplies like weapons and ammunition from Udorn as directed by the Customer (“293” for the CIA, i.e. C-100 or AB-1, and “655” and “545” for Peppergrinder, i.e. the military aid) and between Udorn and Na Khang for the Requirements Office (C-123 “374”). So that day, at least 10 out of 28 aircraft were working for the Lao military or the CIA. Here is the Schedule:

146 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp. 102 and 143.
Half a year later, on 23 February 68,150 no less than 34 aircraft were listed on the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule, including 3 Helios (“183”, XW-PBX, and XW-PCD) as stand-by aircraft and Helio XW-PBZ on stand-by for the ARMA. Again, we have 2 C-46s (N1383N and N1386N) on the Milk Runs to Pakse/Attopeu and to Luang Prabang and 4 C-46s flying rice drops for ASB-034, but this time, only one of them (XW-PFL) was an Air America aircraft, while the other three (N9760Z, N67961, and N1447) were CASI aircraft, each of whom delivered one shipment of rice bags to Long Tieng for Vang Pao’s men, while a second Air America C-46 (N9458Z) also delivered rice (ASB-034) to Long Tieng after returning from a courier flight (ASB-037) to Bangkok. Flights for Pop Buell’s hospital at Sam Thong this time included 3 Caribous (“389”, “430”, and some flights of “392”) that brought rice (ASB-034) and aviation fuel (ASB-035), PC-6C N357F that was stationed there for a week, and 2 Helios (XW-PCA and XW-PEA) that were to be directed by the ASB-038 customer, so apparently were to be used for med-evac work. Some more aircraft (CASI PC-6 XW-PCR, and some flights of Caribou “392”) were assigned to support construction work for to USAID’s Public Works Division (PWD), and Volpar N9157Z made 2 trips Vientiane-Vang Vieng and back for the Lao government’s Bureau of Public Roads (BPR-) in the afternoon, before being on med-evac stand-by. Porter N360F was stationed at the border town of Ban Houei Sai for a couple of days to be flown for ASB-039, which probably meant Customs or Border Police.

The remaining 14 aircraft listed on the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 23 February 68 were assigned to military or paramilitary missions. No less than 5 C-123s (“617”, “545”, “671”, “655”, and “374”) flew for the Requirements Office that day, bringing military supplies – weapons and ammunition (RO-) – from Udorn and aviation fuel (ASB-035) clearly

destined for military use from Vientiane to Savannakhet, Moung Soui, Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, Long Tieng, and Na Khang. No less than 9 Air America aircraft flew for the CIA that day. Since Contract no. AID-439-713 had been signed between Air America and “the Government of the United States of America […]”, acting through the Agency for International Development”\textsuperscript{151} on 21 October 65,\textsuperscript{152} flights for the CIA (i.e. the “713 customer”) could also be given numbers within USAID’s Air Branch System. In the Daily Flight Schedules of 1964-66, CIA flights did not bear any designation, in 1967 the code C-100 was used, and from 1968 onwards, the code ASB-044 indicated flights for the CIA. This is evident by the fact that all of the 5 PC-6s (N359F, N392R, N193X, N196X, and N197X) that flew for ASB-044 on 23 February 68, were assigned to the CIA contract no. AID-439-713.\textsuperscript{153} The destinations where these 5 Porters and Helio XW-PCS were bound for or returned from were Long Tieng, Ban Nam Lieu, Luang Prabang, and Na Khang, and there was also a customer directed flight out of Udorn – possibly an intelligence flight directed by ASB-044. The 2 Caribous (“393” and “193”) that flew to Long Tieng, Moung Cha, and Pha Khao for ASB-044 that day, probably shuttled troops, while C-123 “613” and Volpar N9157Z flew for mixed customers that day. The “back log” (B/L) flight of C-123 “613” to Udorn probably was a flight for ASB-044, as was the first flight of Volpar N9157Z that day, while other flights were for the Requirements Office (RO-) and Peppergrinder (PPG), i.e. transported military aid for the Lao armed forces.


Over the following years, the number of Air America aircraft that flew for military or paramilitary purposes when assigned to USAID contracts will even increase, but those missions have been described in the file about Air America’s contribution to military aid.

\textsuperscript{151} Contract no. AID-439-713 of 21 October 65, p.1, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 27.

\textsuperscript{152} See my file Air America in Laos II – military aid, Part I.

\textsuperscript{153} See Status of aircraft owned or operated on a long term basis as of 1 May 1968, in: UTD/Herd/B2.
Air-drops for USAID’s Rural Development Division: rice, salt and cornmeal:

Literally, USAID’s Rural Development Division was responsible for the planning and execution of all construction activities, including both drilled and dug wells, sponsored under the auspices of A.I.D. in the rural areas. Initially, one of the key words in USAID’s rural development work was “counterinsurgency” which was considered to be an effort to win the hearts and mind of the rural people to the side of the Royal Lao Government by helping them to develop social and economic infrastructure and to improve their lives. In 1959, six-man civic action teams were introduced as a counter to similar teams employed by the Communists in northern Laos. But with the ongoing of the war, the political front-lines and their allies became so clear and so hardened that Rural Development’s main activity shifted from winning new hearts to supporting the hearts that had already been won, that is by supplying food and other commodities to the combatants and their dependents of the pro-western side. This was especially true for Military Region II, where USAID’s activities were “overwhelmingly devoted to movement and support of Meo refugee groups.”

But let us return to the humanitarian work done by Air America’s Laos division in the early sixties: At that time, Air America’s activities at Vientiane were mainly focused upon rice, salt and cornmeal drops for USAID’s Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation program. This program was part of USAID’s Rural Development Division (RDD), but in part used SW-coded flights standing for the Royal Lao Department of Social Welfare, as the whole program was run in collaboration with the Royal Lao Government. This program had the following objectives:

“1. Emergency movements created by or in anticipation of military action. The primary requirements to support this phase are evacuation assistance; emergency medical care and attention; provision of food by surface, air-drop or landed load; and the provisioning and emergency staffing of temporary safehaven and staging areas for displaced refugees.

2. Relocation of refugees including allocation of land areas; provision of food, blankets, clothing, mosquito nets, utensils, shelter materials, medical care, assurance of adequate water supply; and movement of refugees into individual family housing constructed on a self-help basis.

3. Assistance in provision of essential facilities such as health, education, police, etc., including the establishment of appropriate agricultural production to bring the refugee groups to a living condition equal to that of non-refugees in the general area where refugee groups are relocated.”

While in the fifties, Lao refugees found their own way to safety and eventually became self-sufficient, active US participation in refugee affairs began after the Kong Le coup in 1960 and his eventual retreat to the Plain of Jars. Shortly afterwards, irregular paramilitary units were formed in Xieng Khouang, Hua Phan, Luang Prabang, Phong Saly, and Houa Khong Provinces who operated out of their remote villages, so that these villages were vulnerable to concentrated or prolonged communist thrusts. When these paramilitary units were forced to retreat from mountain top to mountain top, the villagers, who for the most part included the families of the paramilitary units, retreated with them. In that way, entire villages were

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155 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 208.
evacuated with the assistance of USAID. Indeed, the USAID refugee program was initiated as a result of the paramilitary efforts in North Laos, so in 1962, USAID signed an agreement with the Royal Lao Government to co-ordinate and implement delivery of relief commodities to the paramilitary and their dependents. So USAID personnel was assigned to Ban Houei Sai, Luang Prabang, and Sam Thong to find out how many people of each type needed support; in 1965, other USAID employees were assigned to Thakhek and Pakse.

By 1963 much of the population of eastern Xieng Khouang Province had been forced south and west. This resulted in a vastly overpopulated Long Tieng, Ban Xon, Moung Cha crescent. North of the Plain of Jars, civilians were also trickling into irregular RLG enclaves. Since about 1963, supply dropping to paramilitary units and to remote villages became a large-scale enterprise, which was part of contract no. AID-439-342. Now, the small USAID mission in Vientiane became a massive operation backed by a multi-million-dollar commitment from Washington. More planes were added to the Air America fleet. The list of “Rice/Wheat requirements for November 1964”, preserved in the Hickler papers at the Air America Archives, gives a good idea of the extent this program had adopted by the end of 1964: There were 22 zones noted on this list, ranging from “Zone Alpha”, including Pha Khao (LS-14), Sam Thong (LS-20), Phou San Noi (TF 7396), “Nhot Hong” (LS-98, that is Long Tieng), Pa Doung (LS-5), Tha Vieng (LS-13), and Pha Phai (LS-65) to “Zone Whiskey”, centered around Thakhek (L-40). Most zones included about 5-7 locations, “Zone Victor” even 11 points to be served. For each location, the list gives a red signal letter, for Muong Cha (LS-113) in “Zone Romeo”, for example, a red F. A sack quota is indicated for each location, ranging from a minimum of 45 sacks per month (to be delivered for example to Muong Khiem or LS-124 in “Zone Quebec”) to the absolute maximum of 8,100 sacks, that is 7,500 sacks of rice and 600 sacks of wheat, to be delivered to LS-98 or Long Tieng. In this way, the grand total of sacks flown into Laos in November 64 by Air America was 40,707, that is 34,016 sacks of rice and 6,691 sacks of food to sustain themselves. […] It was quickly recognized that unless material support (food, clothing, tools) was provided to displaced villagers and to paramilitary dependents, the will and means to defend these remote northern areas would be undermined” (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 171).

List “Rice/Wheat requirements for November 1964”, pp.1, 2, and 4, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8

158 “This combined paramilitary/dependent/dislocated persons exodus needed external support for two reasons. First, as the level of communist pressure continued to increase, the paramilitary could no longer attempt to protect their villages and clear fields and grow rice. Likewise, those villagers displaced were not able to grow sufficient amounts of food to sustain themselves. […] It was quickly recognized that unless material support (food, clothing, tools) was provided to displaced villagers and to paramilitary dependents, the will and means to defend these remote northern areas would be undermined” (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 171).
159 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 172.
160 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 209.
wheat.\textsuperscript{161} To do the job, Air America had 5 C-46s and 3 C-47s based at Vientiane in 1964.\textsuperscript{162}

Food supplies included a variety of goods. Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “For the C-46 program, in addition to rice and salt, we also dropped canned meat mixed with rice, eight one pound flat cans and 32 kg rice, this was called hash on the drop sheets; PL-480 cornmeal; noodles, which were actually more of a spaghetti type pasta, we had this made on contract in Vientiane using PL-480 flour, dried milk, and another vitamin fortified item I can’t remember.”\textsuperscript{163} The goods to be delivered were stored and palletized in two ATOG (Air Transport Operations Group) warehouses at Vientiane’s Wattay airport. The warehouses were equipped with roller conveyors. Rice was packaged in 40-kilo triple burlap bags for airdrop loads and in 100-kilo single bags for landed loads. Salt and cornmeal were also packaged in bags varying from 43 kilos to 50 kilos. These commodities were also airdropped or landed. On the ground, the rice program operated on a two shift basis: In 1967, the entire job was done by two supervisors and 36 palletizers and laborers, who, on a busy day, could palletize and load as much as 2,500 bags of drop rice and 400 bags of landed rice, or a total of 163 tons. “On one day alone, AAM Vientiane-based pilots delivered 137 tons of commodities – about 85% was air-dropped, 15% landed.”\textsuperscript{164} Rice drops were a vital function of Air America’s Vientiane Base, which were flown seven days a week, mostly using C-46s,\textsuperscript{165} carrying some 11,900 pounds each. A typical load was 13 plywood pallets, 12 of which were loaded with nine bags of rice each for a total weight per pallet of 864 lbs. (846 lbs. of rice bags plus an 18 lbs. pallet). In late 1967, Air America Vientiane delivered over 7

\textsuperscript{161} List “Rice/Wheat requirements for November 1964”, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8.
\textsuperscript{162} At least in July 64, Air America C-46s B-146, B-156, B-910, N1383N, and N1386N, as well as Air America C-47s B-817, “147”, and “994” were assigned to contract USAID-439-342 and based at Vientiane (Aircraft status as of 7 July 64, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1).
\textsuperscript{163} E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
\textsuperscript{165} A good photo of an Air America C-46 making a rice drop can be found in: \url{http://www.air-america.org/Images/Bonansinga_Frank_003.jpg}. Sometimes, other aircraft were also used for rice drops – even Caribous: In December 62 as well as January and February 63, Ed Eckholdt made several rice drops from his Caribou B-851 (Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13).
million pounds of rice and related commodities in Laos per month.\textsuperscript{166}

Air America kickers push 2 pallets of rice out of a C-46 for an 800 ft. free fall to a drop zone (\textit{Air America Log}, vol. I, no.2, December 1967, p.3)

The drops were a well-planned and complicated operation. When the pallets were loaded onto the aircraft, three Air Freight Dispatchers moved them from the roller-conveyor equipped forklift to the forward portion of the fuselage, where they were positioned on the plane’s center of gravity and securely lashed in place with stout rope. Pilots always had about three primary drop zones on their drop sheet and some alternatives, if the primary drop zones

were inaccessible because of bad weather. When the aircraft arrived at a DZ, the people on the ground quickly laid out panels of red cloth to form the “signal letter of the day” to inform the crew that the rice would be dropped into the hands of the people for whom it was intended. Then the pilot would bring the aircraft to the drop altitude of 800 to 900 feet above terrain. There were several dropping patterns – circles, eights, rectangular patterns –, but the majority of drops was on hillsides or mountaintops, where the drops had to be made in one direction, so that the bags could fall perpendicular to the terrain, allowing the pilots to make the drops with reasonable accuracy. When the drop zone approached, the pilot rang a bell, and two kickers would push the pallets towards the open door and then out of the plane. To prevent the kickers from falling out of the plane, they were hold back by straps and also wore parachutes for the case that a strap did not hold. Pigs were mostly parachuted in crates, and

Caribou “401” landed fuel drums somewhere in Laos in the late sixties (UTD/Wire/B2)

fuel drums either parachuted from C-123s or landed by Caribous. Since the mid-sixties, some Pilatus Porters had drop doors installed in the bottom of the plane, controlled by the pilot by pulling a lever.

But there was also another way of carrying food to the Refugees, also being part of USAID’s Refugee Relief program within the Rural Development Division, as former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson points out: Using “upcountry H-34s (USAID couldn’t afford Hueys, SKY could, we had to learn to deal with the weight and altitude capability differences) and Porters, and the occasional Helio, we also delivered rice, salt, canned meat, medical supplies, clothing, cloth so refugees could make their own clothing, iron bars to make hand tools, and some finished hand tools, vegetable seeds, villagers returning home, and odds and

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168 Robbins, Air America, pp. 120-22.
An Air America UH-34D delivering supplies to the Hmong at Phu Pha Dang
(photo taken by Judy Porter, submitted by MacAlan Thompson with kind permission from the photographer)

ends more. We even paid for hauling building materials, grass roofing sheets sometimes, lumber, nails, etc, for small schools, dispensaries, schools, etc.”. 169

Resettling refugees

One of the most miserable by-products of wars are refugees, and the war in Laos produced many many thousands of them over the years. Who were those refugees? Most of them were people of the hill tribes who had been driven from their homeland, the Plain of Jars, when “the Soviets and North Vietnamese turned the Plaine des Jarres into an armed camp” 170 in December 1960. “On December 31, fighting broke out on the Plaine des Jarres between the combined forces of the Neutralists and communists and General Phoumi’s rightist troops. It was immediately clear that Nosavan’s forces would not be able to retake the PDJ. This was the signal for the Hmong. In 200 Hmong villages, men, women, and children moved to seven friendly mountains surrounding the Plaine des Jarres. Vang Pao headed to Padong to establish his headquarters,” 171 Then, Vang Pao’s troops always moved their families to their chief’s headquarters so that, when Vang Pao had to abandon his headquarters, thousands of civilians had to be moved as well. 172 In later years, whenever the civilian population had to flee because their village was under attack by communist troops or had even been abandoned, the population became refugees who had to be resettled. And that task did not only mean finding a safe place for living, but also feeding and housing those people, caring for the sick and wounded, and providing schools for the children. 173 So there were indeed two groups of

169 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
170 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 85.
171 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 92.
173 Davis, Across the Mekong, p. 92.
refugees, as former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson points out: “Refugees were actually two groups of people. In the Vientiane area and on south, they were just refugees but in the north of Laos, MR [= Military Region]-I & II, USAID did the primary feeding and care for two groups that comprised refugees. These were civilian displaced persons, plus the SGU [= Special Guerrilla Units] / paramilitary dependents of the SGU fighters. We also did the primary feeding for the SGU themselves, as far as rice is concerned, not special rations. Thus RR had a split budget, about 50% funded directly by USAID and the other 50% funded by DoD, the U.S. Department of Defense through RO, the USAID Requirements Office in Vientiane (reckon these funds were actually CIA passed to DoD then to DepChief, which handled the RO funding).”

In the early days those refugees mostly had to walk. When Sam Neua fell to the communists on 28 September 60, the Operation Brotherhood staff set off on foot, lead by Father Bouchard. When Vang Pao and Pop Buell had to abandon Pa Doung (LS-05) in May 61, they marched to a new headquarters at Pha Khao (LS-14). Vang Pao leading his troops, and Pop Buell leading nine thousand civilians (many of them old people, women and children), hundreds of whom died during the jungle march. In August 1962, one month after signing the Geneva Agreement, North Vietnamese soldiers attacked the area around Ban Ban, home to about 6,000 Lao, Kmhmu, and Hmong. Unable to defend themselves, lightly armed villagers fled southward with their attackers behind them. After 18 hours of flight, they rested in a high mountain bowl, only to be attacked at midnight. By noon the following day, 1,300 Hmong, Lao, and Kmhmu were dead, many people were wounded, and some 200 prisoners had been taken away by the enemy. Yet, some survivors reached Muong Meo, some 40 miles from the site of the massacre, and described the atrocities. The 20,000 refugees already at Muong Meo had to be relocated. Pop Buell and USAID personnel hoped that these refugees could start again at a village called Muang Cha, southwest of Muong Meo, where the villagers had already built a new landing site; LS-113. So Air America aircraft flew half of the refugees from Muong Meo to Muang Cha, and this operation of August / September 62 was probably Air America’s first massive refugee airlift. But this seems to have been only a reaction to an emergency situation, just giving the refugees a basic infrastructure to survive in remote villages. Later, that is in “Phase 2” of the USAID program, refugee relocation was planned in a more systematic way: “The second phase was directed mainly toward relocation of selected groups of refugees in areas where they might become self sufficient in foodstuffs. There were integrated projects providing land, housing, schools etc.” And there was even more than that, as the official Termination Report of USAID / Laos notes: “This program was responsible for supplying the basic commodities to the refugees so that they could work and become self-sufficient in as short a time as possible. These commodities included clothing, bedding materials, cooking and eating utensils, hand tools which included axes, hoes, machetes, shovels and other tools, vegetable seeds and, of prime importance, rice seeds.”

As to this type of “Phase 2” activity, that is as to real integrated relocation projects, “the earliest A.I.D.-assisted relocation effort in Laos occurred in 1963 when 544 Hmong refugees from Luang Prabang Province were flown into Nam Hia in Sayaboury Province.”

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174 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
175 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, p. 80.
176 Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, pp. 134/5, at: http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/. The Americans also walked out of Pa Doung, including Tony Poe.
177 Robbins, Air America, p. 115.
178 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp. 120/1.
179 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 173.
180 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 214.
181 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 184.
Yet, walking continued to be the normal way of evacuating people: “If the refugees were in an area too insecure to build villages, they would walk, if possible, to more secure areas. If this was impossible, air lift of the refugees to more secure areas would be undertaken.”182 In the sixties, the usual procedure was the following: “When it was determined where the refugees would relocate, they were assisted and urged to build small air strips capable of taking STOL […] aircraft such as the Helio Courier and the Pilatus Porter. These strips were from 450 feet to 1800 feet in length. Most were situated on high ridge lines or mountainsides and were usually buffeted by strong, unpredictable winds and often shrouded in fog or mist. Planes coming into these strips carried A.I.D. or Lao Government personnel, medicine, food, school supplies, and the like. They were also used to evacuate wounded or seriously ill. Attempts were made to set up a simple village infrastructure, including bamboo schools and dispensaries. Teachers and teaching material were sent to the village. […] Dispensaries were usually staffed by a medic who was trained and paid by A.I.D., although occasionally a Government or military medic was available: Medicine was furnished by the A.I.D. Mission.”183 Since the early sixties, Sam Thong “was the administrative and coordination center for refugee relief activities in the North (MR I and MR II),”184 and when Charles Davis was hired by Air America in January 1965, Clarence Abadie had to tell him that the resettling of refugees was one of the main tasks of Air America in Laos.185 In the meantime, refugee airlifts had become part of USAID’s Refugee Relief / Rural Development program.186 Even later, Moung Cha was a favorite place to resettle refugees. Joe Hazen recalls: “As for refugee flights, I flew them in the Helio, Do-28 and Caribou. In my log book, on 18-21 December 1965, I shuttled between LS-20A (Long Tieng) and LS-20 (Sam Thong) to LS-113 (Moung Cha) with refugees. Moung Cha was located in a rather flat valley, really quite a nice spot”.187

On 13 February 65, a dozen Air America helicopters and aircraft shuttled some 8,000 civilians from Hua Moung in Sam Neua Province to the village of Na Khang (LS-36), astride Route 6, 30 kilometers to the southwest. As, contrary to what many people had presumed, Na Khang was not attacked by Communist troops, it became the new Royal Lao Government cornerstone for operations into Sam Neua Province in February 65.188

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182 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 175.
183 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 176.
184 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 158.
185 Davis, Across the Mekong, p. 17.
186 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
187 E-mail dated 26 October 2005, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.
188 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.127.
airlifts, they were still small compared to what was to follow in the late sixties and early seventies: “In 1966-1967 the RLG, while losing a few key areas such as Hua Muong (LS 58) in the north, actually gained some ground. Earlier losses in 1965 south of the Plain of Jars (PDJ) were not recovered although Muong Ngan (LS 236) was occupied in 1967. By late 1967 a half-hearted attempt was made at Operation Link-Up to draw Vietnamese troops away from the Nam Bac (LS 203) Valley. The list of gains and losses are too many to enumerate. However, in each instance more refugees were generated.”

Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls one of the refugee airlifts of 1967: “Earlier refugee moves in the north, L-100, Nam Tha down to the L-25, Ban Houei Sai area, late 1967? I seem to remember about 3,000 people. Air and walking.”

The “Milk Runs” and other mail services

From a purely operational point of view, a “milk run” was “when a crew flies an aircraft on a series of hops to a certain destination, and then turns around and lands at the same places in reverse order, ending up where the crew started: normally this is a desirable trip as the crew returns home for the night”. Air America operated two of them – one to the North and one to the South – on a more or less daily basis. They were part of the activities performed under the provision of contract no. AID-439-342 and were flown for USAID’s Air Support Branch no. 036 (ASB-036). According to former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson, these “Milk Runs” carried “mail, commissary goods, people of all offices, not just USAID, lighter equipment, odds & ends.” Their routing can be seen from those Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules that are still available. On 8 September 64, C-47 B-817 made the “Milk Run South” Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Attopeu and the same way back to Vientiane for ASB-036, while C-47 “994” made the “Milk Run North” Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Sayaboury and the same way back to Vientiane, also for ASB-036. The next Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule available is that of 13 June 1965, but no “Milk Runs” were made that day. However, the

Caribou “392” landing at Sam Thong in early 66 and used on a “Milk Run” in mid-66 (with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

189 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 177.
190 E-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
191 Davis, Across the Mekong, p. 103.
192 E-mail dated 12 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
194 Original in the possession of Joe Hazen who kindly faxed it to the author on 5 September 2004.
“Milk Runs” did exist in 1965, as on 23 July 65, Ed Eckholdt flew the “Milk Run South” in Caribou “430”. One year later, on 24 May 66, Air America’s Daily Flight Schedule for Vientiane prepared by ATOG listed 26 aircraft, 12 of which were used on purely humanitarian flights, including the 2 “Milk Runs”: “Milk Run North” Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Sayaboury and back to Vientiane was flown by C-47 “147” that day, and “Milk Run South” Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Attopeu and the same way back to Vientiane was operated by C-46 N1386N that day, both flights again for ASB-036. “Milk Run” flights were very popular, so that there would always be many people to come to the aircraft after it had landed, as can be seen in the 2 photos published below. And “Milk Run” flights could be a little bit uncomfortable. Former Thakhek-based medic Dr. Jonathan Pote recalls his flight of 4 February 66, made in “Milk Run” Air America C-47 “994” from Vientiane to Thakhek: “With cargo lashed in the centre, we sat on uncomfortable nylon or aluminum racks down the side, even more uncomfortable on the ground with the tail down, and very poorly placed to survive a crash.”

“Milk Run” C-47 “147” arriving at Luang Prabang in June 1966
(both photos taken by Dr. Jonathan Pote and published here with his kind permission)

“Milk Run” C-47 “994” arriving at Thakhek East in mid-1966

The crowded interior of Air America C-47 “994”, running on a “Milk Run” flight from Vientiane to Thakhek on 4 February 66
(both photos taken by Dr. Jonathan Pote and published here with his kind permission)

196 Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 24 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B7F7A.
In later years, the situation changed a little bit: “The run north was to Luang Prabang, and depending on the hear, Vang Vieng. Ban Houei Sai was usually served by the normal aircraft rotations, Porters, sometimes a Caribou or C-123.” In the early seventies, the “Milk Runs” were flown by CASI aircraft and no longer on a daily basis: On 31 August 72, only the “Milk Run South” to Savannakhet (L-39) and Pakse (L-11) was operated, that day using CASI C-46 XW-PHM. On 3 October 72, only the “Milk Run North” to Vientiane-Sayaboury-Luang Prabang and back the same way was operated, again using CASI C-46 XW-PHM. On 9 November 72, only “Milk Run South” was operated, again using XW-PHM, but in the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules for 1973 preserved at the Air America Archives, there is no longer any trace of those “Milk Runs”. – In addition to the “Milk Runs”, a regular twice-a-week commissary flight linked Vientiane with Bangkok, and there were also some other flights that were operated more or less daily and that, among other things, also carried mail. “SKY had a CASI Baron that went north, 20A [= Long Tieng], LP [= Luang Prabang], Nam Yu. Don’t know what they did about the south […]. Sometimes a CASI C-47 made this run.”

**Flights for USAID’s Public Health Development**

Among the missions covered by USAID contract AID-439-342 were flights for the Public Health Development program of USAID. These flights were mostly undertaken by Helio Couriers and could include flying sick people to Pop Buell’s hospital at Sam Thong, delivering medical supplies, or flying around doctors. As former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson notes: “We worked particularly closely with the upcountry PHD personnel, both

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198 E-mail dated 12 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
203 E-mail dated 12 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
Americans and locals. PHD hauled the normal medicines and medics, med-evacs, etc.” 204

Besides the Helios assigned to contract AID-439-342, the UH-34Ds assigned to the Madriver contract could be used for the same purposes, if the territory required the use of a helicopter. So in the evening of 12 March 66, in his UH-34D Charles Davis took several wounded soldiers to the hospital at Sam Thong. And among the people who sometimes took a ride in an Air America aircraft was Father Lucien Bouchard, “the walking priest”, who did not only work as a Catholic priest, but also cared about sick people, visiting leper villages and working as a “village doctor, dentist, advisor, and general Jack-of-all-trades. He pulls some medical supplies from his bag. I can see him cleansing and bandaging cutes and sores, giving some pills to women for their children who have signs of malaria or other problems such as worms. […] Father B is doing the best he can with what he has.”205

USAID’s Public Health Development project in Laos began in 1963 and was originally focused on providing immediate medical assistance in areas disrupted by war, as the Geneva Accords precluded US military assistance in the health field. “The major thrusts of the project were immediate medical care at forward locations and development of evacuation systems for more serious cases. The major geographical concentration of services were at the outset in Military Region II, largely in Xiang Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces, with less extensive activities in MR I north of Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai, and on the Bolovens Plateau in MR IV. […] The main instrument for furnishing medical care from the onset was the village dispensary. This was a primitive structure of one or two rooms roughly constructed from locally available material by the villagers. In some cases galvanized iron for roofing was supplied by A.I.D. Typically the village dispensary was staffed by one or two ‘medics’ who were housed in village-type huts. Depending on the military situation and the associated needs for care and evacuation of the war wounded, some of the village dispensaries were expanded into small ‘bush hospitals’. These were actually primitive collecting stations where the less seriously sick or wounded could be held for a few days for treatment. Such collecting stations were usually located close to short improvised air strips for STOL […] aircraft which facilitated the delivery of supplies and the evacuation of the seriously sick or wounded. By 1964 a network of such village dispensaries and collecting stations had been established throughout most of the contested areas of MR II and MR I with selected areas of coverage in the South, particularly East of Savannakhet, the areas surrounding Saravane and on the Bolovens Plateau. In all, the total number of village dispensaries in 1964 was about 180 and

204 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
205 Davis, Across the Mekong, pp. 119-24, quotation p. 123.
by 1972 numbered 250. By then it had become evident that a number of decentralized rural hospitals had to be built.

Busy Sam Thong on 9 January 1966, four photos taken by Dr. Jonathan Pote (with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

One of the centers of medical activities in Laos was Sam Thong (LS-20), where Pop Buell had built his hospital in 1962/3. This first hospital at Sam Thong had consisted of thatched huts, but it quickly became inadequate for the care of the increasing numbers of sick and wounded among the tribal people of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces. So in 1964, with USAID assistance, the Royal Lao Government built a wood-frame hospital that could accommodate some 150 patients adjacent to the STOL strip at Sam Thong. In 1965, that hospital was improved by USAID to include x-ray, laboratory, surgical units and extensions for laundry and kitchen, consequently serving as the main field-support hospital for MR II.207

On 2 March 64, most of Air America’s flights out of Vientiane – 5 Helios (843, 855, 857, 865, and 871) and Caribou “851” – were headed for Sam Thong. The other aircraft listed were 2 Bird & Sons C-46s (N9760Z and N9473Z) making rice drops, Air America C-46 B-156 on a commissary flight to and from Bangkok, C-123B N5003X on training flights, and Ten-Two N7951C on a flight for USAID’s Rural Development Division to Paksane-Thakhet-Savannakhet and back to Vientiane.208

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207 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 158.
Air America crews could also profit by the shower, laundry and 28 beds of Sam Thong’s Air America Chalet, while their aircraft were taken care of at Sam Thong’s open maintenance hangar. In 1969, William C. Yarbrough, Air America’s Station Manager of Sam Thong, describes Sam Thong as follows: “Sam Thong, Northern Laos, one of Air America’s most remote and inaccessible up-country bases, is possibly the busiest dirt-strip airfield in Southeast Asia, if not in the whole world. The strip, whose elevation is 3,800 feet, handles an average of 125 landings and take-offs a day, seven days a week the year round, weather permitting. Air America established this forward operating base, in support of various United States civilian aid programs, four years ago. The existing short strip was lengthened to a 2,200 foot dirt runway capable of handling Caribous and C-123s as well as helicopters, Helios and Porters. Much of the activity in Sam Thong is related to refugee relief movements which are mounting daily as Communist troops increase their pressure in many sections of north, central and eastern Laos; Sam Thong also assists larger aircraft in air drops of various commodities to thousands of refugees in flight from enemy forces. The base supplies up to 70,000 gallons of fuel each month to aircraft flying in the area. Operations continue from dawn to dusk throughout the year whether it is dusty or muddy – or both. Next to a 110 bed hospital jointly operated by USAID and the Lao Government, AAM’s are the most prominent facilities in Sam Thong. They include an open maintenance hangar, a Quonset hut Operations building, transient billets with 28 beds, toilets, hot water bathing facilities, a laundry plus a dining room and recreation lounge.”

At the time it was overrun by the Pathet Lao in 1970, “it was a very adequate 250-bed, well-equipped and well-staffed facility which also served as the main in-service practical nurse training unit for Meo and other tribal minorities.”

Sam Thong was not the only rural hospital in Laos built or expanded by USAID, where Air America aircraft carried wounded and sick people as well as medical supplies. With assistance from USAID, smaller units were constructed at Houa Moung in Sam Neua Province and at Ban Nam Thourei in Houa Khong Province in the early sixties, and at the same time, informal support and coordination with the Tom Dooley Hospital at Ban Houei Sai and with several rural hospitals run throughout Laos by Operation Brotherhood was

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211 “The Philippine-based Operation Brotherhood International (OB) had been in Laos under the aegis of the International Junior Chambers of Commerce since 1957. This private non-profit organization began working under A.I.D. contract in 1963. Their program, in 1964, was based on a community-development approach with a strong emphasis on hospital-based health services. In 1964, the RLG and A.I.D. built or renovated existing facilities served by OB to establish a number of small rural hospitals and one larger general hospital in
established. Hospitals in the South included the one run by Operation Brotherhood at Kengkook, government hospitals at Savannakhet and Thakhek, and an Asian Christian Service Hospital at Ban Paksong-Nonkeung.\textsuperscript{212} USAID furnished nearly all the medicine, equipment, and medical supplies for this operation at a cost of nearly $1.5 million per year, and they were mostly transported by Air America and CASI aircraft from three medical supply warehouses: the big one in Vientiane, a small regional warehouse at Sam Thong and a smaller warehouse at Pakse to supply facilities in the South.

The original Search and Rescue (SAR) missions:

With so many Air America and CASI aircraft operating in a country that was not only afflicted by an ever growing war, but also by weather conditions that were sometimes very difficult, it was inevitable that one day some of those aircraft would be shot down or simply crash in bad weather. In case of such an event, it was the first and most noble duty of all Air America crews to search for their downed colleagues and to pick them up. When in the air, all Air America aircraft had to send a position and “operations are normal” report back to base at least once every hour. When those calls did not come in, when an airstrip radioed that an expected aircraft did not arrive, or when one of the Air America pilots sent a “Mayday” call, a search was organized in order to find the downed aircraft and to pick up the crew and fly them to hospital if necessary.\textsuperscript{213} Sometimes, a helicopter might be close by and pick up a downed pilot within a couple of minutes,\textsuperscript{214} but a search could also take several days and might involve several Air America aircraft, as is illustrated below by the Search and Salvage operations for Air America UH-34D H-32 that were organized in October 1965. If the accident happened in enemy territory, Air America crews had at least something to trade in for fair treatment: gold bracelets – at least in theory. As Joe Hazen points out: “Regarding the bracelet, in reality, if one went down in unfriendly territory, the people would just take what you had: you would not be in a position to barter.”\textsuperscript{215} If the accident happened in friendly territory, a technical team was sent in later to assess the damage that had occurred to the downed aircraft.\textsuperscript{216} Depending upon the extent of the damage, the size of the aircraft, and the environment of the accident, measures were taken to repair the aircraft. Sometimes, an aircraft could fly back without any problem,\textsuperscript{217} sometimes it could be repaired on place,\textsuperscript{218} sometimes...

\textsuperscript{212} Ramsey \textit{et al.}, \textit{USAID Laos Termination Report}, p. 159. Since 1966, those medical supplies arrived from the US Military Medical Depot in Okinawa (p. 160).

\textsuperscript{213} There were 2 levels of search: “If one does not make this routine check-in, a radio search is requested to any aircraft in the area to make sure the aircraft in question is not experiencing any difficulty. If the radio search is unsuccessful, the next step is a physical search to find the missing aircraft. [...] The receiver of these HF transmissions is in a room near the Chief Pilot’s office” (Davis, \textit{Across the Mekong}, p. 105).

\textsuperscript{214} That happened when Charles Davis picked up Porter pilot Dave Allen near Vang Vieng on 30 July 66 (Across the Mekong, pp. 143-45).

\textsuperscript{215} E-mail dated 1 March 2008, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.

\textsuperscript{216} Such an assessment (“maintenance report”) is preserved in UTD/Lewis/B2F6 for UH-34 “H-G” that crashed at Pa Doung on 30 May 1961 at about 1530 hours local time. That report, written by Jackson L. Forney, Air America’s Manager, Technical Services SEA, on 5 June 61, starts by interviewing the flight mechanic of the ill-fated aircraft, followed by a description of the major components, for example: “Engine: Forced back and twisted approximately 10° clockwise in its mounting structure; mounts are destroyed; engine is in repairable condition” or “Main rotor head and blades: Destroyed, no possibility of repair”, and so on. Then a list of major component times since overhaul or new and details about the last periodic inspection of the aircraft are added, resulting in 2 conclusions: “These records do not indicate any discrepancy which is considered a contributing factor in the accident. [...] Salvage possibilities are limited and to my mind not economical or practicable at this time”, adding the reasons why “H-G” could not be salvaged.

\textsuperscript{217} When Helio B-857 ground looped at Sam Thong (LS-20) on 4 March 66, the XOXO of that accident (in: UTD/Hickler/B26F16) reports: “Front left wind shield broken, PIC [= Pilot in command] door frame and door
Air America ramp Vientiane in 1963: Ed Dearborn and Joe Hazen wearing gold bracelets
(with kind permission from Joe Hazen)

it had to be flown to the next airport,\textsuperscript{219} back to Udorn\textsuperscript{220} or even to Tainan\textsuperscript{221} for repairs. In the early days, small aircraft like Helios would be put into an Air America Caribou,\textsuperscript{222} after their wings had been taken off. Since the mid-sixties, ill-fated Helios or Pilatus Porters were dismantled and their fuselage and wings were put onto a recovery rig, tied to both sides of a UH-34D, and ferried back to the next bigger airstrip or even to Udorn.\textsuperscript{223} In the mid-sixties, that recovery rig “was conceived, engineered, and built entirely by Air America personnel at our Udorn Base along basic design lines developed under the guidance of Udorn’s Chief Flight Mechanic, Geza Eiler. Purpose of the rig is to enable any of AAM’s UH-34 choppers to recover a downed or crash-damaged light aircraft by attaching the fixed-wing plane directly to the fuselage of the helicopter rather than slinging the plane externally from a hook underneath the chopper. […] The rig consists of three major assemblies. A double assembly – secured to the left side of the chopper (bolted to the fuselage in front and held in place by a yoke bent, left hand tire blown, left hand fuse truss bent; aircraft returned L08 [= to Vientiane] C05 [= on 5 March]; WL L08 T08 C06 [= will leave Vientiane for Udorn on 6 March] for repairs.”

\textsuperscript{218} When UH-34D H-28 was damaged at coordinates WD5030 on 6 January 66, the XOXO of this accident (in: UTD/Hickler/B26F16) reports: “Area secure; parts for repair enroute.”

\textsuperscript{219} When Helio XW-PBZ crash-landed at LS-131 on 5 January 66, it was considered to be unflyable by the team that had flown to the crash-site to assess the damage; the XOXO of 6 January 66 (in: UTD/Hickler/B26F16) reports: “aircraft presently being dismantled and airlifted L-54 [= to Luang Prabang] for further evacuation; will advise if repair can be made T08 [= at Udorn]”

\textsuperscript{220} When Helio XW-PBZ landed off the left side of the runway at LS-57 on 6 June 66, the damage was such that the XOXO of this accident (in: UTD/Hickler/B26F16) notes: “will disassemble and return T08 [= to Udorn].”

\textsuperscript{221} Two pictures published in \textit{Air America Log}, vol. II no.1, January 1968, show Caribou “393” after it crash-landed at Ban Na (LS-15), Laos, on 6 March 66, and after it had been repaired at Tainan.

\textsuperscript{222} A photo of a Helio Courier loaded onto a Caribou in Laos in 1963 can be seen in the video tape made by Ed Eckholdt at 1.34.20 to 1.34.40 minutes. On 25 January 64, Caribou “851” picked up a Helio at Phou Khong (VS-42) and ferried it back to Udorn, and on 27 March 64, “851” picked up another Helio at Ban Nam Thouei (VS-118) (Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13).

\textsuperscript{223} A photo of Porter N153L carried by an Air America UH-34D can be found in the PC-6 file of this database.
fastened around the fuselage in the rear) – carries the two wings of the recovered aircraft with the wing chord in a vertical position and with the leading edge down. On the right side of the helicopter, positioned in its entrance door, is an outrigger platform which supports the fuselage of the aircraft. On the right aft section of the chopper’s fuselage is a third rig to support the empennage; it is attached to the helicopter by a yoke fastened around the fuselage. The downed aircraft’s engine, radios and other small equipment are carried in the chopper’s cabin. […] It takes approximately two hours to mount the recovery rig on a UH-34 and about 30 minutes is required to load or unload a downed aircraft. The plane is held in place with nylon straps; in addition, the rescue hoist is used to secure the plane’s fuselage to the chopper. […] To date [that is to 1971], over 25 aircraft have been successfully recovered with Air America’s rig – some of which were not AAM aircraft.”

Larger aircraft that had to be flown back were picked up by a US Army Sikorsky Skycrane and helicoptered to the next airport where they could be dismantled and flown to Tainan by larger Air America aircraft. If an accident occurred in an unfriendly or insecure area, the aircraft was abandoned on Customer’s advice.

The rescue itself could take several days. The following is a chronological account of the activities observed and / or recorded by Accident Investigation Team Members in connection with the search and rescue operations for Air America UH-34D H-32 which had been reported down on 12 October 1965:

**12 October 1965** – At approximately 1745 hours information was received at T08 (Udorn) that the Customer at L11 (Pakse) had reported that H-32 was down in the vicinity of coordinates XC 5157. Further information was later received that two Customer people were aboard, but no other intelligence had been obtained as to the condition of the aircraft and crew or circumstances surrounding its going down. Helio 166 made a night search in an effort to locate the missing aircraft, but this was without success.

**13 October 1965** – At 0545 hours an Accident Investigation Team (Capt. Marius Burke, John Aspinwall and Richard Ford) departed T08 aboard [UH-34D] H-15 (crew – Baker and

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225 See the photo of a US Army Skycrane airlifting Air America’s ill-fated Caribou “392” out of Ban Muang Ngan (LS-236), Laos, on 21 May 69 published in the “Skycrane” file of this database.
226 This occurred to many UH-34s of the first generation; see the UH-34D file of this database, part 1.
in company with two Customer indigenous representatives. H-15 arrived at L11 [= Pakse] at 0900 with the intent of checking with the local Customer representative for more detailed information. Here instructions were received that the search and Investigation Teams should not depart L11 until T28s arrived to provide cover and until Ambassadorial approval had been granted to go into the search area. While on the ground at L11, we were advised by radio to wait [for] a Customer representative who was aboard 49Z [= CASI Baron N1349Z]. After waiting well beyond his ETA [= estimated arrival time] a radio check was made, and it was learned that he was already at L44 (Saravane). At 1020 hours [we] departed L11 for L44 arriving at 1110 hours. First helicopter search flights began at 1125 hours. Earlier in the day, [Air America] Helio 166, [XW-]PBX, and 869, [CASI] Dorniers [N91]81X, [N91]82X, and [CASI / Boun Oum Do-28 XW-]PCG; [CASI] Beech Baron [N13]49Z; [Air America] Caribou 853, and helicopters H15 and H-28. In addition a C-123 ((N50)05X) was used as Victor Control and three T28s were available for air support if requested.

Upon return to L44 [= Saravane] for the first refueling, H-15 recommended that a ground search party be sent into the area as locating the crash from the air at this time seemed improbable due to the dense overgroth and no apparent signs of a crash. A party of 30 men (15 from the upper helicopter pad and 15 from the lower pad) left for the probable crash area at 1325 hours. The air search continued, and at 1625 hours H-15 reported sighting the crashed aircraft at XC 675465. H-15 also reported the possibility of there being at least one apparently injured survivor, as they had sighted a body stretched out on the fuselage. In the meantime information was received that paratroops were enroute aboard Caribou 853 which was expected in the search area within 20 minutes. The local Customer representative decided against using locally available paratroops as those then enroute should be over the search area in less time than it would take the others to make necessary preparations. A State Department physician from Vientiane, who had been standing by, was embarked on H-15 to be ready to give assistance as needed. After some wait for the paratroopers, the doctor was lowered by the hoist on H-15 into the creek bed as near as possible to the crashed aircraft.

Caribou 853 arrived over the crash site at approximately 1725 hours; began making paradrops at 1745 hours, and completed them at 1800 hours in almost total darkness. Efforts were made by radio between Victor Control, H-15, and the ground parties to link up the various ground search elements. Due to lack of adequate communication, complete darkness, and rugged terrain, the ground party failed to assemble. The doctor and the Customer representative on the ground did make contact at about 2100 hours. They then searched the creek bank, up and down stream, for about three and one-half hours without success. Air search operations were secured when H-15 returned to L44 at 1825 hours. Victor control continued its efforts to assist the ground party elements locate each other. At L44 [= Saravane] the local USIS [= United States Information Service] representative made arrangements for mess and billeting of the air search crews in cooperation with the OB [= Operation Brotherhood] Hospital.

14 October 1965 – H-15 and H-28 departed L44 for the search area at 0600 hours. The various elements of the ground search party were observed spread along the creek bed, and it was apparent that they had not reached the crashed aircraft. A Customer representative with a VHF radio was lowered by the hoist on H-15 into the creek bed downstream from the crash site. He then moved upstream and contacted several members of the ground search party. They were then vectored into the crash site by H-15. The ground party immediately ascertained and reported that there were no survivors. A member of the Accident Investigation Team, Dick Ford, was then lowered into the creek and proceeded to the crashed

227 Blackened in the report coming from the CIA.
Discovering the crash site of Air America UH-34D H-32 on 13 October 65
(former photo no. 1-WL1-28-16-PB262, now at UTD/Leary/B74F13)

aircraft. On arrival he borrowed a small machete and began to clear brush from about the aircraft in order to take [the] necessary photographs and to assist in the investigation of the crash. The immediate investigation indicated that all three persons riding in the cabin compartment apparently had died on impact. The pilot, despite obviously severe and painful injuries, managed to extricate himself from the cockpit and crawl out on the fuselage where he expired.

Dense foliage and resultant light conditions made doubtful the quality of the photos taken at this time. Together with Customer representatives, the Team member assisted in the supervision of clearing of the area to permit helicopters to hover and eventually to land and deliver additional personnel and supplies. Also, together with a Customer representative, [we] accomplished the extremely unpleasant chore of removing and bagging all four bodies. We were assisted in this job by about eight local troops whose reluctance was understandable and whose aid was procured only after an hour-long ceremony and harangue by their commander. Mr. Aspinwall arrived at the crash site at about 1415 hours as the last body was being bagged. He immediately began his initial inspection of the wrecked aircraft. […] Customer personnel departed the crash site shortly after the last body was removed. We were then informed that the local troops would remain as long as they were required. Inspection of the wreckage and clearing the area continued until operations were secured and both H-15 and H-28 returned to L11 (= Pakse) at 1805 hours.

15 October 1965 – H-15 departed L11 for the crash site at 0855 hours; delayed due to lack of ground transportation, [it] arrived at L44 at 0945 where all surplus gear was off-loaded. Capt. Burke and R. G. Ford departed for the crash site aboard H-15 and arrived at approximately 0955 hours. They immediately continued the investigation of the wreckage. Additional photographs were taken as the area had been substantially cleared of all concealing foliage. Mechanics arrived and dismantling of H-32 was begun. As the brush was cleared, all parts of the aircraft not previously accounted for (tail wheel assembly and radio antenna) were found in the immediate vicinity of the aircraft.** During the following days, the remains of H-32 were flown to Udorn, and the aircraft was considered to be a total loss.*** Yet, Air America’s Udorn facility was nevertheless able to rebuild the aircraft so that H-32 entered service again – probably in April 1966**** and flew with Air America until its definite

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229 See for example the list “Aircraft destroyed and lost”, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2.

230 The list “Revised status of aircraft” of 8 April 66 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1) still lists H-32 as “IRAN ETR E30” [= Inspection and Repair As Necessary with an Estimated Time of Return on 30 May 66]. However the list “Status of aircraft” of 4 May 66 (in: UTD/Hickler/B1F2) already lists H-32 as fully operational again.
destruction near Ban Dong Hene (LS-54) on 28 March 72.\footnote{XOXO of 28 March 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B61F3.}

This detailed report of the search and salvage operations of H-32 does show some typical elements of such an operation: At the beginning, many Air America and also CASI aircraft were involved in searching for the downed aircraft, and Air America aircraft also participated in the search for downed CASI aircraft.\footnote{The log book of Allen Rich (in: UTD/Rich/B1) lists many CASI aircraft crashes.} The rescue itself comprised three elements:

1) two Air America helicopters that would land at the crash site or lower doctors or other personnel that could assist the wounded and then would pick up the wounded and fly them to hospital;

2) a defense element to protect the crash site; that was the primary function of the paratroopers who were flown in; they would also secure the crash site until the aircraft was recovered; in other cases, the crash site was protected by military aircraft such as the T-28s that were only on stand by this time; when necessary they would attack unfriendly troops who would try to capture the downed people;

3) a coordinator of the whole operation and command post orbiting in the air and called “Victor Control”; this was mostly a bailed Air America Caribou or a C-123 like in this case, as both aircraft had VHF/UHF capability so that they could also talk to military aircraft;\footnote{E-mail dated 24 April 2005 kindly sent to the author by former Caribou pilot Joe Hazen.} “Victor Control” had to coordinate the search and later to relay communications between the various elements of the rescue operation.

Of course this type of rescue flights existed as long as Air America flew in Laos, and from about June 1964 to the late sixties, some of those missions were accompanied by Air America-piloted T-28s that flew cover.\footnote{The rescue of Lt. Klusmann in June 64 described below was probably the first of such missions, and in January 67, Air America’s T-28 program was closed down (Leary, \textit{Outline - Air America in Laos}, 1965, p. 14; Interview with William E. McShane conducted by Prof. William Leary at San Rafael, CA on 4 August 87, in: UTD/Leary/B43F4).} During that period, USAF T-28s, belonging to \textit{Water Pump} or to the Military Assistance Program for Thailand/Laos and painted in the colors of the Royal Lao Air Force, were flown by Air America pilots on rescue missions to secure the area where Air America UH-34Ds were to land and pick up the downed airmen.

When Air America pilots qualified to fly the T-28 heard a certain code word over the radio – Tom Jenny mentions “dropkick” –, they would all drop their regular mission and return to Vientiane for briefing and then pick up “their” T-28.\footnote{For details, see Ahern, \textit{Undercover armies}, pp.229-32.} Some of these T-28 covered rescue missions would pick up downed Air America pilots, others downed Bird & Sons and later Continental Air Services pilots: So, on 21 May 65, a Bird and Sons PC-6 made a landing at Boum Lao (LS-174), Laos, when the pilot, Ernest Brace, was captured by Pathet Lao forces: Air America-piloted T-28s, led by Jim Rhyne,\footnote{Leary, \textit{Outline - Air America in Laos}, 1965, pp. 134/5; Rones and Rhyne often led T-28 missions.} and including T-28 “656” flown by Allen Rich and another T-28 flown by Don Romes,\footnote{Donald R. Rones, telephone interview made by William M. Leary on 19 May 1990; notes of Prof. Leary preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.} arrived and strafed the jungle along the landing strip so that an Air America helicopter could land and Terry Burke could check the Porter to see if Brace was alive. Burke searched the area by air over the next two days, guiding T-28 strikes on suspected positions around the airstrips and dropping leaflets.\footnote{Leary, \textit{Outline - Air America in Laos}, 1965, pp. 11+13/4; Conboy / Morrison, \textit{Shadow war}, p.134/5; Davis (\textit{Across the Mekong}, pp. 76-78) reports the crash of Ernest Brace for 24 May 65; the T-28 flown by Allen Rich according to his log book (in: UTD/Rich/B1) was “656”, i.e. T-28D 51-3656 (msn 174-194), which, according to the USAF Assignment Records preserved at Maxwell AFB, had been transferred by the USAF’s SMAAR unit, McClellan AFB, Sacramento, CA, to the Military Assistance Program on 64155, that is on 4 June 64.}
Introduced in 1964: SAR missions for the US Military

With this type of experience in mind, a new type of mission was assigned to Air America’s T-28s in June 64 – at first unofficially. Already before, Air America UH-34Ds had picked up downed military pilots – one of the first had probably been Boonrat Comintra, who later became an Air America pilot, but who had been shot down in his RLAF T-6 near Tha Thom on 31 March 61; three days later, he had been located by an Air America helicopter and picked up. The first occasion to rescue a downed US military pilot came on 6 June 64, when US Navy Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann was shot down in his RF-8A Crusader from the USS Kitty Hawk over the northeastern corner of the Plain of Jars, that is near Khang Khay in the Ban Pha Ka (LS-40) area. In May 1964, the Royal Laotian Government had asked the US Government to provide a show of support, and so, RF-8s from the USS Kitty Hawk flew reconnaissance missions over the Plain of Jars and the road leading from there to North Vietnam. The mayday call had been picked up by a RLAF T-28 and by an Air America C-123. As there was no one else to rescue airmen downed over Laos, the Air America C-123 flew to the general area to assume the role of an on-scene commander. An Air America Helio Courier appeared on the scene, and “within an hour they located the pilot. Three hours after the call for help went out, two Air America helicopters arrived at the crash scene, but as they approached to make the recovery, the entire area erupted in gunfire. The enemy had employed a tactic he would use often during the next ten years: the flak trap. While allowing the injured survivor to call for help, enemy gunners positioned themselves to wait for the arrival of the vulnerable helicopters. In this case both Air America choppers were hit and two men were critically wounded. The helicopters abandoned their efforts and headed for the nearest Lima Site. Due to this heavy anti-aircraft artillery, four Thai-piloted T-28s were called in from Vientiane to provide cover for the rescue, but they were unable to find the target. So Air America piloted T-28s were sent in, but when they reached the scene, the Pathet Lao had already removed Klusmann from the area. “Air America continued the search until noon on 8 June without any promising indications,” so that the rescue mission had to be given up. Fortunately, Lt. Klusmann later escaped. “At his debriefing he praised the Air America rescue attempt in the face of intense ground fire – really an action inspired by what has later been called “Air America upholding the Airmen’s bond”.

Already the following day, on 7 June 64, another US Navy aircraft was shot down over Laos, when the F-8D BuA 147064 piloted by Cdr Doyle W. Lynn was hit by anti-aircraft fire while escorting an RF-8A reconnaissance plane in the same area where Klusmann had gone down the day before. Lynn’s wingman “called the mayday at approximately two in the afternoon, reported that the commander’s chute had opened, and passed coordinates to controllers at the Air Support Operations Center at Udorn. The controllers there passed the

240 This portion of this file has been completely revised in May 2016 based material about SAR missions for US military aircraft downed in Laos that Harold Colson had obtained from the Air Force Historical Research Agency (Maxwell AFB) and from the National Archives. Without the precious help from Harold Colson this new version of my file would not have been possible.

241 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p. 51.

242 According to Anderson (Capt. B.C. Anderson, USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia (1961-66), HQ PACAF, 24 October 1966, p.31, Project CHECO Report), an Air America C-123 and Caribou intercepted the mayday, dumped their cargoes and flew to the scene.


244 Castle, At war, p.70.


246 Klusmann, Price of freedom, Castle, At war, p.70.

247 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.164, note 79.


249 Hobson, Vietnam air losses, p.9.

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information to the Air Operations Center at Vientiane, and to Detachment 3, Pacific Air Rescue Center at Tan Son Nhat. Air America H-34 Choctaws and Laotian-based T-28s responded in a rescue attempt that included an area search three miles either side of a point given as the downed pilot’s location. However, Lynn’s reported position was incorrect. Moreover, the search forces did not know that the Navy used a homing beacon transmitted on a different frequency from the one employed by the Air Force. Air America C-7 Caribous were equipped with compatible receivers and located the downed airman before darkness postponed the rescue. A low overcast covered northern Laos the next morning as the Air America Caribous flew back to the search area with their receivers open for a signal. When they picked up the signal, the downed pilot’s exact location was pinpointed about forty miles south of the originally reported position. When Commander Lynn heard the drone of aircraft above the foggy mist, he fired a flare. An Air America H-34 helicopter dipped beneath the clouds and snatched the weary pilot to safety."250 – another case of what has later been called “Air America upholding the Airmen’s bond”.251 For the Caribous and the UH-34D that picked up Commander Lynn had not been part of the SAR team. In the meantime, unable to find the downed airman, the Air America strike force T-28s of the SAR team, directed by CIA case officers in an orbiting transport aircraft, struck communist positions all over the northeastern corner of the Plain of Jars on 7 and 8 June 64, while officially flying support for the downed US Navy flyers. So while on 7 June 64, 3 Air America T-28s were used on search and rescue work around site Moung Oum (LS-22), later T-28 attacks were flown against convoys of tanks and trucks on the Plain of Jars, as on 6 and 8 June 64, when 2 T-28s were shot down near Xieng Khouang ville. The retaliation continued on 9 June, when 8 USAF F-100s attacked a communist anti-aircraft position at Xiang Khouang, and apparently even without the authority of the USA on 11 June 64, when Thai-piloted RLAF T-28s attacked the Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay and damaged the Chinese Economic Mission building, killing a civilian. This incident caused a lot of loud reactions against the USA.252

For these first SAR missions flown by Air America, Ambassador Unger sent a commen-
tation to Vientiane Base Manager Roy Stitt on 9 June 64, which quoted several US Navy admirals.253 But in the meantime, the US military had also understood that the Search and Rescue situation for downed US airmen in South East Asia had to be improved, especially in Laos. Already on 29 May 64, Lt. General Joseph H. Moore, Commander of the Second Air Division, had asked PACAF for the authority to employ US aircraft in SAR. On 10 June 64, US Ambassador Graham Martin from Bangkok complained to the Secretary of State about the lack of coordination of information when using Thailand-based USAF aircraft as protective cover for rescue aircraft in Laos, as these missions needed Thai authority.254 But as long as the US military was unable to rescue US airmen downed in Laos, an agreement was needed with the only institution that was able to offer that type of service: Air America. “The loss of two American aircraft within twenty-four hours over northern Laos made the 15 June [1964] meeting at Udorn, attended by General Moore,255 Colonel Catlin,256 and Colonel Tyrrell257 as

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250 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.49. According to Anderson (USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-66, HQ PACAF, 1966, p.33, CHECO Report), there were some complications in the pick up operation: “Commander Lynn had worked himself onto a wooded ridge at about 4800’ elevation. At that altitude the hover power of the H-34 is limited and Mr. Eates, the Air America pilot, found himself in danger of settling into the trees. Rescue effort was further hampered because the cable was about 15’ too short in the 120’ high forest.”


252 Castle, At war, pp.71/2.


254 Telegram of 10 June 64, US Embassy Bangkok to State Dept., DDRS no.268027 kindly supplied by Harold Colson.

255 Maj. Gen. Joseph H. Moore was the Commander of the USAF’s 2nd Air Division (Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.48). In reality, Saigon-based General Moore was absent and later informed by Lt.Col.
Commendation of 9 June 64 sent to Air America’s Vientiane Base Manager Roy Stitt

well as representatives from Air America, even more critical to future operations. At the conference a plan evolved whereby Air America assumed responsibility for rescue coverage on the Plain of Jars during all Yankee Team missions. The Deputy Commander of the 2d Air Division became responsible for all Air Force search and rescue operations in Laos subject to the rules of engagement established by the American Embassy in Vientiane.” The minutes of that meeting about “SAR capabilities and responsibilities in Laos” reveal that Capt.


Col. Jack Catlin was the Deputy Commander of the USAF’s 2nd Air Division (Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.48). The minutes (“Report of Staff visit”) do not list him as a participant, so he was probably also informed later. Present at the meeting were Lt. Col. Scott (2ODC-R), Capt. Whisler, Commander Blevins, and Commander Hudson (US Navy) (see “Report of Staff visit”, document no.63, in: MSgt Robert T. Helmka / TSgt Beverly Hale, USAF Operations from Thailand 1964-65 (CHECO Report), HQ PACAF, 10 August 1966, vol. “Supporting documents”, AFHRA. Document kindly provided by Harold Colson). Probably, Captain Whisler, Commander Blevins and Commander Hudson were all from US Navy CTG (Carrier Task Group) 77 (see 1st Lt. Robert L. MacNaughton, Yankee Team, HQ PACAF, 8 March 1966, pp.2+9, Project CHECO Report, in: ARHRA, both documents kindly provided by Harold Colson).

Col. Robert Tyrrell was the Air Force Attaché to the US Ambassador to Laos (see Castle, At war, p.88).


Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.50.
McShane (1 ACW), Ben Moore (Air America Udorn), Roy Stitt (Air America Vientiane), Earl Jones (CASS Intelligence) as well as US Navy representatives were also present. After the list of participants, the minutes begin: “From the discussion it became apparent that Air America has a considerable SAR potential, but that all activities in SAR must be coordinated and controlled through a single agency. Col. Tyrell was emphatic on this point, stating that an on-scene SAR commander was vital for successful pick-ups. He said that the pick-up of the second Navy pilot went very smoothly when the military, represented by his office and SAW [Special Air Warfare] personnel, assumed responsibility for coordination and control of the search.”

Apparently, the idea to use Air America aircraft flying under a military commander in SAR operations in Laos came from Col. Tyrell, the US Air Attaché to the Ambassador to Laos, and perhaps from the Ambassador himself. Air America agreed immediately, but Ben Moore from Air America Udorn asked for 5 additional UH-34Ds, Roy Stitt from Air America Vientiane asked for UHF equipment to be installed in some of Air America’s fixed wing aircraft, and both men asked for more Company employees. Col. Tyrell, who had convened the briefing, added “that he urgently needed a complete USAF/USN rescue plan to present Ambassador Unger for approval. He stated the Ambassador was appreciative of the military’s concern for rescue of downed personnel but that any plan involving US aircraft would require State Department approval, particularly if armed escort were involved.”


Extracts from Minutes of the meeting of 15 June 1964 held at Udorn

This informal agreement was all the more necessary as due to their range limitation of 125 to 140 nautical miles, the USAF HH-43Bs SAR helicopters that had finally been stationed at Nakhon Phanom on 20 June 64 were unable to provide rescue services for the Plain of Jars or areas southeast of Pakse in the Laotian panhandle. “Fortunately, Air America planes and helicopters were available to provide search and rescue support when needed.”

“Following the two-day meeting at Udorn, 2AD outlined a plan for rescue operations in Laos which was to be discussed at another Udorn meeting on 18 June. […] Four […] H-34’s would be deployed to forward operating fields in Laos (Sites 15 and 89) where they would be placed on alert during Yankee team reconnaissance missions over Laos. Two T-28 aircraft at Vientiane would be on alert also. These aircraft would provide air cover and rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP) in the event the Air America helicopters were scrambled.”

If the additional UH-34Ds for Air America were not approved by CINCPAC, the 2AD plan was to station 3 USMC H-34s at Udorn for SAR duties. On 18 June 64, COMUSMACV General Westmoreland sent a cable to CINCPAC:

1. Ref. A [i.e. cable AMEMB Vientiane DTG 132154Z] indicates helo capability in Laos is inadequate to provide desired SAR capability if air operations over Laos are to continue at past pace. In view apparent continuing nature Laos photo recce best solution appears to be to provide Air America with additional H-34’s rather than station USMC helos at Udorn as proposed in ref. B.

2. Facilities at Udorn are crowded and incapable of accommodating USMC personnel required to support and operate four or five H-34’s. In addition, use of US marked military aircraft precludes prepositioning these aircraft in Laos to support specific missions. Unless helo’s are prepositioned in Laos as close as possible, reaction time will be too slow to provide acceptable rescue potential.

3. Air America representative at Udorn has indicated a capability to operate and maintain five additional H-34’s required to provide two on alert at Air America Site 15 southwest of PDJ and two on alert at Air America Site 89 northeast of PDJ during US military air operations over Laos. Proposal is to base these aircraft at Udorn and deploy to the above sites upon request.

4. […] We request following actions […] Adjust Air America contract to include requirement for them to provide four H-34’s to conduct SAR in PDJ area of Laos as required to support US military air operations in that area.”

At the end, by order of the Secretary of Defense, Air America received 4 more UH-34Ds in 1964. These aircraft were turned over to Air America from the Fleet Marine Forces,
However, “projected SAR requirements were not predicated on the commitment of Yankee team forces alone. Early SAR planning was contingent upon the possibility of retaliatory strikes in North Vietnam and the growing need for a comprehensive interdiction operation in Laos. The 2AD Commander, General Moore, was charged with the responsibility for search and rescue for all Southeast Asia and a USAF SAR organization for Laos began to take shape under his direction in the summer months of 1964. On 11 June 1964, an Air Support Operations Center (ASOC), operated by Detachment 2, 35th Tactical Group, was opened at Udorn, Thailand, under the direction of a newly established deputy commander for 2AD Thailand (Dep Cmdr 2AD Thai). The new deputy commander was responsible for all USAF air operations in Laos including search and rescue. He also coordinated rescue activities with Air America and the American Embassy’s Air Operations Center in Vientiane.”

The source text for that statement was a message of July 1964 sent from PACAF to 2AD about responsibilities at Udorn. Here, the functions of ASOC are described as follows: “A. Provide sortie apportionment and mission planning support to the Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) Air Operations Center (AOC) at Vientiane, Laos, for close air support, interdiction, reconnaissance, airlift, search and rescue, and other functions of air as required.”

What is called here “RLAF AOC”, in reality was the Air Operations Center established by the State Department (Ambassador Unger) and staffed by Water Pump personnel in civilian clothes, i.e. by the US military. This was the team of Col. Tyrell, the Air Attaché. Of course, they coordinated all sorts of military missions, including SAR, but officially, they also trained RLAF personnel – which explains the name “RLAF AOC”.

On 22 June 64, the Pacific Air Rescue Center, “PARC, located at Tan Son Nhut, notified PACAF that the procedures for coordinating rescue between Air America and USAF resources had been established. The Air America helicopters could be scrambled through the air attache’s office in Vientiane or by the HU-16 aircraft orbiting the area during U.S. air activity.” So since then, Air America’s SAR operations of downed US airmen in Laos were officially part of the USAF rescue procedures.

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269 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, pp.51/2.
270 MSgt Robert T. Helmkka / TSgt Beverly Hale, USAF Operations from Thailand 1964-65 (CHECO Report), HQ PACAF, 10 August 1966, p.120, AFHRA, kindly provided by Harold Colson.
272 Castle, At war, p.66.
273 For more details, see my file Air America in Laos III – in combat.
274 MSgt Robert T. Helmkka / TSgt Beverly Hale, USAF Operations from Thailand 1964-65 (CHECO Report), HQ PACAF, 10 August 1966, p.121, AFHRA. The same information can be found in: 1st Lt. Robert L. MacNaughton, Yankee Team, HQ PACAF, 8 March 1966, p.12, Project CHECO Report, in: ARHRA, both documents kindly provided by Harold Colson. The source was Msg, 2AD to PACAF, 2ODC-678, 22 June 64.
And so, in 1964, “Air America became the principal recovery force in Laos, with the Commander, Det.3, assisting whenever possible.”

Sometimes, a SAR mission flown to rescue the pilot of a downed military aircraft could end in SAR missions flown to rescue Air America crews. A particularly dramatic series of accidents happened on 18 August 1964. That day a T-28 engaged in close air support of Neutralist troops and with Capt. I. Tavashi, the base commander of Udorn, in the back seat, was shot down by Communist gunners near route 42 north of Phong Savan (L-21) and Ban Peung (LS-95) at the southeast corner of the Plain of Jars. “The wingman notified the Air Support Operations Center at Udorn, and the controllers there, following rescue procedures established at the 15 June Udorn conference, contacted the Air America Air Operations Center at Vientiane.”

As the wingman had notified Udorn, Air America sent UH-34D H-19 piloted by Capt. William A. Zeitler. Another Air America pilot, Dick Elder, had located the downed T-28, but was too heavy to land for the pick up; so he flew to LS-95 and returned with a .30 caliber machine gun to give Zeitler some cover, as in the meantime, Air America Caribou “392” flown by Gary Malmberg and working as “Victor Control”, was drawing fire. In the meantime, the downed Thai pilot had climbed on top of the jungle, and Zeitler tried three times to bring the cable lowered from the hoist on the helicopter close to the downed pilot so that he could grip it, but it did not work. So it was decided that Zeitler would land in an open rice field about 50 yards from the downed pilot, and when he was coming in to hover in that clearing, both aircraft received heavy ground fire, and H-19 went down. Capt. Zeitler got out of the helicopter, but when he tried to help out his mechanic Cornelio N. (“Pappy”) Pascual, the aircraft blew up, killing Pascual and heavily burning Zeitler. From Caribou “392”, Gary Malmberg had witnessed the approach to the pick up, the hover of H-19, and the roll as it fell off down the slope of the hill, filled with bullets and the immediate fire that engulfed and destroyed H-19. The other Air America UH-34D piloted by Dick Elder immediately flew to LS-95 asking the local commander to send troops, but when he returned to the crash site to look for survivors, a large thunderstorm had moved into the area forcing him to leave. So Zeitler hid out for several hours while awaiting rescue, and during that time, he had to kill two people who came too close. “In the meantime, Malmberg had returned to Vientiane from the scene of the crash which was definitely located about five miles from LS-95 on a heading of 020 degrees. He was immediately brought to the Ambassador who had arrived at Air America’s radio room in Vientiane and had already been

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276 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.52.
brieved by the Air Attaché, his designated air rescue chief and coordinator, as well as by Air America’s Flight Information Center and Senior Operations Manager. Malmberg “made an excellent presentation to the Ambassador by drawing diagrams of the terrain, position of the H-19, where ground fire was coming from, what the problems were and his recommendations that only napalm would do the job. Bullets and rockets alone in this heavily jungled area would not drive out the intruders who were no doubt surely at this moment creeping up on our American pilot from H-19.”

Already before, some of Air America’s T-28 pilots had been called to the airport for stand by. “The Ambassador listened attentively to Malmberg, asked the proper questions, and was the center of a quiet but earnest crowd of about ten very concerned individuals, including myself [= Dave Hickler speaking]. Finally, after a quiet moment of reflection, he said: ‘OK, let’s go’. ‘Napalm, if it must be but no, repeat, no villages or houses are to be hit’ ‘Jungles and troop positions, but no villages.’ Later the Ambassador individually briefed each pilot that ‘no napalm to be used on villages – gun and troops positions only’. Our three special pilots were ready, eager, willing to go – they only wanted the approval to go. And go they did.”

Those 3 T-28 pilots were Joe Hazen (lead man), John Wiren (wing man), and Rick Byrne (wing man). This was at about 1600L and the T-28s had about 40 minutes to arrive at LS-95. In the meantime, Vientiane had also sent out Fred Walker and Andy Anderson in Caribou “443” to fly high cover. Dave Hickler continues his report to Air America’s President: “We had coffee and waited for the action. It came. Our T-28 pilots did their job, our Hotel moved in and picked up our Hotel 19 pilot and took him to Alternate [= Long Tieng] where he was picked up by a Helio and taken to T08 [= Udon] and to where we dispatched a Ten-Two to take him to Korat. Our information at this writing is that he has a bullet hole through his foot or ankle and has burns covering 25 per cent of his body and that he is suffering from shock.”

T-28 lead man Joe Hazen recalls this rescue mission as follows: “On 18 August 1964, I was flying Caribou 851 in the L-25 area and was called back to Vientiane by company radio, arriving there somewhere around 1500. I was quickly brought in to the presence of Ambassador Unger, Dave Hickler and others. John Wiren had also been called back to Vientiane from whatever he was doing and Rick Byrne had the day off, so the company sent a car/bus to his residence to bring him to the airport. I think we were the only T-28 qualified pilots available that day as the others may have been on vacation or elsewhere. We were briefed on the situation and were told not to use the napalm unless absolutely necessary. I did not want the napalm at all as it is not that effective in the jungle, is not accurate, (consider Bill on the ground), and if we did not use it, would have to land with it, which could be dangerous if the tank(s) broke loose on landing. The Ambassador kept talking about not using the napalm and I finally had to remind him it was getting late and we had best get going. We launched about 1600 or so. We got to the crash site and established contact with Fred Walker in a Caribou and the rescue helicopter, flown by Jack Conner. There was another AAM aircraft in the area with UHF capability, Caribou or C-123, who kept interjecting into the rescue effort and was told by Jack to shut up. No more was heard from him. I checked with John Wiren and he recalled we made our strafing runs from NE to SW in a left turn pattern. I recall the left turns, but not clear on the direction, so will have to go with

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277 “Personal observation”, letter sent by D. H. Hickler to the President of Air America, that is document no. GML-64-065H dated 22 August 1964, p. 1, in: UTD/Hickler/B3 cont. I.
278 “Personal observation”, letter sent by D. H. Hickler to the President of Air America, that is document no. GML-64-065H dated 22 August 1964, p. 2, in: UTD/Hickler/B3 cont. I.
279 Note added by Joe Hazen to document GML-64-065H of 22 August 1964, kindly faxed to the author by Joe Hazen on 9 May 2005.
280 “Personal observation”, letter sent by D. H. Hickler to the President of Air America, that is document no. GML-64-065H dated 22 August 1964, p. 3, in: UTD/Hickler/B3 cont. I.
281 Probably Air America C-123 “525” who had reported that the T-28 was down and who had also located the ill-fated UH-34D H-19 (Rescue Mission Report no.44, 18 August 64, AFHRA file no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson).
his recollection. Bill Zeitler told me later we came down so low he could see our faces. Jack picked up Bill and was on his way to LS-20A. We in the T-28s were headed back to Vientiane, although John Wiren recalls he had a T-28 (not flown by AAM) join on him and went back to look for the downed T-28, which was why Bill Zeitler was there. [...] We all made it back to Vientiane, landing with the napalm tanks attached. I know I made a smooth landing and assume the other two did also, as nothing broke loose”.282 At 1720L Billy Zeitler was picked up by Air America’s UH-34 H-20, piloted by Jack Conner and Stan Wilson; the downed Thai pilot did not survive; he was killed rather then surrender.283 Later in the day, at about 1820L, there was another last strike at the area, this time flown by 4 USAF F-100s from Takhli.284 They were directed by Fred Walker in his Caribou “443” who was still on scene. One of the F-100s, “32”, crashed during that mission, but the pilot was saved by a CIC helicopter.285 At that time, provisions for rescue escort were still informal: “The senior controller at the Air America operations center in Vientiane obtained what he could for this mission,” and the F-100 pilots from Takhli were totally untrained for this type of mission.286

That mission had particular consequences, as Ambassador Unger knew that by sending out Air America pilots to drop napalm, he had acted without authority and even against his orders, because “he had specific orders not to send out those AAM pilots! He was instructed to secure Washington approval prior to authorizing this sort of military.”287 Unfortunately, early USAF reports do twist the truth to the detriment of Air America. In the CHECO Report Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia (1961-66), we read: “In August [64], the Ambassador withdrew authority for the use of Air America pilots in RESCAP after a sensitive situation developed involving two Thai pilots who bailed out over Laos”, quoting as source a cable dated 18 August 64 from the US Embassy to the Secretary of State.”288 This is wrong. The incident raised considerable concern in Washington, but Unger insisted on the emergency situation that had forced him to act without authorization. While the CHECO Report is wrong, USAF author Earl A. Tilford, Jr (Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, Washington: Center for Air Force History 1980) is right: “In the next two days enemy gunners bagged two more T-28s and the crews were not rescued. From the earliest days of the air war in Southeast Asia it was apparent that search and rescue had to be timely and well organized if it was to succeed. To improve the rescue capability, Ambassador Unger asked the State Department for discretionary authority for use of Air America helicopters and planes for search and rescue whenever he felt the situation warranted such action. The Air Rescue Service HH-43Bs at Nakhon Phanom were limited in range, therefore limited in their usefulness. Royal Laotian Air Force rescue capabilities were negligible, and language differences would have made proper coordination among rescue forces, airborne controllers, the Air Support Operations Center in Udorn, the Air Operations Center in Vientiane, and the downed pilot impossible. Additionally, Air America pilots had a knowledge of flying conditions in Laos that came from

282 E-mail dated 16 October 2005, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.
283 Leary, Outline - Air America in Laos, 1964, for 18 August 64, pp. 29-31, in: UTD/Leary/B1: Aircraft accidents 1964, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2: Aircraft destroyed or lost, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2; this accident is also described in: Robbins, Air America, pp. 146/7.
284 On 15 August 64, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had decided that in rescue missions, “no more than four rpt four U.S. RESCAP aircraft can be employed over target at any one time” (JCS, flash of 151607Z Aug 64 to CINCPAC, DDRS document no. 242131, kindly provided by Harold Colson).
285 Leary, Outline - Air America in Laos, 1964, for 18 August 64, pp. 29-31, in: UTD/Leary/B1; “Personal observation”, letter sent by D. H. Hickler to the President of Air America, that is document no. GML-64-065H dated 22 August 1964, pp. 4/5, in: UTD/Hickler/B3 cont. I.
286 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.65.
287 “Personal observation”, letter sent by D. H. Hickler to the President of Air America, that is document no. GML-64-065H dated 22 August 1964, p. 3, in: UTD/Hickler/B3 cont. I.
The RLAF had always helped on an unofficial basis, but “Ambassador Unger wanted to offer the pilots assurances that they were not going to be abandoned.”What Ambassador Unger had really done on 18 August 64 was to send in Air America-piloted T-28s and to allow them to use napalm if necessary, without having the authority to do this, i.e. without a prior authorization from Washington, and even against his orders. On 18 August 64, Ambassador Unger sent the telex reproduced here to Secretary of State Dean Rusk stating that he had to do this as it was an emergency: “Regret need for immediate decision prevented me from obtaining prior authorization for use AA pilots in FAR operation,” recommending at the end to invent a cover story should an Air America pilot be downed and captured. In his reply to the Ambassador dated 18 August 64, the Secretary of State underlined that “use of American pilots in T-28’s or other combat role in Laos involves considerations on which highest level responsibility in Washington must be engaged.”

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Telex dated 18 August 64, sent by US Ambassador Unger to the Secretary of State (copy kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen on 25 March 2013)

The following day, on 19 August 64, Secretary of State Rusk cabled to Ambassador Unger, “would welcome your suggestions as to how T-28 operations during weeks ahead could best be used as to maintain above advantages while at same time minimizing probable calls upon U.S. planes and personnel.” So, on 20 August 1964, in a highest priority cable to the State Department (Embtel no. 337), Ambassador Unger again explained his action, asking at the

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290 Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia*, p.53.
291 Telex dated 18 August 64, sent by US Ambassador Unger to the Secretary of State (copy kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen on 25 March 2013).
292 Deptel no. 171 of 18 August 64, Rusk to American Embassy Vientiane, in: DDRS no.246917, kindly supplied by Harold Colson.
293 Deptel no. 174 of 19 August 64, Rusk to American Embassy Vientiane, in: DDRS no.235535, kindly supplied by Harold Colson.

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same time for an advance authorization to use Air America pilots in T-28 SAR operations: “Recent events (Embtel 314) have pointed up what we believe to be inadequacy present guidelines for Search and Rescue operations. Specifically believe eye require advance authorization for use Air America pilots in T-28 SAR operations if they are to have reasonable chance of success. SAR operations are one of most critical factors in maintaining morale hard pressed RLAF and Thai T-28 crews and civilian aircraft pilots (Air America and Bird & Sons). Eye am confident there would be sharp reduction of effectiveness all air operations if pilots were not persuaded we were prepared to take all reasonable measures to rescue them once they were down. Time factor and proper coordination by rescue control aircraft are two crucial factors in effecting rapid rescue of downed pilots. Chances of rescue decline sharply after first hour and steadily thereafter. Air America pilots much more effective in rescue operations than Thai or Lao, who have limited command English and cannot be properly coordinated by control aircraft. This in turn makes it difficult provide proper escort and cover for helicopters without which choppers are usually sitting ducks in these situations. Eye fear, too, that helicopter pilots may soon decline accept risks which, under best of circumstances, are great, unless they know operation is being effectively supported by Air America pilots in T-28s. In light of this and the decisive role played by air operations in recent military successes, of which good SAR a critical element, eye hope Dept will grant me discretionary authority to use Air America pilots in T-28s for SAR operations when eye consider this indispensable to success of operation and with understanding that whenever situation permitted eye would seek specific authorization from Washington.”

In the final 2 paragraphs of this telegram, Ambassador Unger then asked for the authorization to use napalm when necessary and practicable without any danger for civilians. Finally, he asked for support by US jet aircraft as cover “when we consider they might be effective in SAR operations. They too have played a critical role in maintaining effective SAR.”

The very same day, on 20 August 1964, Ambassador Unger sent another cable to the Department of State (Embtel 338), this time a Joint Embassy/AIRA/ARMA message with info to CINCPAC. His main argument was that the T-28s were also needed for other military operations, so that both Air America and the US military were needed for SAR operations:

“125. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State

Vientiane, August 20, 1964, 7 p.m.
338. Joint Embassy/AIRA/ARMA message. Deptel 174. I do not see much prospect of reducing calls on US planes and personnel for SAR operations if we hope to exploit the advantages of our T–28 strike force in present military situation. SAR is a crucial factor in maintaining morale of pilots and there is no prospect at this juncture of establishing effective SAR procedures without use of both civilian (Air America) and US military personnel. See Embtel 337. […]

Unger”

As Embtel 338 then explains, the other operations that also needed the T-28 strike force were military operations against the Pathet Lao (PL):

“As Embtel 338 then explains, the other operations that also needed the T-28 strike force were military operations against the Pathet Lao (PL):

“Even if Muong Soui area is stabilized and no counter-attacks in PL occur there, or elsewhere, we still foresee need maintain military pressure against PL, e.g., Route 7, Thatom and panhandle, in which T–28s must play important role. Moreover we must maintain strength which continued T–28 operations provide for Souvanna Phouma in current negotiations. […] As refiel points out T–28s have proved be decisive factor in recent military operations. They have carried out air operations to destroy PL bases, interdict supply lines, provide close support for ground operations and provide visual and photo recce. They have...”

294 Embtel 337 of 20 August 64, Unger to Dept. of State, DDRS-270481, kindly provided by Harold Colson.
295 Embtel 337 of 20 August 64, Unger to Dept. of State, DDRS-270481, kindly provided by Harold Colson.
296 See https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d125 .
also played important role SAR operations. In many respects amount and effectiveness hostile fire here is much greater than in South Viet-Nam.”

On 26 August 64, Secretary Rusk agreed to Unger’s request:

“127. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos

Washington, August 26, 1964, 5 p.m.

193. Vientiane’s 337 and 338. We agree with your assessment of importance SAR operations, that Air America pilots can play critically important role, and that SAR efforts should not discriminate between rescuing Americans, Thais and Lao. You are also hereby granted as requested discretionary authority to use AA pilots in T–28’s for SAR operations when you consider this indispensable to success of operation and with understanding that you will seek advance Washington authorization wherever situation permits. […] Rusk.”

With this document, Air America had the authority and task to rescue US military flyers downed in Laos not only by order of the US Ambassador to Laos, but also with permission from the US Department of State, including the right to use T-28s. As can be seen, the statement of the CHECO Report made immediately after the phrase quoted above – “subsequently, the fighter support was to be furnished by Thai-based WATER PUMP/RLAF aircraft […] and Navy A-1H’s on rotation” – is wrong again: Ambassador Unger had asked for and was given the advance authorization to use Air America-piloted T-28s only in SAR missions, not in attack missions. That is why, in later years, Air America-piloted T-28s were mostly used in SAR missions. And, as has been seen above, in Embtel 338 of 20 August 64, Ambassador Unger had asked for “use of both civilian (Air America) and US military personnel” in SAR operations in Laos; that is how Water Pump, RLAF, and US Navy aircraft really fit into the picture.

The way the CHECO Report says it, however, sounds like a first step in withdrawing Air America from the SAR scene in Laos. Apparently, such an idea must have pleased the US military at that time. First, CINCPAC was opposed to giving 4 more UH-34Ds to Air America for doing the rescue work, then, the Rescue Mission Reports mostly reduce the role of Air America to a shallow “numerous sorties and hours flown by non-military aircraft not included in this report.” Finally, the CORONA HARVEST Report dated 31 January 1969 about USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1954-31 March 1968 twists the truth even worse when, based upon the CHECO Report quoted above, it says about the role that Air America had in SAR operations: “Since Air America was supposedly a private company, their continued operations could possibly have led to an embarrassing incident for the U.S. government. To preclude this occurring, authority was withdrawn for the use of Air America pilots in support of rescue operations.” What a nonsense!

On 29 August 64, Ambassador Unger thanked the State Department for the discretionary authority to use US pilots in T-28s for rescue missions. At the same time, he proposed to base

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297 Embtel 338 of 20 August 64, Ambassador Unget/AIRA/ARMA to Dept. of State with info to CINCPAC. See https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d125.
298 Castle, At war, pp. 74-76.
299 Complete document at: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d127.
301 Embtel 338 of 20 August 64, Ambassador Unget/AIRA/ARMA to Dept. of State with info to CINCPAC. See https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d125.
302 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, pp.51/2.
303 USAF Rescue Mission Report no.594 of 14-15 June 1965, AFHRA file no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson, but also in many other Rescue Mission Reports.
5 A-1Hs at Udorn, which could be flown by Air America pilots.305 But this proposal was refused.306 The experience of using T-28s in rescue missions soon led to a new task for the T-28s: Although those aircraft had been brought to Udorn in March 64 with a detachment of the 1st Air Commando Wing in order to be used for training the Royal Lao Air Force in operations and maintenance (program Water Pump) and then, to fly strafing missions against the Pathet Lao,307 they could of course also be used as a fighter bomber cover for rescue missions flown by other Air America aircraft.308 This type of missions required quick reactions, so most probably the Air America aircraft that were closest to the crash site were requested to do the job, which, in that case, probably meant one of the C-123s, Caribous, and Helio Couriers assigned to contract no. AID-439-342. But the UH-34Ds, which were vital for picking up the downed airmen all came from the Madriver-contract, that is from AF62(531)-1758. And already the original Madriver-contract, dated 1 July 61, had called for services “in the interest of National Defense, which because of military considerations, should not be disclosed” to be flown by Air America UH-34Ds.309 As to the T-28s, they belonged to the USAF’s Air Commando Detachment called Water Pump or to the USAF’s Military Assistance Program for Thailand/Laos, but were flown by Air America pilots in the Tango Program.310 Since that time, Air America had a permanent new task: the rescue of US military pilots shot down over Laos, and so, in July 64, the Company received 4 more UH-34Ds for rescue work and the contract between Air America and DEPCHEF was changed to include military rescue work.311

“In September 1964, 2AD delegated authority to commit U.S. forces into Laos for search and rescue escort and air cover missions to the deputy commander at Udorn. This authority was to be exercised, however, only upon request from the US Ambassador in Laos, and 2AD was to be notified immediately upon decision to launch the SAR forces. The division also was to be kept informed of the progress of SAR missions.”312 The document that transmits that decision underlines that this has been done “upon request of Ambassador Laos”.313 There may have been at least 2 reasons for this. While the Commander 2AD was based at Tan Son Nhu in South Vietnam, the office of the Deputy Commander 2AD Thailand was at Udorn, so closer to SAR operations in Laos. On the other hand, this distinction clearly marks out the sphere of the Ambassador: Any requests coming from Udorn or the AOC in Vientiane for SAR operations in Laos had to be taken care of by Air America, because this was their job. When, however, a request came for rescue work outside Laos, Air America’s assistance was

305 Cable of 29 August 64, Ambassador Unger to Secretary of State, in: DDRS, document no. 241632, kindly supplied by Harold Colson.
306 In an undated Memorandum written to the Secretary of State probably in July 64, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William P. Bundy states: “Unger has been urging this [that is an operation against Route 7] for some time, with a proposal for Air America pilots using the A-1Hs out of Vietnam. Although the JCS came out for this [...], we have all felt that the better way to do this would be through the Air America pilots in T-28s” (US Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, vol. XXVIII, Laos, document 116, in: http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d116).
307 Dorr/Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, pp. 30-32; Trest, Air Commando One, p. 10.
308 Leary, CIA Air operations, pp. 60/1.
309 Castle, At war, p. 44, who quotes from the original Madriver-contract.
310 See John Wiren, “It takes five to Tango”, in: Air America Log, vol. XVII, no. 4, p. 5.
311 Castle, At war, pp. 70/1; Leary, Outline - Air America in Laos, 1964, pp. 21+14.
what Ambassador Sullivan later called “actions [that] have been voluntarily ad hoc,”\textsuperscript{314} and what even later was called “Air America upholding the Airmen’s bond”.\textsuperscript{315}

“Although the USAF rescue operation capability continued to grow through the end of 1964 and throughout 1965, Air America had provided the backbone for the humanitarian operation in the early months. In the first year of operation, 1 June 64 – 1 June 65, Air America made 21 successful recoveries in Laos. In that period, USAF rescued five pilots in Laos; four in March 65 and one in April.”\textsuperscript{316} A list compiled from Air America and USAF rescue logs maintained at the Udorn ASOG gives the following picture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>AIRCRAFT TYPE</th>
<th>PILOT OR CREW STATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 June 64</td>
<td>RF-88</td>
<td>Captured and escaped. Pilot killed and rescued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 June 64</td>
<td>F-101</td>
<td>Air America Rescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 July 64</td>
<td>UB-34D</td>
<td>Air America Rescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Aug 64</td>
<td>UB-34D</td>
<td>Air America Rescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Aug 64</td>
<td>F-100</td>
<td>Air America Rescue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of aircraft crews downed and rescued in Laos 1 June 64 to 24 July 65\textsuperscript{317}

\textsuperscript{314} Telegram dated 22 June 1965, Ambassador Sullivan to Admiral Sharp, DDRS no. 272784, kindly supplied by Harold Colson.
“The first large-scale search and rescue effort of the Indochina war took place on November 18 and 19, 1964, and involved Air Force, Navy and Air America aircraft. It began when Ball 03, one of two F-100s escorting a Yankee Team reconnaissance mission, was shot down while trading fire with an enemy antiaircraft gun position. Ball 03’s wingman called ‘dropkick’ (a distress signal used in place of mayday to confuse any listening enemy troops) to the Air America Air Operations Center in Vientiane at 11:27 in the morning. Ball 03 crashed just south of Ban Senphap in central Laos near the North Vietnamese border. The Air America operations officer at the Air Operations Center diverted one of their C-123s to reconnoiter the area and act as airborne controller until Air Force HU-16s arrived from Korat. [...] Before darkness temporarily ended the rescue efforts, the HU-16 coordinated thirteen F-105s, eight F-100s, six Navy A-1Es, two Air Rescue Service HH-43s, and a pair of Air America H-34s in a concerted effort to find and rescue the downed pilot.”

The following day, the wreckage was sighted, and “the on-scene commander contacted Nakhon Phanom and ordered helicopters and their propeller-driven escorts. However, poor weather conditions kept the helicopters grounded for nearly two hours before a pair of Air America H-34s took off and joined four American piloted T-28s out of Savannakhet to provide escort. Tacky 44, a second HU-16, relieved Tacky 45 as the on-scene commander and began to control the pickup attempt. Upon arrival at the crash site the copilot of one of the Air America choppers was lowered on a cable. He found that the flyer had apparently died of injuries sustained when he landed on the karst.”

“On November 21 [1964], an RF-101 on a Yankee Team mission was lost forty miles east of Thakhek. The pilot ejected and came down in a tropical rain forest. An Air America H-34 happened to be in the area and recovered the survivor within an hour. Within thirty-six hours the Air Force was forced to rely on Air America twice to perform aircrew recovery missions. At the end of 1964 it was evident that the Air Rescue Service was not able to handle the rescue mission in Laos.”

Other SAR missions that were covered by Air America-piloted T-28s included those flown on 13 and 14 January 65 to cover the rescue of USAF F-100 Captain Charles F. Ferguson or several missions flown in March and April 65. On 14 May 65, an Air America C-123, 2 UH-34Ds and 6 T-28s had a mission to Sam Neua, as a Hmong team had reported that a US pilot was captured in a cave near Sam Neua city; one Air America UH-34D was hit while picking up part of the team, and one of the T-28s was hit while attacking the gun emplacements. Another successful rescue was that of Lt. Paul Ilg: On 3 June 65, he was shot down in his A-4C Skyhawk over Laos. On 4 June, Joe Hazen flew Caribou “392” during the rescue mission, and on 5 June Caribou “401”; on both days, his First Officer was Bill

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318 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.54.
319 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.55; see also Ambassador Unger to Dept. of State, flash of 19 November 64, DDRS document no. 24164, kindly provided by Harold Colson.
320 So this was another case of Air America upholding the airmen’s bond!
321 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.55.
322 Leary, Outline - Air America in Laos, 1965, pp. 3+11.
323 Leary, Outline - Air America in Laos, 1965, p. 11. “The team said they followed the pilot and his captors to a cave in the village of Sam Neua. While three team members remained around Sam Neua to check on guards and prison routine, the other agents slipped away to the rendezvous point. These men reached the designated site just as the Air America armada arrived. An H-34 hovered above the ground while the men scrambled aboard, but before the helicopter could clear the trees, 37-mm antiaircraft fire erupted from the surrounding jungle. The chopper was hit but managed to get back to a Lima Site. Meanwhile, the C-123 control ship directed the T-28s in an attack on the gun emplacements. Enemy fire severely damaged one of the planes, but the pilot elected to stay with the aircraft rather than eject deep inside enemy territory. The pilot made a ‘dead stick’ landing at Lima Site 36 where the T-28 careened off the end of the runway and flipped over. Although trapped in an inverted cockpit, the pilot dug his way out. The following day an Air America task force returned to the area to pick up the remaining team members. The team members never made it to the rendezvous point, and all efforts to contact them failed” (Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.68).

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Zeitler. On 4 June 65, T-28s flown by Air America pilots – including Romes and Crafts – took out gun emplacements near the crash site. The T-28s made several runs on the target, but they could not get a good look at it due to the nature of the terrain; Joe Potter was shot down in his T-28 on 4 June; and on 5 June, Ilg was picked up. Similar missions are known to have been flown on 14-15 July 65 and on 16 September 65, just to mention a few of them.

Since the first half of 1965, when the air war expanded into the northwestern portion of North Vietnam, these missions became even more difficult. “Increased operations in Laos and strikes against North Vietnam placed new demands on SAR forces in the spring of 1965. Although Air America rescue operations in NVN [= North Vietnam] were not specifically authorized, on several occasions, Air America pilots crossed the border to make pick ups.”

Around June 1965, the USAF introduced some improvements to Search and Rescue operations in Laos. First, “in June 1965 three HC-54s, on temporary duty from the 79th Air Rescue Squadron at Guam and the 36th Air Rescue Squadron at Tachikawa, were sent to Udorn. The Hu-16s, which had recently moved from Korat to get closer to northern Laos and North Vietnam, were transferred to Da Nang. From there the Albatrosses flew rescue missions in NVN [= North Vietnam] were not specifically authorized, on several occasions, Air America pilots crossed the border to make pick ups.”

Joe Hazen’s letter dated 8 September 2002 sent to Heinie Aderholt, faxed to the author on 24 September 2005; Joe Hazen continues: “On 4 June we took heavy fire from AA (proximity fuses) as we circled the area. Why we weren’t hit is a miracle as we were ringed. The AFS (kicker), name unknown, reported flak on the tail and Bill and I could see the black puffs around us. VADM Ilg can verify this as he was hiding in a corn field and on his emergency radio told me some heavy stuff was being moved and to get away. Fortunately, before the shooting started, I was able to direct him to an area SW of Sam Neua, a burn spot on the hillside where we would attempt a pickup the next day. – On 5 June, I was Victor Control, and in the afternoon met up with 4 A-1H aircraft from the USS Midway. I was in contact with Lt. Ilg, call sign Beefeater, and he said there were some huts on the ridge line of the hill and was concerned that there may be enemy in them. I directed the flight leader to take out the huts, which was done with 20mm cannon. Lt. Ilg then crossed over the ridge where an Air America H-34 spotted his flare (second shot, as I recall), lowered the hoist and pulled him up.”

Don Romes remembers providing cover for the pickup: Ilg was near a village and popped smoke, and a helicopter went in to pick him up. The helicopter pilot reported to see a cloud of dust heading up a road toward the village and believed it might be an armoured car. When the cloud neared the village, Romes made a low pass, only to discover that the cloud of dust was being made by a frightened horse (Donald R. Romes, telephone interview made by William M. Leary on 19 May 1990; notes of Prof. Leary preserved at UTD/Leary/B43FS).


Leary, Outline - Air America in Laos, 1965, pp. 15/16; probably this was the rescue mission described by Tom Hoppe in Davis, Across the Mekong, pp. 100-2.

On 14-15 July 65, two downed airmen, pilot Lt. Donald V. Boecker and his bombardier/navigator, Lt. Don Eaton, whose A-6A Intruder belonged to Air Wing Seven of the USS Independence had been shot down, were rescued by an Air America UH-34D that was accompanied by 2 Air America-piloted T-28s; Lt. Eaton was picked up on a tall grass-covered ridge near the Sam Neua highway, then, while looking for Lt. Boecker, gunfire came up from the nearby jungle area, but it was silenced by the T-28s. When Lt. Boecker was finally spotted, “the 100 ft hoist was about ten feet short of reaching the ground and Boecker must have had to do some climbing to reach the hoist. When I was told by my flight mechanic that we had retrieved the pilot, I started to move out of the area. As it turned out, Boecker was actually hanging from the hoist outside the aircraft. […] After a few moments I was told that he was definitely in the cabin. The total time in hove over Boecker must have been 20-30 minutes” (Samuel T. Jordan, “All in a day’s work”, at: http://www.air-america.org/Articles/Jordan.shtm).

Joe Potter was the pilot in the La Khang (LS-36) area (Davis, Across the Mekong, p. 114).

Leary, CIA Air operations, p. 61.


These were HC-54Ds 42-72658 from Guam as well as 42-72702 and 42-72713 from Tachikawa (e-mail dated 22 May 2016, kindly sent to the author by Harold Colson; AFHRA, microfilms AVH-1 and AVH-2).
missions over the Gulf of Tonkin for the next two years.\footnote{333}{Tilford, \textit{Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia}, p.64.} “In August 1965, to meet the needs of rescue escort over northern Laos and North Vietnam, the 602d Fighter Squadron (Commando) rotated its A-1Es from Bien Hoa to Udorn. Two TAC CH-3C helicopters had, meanwhile, arrived at Nakhon Phanom on July 5, and two HH-43Bs moved up from the Mekong River town to Udorn where they were joined by two factory-fresh HH-43Fs. The addition of the A-1Es meant that with the HC-54s in place, and the HU-16s operating out of Da Nang to cover the water rescue mission, a full rescue task force was in Southeast Asia.”\footnote{334}{As it seems, as early as late June 1965, at least one of the USAF HH-43s was also stationed at Na Kham (LS-36),\footnote{335}{Tilford, \textit{Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia}, p.67.} at least on a temporary basis.}

On 14 June 65, USAF F-105D 62-4220 from Korat was shot down “about 30 miles northeast of Sam Neua, just inside North Vietnam itself.” The pilot ejected, landed in a village and 15 minutes later, contact with him was lost, as he had been captured.\footnote{336}{Hobson, \textit{Vietnam air losses}, p.22. The official rescue report (mission no.594) does not say that he went down in North Vietnam, but that he “was not seen by Rescue HC-54D or Air America helicopters that spent one hour in area searching”. So the search was suspended on 15 June 65, also after “numerous sorties and hours flown by non-military aircraft not included in this report.”\footnote{337}{On 16 June 65, General Simler, 2AD sent a cable to Col. Murphy, Deputy Commander 2AD Thai, stating: “You are aware of extent we rely on Air America to satisfy SAR requirements in Laos and adjacent DRV areas. We have been requesting prepositioning SAR forces in closest practical proximity to specified areas through daily messages to you and AIRA. Two recent incidents of delayed response to SAR requirement by Air America reveals that aircraft are not being prepositioned and held in readiness for purpose of SAR. Ready response of SAR aircraft is essential, cannot afford delays associated with after the past assembly of forces. Desire that you coordinate with the AIRA and press for the commitment and prepositioning of helicopters for specific purpose of engaging SAR endeavor during periods announced in Ops and frag orders.”\footnote{338}{Evidently, these allegations were unjust, first because, after the war had started in Vietnam, 2 Air America helicopters were permanently on alert for that kind of pick up: Also, whenever bombing missions were scheduled in Laos, there were usually 2 helicopters standing by; sometimes 2 pilots were required per helicopter and sometimes only one. These allegations were also unjust because a UH-34D prepositioned at Na Khan would probably not be able to reach North Vietnam within 15 minutes. In 1965, there were 2 Air America UH-34Ds working out of Na Khan (LS-36) or Houei Ma (LS-107), and their crews had to remain on standby there and maintain a listening watch on the HF radio.\footnote{339}{Sometimes, those Na Khan-based rescue helicopters were fast enough on scene to recover a downed pilot even before the rest of the rescue fleet arrived from Vientiane, as it happened to UH-34D pilots Charles Davis and John Grassi on 16 September 65.\footnote{340}{But it seems that the real reason for this complaint was that higher echelons of the USAF wanted to station their own rescue helicopters in northern Laos. In early July 65, Col. John R. Murphy, Deputy Commander 2AD, Thai, informed General George B. Simler, 2 AD about the USAF SAR status in Laos.}}}}

Across the Mekong

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“1. No USAF SAR currently operating or staging from Laos. SAR H-43 alerts being run from Udorn and Nakhon Phanom.
2. Familiarization flights conducted 27 June – 1 July 65 served to show H-43 temporary stop-gap at best due to operational limitations. Also, 10-20 days terrain familiarization required for aircrew to operate through mountains without a guide is experience of Air America and confirmed by USAF pilots. This is due to non-production of small scale maps and requirement for absolute familiarity of passes, box canyons, etc. to avoid being trapped by weather or wandering over hostile forces.
3. Status of operations by Air America and Bird and Son unchanged. They will continue to perform in-country operations as requested. Out of country will be furnished to realistic distances and locations in emergency when requested, but strongly desired USAF perform. Out of country may be permitted no longer than reasonable time for us to become operation with CH-3 and crews familiar with terrain.
4. Unfortunately all current H-43 aircrews TDY and due for rotation next 4-6 weeks. Nevertheless it is recommended that the H-43’s be placed now on rotational deployment to Site 98 for prepositioning forward on RT missions. This will not only provide knowledge and experience to be passed on to later CH-3 operations, but will assure AMEMB [= American Embassy] Laos our intentions.”

“In the last half of 1965, USAF A-1E’s on rotation from bases in South Vietnam, were staging at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom to provide SAR RESCAP. F-105’s and F-4C’s were also used for the vital mission. In the event an airplane was shot down in Laos, all aircraft in the vicinity took part in the search and rescue operation. […] In November, seven HH-3C’s were added to the SAR inventory in Thailand and authorization had been obtained to pre-position the new helicopters at forward operating bases in Laos. Two HH-3C’s were stationed at Nakhon Phanom, two were maintained at Site 36 and three were kept at Udorn.”

One of the CH-3Cs loaned from TAC was lost on 5 November and the other one returned to the Tactical Air Command in early January 66, but by the end of December 1965, there were 6 HH-3Es at Udorn that were assigned to SAR flights. Later, the USAF Rescue Control Center at Udorn was usually tasked to also position helicopters at Long Tieng and at Na Khang.

It seems to have been this new situation of a USAF Rescue unit being installed in Thailand that, probably in early August 65, apparently caused the US Embassy at Vientiane to ask the Department of State, how to proceed with Air America rescue operations, as there were also the Jolly Green Giants (“Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters”). The answer was given on 5 August 1965 in a “Joint State/Defense Message” that can be read online: “Political factors require that Air America helicopters continue to assume responsibility for all SAR operations in Laos”, while the “Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters” were to be used for rescue missions in North Vietnam and only “for temporary period […] in extremis for SAR missions in Laos, operating either form Site 36 or directly from bases in Thailand.”

At the same time, this telegram to the American Embassy at Vientiane gives an interesting insight into the chain of command in case of an SAR mission in Laos. After the Bay of Pigs failure, President Kennedy had determined to make the Department of State the central point,
below the President, in the conduct of foreign affairs. On 29 May 61, Kennedy sent a letter to each US Ambassador working abroad stating that they were in charge of all operations of the US Diplomatic Mission, also including “representatives of all other United States agencies”, that is also including all CIA operations. In that letter, only the US military forces operating in the field were excluded, provided that “such forces are under the command of a United States area military commander.” But officially, Laos was neutral and there was no US military in Laos, and so there was no such “area military commander” either. Consequently, by this letter of President Kennedy, the US Ambassador to Laos became the controlling authority for all aspects of the war in Laos. He was the man who really was in charge of the entire war in

Joint State/Defense message dated 5 August 65, sent to the US Embassy at Vientiane

Laos – a situation that made Admiral John S. McCain, Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), observe that “Laos is a SECSTATE [Department of State] theater of war.” So, this “Joint State/Defense Message” was signed by Secretary of State Rusk and sent from the Dept. of State to the American Embassy at Vientiane.

But even the distinction made in the “Joint State/Defense Message” of 5 August 65 between US military pilots downed inside Laos to be rescued by Air America and US military pilots downed in North Vietnam to be rescued by Thailand-based USAF helicopters often was only theory. Of course, there were a lot of cases, when US airmen who had been shot down in North Vietnam, were rescued by USAF planes: “A typical search and rescue for the period occurred on 23 June 23, 1965, when Maj. Robert Wilson’s F-105 was hit by groundfire while on a mission over southwestern North Vietnam. Wilson could not fly his damaged Thunder-
chief over a ridgeline, so he ejected. After a normal descent […] he retrieved his URC-11 survival radio. Wilson contacted the HC-54 airborne rescue command post called ‘Crown’ which, in response to his mayday, had moved off its orbit along the Thai-Laotian border and now flew nearby. Half an hour later four Air Force A-1 Skyraiders droned into view and contacted the survivor. Soon the pilots spotted Wilson’s chute and, after radioing the downed pilot’s exact position to Crown, flew to an orbit several miles away so as not to reveal Wilson’s location to any enemy troops that might be lurking nearby. […] Ninety minutes after Wilson’s ejection, an HH-43, from a forward operating base in Laos, showed up. Wilson fired a small flare that was part of his survival equipment. The Huskie pilots spotted it and moved their chopper directly overhead while the parajumper lowered the penetrator through the foliage. Wilson grabbed it, strapped himself on, and began his ascent to the helicopter.”

However, even rescue missions flown into North Vietnam often were the result of a cooperation between the US military and Air America, if the USAF asked Air America to help them. A particularly hard long-range mission into North Vietnam took place on 20 June 65, when a USAF F-4C Phantom was shot down at Son La, North Vietnam, about sixty miles north of the Lao-North Vietnam border. Two Air America UH-34Ds, H-22 and H-33, departed from Na Khang (LS-36), guided by Colonel Thong, the area commander of the Hmong forces of northern Laos. On the place, operations were controlled by an Air America C-123, and cover fire was supplied by two F-4Cs. The two UH-34Ds took heavy ground fire, in which Colonel Thong was wounded, but made it back to Houei Ma (LS-107), from where he was flown by an Air America Helio to the USAF hospital in Korat, where he died a couple of days later. It was only the next day that USAF Capt. Briggs, the rear seat navigator of the downed F-4C, was finally rescued by two other Air America UH-34Ds (H-21 and H-14), this time covered by several A-1Es. The pilot of the downed F-4C, Capt. Paul Kari, was taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese and not released until 1973.

![Air America UH-34D H-22 somewhere in Laos during the mid-sixties (UTD/Wiren/B2)](image-url)

349 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, pp.66/7.
350 Report by George Carroll in: Davis, Across the Mekong, pp. 86-90; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.128; Logbook of OL-B Rescue Control Center, Udorn, National Archives, kindly submitted by Harold Colson on 19 May 2016.
Thanks to the efforts of Harold Colson, the reports for this rescue mission, issued by Det.3, PARC (Pacific Air Rescue Center) and preserved at the AFHRA at Maxwell AFB, have come to light. In the Opening report of 20 June 65, we read among others: “6. Alerting agency and DTG [Date/Time Group] ARS [Air Rescue Squadron] initially notified: Target mission commander notified prepositioned ARS orbit[ing] aircraft on guard channel of emergency (Mayday) in his area. Time 20/1125 hours.” So the Mayday call was sent to the orbiting HC-54. Then: “9. Type and time of initial SAR action: Moved prepositioned ARS orbit[ing] aircraft towards area. Alerted Air America resources through Udorn, who in turn scrambled Air America C-123 and two AA helicopters at 20/1136 hours. Diverted Navy A-1Hs escorting Tonkin Gulf ARS orbit[ing] aircraft to scene and arranged for further rescap.” So the HC-54 moved to the crash site and alerted Air America thru the Air Support Operations Center at Udorn and diverted some US Navy A-1s to the scene for cover. Air America immediately sent 2 UH-34D helicopters for the pickup and a C-123 that apparently was to serve as “Victor control”. Indeed, the pickup was to be done by the 2 Air America helicopters (“10. Future plans: attempt recovery utilizing Air America helicopters”). Progress Report no.1 of 20 June 65 states: “Area searched and percent effective: searched area vicinity 2118N-10404E with two Air America helicopters.” So the search work was done exclusively by the 2 Air America UH-34Ds. “6. Result of Research: negative. Both helicopters received intense ground fire and hits forcing both of them down with one reported casualty. Both helicopters returned to friendly territory. Two backup helicopters from Air America resources held in Laos by Ambassador pending positive sighting of survivors. The last positive sighting of objectives was when they hit ground after bailout. Intermittent beacon signals reported received by helicopters, however they were unable to home the signals. 7. Future plans: utilize Navy AH-1 aircraft to attempt visual sighting of objectives. Prepositioned Air America helicopters will only attempt to enter area if positive visual sighting is made.”

On 21 June 65, the search continued, as Progress report no.2 shows: “10. Additional info: Capt. Curtis Henry Briggs picked up by friendly non-military helicopter at 1846H. Final destination unknown at this time. Helicopter pilot […] appears to be in good shape. Pickup made near 2118N-10404. Location and position of other pilot unknown.” Then, the Suspending report of 22 June 65 notes: “7. Reason for suspending: A radio signal was received intermittently from soon after bailout to time of pickup of Capt. Briggs. Survivor has no knowledge of location of other pilot and he has not been in contact with him since ejection. Wreckage located on hill 2-3 miles south of pickup point. Search continued for 5-6 hours after first pickup. No visual sightings or radio signals received after Capt. Briggs picked up. Active search is being discontinued. Aircrews penetrating area will be advised to listen for radio signals. Commander, 2nd Air Division concurs in suspending.” At the end, the sorties and
hours of flying time are listed for the US military aircraft, i.e. F-105, F-4C (both fighter cover), KC-135 (tanker), Navy A-1H (search and fighter cover), and the HC-54 (control). The Air America aircraft (C-123, UH-34Ds) involved are only mentioned as “numerous sorties and hours by non-military aircraft.” Here is the Air Rescue Mission report:

Air Rescue Mission reports for mission no. 619 of 20-22 June 1965 as preserved at the AFHRA.

352 Air Rescue Mission reports for mission no. 619 of 20-22 June 1965, AFHRA, IRIS no. 01009280 (see http://airforcehistoryindex.org/data/001/009/280.xml), kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 19 May 2016.

353 Air Rescue Mission reports for mission no. 619 of 20-22 June 1965, AFHRA, IRIS no. 01009280 (see http://airforcehistoryindex.org/data/001/009/280.xml), kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 19 May 2016.
More details about how Air America aircraft were involved in this rescue mission can be found in the logbook of the Rescue Control Center at Udorn that covers this mission. For 20 June 65 we have: “1126 hours: UNCAP 27 [i.e. the HC-54] at site 111 [= LS-111, i.e. Houei Kah Moun in Laos] at this time. Advised to Hotel [= Air America]. Requests A-1H’s to RESCAP [= Rescue Combat Air Patrol] to survivors’ position + hold” “1130 hours: Victor Control [= Air America C-123] ETA [= Estimated Time of Arrival] 111 [= at LS-111, i.e. Houei Kah Moun in Laos] at 1145L with 2 hours loiter time, attempting to move helicopters further north.” “1138 hours: Hotel 22 en route to Site 111 to refuel.” “1211 Hotel aircraft at Site 36 [= Na Khang] refueling and will be proceeding to position crash site for Victor Control. After refueling will be Hotel 374.”

“1344 hours: Victor Control has contact with Hotel 22 and 33 and is attempting to escort to scene.” “1415 hours: two Hotel aircraft in area starting search.” “1423 hours: Victor Control and H-33 are in the area. Hotel has beacon and attempting homing, one Hotel picking up ground fire.” “1432 hours: one Hotel thought he saw a survivor but lost him.” “1434 hours: Hotel aircraft located downed aircraft, camoflaged green. They think they have survivor located. One Hotel aircraft hit by ground fire and is down. RESCAP aircraft coming in for cover.” “1445 hours: Hotel 33 receiving heavy ground fire while trying to pick up crew of Hotel 22. Requests more Hotel and cover aircraft.” “1447 hours: Hotel 33 crash landing this time. Requests more cover.” “1457 hours: Victor Control is controlling mission. Victor Control requests more Hotel aircraft.” “1501 hours: both Hotel 22 and 33 airborne again and leaving area. One casualty aboard. Requests doctor meet at Site 107 or 111.” “1516 hours: UNCAP 27 is escorting Hotel aircraft out of area.” “1531 hours: Hotel 22 and 33 are landing at Site 111. Request doctor at this time.” “1554 hours: Hotel 14 and 21 departing for Site 107 with A-1H. ETA for 14 0930Z, 21 1015Z. Request more RESCAP.”

So the 2 new Air America UH-34Ds were estimated to arrive at the crash site, H-14 at 1630 hours local time and H-21 at 1715 hours local time. “1659 hours: Victor Control E[stimated] T[ime of] A[rriaval] crash site 1132Z [= 1832 hours local time]. Requests A-1H for Hotel escort.” “1757 hours: Victor Control calling off Hotel activity for the day. All equipment was closed down due to misfit red.” The Air America C-123 calls off all activity of the Air America helicopters, as a North Vietnamese MIG fighter (“misfit red”) had appeared on scene. About 20 minutes later, the MIG was shot down, but then UNCAP – the HC-54 – also closed down the operation for that day.

On 21 June 65, the 2 Air America helicopters were holding until a sighting was made. “0720 hours: Victor Control is over Site 107 with 2 A-1H aircraft.” “0818 hours: Victor Control ETA area 0832. 2 A-1Hs at [LS-] 107.” A beacon was received, and so Victor Control, Air America’s C-123, was planning to bring one Air America UH-34D in to attempt a visual contact, but UNCAP “advised Victor Control holding Hotel aircraft at [Site] 107” because there would be no hi cover to return to LS-107, if the helicopter was shot at. At 1036 hours, one survivor was located: “Hotel aircraft inbound to location, ETA 1130.” “1116 hours: Hotel 21 7 nautical miles out. Will make 2 loose passes.” “1140 hours: A-1H in area vectoring Hotel to position.” “1142 hours: Hotel going in to make pick up.” “1148 hours: Hotel has survivor in sight. Making pass to check for ground fire.” “1149 hours: Hotel going in for pickup, 1 A-1H on either side.” “1152 hours: Hotel drawing ground fire. A-1H’s strafing area.” “1154 hours: one survivor picked up. Hotel will question survivor on info on other crew member.” “1157 hours: survivor on Hotel being taken to Site 107. Has no info on other pilot. Requested position of survivor, front or back seat.” “1203 hours: pilot picked up is same as spotted yesterday and that was transmitting beacon today. Other pilot had URT-21 +

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354 “374” was the tail number of Air America’s C-123 flying Victor Control. On its flight from Na Khang (LS-36) to LS-111, the aircraft flew as an ordinary Air America C-123, using its tail number 374 as call sign.

355 Logbook of OL-B Rescue Control Center, Udorn, covering that accident, preserved at the National Archives, kindly submitted by Harold Colson on 19 May 2016.
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URC-10.” “1215 hours: both Hotel aircraft have departed area.” “1220 hours: [...] Hotel 21 is on top of clouds, Victor Control is escorting him out.” At 1235 hours, “Victor Control decided to continue search temporarily”, but at 1248 hours, UNCAP 27 advised to withdraw all forces to LS-107 “due to lack of high cover.” The problem was low clouds. At 1410 hours, UNCAP directed to return to scene and to continue the search, but due to lack of fuel, the search fleet departed the scene at about 1530 and returned to Udorn.356

For following morning, on 22 June 65, another rescue effort was to be launched, but bad weather retained the fleet at Na Khang (LS-36). “0835 hours: Hotel aircraft on ground at 20 [that is LS-20, Sam Thong] waiting for WX [= better weather]. Request we hold low cover until choppers depart for Site 107 [= LS-107, Houei Ma].” “0855 hours: UNCAP 27 advises Victor Control. Requests we launch low cover now. Also requests hi cover to commence 10 minutes prior to departure for [LS-]107.” “0921 hours: From HAP [High Altitude Platform] (Victor Control, then UNCAP 27): Hotel 14 and 31 off at 0920. ETA Site 36 0315Z [estimated arrival at Na Khang at 1015 local time]. Will give ETA for 107 when they arrive at 36.” “Hotel 14 and 31 forced to land at 108 [= LS-108, Ban Nam Keng] due to WX. Will advise when airborne again.” “1008 hours: HAP advised (Victor Control, then [UNCAP] 27) Hotel aircraft estimated 2-3 hours delay. When they go get off, it will take 1-½ hours to get to 107 due to refuel at 36.” “1210 hours: Hotel 14 and 31 departed 108 for 36. Do not know if they can make it.” “1255 hours: UNCAP 27 advises that Hotel 14 and 31 are on ground at 36 and are refueling to go to Site 107. Will advise when to launch RESCAP.” But the bad weather made a rescue impossible that day. At 1505 hours, UNCAP 27, i.e. the USAF HC-54, advised that weather in the target area was “unsuitable”; at 1525 hours, Victor Control, i.e. the Air America C-123, advised that weather in the target area was “deteriorating again”; and at 1545 hours, UNCAP 27 advised that the mission had been scrubbed by Victor Control due to bad weather. “1547 hours: [...] Hotel aircraft remaining overnight at Site 36.” But Victor Control “planned to proceed with mission tomorrow (23 June 65).” On 23 June, however, the weather situation seems to have been the same, as at 0950 hours, there was still “no estimate on when Hotel will be airborne.”357

What can be seen from this detailed report are 3 things:

1) It was the USAF who asked Air America to participate in that rescue mission in North Vietnam, and Air America accepted this although doing rescue operations in North Vietnam was not their job – so this was another example of “Air America upholding the Airmen’s bond”. That is what Ambassador Sullivan underlined, when he wrote to Admiral Sharp, CINCPAC, on 22 June 65: “I am becoming increasingly concerned about the political risks we are accepting for ourselves and for RLG by continuing to use Air America helicopters for rescue operations in DRV [= North Vietnam]. [...] Actions to date have been voluntarily ad hoc. Fact is that we have been doing these jobs more and more regularly.” Then he proposed, instead of compromising the US Embassy and Souvanna by the risk of an Air America helicopter falling into North Vietnamese hands, to station USAF HH-43s at a site in northern Laos.358

2) US military aircraft flew cover, searched the area, and an HC-54 was used as the command ship.

3) Air America’s UH-34Ds were the only aircraft in the recuce fleet that were technically capable of picking up the downed persons, and they did it in spite of the losses suffered the first day. On 20 June, they did the search work, and on 21 June, they picked up the survivor. It

356 Logbook of OL-B Rescue Control Center, Udorn, covering that accident, preserved at the National Archives, kindly submitted by Harold Colson on 19 May 2016.

357 Logbook of OL-B Rescue Control Center, Udorn, covering that accident, preserved at the National Archives, kindly submitted by Harold Colson on 19 May 2016.

358 Telegram dated 22 June 1965, Ambassador Sullivan to Admiral Sharp, DDRS no. 272784, kindly supplied by Harold Colson.
was even Air America’s Victor Control that proposed to continue the search for the second pilot on 23 June.

The growing number of US military crews rescued in Laos and adjacent North Vietnam by the US military from mid-1965 onwards is well illustrated by the list below that had been compiled from Air America and USAF rescue logs maintained at the Udorn ASOG and covers the period from 24 July 65 to 5 October 65. Air America still rescued a lot of US airmen that had been downed in Laos and adjacent North Vietnamese areas, but the USAF did the same, and in many cases, the pilot status was still unknown at that time. So now Air America and the USAF worked tandem in these rescue missions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>AIRCRAFT TYPE</th>
<th>PILOT OR CREW STATUS</th>
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<tr>
<td>24 Jul 65</td>
<td>F-105</td>
<td>USAF Rescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Jul 65</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Oct 65</td>
<td>RF-101</td>
<td>Pilot Status Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of aircraft crews downed and rescued in Laos 24 July 65 to 5 October 65

By December 1965, the USAF already had its own rescue organization installed at Udorn, and USAF HH-3E *Jolly Green Giants* had been stationed at Na Khang (LS-36) for Search and

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Rescue duties. 360 “The HH-3C helicopters were pre-positioned at forward operating bases in Laos, and, during ‘very high risk’ missions, were placed on airborne alert near the target area.”361 So then, Air America’s rescue operations worked together with the Rescue Coordi-

ination Center (RCC) at Udorn (call-sign “Compress”), which directed Detachment 2, 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) flying those Jolly Green Giants out of Nakhon Phanom and later the HH-53B Super Jolly Green Giants out of Udorn,362 and which was primarily responsible for the recovery of military aircrews in Laos and North Vietnam363 – but for Laos only, when and if the US Ambassador requested help from the military.364

Already on 15 August 65, the Deputy Commander for 2AD Thai picked up responsibility for all SAR operations in Laos and North Vietnam. “Under the new procedures, the deputy commander was given authority to initiate or terminate SAR efforts in his area and to control the SAR forces involved.”365 These new procedures, undated, but probably released around November 1965, clearly show that Air America was an integral part of the overall rescue system that the US military had established for Southeast Asia. 1) The USAF HC-54 orbiting over Thailand and Laos would also “call appropriate agencies for additional forces as necessary”, which also includes Air America. 2) “HH-43B/F and H-34 helicopters located at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom in Thailand […] serve in a shorter range recovery role. Helicopters in Thailand operate from home station or from Lima Sites in Laos.” Only the HH-43’s were USAF aircraft,366 so the H-34s were Air America helicopters. 3) The section about

![Site 36 Na Kong](image)

(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

360 Davis, Across the Mekong, p. 90; see also Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.160, note 2, and Tilford, Search and rescue in Southeast Asia, who notes that by the end December 65, 6 HH-3Es were operating out of Udorn (p.69) and that some of these helicopters were also positioned at Long Tieng and Na Khang (p.74).


363 Castle, One day too long, pp. 115+119.

364 Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, p.74.


366 “The USAF SAR aircraft inventory in Thailand changed little in the first half of 1965. In March, there were still only two HU-16 Albatross aircraft and seven H-43 helicopters at Thai bases. The number of H-43’s
Victor Control (Air America) is self-explanatory, including the note saying that “they are highly skilled, extremely knowledgeable of the ground situation in Laos and are experienced in the prosecution of the SAR mission.” 4) “The rescue aircraft initially answering your call [i.e. most probably the USAF HC-54] may hand you over to another aircraft that is in a better position to assist” [i.e. for example, an Air America Victor Control C-123].

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**USAF SAR Task Force Procedures of late 1965, p.1**


The Rescue Control Center at Udorn was responsible for rescue operations in northern Thailand, North Vietnam, and, when requested and authorized by the ambassador, in Laos. Because of the increasing need in Laos, problems posed by political considerations were solved so that a reliable rescue capability became a reality. Negotiations between the Royal Laotian Government, the US Ambassador, the Deputy Commander, 2d Air Division/13th Air Force at Udorn, Central Intelligence Agency representatives, and the Commander, 2d Air
Division, established guidelines. These negotiations were conducted at conferences held throughout the long war.” With the Ambassador and the CIA at that table, it is obvious that, to the end of the war in Laos, one part of the rescue job in Laos was always done by Air America. Indeed, in later years, the cover for SAR missions flown by Air America-piloted T-28s could also mean, “plucking a downed military pilot out of North Vietnam”. So those T-28s missions flown by Air America pilots continued until the late sixties. Earl Jones flew the T-28s to the last moment, when Major Secord, who had become the CIA’s air advisor at Udorn for operations in Laos in August 66, shut down the Air America T-28 program. As to the other parts of the rescue missions, the UH-34Ds were supplemented by Air America Bell 204s, Bell 205s, and S-58Ts over the years.

For the period discussed here (1964-65), an analysis of some 20 Rescue Mission Reports available that do show an Air America participation in the actual rescue, and of the reports of these accidents contained in Chris Hobson, *Vietnam air losses*, gives the following picture: All missions flown to rescue downed military flyers prior to 15 June 64 were completely voluntary that is examples of the idea of “upholding the airmen’s bond”. Initial alert often came from a wingman of the downed pilot or a radar site that alerted Udorn (Det.3 PARC). In the case on Lt. Klusmann (6 June 64), Udorn ASOC noted “will attempt to monitor non US military”, and in the case of Cdr Lynn (7 June 64), “Air America Operations Vientiane” was immediately alerted. In both cases, a Caribou (“CV-2B”) acted as Victor Control, Helios, UH-34Ds and other aircraft functioned as search aircraft, and Air America/RLAF T-28s worked as fighter cover for several days. In the case of Lt. Klusmann, they came too late so that he was taken prisoner (until he escaped in September 64), but Cmd. Lynn could be picked up by an Air America UH-34D.

Following the Udorn meeting of 15 June 64, Air America was tasked to cooperate with the US military in missions that were to rescue US military crews who had been shot down in Laos. From this time onwards, the alerting station was often a USAF HU-16 and later a USAF HC-54 orbiting along the Thai-Laotian border that picked up the mayday call. This aircraft would then call the ASOC at Udorn who would alert the AOC at Vientiane or directly Air America Operations Vientiane. USAF aircraft downed in the Laotian panhandle mostly called the 2nd Air Division Command Post, Saigon, who would then alert Udorn. The fastest way was what the wingman of an F-100 did that had been downed on 18 November 64 near Ban Senphän in southern Laos: He “called the Air America Operations Center that ran the SAR system in Laos.” Consequently, “an Air America C-123 was first on the scene and acted as airborne controller until handing over to a USAF HU-16 from Korat.” The official Rescue Mission Report (no. 76) begins only when “HU-16 assumed on scene coordinator role”. It was the HU-16 that located the wreckage on 19 November 64, and the same day, an “Air

369 Wiren, *Tango*, p. 5.
371 These Rescue Mission Reports are from AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.
372 Rescue Mission Report nos. 25 (6 June 64, Lt. Klusmann) and 26 (7 June 64, Cmd. Lynn), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.
373 This way sometimes caused a little delay in reporting. In mission no. 313, which was to rescue the crew of a USAF B-57 downed in Xieng Khouang Province, Laos on 7 April 65, an Air America C-123 was the “on scene commander”. For 7 April, the report mentions “numerous Air America aircraft participating in search”, and for 8 April, it notes: “Search conducted by Air America forces only today and debriefing results unobtainable at this time.” Only some time later, “Udorn Air Support Operations Center [was] advised by USAIRA Laos negative results” (Rescue Mission Report no. 313, 7 April 65, in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson).

84
America H-34 helicopter recovered [the] deceased [pilot] and delivered [him] to Nakhon Phanom AB, Thailand.”\textsuperscript{376}

Although SAR missions for US military crews downed in Laos were part of Air America’s job since June 64, many cases had some particularities. Often, Air America aircraft were on the scene, before the rest of the rescue team arrived: On 21 November 64, RF-101 56-0230 was shot down near Ban Kouantan in southern Laos. ASOC, Udorn was alerted “at 21/0450Z [= 1150 hours local time]; [a] “USAF HU-16 [was] diverted to [the] search area at 0451Z with RESCAP.” However, an Air America UH-34D happened to be in the vicinity, picked up the downed pilot within an hour, and transported him to Nakhon Phanom for medical treatment, even before the rescue team arrived on scene.\textsuperscript{377} A similar case happened on 13 January 65: An F-105 and an F-100 were both shot down near Ban Ken bridge in the northern end of the Laotian panhandle. At 1324 hours, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Air Division Command Post was alerted, who “diverted HU-16 aircraft to area as on scene commander 13/1324H.”\textsuperscript{378} However, “fortunately, both pilots were soon rescued by an Air America UH-34 helicopter directed by an Air America C-123 that had been standing by to act as airborne controller in the eventuality of a rescue being required.”\textsuperscript{379} The official Rescue Mission Report (no.30) does acknowledge “SAR objective by Air America helicopters at 13/0650Z [= 1350 local time] and 14/0434Z [= 1134L]” and “Method of rescue of survivors: Air America helicopters”, but does not mention the presence of the C-123 Victor Control.\textsuperscript{380} Another case of this type happened on 5 February 66: RLAF T-28B 0-38371 had been shot down north of Phong Savan in northern Laos. An Air America Porter alerted SAR “at 05/0414Z [=1114L].” Already 38 minutes later, at 05/0452Z, the downed pilot was picked up by an Air America UH-34D. So, “all USAF SAR forces were released and told to return to their respective places”, i.e. 2 HH-3C back to LS-36, 2 A-1Es back to Udorn, another 2 A-1Es back to Nakhon Phanom, and a HC-130H, which was to be the command ship, back to its orbit.\textsuperscript{381} The HC-130H replaced the HC-54 in 1965/66, but its air refueling capability became operational only in July 1967.\textsuperscript{382} In the case of another F-100D (55-3783), which was downed near the Ban Ken bridge on 19 February 65, “prepositioned SAR forces responded immediately and were engaged in SAR at time of Command Post notification”, that is before the search was officially launched. As “SAR objective [had been] located by Air America H-34 [already] on 19 Feb (date of crash) at 2015N-10355E”, Air America aircraft were probably among those “prepositioned SAR forces”. However the pilot did not survive, and an Air America UH-34D took the remains to Udorn. Again, the role of Air America is summarized by an “undisclosed number of sorties and flying hours by various types of Air America and Bird and Son aircraft.”\textsuperscript{383} However, it should be noted that, whenever an airman was rescued or a deceased person was recovered, the last service mentioned in all of these official mission

\textsuperscript{376} Rescue Mission Report no. 76 (F-100, 18 November 64), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.


\textsuperscript{378} Rescue Mission Report no. 30 (F-105 and F-100, 13 January 65), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{379} Hobson, Vietnam air losses, p.14.

\textsuperscript{380} Rescue Mission Report no. 30 (F-105 and F-100, 13 January 65), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{381} Rescue Mission Report no. 2-9-05 Feb.66 (T-28 “371”), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.


\textsuperscript{383} Rescue Mission Report no. 160 (F-100D, 19 February 65), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.
reports, since the rescue of Commander Lynn in June 1964, was to bring the survivor or the deceased person to Udorn, to Nakhon Phanom, or to Korat, for medical treatment or for transportation back home. This final evacuation – the final part of a rescue mission – was always the task of an Air America aircraft. In most cases, it was done by the Air America helicopter that had made the pick up. However, some other cases should also be mentioned: Sometimes, Air America’s service consisted of contacting local people who knew who were the people who had taken a downed pilot with them, and sometimes Air America helicopter crews rescued their own downed colleagues, before HH-3Cs and A-1Es had arrived from Nakhon Phanom. So, even if Air America was tasked to rescue the US airmen downed in Laos, their extra-fast service had also something to do with “upholding the airmen’s bond.”

Since at least August 1965, it was clear that rescue missions that had to enter North Vietnam were the primary job of USAF SAR units. However, in many cases, Air America did this job, too, because at that time, only Air America had the helicopters needed to pick up the downed airmen – again according to the idea of “upholding the airmen’s bond”. Already on 15 June 64, AIRA Col. Tyrell had even proposed to use the “primary Air America emergency frequency of 119.1 mc for this, and USN can provide an A-3B (UHF/VHF/HF equipped) for relay of emergency calls.” So, the VHF- and UHF-equipped Air America C-123s or Caribous that accompanied these UH-34D’s either served for mission control or for communications between UHF-equipped military aircraft and Air America aircraft that had only VHF-capability.

There still was another reason, why the USAF Rescue Control HC-54 (“Crown”) was often accompanied by an Air America C-123 serving as “Victor Control” – the technical insufficiency of the HC-54 already criticized in the CHECO Report of 1966: “The HC-54C was not, however, properly equipped to perform the function of a flying command post. Brigadier General John R. Murphy, the 2AD Deputy Commander, felt that it was the weakest link in the rescue operation because it lacked adequate back-up communications equipment, and, like the HU-16, had no special control equipment that would enable the crew to assume effective directions of the mission. The pilot had to try to keep track of the positions of the helicopters, the bingo times of the RESCAP, and many other details from the cockpit. A console arrangement was proposed but never installed.”

The CORONA HARVEST Report of 1969 puts it even more dramatically: “Another lesson learned is that the pilot of the rescue fixed-wing aircraft can’t control and plot the positions of recovery and tactical aircraft, and fly his own aircraft at the same time. When a recovery mission is in progress, the rescue aircraft commander must coordinate and direct the activities of the recovery aircraft, direct RESCAP and fire suppression tactical aircraft, and maintain a complete current status of all aircraft involved. To effectively manage all facets of the

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384 That is what the wingman of a downed F-105D had seen east of Sam Neua on 18 May 65. So, Air America “transported indigenous personnel to the vicinity of the village. They were informed that the downed pilot had been captured by the Pathet Lao” (Mission no. 472, 18 May 1965, in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016).

385 On 6 January 66, Air America UH-34D H-28 had come down, but the crew was rescued by H-22 (Mission no. 2-1-6 Jan 66, in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016).


387 Already at the Udorn meeting of 15 June 1964, Air America’s Ben Moore had stated that “Air America needs to upgrade their Comnet with UHF equipment, including the ARA-25 airborne homing devices” (“Report of Staff visit”, document no.63, in: MSgt Robert T. Helmka / TSgt Beverly Hale, USAF Operations from Thailand 1964-65 [CHECO Report], HQ PACAF, 10 August 1966, vol. II: “Supporting documents”, in: AFHRA. Document kindly provided by Harold Colson). As late as 1970, Air America’s Helio Couriers, which were also among the aircraft to be used for search duties, only had VHF capability (F.O.C. no. OF-C-70-023 of 1 July 70, in: UTD/Leary/B41F4).

mission, an additional mission controller’s position is required in the control aircraft.” In an Air America “Victor Control” C-123 operating inside Laos, it was not the pilot who coordinated the rescue efforts, but a CIA case officer on board. In later years, Air America’s Communications Department at Vientiane and elsewhere in Laos (Flight Watch) were operating “three separate VHF, two HF, and one UHF air-to-ground circuits [that] are continuously guarded by Air America in order to provide immediate response to all MayDay calls for assistance.”

The missions themselves were multicolored, like those flown inside Laos. There were cases of great luck: On 5 April 65, an F-105 was shot down at 1912N 19421E east of Phong Savan, but inside North Vietnam. Another aircraft of the same mission reported the bailout, and “USAF F-105 aircraft [were] sent to search area of reported bailout 1150H.” A little later, apparently by pure chance, the “pilot [was] recovered by Air America helicopter”. The USAF HC-54 that was to serve as command ship flew only one sortie of 20 minutes. The mission report (no.317) doesn’t say it, but apparently, the Air America UH-34D had been prepositioned and was waiting for an eventual rescue job. Other missions were less successful. On 14 June 65, another F-105 was shot down at 2045N 10436E, that is 30 miles NE of Sam Neua, but inside North Vietnam. The pre-positioned orbiting ARS HC-54 monitored the bailout and “alerted Air America for H-34 and C-123 control ship; moved HC-54 to crash area” “Future plans: continue search for survivor utilizing Air America helicopters and Rescue HC-54D until darkness.” […] Pilot reported landing in village, was seen running uphill out of village. Air radio contact with wingman. Was not seen by Rescue HC-54D or Air America helicopters that spent one hour in area searching.” On 15 June 65, the mission was suspended: “Reason for suspending: wingman observed pilot land in the edge of a small village. After landing, pilot removed his parachute, opened his survival equipment, and established radio contact with aircraft overhead. Pilot left parachute and some of his equipment, where he landed, and after a few minutes moved approximately two hundred yards out of the village and into a nearby corn field. There he stated he was going to check out the beacon of his emergency radio. From this point on no further visual or radio contact was established. Pilot bailed out shortly before noon local time and contact was lost within 15 minutes. Later three people were observed to pick up the pilot’s parachute and equipment and move away. These were the only people seen in the area. Fighter aircraft provided continuous overhead CAP. Rescue and additional search aircraft were moved into the area and search continued until darkness forced the aircraft to depart the area. Two helicopters were in the area of the downed pilot for over an hour. Some ground fire was reported but no aircraft was hit. CAP and search aircraft were in the area for about seven hours after radio contact was lost with negative results. Weather and Electronic Recce was launched with first light on 15 June. Weather was reported as marginal and no electronic contact was established. Search aircraft moved into area at 0700 local and remained until about 1300 hours, when bad weather forced withdrawal of all aircraft in the area.” The Air America C-123 and UH-34Ds were just search aircraft, and their work is included in the remark “numerous sorties and hours flown by non-military aircraft not included in this report.” Another unsuccessful mission was that of 29 June 1965 (no. 650): A USAF RF-101 was flying at only 1,000 feet, when it was hit at 2120N 10355E in North Vietnam. The wingman observed that the aircraft came down in pieces and

390 Castle, At war, pp.71/2.
392 Rescue Mission Report no.317 (F-105; 5 April 65), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.
393 Rescue Mission Report no. 594 (F-105; 14 June 65), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.
reported that no chute was sighted. “Air America helicopters at prepositioned sites [were] unable to scramble due weather at their location.”

Rescue mission no. 619 has already been discussed above: USAF F-4C 64-0685 was shot down in North Vietnam on 20 June 65; one crew member was taken prisoner, and one crew member was picked up by an Air America UH-34D on 21 June 65. It was this mission – in which 2 Air America helicopters had been damaged over North Vietnam on 20 June, but had made it back to friendly positions in Laos – that caused harsh critics from Ambassador Sullivan who wrote to Admiral Sharp, CINCPAC, on 22 June 65: “I am becoming increasingly concerned about the political risks we are accepting for ourselves and for RLG by continuing to use Air America helicopters for rescue operations in DRV [= North Vietnam]. […] Actions to date have been voluntarily ad hoc. Fact is that we have been doing these jobs more and more regularly.” Then he added: “We realize however that there are literally no provisions aside from our voluntary efforts to care for pilots shot down in these Route 6 areas of DRV. Partial answer to problem would lie in procurement of long range Sikorsky choppers for USAF to fly out of Udorn. This is not likely to be as immediate as next emergency SAR call. Second solution, which my Air Attached has discussed at least twice with Second Air Division, would provide immediate relief from current political risks. This would involve pre-positioning JP-4 fuel at selected and secluded forward sites in Laos for use by USAF H-43 helicopters based in Thailand. For reasons not clear to me, Second Air Division has not yet followed up these suggestions, presumably because they are awaiting word from higher headquarters. H-43’s could fly into forward site, refuel, have long enough range to conduct SAR, return to forward site for second refueling, and have enough range to get back to Thai base. If you concur with this concept, would appreciate your action to nudge machinery into motion.”

A first known mission of the type proposed by the Ambassador was flown on 13 August 65: A USAF RF-101 was shot down 50 miles due west of Hanoi. The pilot was taken prisoner, but the rescue mission used USAF HH-43 and CH-3C helicopters. Yet, Air America was still there as an auxiliary force, upholding the airmen’s bond: “AA H-34 [flying] 3 sorties, 6:04 hours.”

In October 66, the CHECO Report noted: “With this USAF buildup, direct SAR support from Air America in Laos was needed less. Air America continued to provide SAR for the RLAF, their own operations, and on an on-call basis for U.S. aircraft. At present Air America continues to furnish the USAF SAR forces with staging sites, weather information, and intelligence, all of which are indispensable to successful operations.”

In December 66, 2 USAF HH-3 Jolly Green Giants were operating out of Na Khang (LS-36), where they sat all day unless needed for a rescue attempt of a downed aircraft. “With the arrival of these helicopters in Laos,” Air America pilot Charles Davis recalls, “our choppers have been assigned a backup role and we are seldom used for rescue missions anymore.”

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395 Sometimes before, this idea had already worked: On 2 June 65, a Navy A-4E was shot down northwest of Vinh and the pilot was immediately taken prisoner, “Prepositioned fuel had been arranged for helicopters through coordination by Udorn ASOC with US AIRA Vientiane and Air America, but was not necessary” (Rescue Mission Report no. 536 [USN A-4E; 2 June 65], in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016).
396 Telegram dated 22 June 1965, Ambassador Sullivan to Admiral Sharp, DDRS no. 272784, kindly supplied by Harold Colson.
397 Rescue Mission Report no. 821 (RF-101; 13 August 65), in: AFHRA, reel no. 31113, kindly supplied by Harold Colson on 25 May 2016.
399 Davis, Across the Mekong, pp. 197/8. But the CORONA HARVEST Report of 1969 insists: “It must be reiterated that, throughout 1965 and well into 1966, professional SAR forces in theater were inadequate for the
required missions, and secondary SAR forces [i.e. Air America] were utilized to fill the void” (Crozier, USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia 1954-31 March 1968, Scott AFB, 1969, vol. III, p.143).

In 1966, some changes occurred inside USAF: The 2nd AD became the 7th AF, and the 3ARRGp Commander would direct rescue operations at the request of the 7th AF (Crozier, USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia 1954-31 March 1968, Scott AFB, 1969, vol. I, p.109 – Corona Harvest Report). Inside the 3ARRGp (3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group) of Tan Son Nhat, the Joint Search and Rescue Center, also located at Tan Son Nhat, was the central coordination agency for all SAR activity within the 7AF area of operations. Smaller units included the Rescue Coordination Center at Udorn and Det. 1 and 2 of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Nakhon Phanom and Udorn respectively. The detachments in Thailand employed a preposition plan in Laos to permit the HH-3Es a quicker response time. The most secure forward base in Laos was LS-36 utilized as a daytime staging base. Daylight orbits over the Gulf of Tonkin and Laos were also used to provide a minimum response time for areas of high aircrew recovery probability in North Vietnam (Durkee, USAF Search and Rescue, July 1966-November 1967, HQ PACAF, 1968, CHECO Report, pp.1-5).

“Very important to rescue efforts are the Sandys or A-1E Rescue Escort (RESCORT) aircraft, which are part of the 602d Air Commando Squadron. They have no significant speed edge over the HH-3Es, but with a dual responsibility of protecting the Jolly Greens and locating and flying cover for survivors, they must have a quicker response time, which requires airborne alert. The Sandys and Jolly Greens stationed at Udorn receive frags on raids in their areas of responsibility. Departing from Udorn, four Sandys will plan to arrive in an orbit over Lima Site 36 or Lima Site 98 before the first TOT [= Time on Target]. They will maintain this posture until 30 minutes after the last TOT, in readiness for a rescue mission. When notification of a downed airman is received, two of the Sandys depart the orbit for the rescue site. Their job is to locate and protect the airman, neutralizing defenses in the area before arrival of the Jolly Greens. The remaining two Sandys stay in orbit awaiting the liftoff of the two rescue helicopters, giving them protection while they are en route to the rescue area. If the rescue is heavily defended and the Sandys have not suppressed the ground fire, they will notify the Jolly Greens to stay in a safe area. Once the Jolly Greens are cleared in, one HH-3 remains high while the other performs the actual rescue. […] The normal procedure for positioning the Jolly Greens is to have them depart Nakhon Phanom in pairs early enough to arrive at Lima Site 36 or Lima Site 98 during first light. From these FOLs [= Forward Operating Locations], the Jolly Greens have a response time of five minutes from alert until airborne, plus the flying time to the rescue area” (Durkee, USAF Search and Rescue, July 1966-November 1967, HQ PACAF, 1968, CHECO Report, pp.11+13).


In 1969, the CORONA HARVEST Report described the fuel situation at Na Khang as follows: “In order to reduce the access time to the area north and west of Hanoi, our helicopters have been staging from crude forward operating locations in Laos. Refueling from 55 gallon drums, with hand pumps is incompatible with the current status of air technology, but these are the conditions under which our recovery forces have been forced to operate. We are taking action at the present time to provide portable rubberized fuel cells, with powered fuel pumps, to facilitate operations from these sites. These forward bases have contributed, in great part, to several successful recoveries” (Crozier, USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia 1954-31 March 1968, Scott AFB, II., 1969, CORONA Harvest Report, vol. I, pp.100/1).
For rescue missions in which Air America helicopters saved the life of downed US military aircraft crews during the early 1970ies, see my file Air America in Laos I – humanitarian work, part 2. Bill Lair estimated that at his time, i.e. prior to 1968, Air America rescued about 30 US military pilots that had been downed in Laos or North Vietnam. The “Jolly Green Giant” supplemented but never replaced Air America’s special capability to find and rescue not only its own aircrews but also those of the US military. Even USAF authors admit: “Any pilots unfortunate enough to be shot down had a better chance of being rescued by a passing Air America flight than they did by military forces.”

**Med-evac missions**

“Med-evac” is short for “Medical evacuation”, a word used for aircraft to transport seriously wounded from front line areas to a hospital. They were flown by small aircraft like the Helio Courier or by UH-34D helicopters. Joe Hazen recalls: “I flew several medevac flights in a Helio Courier or Do-28. There was a hospital at Sam Thong (LS-20) and this is where wounded / sick soldiers and civilians from outlying villages were brought for treatment”. On 20 January 65, CIA man Tony Poe, PARU Team V and 100 militiamen were attacked by North Vietnamese infantry at Hong Non (LS-86). Five defenders were killed, five were wounded, including Tony Poe who had taken an AK-47 round: “As the wounded case officer was carried into the jungle by two guerrilla medics, an Air America Helio and H-34 arrived overhead. Taking small-arms fire as he hovered with just one wheel touching the ground, the chopper pilot – at Poe’s insistence – waited as a handful of wounded guerrillas were unloaded. Rushed back to Hua Moung, Poe was then transferred to a fixed-wing aircraft bound for the USAF hospital at Korat, Thailand.” At least in the helicopters, normally a doctor or a nurse would be aboard. This was one of the most important types of missions flown particularly by Air America’s UH-34Ds that were assigned to the Madriver contract. And it was a particularly dangerous type of mission, because evacuating wounded soldiers from an area too close to a combat zone could result in the loss of flight personnel and aircraft, as happened on 3 August 67. That day, “UH-34D, H-38, piloted by Captain C. A. Weitz departed LS-131 on a routine mission to evacuate wounded personnel from a landing zone at TH 2867 under the provisions of AF 1841 contract. First Officer C. L. Asta was acting as observer and trainee, Flight Mechanic L. Z. Pirkle was the Flight Mechanic, and there was one (1) passenger on board. The flight was normal until 30 seconds after landing at TH 2867, when projectiles fired by hostile forces struck and completely destroyed the aircraft. [...] Approximately 30 seconds after landing at 1745 hours local time, H-38 was hit by a 57mm recoilless rifle round near the center of the fuselage just below the transmission floor. After securing engine switches, Captain Weitz and First Officer Asta evacuated the aircraft through the co-pilot’s window and took shelter in entrenchments near the aircraft. A few seconds after departing the aircraft, Captain Weitz observed the aircraft burning. Neither the pilot nor the co-pilot knew the fate of the Flight Mechanic or passenger, until indigenous personnel informed them that they had expired inside the aircraft”.

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405 Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.236.
407 E-mail dated 26 October 2005, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.
410 Accident report for this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B59F8.
Other USAID programs supported by Air America

Savannakhet in the South was an area that for a long time was not that much a center of the war. Charles Davis recalls: “Many of our trips here are not related directly to the war, but rather to various other aid programs, such as hospitals or schools being set up and supported.” As to USAID’s “Agriculture” program, former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson notes: “Well, in the places I worked out of, we, RR, or Refugee Relief, did most of their local hauling, if they had any. RR actually funded the vegetable seeds for the refugee population. This was particularly true in the north.” Other goods transported by Air America were livestock such as water buffalos, cattle, and chicken. Former Air America kicker John Kirkley describes the role of Udorn as follows: “Here we worked out of AB-1 or Pepper Grinder. AB-1 was where we loaded humanitarian supplies, i.e. live pigs, chickens, water buffaloes, white rice and passengers.” The official Termination Report of USAID / Laos notes: “During the war, most of the cattle and buffalo, which were used for draft purposes, were either killed for meat or killed in the heavy fighting. At the time of the cease-fire, it was noted that due to the lack of draft animals, much of the heavy farm work could not be accomplished. Two hundred fifty buffalo and 250 cattle were brought from the Vientiane Plain area to the MR II area. The cattle were ultimately distributed to disabled veterans and demobilized troops in areas were cattle were scarce.” As to MR III, “during the early program years following 1965 only a few projects introducing ducks and chicks were implemented. […] In 1967, one project was undertaken in Savannakhet City. […] The project included vaccines from the Veterinary Services. […] Eggs were sold on the Savannakhet market and shipped to Vientiane daily by air.” Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “I do remember when I was at Nam Bac, LS-203, spring of 1967, that there was a daily shiment of fresh meat there, primarily for the FAR troops in the local HQ. Water buffalo, probably, but also pig and chicken, and fresh veggies. This might come up via AirAm H-34 or Porter, AirAm or CASI, depending on the contract at the time. This was also the case to several of the Thai SGU outposts out of 20A. If not in a combat situation, they’d get some fresh food. Ban Na, LS-15, comes in mind. This would be 1970 or so. […] Two other short-lived live protein programs, forget the year, but perhaps 1968? ‘Pigs for Pop’ was in reference to flying live pigs from Udorn on up to Sam Thong and perhaps 20A, for onward shipping upcountry. ‘Pop’ in this case, was a reference to Pop Buell. ‘Ducks for Doc’ was in reference to one or two AirAm C-123 flights from Taiwan to Udorn or Vientiane, then up to Sam Thong or 20A. Live ducks, air sick, as I heard, would not have liked to clean up the plane afterwards. The ‘Doc’ here is Doctor Charles ‘Jigs’ Weldon, head of USAID/PHD then.”

Former Air America pilot John Deakin recalls a mission in South Vietnam, where he had to transport pigs in his C-46: “Man, do they get interesting! They all smell bad, and they all make a lot of noise. Some can make real trouble, and thereby hangs this tail … er, tale. Why on earth would we haul live animals? Well, the ravages of war are hard on livestock and food supplies, and we’d often relocate whole villages from a danger area to a safer spot (only to move ‘em again months later). Some livestock was flown in to serve as breeding stock, but I’d guess very few of the animals that I delivered survived more than a few days before being consigned to the cook pot. In a few cases, live animals would be air-dropped by parachute. On at least one occasion I’m familiar with, live pigs were air-dropped without parachutes,

411 Davis, Across the Mekong, p. 192.
412 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
413 Kirkley, Air America: a daily adventure on Friday, May 2, 1969.
414 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 213.
415 Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, pp. 226/7. There was also a tribal shuttle service to the markets of Long Tieng and Sam Thong by contract aircraft (Castle, At war, p.84).
416 E-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
presumably to be eaten that night, as none, to my knowledge, survived the drop (no matter how hard they flapped their fat little legs). This was long before Animal Rights, of course – can you imagine the furor that operation would cause today?

A much more conventional method was to box the pigs up in cheap, flimsy wooden-slat crates, wrapped in chicken wire. (I could never understand why they don’t call it ‘Pig Wire.’)

We’d stack up a whole bunch of these crates from the floor to the ceiling in the C-46, over hard against the right side, leaving only a narrow passage along the left side of the airplane for the crew to get in and out. I was much skinnier in those days, but it was still a chore to wiggle through that passage. Stink! Whooee! One of those trips, and there wasn’t enough hot water in Saigon for me to wash the smell off for a week! Some uncharitable people said they didn’t notice any difference, but I always ignored them and figured their sense of smell was too delicate. The normal airflow in a C-46 cabin is forward, which is nice for detecting smoke or fuel leaks, but it is not exactly optimum with a load of pigs. We always flew with the overwing hatches out, which helped pull some of the smell out, once we got off the ground.”

Flying livestock in Laos probably was a similar experience, although in the case described by John Deakin one of the pigs ran amok aboard his C-46.

For USAID’s Rural Development Division, Air America aircraft mostly carried “personnel, building materials. For the most part RD worked via roads, and in some areas boats, especially in the south. Weren’t all that active in the north in areas that were only supported by STOL aircraft and choppers.” Occasionally, Air America also flew for some other USAID programs in Laos – like the Customs Assistance Division (CAD), the Education program (EDU), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), or the Public Safety

418 E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.
419 The USAID Laos Termination Report by Ramsey et. al. describes the activities of this program as follows: “The number of schools was greatly expanded; teachers were trained and placed; teaching materials were provided” (p. 6). “U.S. assistance to the educational program in Laos began in 1955 under a single project which from the outset emphasized the training of adequate numbers of teachers. In 1964, there was a reorganization and expansion of educational assistance which resulted in the following sub-projects: Teacher Training 1964 to 1975; Community Education 1964 to 1975; Materials Production 1964 to 1968; Secondary Education 1967 to 1975” (p. 89). Between 1955 and 1975, the number of elementary schools increased from 1040 to over 3500; USAID also provided assistance to the Savannakhet and Vientiane Technical Schools (pp. 89/90). “School construction at the elementary level was carried out as a community self-help activity supported by imported materials and construction supervision supplied by the Mission” (p. 92). In Military Region II, “all the elementary schools up to the time of the cease-fire were temporary, i.e. constructed from bamboo and plastic sheeting, with the exception of Long Tieng and a few villages in and around Ban Xon. After the cease-fire, it became important to construct more permanent buildings. […] The A.I.D. Mission in all cases provided a sawmill to saw the logs felled by the villagers, cement, hardware, tin roofing and carpenter foremen” (p. 215). Teacher Training was organized near Vientiane and in four additional normal schools built in 1962-67. “A large additional normal school opened at Savannakhet and a smaller one in Ban Keun in FY 1969. […] Workshops on teaching aids were held in Luang Prabang, Sam Thong, Savannakhet, Pakse, Vang Vieng, Ban Houei Sai, Paklay, and Vientiane to aid teachers in constructing their own teaching materials ” (pp. 96/7).
420 The USAID Laos Termination Report by Ramsey et. al. describes the activities of this program as follows: “Some major routes and many minor feeder roads were constructed. […] Over the years, the A.I.D. program assisted the Lao Government in making the major road artery, Route 13, passable in all weather from Luang Prabang in the north to the Cambodian border in the south. All weather roads were constructed connecting mountainous Ban Xon, Long Tieng, Nam Moh and Muong Cha with Route 13. An all weather road was constructed between Xiang Ngeun and Muong Nane. Although it was designed principally to open up the area between these two towns for refugee resettlement, at the same time it increased commercial exchanges between the city of Luang Prabang and Savayboury City and Province. Hundreds of kilometers of feeder and village roads were constructed in the areas of Pakse, Savannakhet, Thakhok, Borikhane, Vientiane, Savayboury, Xiang Khouang and Ban Houei Sai” (p. 6). “A contract was let in April 1963 for construction of a 100 km road project from the Nam Hin Boun to Nam Ca Dinh Rivers on Route 13, the main north-south route through the country. This project was completed in June 1965 at a cost of $8.4 million” (p. 121). In June 65, USAID bought all of the contractor’s (Grove-Jones) equipment and supplies and moved them to Vientiane by truck and barge, and then
Division (PSD). As all aircraft used for those programs were small – on 24 May 72, Helio XW-PGI flew from Vientiane to several small airstrips for the FHWA; on 18 August 72, Porter N392R flew for the Requirements Office and for USAID’s Education program in the morning and for the FHWA in the afternoon; on 19 August 72, Porter N355F flew for the CAD; on 28 August 72, Volpar N9664C flew for USAID’s PSD, to mention just a few examples, they probably only carried personnel that worked for those programs. And the Company even had its own security force called Security Inspection Service (SIS), and for them, Air America C-123K “556” flew to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) and Sayaboury (L-23) on 18 August 72 on flight “SIS-06” – apparently an anti-narcotics mission. For more details about this aspect of Air America operations see Part II of this file.

Ban Houei Sai (L-25) in the late sixties or early seventies, taken by Dan Gamelin
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

up to Ban Hin Heup in September 65 to begin the reopening of the Vientiane-Luang Prabang road – again by road; this project was completed in June 1969 (p. 121).

421 Explanations of the codes given by MacAlan Thompson in the e-mail he kindly sent to the author on 12 Nov. 2005. “Developing the capability of the Lao National Police to maintain order and internal security was the primary purpose of the Civil Police Administration Project. Technical assistance, equipment, and training were provided to the police force with special attention given to improving administration and management, the National Police Training Center, police communications and mobility, and enforcement methods and techniques. As a result of U.S. congressional action, the project was terminated in 1974. A Termination Phase-Out study (May 1974) was prepared by the Office of Public Safety” (Ramsey et. al., USAID Laos Termination Report, p. 325).

422 On 19 August 72, Porter N355F flew for the CAD Vientiane (L-08) - Sayaboury (L-23) - Ban Houei Sai (L-25) as directed and back to Vientiane; on 30 August 72, Volpar N9157Z flew Vientiane - Ban Houei Sai - Vientiane for CAD (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 19 and 30 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).


424 Before C-123K “524” departed Luang Prabang for Ban Houei Sai on 7 March 73, “the Company Security Inspection Service (SIS) personnel at L-54” observed the unloading and loading of the aircraft (Accident report for the C-123 accident of 7 March 73, in: UTD/CIA/B62F2). This security force already existed in 1968. Its duties are described as follows: • Prevent pilferage and the overall protection of Company property. • Deny access to Air America facilities, property or planes to unauthorized persons. • Be alert for any and all illegal actions. Among them, smuggling such items as gold or opium on to Company property or aboard Company aircraft. • Detect hazardous conditions which might lead to injury to Company personnel or to damage to Company property – such as fire hazards. • Recover lost personal effects – operate a lost-and-found set-up as efficiently as possible. • Take action necessary to correct physical security deficiencies – such as lock doors and windows which have been left open, etc. • Provide a 24-hour mobile patrol throughout Air America’s base to accomplish all the above duties” (Gilbert, “VTE security force”, in: Air America Log, vol. III, no.3, March 1968, p. 6).

The Flight Information Center (FIC):

With the war in Laos going on, more and more drops were necessary. But at the same time the danger of being shot at or even shot down by enemy anti-aircraft artillery became bigger and bigger. So all those drops were only possible, because somebody told the pilots where they could go and which areas they should avoid. This “somebody” was the Flight Information Center that had been created in late 1963 – as a lesson learnt from another Air America aircraft that had been shot down. As the “Short history of the Flight Information Center” of 12 October 1964 states: “On September 5, 1963, C-46 B-150 deliberately or accidentally flew over a hostile area and was shot down. The pilot and the co-pilot are presumed dead; five other crew members have been prisoners of the Pathet Laos for over a year. This incident caused much soul searching on the part of both Company and Customer officials and it was decided that some action should be taken to ensure that aircraft operating in Laos would not fly over known hostile areas if it could be at all avoided. After much discussion it was decided that a pilot briefing facility was required. It was envisioned that this briefing facility would have all the latest intelligence information at its disposal, would know the location of all the hostile areas in Laos and, therefore, would be able to brief pilots on how to reach their destinations without becoming exposed to enemy ground fire. […] Accordingly the 342 Contract was amended to include three intelligence types to be known as Operations Specialists to be hired by the Company immediately. Two of these men arrived on the scene shortly after the first of December; [they] were given the best facility then available in the Operations Quonset hut. While all concerned knew about the primary purpose of the Flight Information Center, little was known about what the day-to-day activities of the Center might entail. After some discussion it was felt that the Operations Specialists would report to the ATOG Manager administratively but that they would for the most part define their jobs and responsibilities as they went along. With this view in mind, the Operations Specialists were told: ‘go to it, fellows, brief the pilots, and don’t let anyone get shot down’”. 426 In January 64, the Flight Information Center was put into full-time operation.427

One of those original Operations Specialists, James L. Mullen, recalls: “Due to a rash of lost or damaged aircraft due to enemy ground fire, Bill Solin, a former Army Intelligence Officer out of Ft Holliberd MD, and I, the Combat Intelligence Officer for the 1st Marine Air Wing, were hired to set up an office to try to prevent Air America and Bird & Sons (later CASI) aircraft from being shot down.” 428 At the beginning there was some competition from the COR on contract 342 who gave his own private briefing to the pilots and ignored the FIC “as much as he possible could”. 429 In the spring of 1964, he was replaced by Earle Jones, who – unlike his predecessor – “bought” the idea that there should be only one Air America source for all flight information and that this one source should be the FIC. So Earle Jones stopped private pilot briefings/debriefings and began to funnel all the information that he felt necessary for proper flight safety to the Operations Specialists. 430 And indeed: “We were responsible for briefing and de-briefing all air crews operating in Laos, including Helio, helicopters (eventually we established an FIC in Udorn to handle the helicopter traffic) and other STOL aircraft”, James Mullen says: “Most of the latter was directed up country by the Case officer. Even so, we still benefited by de-briefing these crews. This was initially our primary source of information until the Customer finally realized that we were providing a

426 “A short history of the Flight Information Center”, Memorandum dated 12 October 1964 signed by T.C. Walker, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8; a more aggressive version of the same text, dated 3 October 64 and not signed by T.C. Walker – so probably only a draft – is preserved at the same location.
428 E-mail dated 12 Jul 2005 kindly sent to the author by James L. Mullen.
vital service for the entire operation.”

The next moment of conflict came in May 1964, when a group of T-28s was based at Wattay airport whose pilots, in the beginning, were to be briefed by USAF people who did not know Laos or the flying conditions in that country or the military situation in Laos and so turned to Air America for help. After consulting with the Customer, the Operations Specialists were given green light to assist the T-28 (AOC) unit in any way they could. “As time went on, the Operations Specialists became involved not only in helping the AOC operations, putting up maps, briefing the AOC officers, they also found out that their information supplied by Earle Jones and Air America pilots was more current than that received through AOC intelligence sources. They found they were getting this information faster than AOC and sometimes this information was very vital to AOC activities. The Operations Specialists could give information to AOC of a truck convoy proceeding down route 7 eight or ten hours before this information would come in from Air Attache offices.”

The danger of this was a lack of control from the decision makers at the Embassy, because the information given by the FIC was only based on the principle of efficiency, and if the T-28 pilots forgot that they depended upon orders given by the Embassy, they might – for example – strike a target that politically should not be attacked. The same conflict between efficiency and political control also affected other areas such as an unauthorized debriefing of military personnel that had been rescued by Air America, and FIC’s efficiency even raised suspicion at the Embassy that Operations Specialists were responsible for diverting a flight of T-28s from its previously briefed target on 9 September 64 – but as then came out, that diversion had only been the result of some misunderstandings that happened because a clear chain of command was lacking. But after those early conflicts had been overcome by establishing clear channels of command and control and by making up “a listing of the duties and responsibilities of the Operations Specialists and the FIC”, the efficiency of the FIC could prove its usefulness for all sides. As James Mullen recalls: “Once the air war in Laos and North Vietnam heated up in 1964, Air America became the primary Search and Rescue (SAR) operation for the military. FIC on direction from the customer and operations played an integral part in that effort. Briefing crews including the T-28s on friendly and enemy activity in the area, as well as assisting in getting the necessary air cover our helicopters needed to make the rescues.”

And when more and more anti-aircraft artillery expected Air America aircraft since the mid-

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431 E-mail dated 12 Jul 2005 kindly sent to the author by James L. Mullen.
434 “On or about 9 September, a flight of T-28 aircraft was diverted from its previously briefed target to another target; a Bird and Sons aircraft rendezvoused with these T-28s, led them into this other target and marked the enemy position with smoke. The T-28s expended on target with excellent results and then returned to their Vientiane base. During their debriefing in AOC they mentioned this diversion from their assigned target to the target pointed out by the Bird and Sons aircraft. This debriefing information reached the Air Attache in Laos who assumed that the diversion was laid on by Earle Jones’ group operating out of Udorn. In order to avoid this type of incident in the future or to provide better control, the Air Attache brought this matter up to Earle Jones’ boss in Vientiane only to find out that the Udorn group had not sanctioned or had any control over this strike diversion, whatsoever” (“A short history of the Flight Information Center”, Memorandum dated 12 October 1964 signed by T.C. Walker, p. 5, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8). A confidential note dated 11 September 64 (preserved in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8) then accused the Operations Specialists and a USAF Captain to be responsible for using Bird & Sons Porter XWPBL as a FAC aircraft and deliberately diverting the flight of T-28s to a new target. But T.C. Walker insists: “To my knowledge, they have never actually seen the complete dossier that Mr. Jones has on file”, so that everything seems to have been a misunderstanding (“A short history of the Flight Information Center”, Memorandum dated 12 October 1964 signed by T.C. Walker, p. 5, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8).
435 E-mail dated 12 Jul 2005 kindly sent to the author by James L. Mullen.
In later years, the Flight Information Center, together with other services of the Air Support Branch like the ATOG warehouses, Flight Watch, Scheduling, Operations Coordination, Weather Forecasting or Control Tower Services, were covered by a separate USAID contract, i.e. by contract no. AID-439-777 effective 1 July 1970:


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436 See the interview with John McRainey in Monte Markham’s documentary The CIA’s Secret Airline (2000) at 0.17.40 to 0.18.00 minutes.