Air America in Laos II – military aid
by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

Part II

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I) Air America in Laos: military and paramilitary aid 1968-1973

Madriver operations 1968-73

During the 1968-73 period, the original Madriver contract had been transformed into contract no. F62531-67-0028 for Fiscal Years 68, 69, and 70 on 1 July 67, but as before, this contract covered flying services to be provided by an ever growing number of Udorn-based UH-34Ds plus the operation of one C-47 out of Bangkok, apparently a courier aircraft.¹ On 1 July 70, that contract was followed by contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 that covered the Udorn-based UH-34Ds, the Bangkok-based C-47 plus a Udorn-based Volpar, apparently another courier aircraft.² That contract is much more complex, as it does not only cover flying services to be performed by the UH-34Ds and the 2 transport planes, but also drop-in maintenance of Raven O-1 and U-17 aircraft, crash / battle damage repair to DEPCHIEF-managed T-28s, support services to the Khmer Air Force and a lot of other operation and maintenance services. But apart from the prices, section XIV dealing with “Flying Services for Government furnished UH-34 aircraft (Item 1)” is not much different from similar sections in earlier versions of the Madriver contract.³ So it can be assumed that the types of missions flown by Air America’s UH-34Ds were still more or less the same as those described for the pre-1968 period. Although new UH-34Ds continued to arrive from US military sources all the time, it is noteworthy that some of Air America’s UH-34Ds had a very

Plaque awarded to Air America UH-34D H-15 on 28 May 1969
(photo kindly supplied by Ward S. Reimer)

² Flight Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-71-014 of 1 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B; the Udorn-based Volpar was N3728G at that time.
long life, and the one that set the record was H-15 to whom even a plaque was awarded. On 28 May 1969, Air America’s H-15 was the first UH-34D ever to achieve 10,000 flight hours, and a plaque was awarded to the Company. Pilots who – like the helicopter and Helio pilots – remained overnight (RON) in northwestern Laos, could stay at Air America’s comfortable hostel at Luang Prabang, rented since 1 December 72.4


In 1971, there was another Air America jubilee: “Air America’s Base at Udorn, Thailand has a group of accident-free helicopter pilots – all hired prior to 1963 – who represent a combined total of approximately 37,822 hours of accident-free helicopter flying with AAM, during a period of some 57 cumulative years of flying. Such a record is worthy of note and exhibits the high degree of professionalism that these individuals are capable of offering to Air America’s rotorcraft operations – often under unusually difficult conditions. We would like to compliment these individuals and give them recognition for their contribution towards

making AAM’s safety record something to be proud of.” On 1 November 1972, UH-34D H-15, the very same that had reached 10,000 flight hours in 1969, even totaled 15,000 flight hours, and so another plaque was awarded to Air America by Sikorsky Aircraft.\(^5\)


Re-supplying and operating the TACANs 1968-73

Among the duties performed by Air America’s UH-34Ds assigned to the Madriver contract was to re-supply the TACAN sites. For in spite of the Communist attacks of 1967 and 1968 described above, the USAF continued to operate TACANs in Laos, because they were vital for organizing the air war against North Vietnam. On 30 June 1970, the old Madriver contract no. F62531-67-C-0028 had been replaced by a more comprehensive contract, that is by contract no. F04606-71-C-0002. The Price Negotiation Memorandum of 20 October 1971 covering the Fiscal Year 72 period of that contract lists $215,000 assigned to TACAN operation and maintenance and $25,000 to TACAN Flight Support.⁷

At that time, three TACANs still existed in the area, the one at Phou Kate near Saravane (L-44), the one on Skyline Ridge near Long Tieng (LS-20A), and the one at Phou Mano near Mukdahan in Thailand. On 18 June 70, the TACAN located at Phou Kate was overrun by North Vietnamese sappers. As compensation for the loss of Phou Kate a new TACAN was established on a mountaintop north of Wat Phu in Champassac Province, but Phou Kate was retaken by heliborne guerrilla forces in July 70.⁸ On 5 January 72, the TACAN on Skyline Ridge was relocated to Phou Xang, a mountain 20 kilometers south of Long Tieng.⁹ This situation is reflected by the Price Negotiations of 20 October 71 to contract no. F04606-71-C-0002: “Order 0004 provides for operation and maintenance of PACAF / TACAN equipment at three SEA locations. Item 21 provides for O & M of one TACAN installation exclusive of the PACAF / TACAN requirement. […] Subsequent to establishment of contract coverage for site 3, PACAF requested establishment of a new TACAN site (identified as Site 4).”¹⁰

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⁸ Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.276 plus p.280, note 43.
⁹ Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.330.
The secret bases:

Long Tieng in the late sixties, taken by Dan Gamelin
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

Long Tieng (LS-20A) in the late sixties or early seventies
(all photos in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B31)
Although many of the Lima Sites that had been built in Laos since the early sixties had been overrun by enemy forces since then, some of them were still doing very well: Estimates say that in 1970, the population of Long Tieng was about 40,000 inhabitants, most of them Hmong soldiers and their families, but also including some 50 CIA men. There was an Air America chalet at Sam Thong (LS-20), which was a favorite overnight stay for pilots working in northern Laos, as it had 28 beds, hot-water showers, a laundry, hot meals served in a dining room, and a recreation lounge.\(^{11}\) There was also a CIA training-camp for the Nung-tribe in southern Laos since the early 60s.\(^{12}\) But the most important place was the secret base of Long Tieng, better known as “the Alternate” (LS-20A),\(^{13}\) Sam Thong (LS-20), the place where “Pop” Buell had built a hospital and where later a school and the Sam Thong College had been organized by Moua Lia and his teachers, was attacked and destroyed by North Vietnamese troops in the early morning of 19 March 1970. The hospital staff moved permanently to Ban Xon (LS-272), and Sam Thong College moved temporarily to Vientiane.\(^{14}\) Air America helicopter pilot Dick Casterlin recalls: “LS-272: […] I was only in and out delivering wounded and the sort. I do not think that I ever shut down there.”\(^{15}\) Then, the same day, the North Vietnamese troops infiltrated the southern ridge of Skyline, dug in, and directed their guns from above into the valley of Long Tieng. Many people were evacuated, others fled to Ban Xon. Still the very same day, on 19 March 70, Thai “volunteers” and Hmong from other positions were helicoptered in by Air America to help defend Long Tieng against the North Vietnamese. USAF A-1 Skyraiders and T-28s from Thailand joined the Hmong T-28s to bomb the enemy positions on Skyline Ridge. On 1 April 70, after receiving sustained heavy bombardment from US, Thai and Lao planes, the North Vietnamese finally withdrew from Skyline Ridge; Long Tieng had been held, but not without Thai air support, Thai artillery, and Thai ground troops.\(^{16}\) But in February 1971, the North Vietnamese came back: Again, they dug in Skyline Ridge and terrorized the valley with their 130mm field guns, but were immediately bombed by Hmong T-28s. In the early morning of 14 February 71, North Vietnamese commandos stormed Long Tieng, blowing up aircraft, ammunition dumps, and supply stocks. USAF F-4s called in from Thailand at dawn hit friendly positions as a result of panic and confusion, so that more people were killed by the US jets than by the enemy. This debacle would be referred to as the “Valentine’s Day Massacre”. From their mountain positions, North Vietnamese guns continued to shell Long Tieng for the next weeks; during this time, T-28s flew over 1,000 sorties in defense of the base at daytime, while at night, AC-47A Spooky gunships attacked the enemy ground positions illuminated by flares dropped from flareships. On 18 April 71, Vang Pao retook Skyline Ridge, although the enemy still held some mountain positions. So Vang Pao used Air America helicopters to aircrill small units with Forward Air Guides behind enemy lines to locate enemy gun positions and call in air strikes. This strategy worked, and after a couple of weeks, the Communist troops fell back, relieving the pressure on Long Tieng.\(^{17}\) Around Christmas 1971, the North Vietnamese were back again: The enemy had overrun positions at the southern end of Skyline Ridge and captured the navigational equipment; snipers controlled the approach to Long Tieng. Then, on 31 December 71, “the first 130mm shells landed in the Long Tieng Valley, destroying the

\(^{11}\) Video of John Tarn, at 0.07.05 minutes; Robbins, \textit{Air America}, p.144.

\(^{12}\) Video of John Tarn, at 0.32.30 minutes.

\(^{13}\) For Long Tieng in the 70ties see the video at \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BybiNHmVDbY}.

\(^{14}\) Hamilton-Merritt, \textit{Tragic mountains}, pp.242/3.

\(^{15}\) E-mail dated 17 February 2015; kindly sent to the author by Dick Casterlin.

\(^{16}\) Hamilton-Merritt, \textit{Tragic mountains}, pp.243/4; for the battle of Long Tieng in 1970, see the video tapes at \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bz/PpLoqRgo}.

\(^{17}\) Hamilton-Merritt, \textit{Tragic mountains}, pp.253-58; a portrait of General Vang Pao in the 70ties can be found at \url{http://youtu.be/MVbGkmMuWxI}.  

main ammunition dump and the Lao air force facilities there”, and North Vietnamese troops arrived at the airfield, and by dawn on 1 January 72, the North Vietnamese held the southern end of the runway of Long Tieng, so that Vang Pao could only move by Air America helicopters. With Long Tieng under daily attack and the airfield unusable, Ban Xon (LS-272) was designated as the temporary frontline area for troop redeployment, resupply, and as a Search and Rescue base, where most CIA equipment – jeeps, electronic gear, generators, etc. – moved on 5 January 72. Air America UH-34Ds carried in wounded and dead bodies, while Air America Caribous picked up supplies that were to be dropped to friendly troops. This situation continued until March 72. Then, in almost a month of bitter fighting, Vang Pao’s troops moved some two miles back up the ridge; and it took another two months, that is until June 72, until Long Tieng base was re-secured and the airstrip operational again.

But there was still another place in Laos, which was vital to the Hmong and to the United States: Na Khang (LS-36). Located in the north, 150 nautical miles west of Hanoi, it had always been of strategic importance to the United States, as it served as a forward staging area for US Search and Rescue operations which tried to reach downed aircrews before they were captured. USAF Jolly Green Giant helicopters waited at Na Khang to pick up US aircrews downed over North Vietnam or Laos. As in 1966, US helicopters couldn’t be refueled in the air, Na Khang’s fuel depot was critical to SAR missions. In the early days, the downed aircrews were picked up by Air America helicopters and later also by USAF SAR teams. Na Khang also had a US tactical air control system (TACAN), and it functioned as Vang Pao’s most forward resupply base in MR 2. CIA adviser Jerry Daniels and the Hmong had dug in along this 4,400-foot-high landing field, and from here, Vang Pao’s troops and their supplies were airlifted almost daily to remote mountaintops. For all of these reasons, Na Khang was also a primary NVA target, and on 17 February 66, LS-36 fell to the enemy, but was retaken

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18 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.438.
20 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp.277-87.
21 Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic mountains, pp.144/5.
by Vang Pao’s forces in the summer of 1966.\textsuperscript{22} The following winter, Na Khang was again attacked, but saved by USAF A-1Es, and thereafter, the site became known as the Alamo. In 1968, the site was again under repeated attack by Pathet Lao and NVA troops. During that time, Na Khang was supplied with ammunition by Air America C-123s, and not only Royal Lao Air Force T-28s, but even USAF Steel Tiger A-26s, normally used in the south, were transferred to the north to support the battle for Na Khang in 1968.\textsuperscript{23} But several T-28s were shot down during the Communist attacks, as can be seen on the video-tape made by John Tarn.\textsuperscript{24} In February 69, communist troops again threatened Na Khang with its TACAN facility and staging base for rescue operations, and this time, after many Hmong and Lao officers had been killed, all remaining CIA advisers evacuated, and the remaining forces fled, and on 1 March 1969, Na Khang fell to the enemy.\textsuperscript{25}

**Military aid to Laos:**

As will be recalled, there were four types of clandestine transport missions operated from Thailand into Laos: The first type were the *Peppergrinder*-missions, whereby arms and ammunition were transported from Udorn to the Royal Lao Air Force and to the Royal Lao Army. These missions were arranged in Thailand by DEPCHIEF and were managed in Laos by the *Requirements Office*, which was officially part of USAID. In October 69, the former US Ambassador to Laos, William Sullivan, admitted at the US Senate hearing that at that time, 558 Americans were employed by the US Government in Laos, including 338 Americans on direct hire with USAID and another 127 serving as military attachés. He equally admitted that the USAID mission in Laos also administered Souvanna Phouma’s request for military aid in checking to make certain that material arrived safely at its destination and was used correctly.\textsuperscript{26} But not all of these USAID people worked for USAID or the *Requirements Office*: The other three types of clandestine transport missions into Laos probably also involved people officially working for USAID: the CIA’s supply pipeline into Laos, mostly served from Takhli by Air America’s “Project aircraft”, the paramilitary support-missions within contract USAID-439-713, which included liaison flights between the CIA stations, and the AB-1-missions, which transported additional supplies to General Vang Pao’s irregulars and to other CIA-programs. For USAID Laos also gave cover to CIA personnel, notably those advising Vang Pao’s army. “CIA ‘AID advisers’ also relayed intelligence information on enemy movements and, on occasion, acted as forward observers for air strikes in the northeast where they could pose as ‘refugee workers’ aiding Meo tribesmen fleeing the scenes of battle.”\textsuperscript{27} Some years later, US military presence in Laos became even more visible: On 8 June 1971, the Secretary of Defense directed the relocation of DEPCHIEF from the Capital Hotel in Bangkok to Udorn – probably in order to have the most important components of the American military aid program to Laos located in one place.\textsuperscript{28} While previously, US military aid to Laos had been more and more handled by Project 404 attachés, sideling DEPCHIEF, the proclamation of the “Symington ceiling”, i.e. the law sponsored by Senator Stuart Symington that dictated that, effective October 1971, total US spending in Laos could not exceed $ 350 million during the remainder of that fiscal year, required control of the entire military aid program to Laos by what was to be a high-ranking officer: DEPCHIEF, working out of Udorn. Shortly afterwards, in December 71,

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\textsuperscript{22} Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp.144-47.
\textsuperscript{23} Hagedorn/Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, p.164.
\textsuperscript{24} At 0.33:40, 0.18:15, and 0.53:42 minutes.
\textsuperscript{25} Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp.144-46, 152, and 205/6; Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.312.
\textsuperscript{26} Kirk, *Wider war*, p.236.
\textsuperscript{27} Kirk, *Wider war*, p.236.
\textsuperscript{28} Castle, *At war*, pp.103/4.
DEPCHIEF took office at Udorn. In February 72, Brigadier General John W. Vessey Jr., the highest-ranking officer yet to hold the slot, took command of DEPCHIEF, assuming control over the hundreds of Project 404 augmentees that had previously reported to the ARMA or AIRA. In October 72, B.G. Vessey joined the “Country Team” of US Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley at Vientiane and soon became his primary military adviser.

**Peppergrinder-missions 1968-73:**

Peppergrinder-missions, as will be recalled, carried arms and ammunition to the RLAF and to the Royal Lao Army, using C-123s that were assigned to contract AID-439-342 and would normally haul fuel and heavy equipment into Laos out of their base at Vientiane. For a Peppergrinder-mission, these C-123s would arrive at Udorn, pick up their cargo at the Peppergrinder-warehouse, and fly it to the destination given to the pilots only at Peppergrinder. Compared to the situation in 1966, when between one or four C-123s a day were used on Peppergrinder-flights, as has been seen above, the number of flights per day was considerably increased in this period: For the month of June 1969, the daily flight schedules of Udorn contained in the Hickler papers of the Air America Archives show that the average number of Air America C-123s used per day on Peppergrinder-missions was three, and on some days – like on 25 June 69 – even no less than five C-123s flew missions “as directed by PPG”.

Approaching Udorn in the early seventies (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

While the Peppergrinder-missions of 1970 had nothing special about them except that their number was a little bit reduced, in 1971, these missions suffered from several accidents, including the dramatic loss of C-123K “293” on 27 December 71, which

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31 Castle, *At war*, pp.103/4.
32 For June 69, the daily flight schedules of Udorn (preserved in: UTD/Hickler/B6F3 + B3F14 + B8F1) show the following Air America C-123s operated “as directed by PPG”: on 11 June: “568” + “576” + “374”; on 20 June: “613” + “636”; on 21 June: “671” + “568” + “545” + “576”; on 23 June: “576” + “374”; on 24 June: “613” + “636”; on 25 June: “617” + “636” + “576” + “613” + “671”; on 26 June: “636” + “617” + “374”; on 27 June: “617” + “576” + “374”; and on 28 June: “576” + “374” + “617”; all of them were assigned to contract USAID-439-342 and were normally based at Vientiane.
33 The frequency seems to have been a little bit reduced, as there were days when only one C-123K was flown on a Peppergrinder-mission – like 18 September 70, when only “524” flew “as directed by PPG” (Udorn daily flight schedule for 18 September 70, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F1).
34 On 20 September 71, C-123K “555” was operating out of Udorn (T-08) “under the provisions of AID Contract 439-342. […] This day’s flights were all scheduled to work from T-08 as directed (primarily from the ‘Pepper
disappeared on a cargo flight from Udorn (T-08) to Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69), while officially

Air America C-123K “293” at Long Tieng in May 1970, photo taken by D. Williams (quoted from https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/pg81.gif/image.gif)

operating under contract AID-439-342. The crew, consisting of Pilot In Command George L. Ritter, First Officer Roy F. Townley, and Air Freight Specialists Edward J. Weissenback and Khamphanh Saysongkham, has never been heard of again. “Between 0615L and 0630 on 27 December 1971 the flight crew [...] reported to the Air America Inc. Flight Operations Section at Udorn RTAFB for briefing. The early briefing was required since 293 needed a Functional Check Flight (FCF) prior to release for operations. [...] The crew was briefed that they would work out of Peppergrinder (PPG) after the FCF. PPG work primarily consists of loading and dispatching mixed ordnance for up-country sites. [...] The briefing was general and covered the normal PPG missions. [...] The situation in the LS-69 area was included since this was a frequent destination for PPG flights. [...] A general briefing was necessitated since the actual destination would not be known until assigned by PPG.” After a successful check flight, “at PPG, the aircraft was loaded with 12,892 pounds of mixed ordnance including 75mm shells, 81mm rounds, 222 caliber small arms ammunition and white phosphorous smoke rounds. This, plus whatever fuel remained from the original 1250 gallon load brought the aircraft close to its maximum allowable weight of 60,000 pounds.”35 C-123K “293” departed Udorn for LS-69 at 270045Z,36 i.e. at 7.45 hours local time. “LS-69 and LS-69A have been combined to one site now called LS-69. It is basically 3,100’ x 100’ clay/laterite strip with an on-call non-directional beacon. Evidently this beacon was not functioning at 0900 on 27 December 1971.”37 The surrounding terrain, both north and south, is heavily populated with

Grinder’ area), and PPG missions were flown to Long Tieng (LS-20A) and to Pakse (L-11); when “555” landed at Pakse with 9,300 pounds of cargo aboard, it “slid off the right side of the runway midfield after blowing the right main tire”, causing “substantial damage to the lower fuselage, right jet engine pod, right jet engine pylon and other damage to the right engine, propeller as well as a blown tire and wheel damages” (Investigation of aircraft accident, C-123K 55-4555 at Pakse (L-11) on 20 September 1971, in: UTD/Anthony/F4). On 14 December 71, a similar accident happened at Long Tieng (LS-20A) to C-123K “636”, also operating “under the provisions of AID Contract 439-342” out of Udorn (Investigation of this accident, also in: UTD/Anthony/F4).

37 The Memorandum of 18 January 72 by P.R. O’Brien, DSAFE, covering this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B29F2,
enemy forces.\(^{38}\) [...] At the time of the flight towards LS-69 the winds were relatively strong and from the southwest. C-123K 57-6293 became overdue at about 0900 on 27 December 1971. An erroneous report of the aircraft landing at LS-69 misled the Flight Watches into non/late notification of an overdue aircraft. [...] The Search and Rescue (SAR) effort was conducted out of the VTE station and consisted largely of Air America, Inc. aircraft.\(^{39}\) [...] For various reasons, the USAF could only offer limited assistance. O-1 and A-1 aircraft did search late the first day but the bulk of their assistance was through radio relay from control aircraft. With a few breaks due to weather and one false lead from a native claiming to have seen an aircraft, the SAR continued through January 1972. All efforts to find traces of 293 were unsuccessful. Due to the extreme hostility of the area, several AAM, Inc. aircraft received battle damage while on the SAR. Due to the proximity of the hostile Route 46, the SAR was rather constricted in nature. The final effort consisted of dropping leaflets offering rewards for information and/or the aircrew. The SAR, although late in starting,\(^{40}\) was as thorough as terrain, the weather and the enemy would permit. Further air search was deemed fruitless after 5 January 1972. [...] Although the cause of the disappearance of 293 must be listed as undetermined, the aircraft probably strayed from course and, over exceedingly hostile country, was hit by enemy fire and rapidly destroyed.”\(^{41}\) Nevertheless, the search for “293” was resumed some days later, again dropping reward leaflets, and on one of these flights, on 15 January 72, Captain Jim Rhyne tragically lost part of one leg, when his aircraft, Volpar

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38 Nevertheless, “293 had only one survival vest, one UZI weapon, but four parachutes” (Memorandum of 18 January 72 by P.R. O’Brien, DSAFE, covering this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B29F2).

39 On 27 December 71, the Air America aircraft involved in the SAR were C-46 XW-PBV, Volpars N9542Z and N9671C, and PC-6s N359F and N195X. Volpar N9542Z took battle damage. On 28 December, the search was continued by C-123K “S45”, Volpar N9157Z and PC-6 N365F, on 29 December by Helio XW-PBC, on 30 December by DHC-6 N5662 and Helio XW-PEA, and on 31 December by Volpar N9671C. As the weather was not good on 1 January, “ground work” was set up “for more positive approach to SAR” on 2 January, asking indigenous people for information about the aircraft. On 4 January, Air America officials interrogated an “indigenous witness who claims to have seen a stricken aircraft in vicinity of SAR efforts”, but on 5 January, a verification by Helios XW-PGC and XW-PGM had “negative results”, so that on 7 January the SAR efforts were put “at a standdown until further information received”. Another effort was made on 15 January 72, when Volpar N9671C, which was normally assigned to the photo missions, dropped reward leaflets for information on the missing C-123K “293”. On that flight, N9671C received a 100 millimeter anti-aircraft artillery round that almost killed Jim Rhyne and severely damaged the aircraft (XOXOs of the period between 27 December 71 and 7 January 72 and for 15 January 72, all in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2).

40 The Memorandum of 18 January 72 by P.R. O’Brien, DSAFE, covering this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B29F2, explains (p.2): “293 estimated LS-69, the destination, at 0900L. Bravo Radio (at Ban Houei Sai) copied 293’s position over the preceding station, LS-62, at 0850L. At around 0930L both Flight Watches (Tango and Lima) began hunting for 293. Radio Bravo had an American Customer check with LS-274, a nearby site, via his SSB radio. An unnamed Customer at LS-274 reported 293 had landed at LS-69 and was now enroute back to T-08. Bravo Radio relayed this information at 1020L. At about 1100L SOM UTH [i.e. Senior Operations Manager at Udorn] began calling 293 assuming he was now in range. These calls, of course, were unsuccessful as were other aircraft calls and SOM UTH contacted his Customer for verification of 293’s status. This Customer confirmed that the original Bravo Radio report had been incorrect and that 293 had never landed at LS-69. In short, in the 1100 - 1200L period, the first concern over the missing aircraft was expressed at UTH. SOM UTH briefed his BM (Base Manager) and CP at about noon. The ASOM VTE briefed Captain Rhyne (CP/L and ABM) at about 1400L. Captain Rhyne immediately instigated the SAR effort.”

N9671C, received a 100 millimeter anti-aircraft artillery round. But the remains of “293” and its crew were never found.

C-123K “374” taken over Laos by Dan Gamelin, probably in the early seventies (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

In 1972, Peppergrinder-missions continued as previously, using two to three C-123Ks per day during the dry months of spring, while in August, more C-123Ks and even C-130s were added to the schedule, until the number of aircraft involved per day was reduced again to one or two C-123Ks in November 72. This frequency of Peppergrinder-missions probably reflects the pattern of fighting mentioned above: During the dry winter months, Communist, i.e. Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces regularly advanced towards the western parts of Laos, as they were moving on foot and could easily drive back the Royal Lao troops when it was possible to walk thru the jungle. But during the monsoon rains of the summer, they always retreated, because when the jungle was drenched, the rivers at flood level, and the lowland rice-paddies shoulder-deep in water, the government always had the advantage of transportation on US supplied or Air America helicopters and aircraft.

43 As the C-123Ks used on Peppergrinder-missions out of Udorn were assigned to contract AID 342 and based at Vientiane, the daily flight schedules of Vientiane (all in: UTD/Severson/B1F7) do mention these missions. For the period between May 72 and mid-August 72, the following aircraft are mentioned as operating Peppergrinder-missions out of Udorn: on 24 May: C-123Ks “524” + “648”; on 18 June: C-123Ks “555” + “556”, operating to Pakse (L-11) and Savannakhet (L-39); on 15 August: C-123Ks “616” + “671” + “636”; on 17 August: C-123Ks “524” + “386”; on 18 August: C-123Ks “524” + “671” and on 19 August: C-123Ks “555” + “671”.
44 For the period between August and November 72, the daily flight schedules of Vientiane (all in: UTD/Severson/B1F7) mention the following Peppergrinder-missions operated out of Udorn: on 28 August: C-123Ks “374” + “386” + C-130 “787”; on 30 August: C-123Ks “545” + “636” + “648” + “617”; on 31 August: C-123Ks “386” + “545” + “636”; on 2 September: C-123Ks “556” + “617” + “648” + C-130 “786”; on 3 September: C-123Ks “556” + “374” + C-130 “786”; on 4 September: C-123Ks “545” + “556” + C-130 “786”; on 5 September: C-123Ks “556” + “576” + C-130 “786”; on 6 September: C-123Ks “576” + “648” + C-130 “786”; on 12 September: C-123Ks “524” + “617” + “636”; on 13 September: C-123Ks “524” + “545” + C-130 “787”; on 14 September: C-123Ks “386” + “616” + C-130 “787”; on 15 September: C-123Ks “374” + “617” + C-130 “787”; on 3 October: C-123K “576” + C-130s “787” + “218”; on 4 October: C-123Ks “636” + “671”; on 5 October: C-123K “545” + “556” + “636” + “524”; on 7 October: C-123Ks “524” + “636” + “616” + C-130 “787”; on 21 October: C-123Ks “386” + “545” + “636”; and on 9 November 72: C-123Ks “374” + “616” + C-130 “787”.
45 For 11 November 72, the daily flight schedules of Vientiane mention only C-123K “556”, and for 17 November 72, only C-123Ks “374” and “524” as operating Peppergrinder-missions out of Udorn (UTD/Severson/B1F7).
As to the C-130Es involved in those missions, former Air America pilot Connie Seigrist recalls: “All sorts of cargo was hauled including a caterpillar bulldozer weighing 45,000 lbs I had aboard on take-off out of Long Tieng (LS-20A). Aerial delivery of both soft and hard rice was required. Hard rice for aerial delivery was always loaded from the ‘Hot Spot’ ramp in Udorn. The warehouse storing the parachutes and rigging for aerial delivery of the hard rice was supervised by a special US Army unit with a Senior Warrant Officer in charge. Usually the hard rice were shells for our big guns on Site 32 (Bouam Long) just to the north of the

Dropping supplies from an Air America C-130E
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

Dropping supplies to Bouam Long (LS-32) from a C-130E, taken by Dan Gamelin
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)
Plain of Jars. Site 32 was located on a mountain top that overlooked the surrounding valley and a small area of the northern part of the Plain of Jars, all within active Communist territory except for the Site 32 mountain top. […] Although I flew the C-130 a considerable amount of time in denied territory and high risk areas in Laos I was never hit by ground fire. But we were often briefed the Communists held the C-130 as number one on their hit list, and with that information it is needless to state we took what care we could while performing our assignments. I do know my particular aircraft was selected as a target by the enemy especially on one occasion while parked for off loading in Long Tieng. We always left our engines and auxiliary power unit running while parked on airfields anywhere else in Laos except Vientiane. The engines and power units created a noise din that left talking or hearing other activities nearby almost impossible. This particular trip we had just parked in between the Karsts on the parking ramp at Long Tieng with our tail gate open in the process of off loading. The cockpit crew and I were in our seats when I just happened to notice some soldiers out to my left running for cover. Having been exposed to ground fire in the past, it was obvious to me we had incoming enemy fire when I saw the soldiers running. I spoke into the intercom to the loadmaster saying: ‘Close the tail gate, we are leaving here fast’, while simultaneously adding power to taxi. We were parked less than 50 yards from the take-off end of the runway. As we were rolling out I heard a faint ‘whump’ over the noise of the engines. When we were coming to the runway for take-off, the loadmaster reported ‘cabin secure’. […] As I turned on to the runway, I immediately added power and started our take-off roll, when I heard a much louder ‘whump’ close by. As we were rolling for take-off, the tower controller radio transmitted ‘incoming – we are getting the hell out of here.’ We took off without incident and returned to Udorn. Two days later I returned to Long Tieng and was informed of what had taken place. Off to the east end of the runway was a very high Karst that was a fairly safe haven for any hiding Communist surveillance teams. My particular flight, a spotter for their large gun that could shoot about 30 miles had infiltrated the Karst and had called in our position. The first shot had been about a hundred yards out where I had seen the soldiers running. The second shot I had faintly heard as we taxied out, had hit an open cargo shed we had been parked by. The close ‘whump’ I heard on take-off had landed just where we had been only seconds before, after I had added power for take-off. It was a convincing demonstration the C-130 was a prime target for the Communists, as they had stopped shooting when we were airborne, yet the parking ramp was full of other type aircraft targets.”

A change took place on 1 July 1972, as at this date, the former USAID contracts 439-342 and 439-713 became part of USAF contract F04606-71-C-0002. “In FY72 [Fiscal Year 1972], DOD [Department of Defense] and State Department agencies negotiated contracts with Air America for flying services in Southeast Asia. The specific contracts involved were USAF contract F04606-71-C-0002 and US Agency for International Development (USAID) Contracts 439-342 and 439-713. After extensive DOD/State Department discussions, agreement was reached to consolidate, effective 1 July 1972, all flying services under USAF procurement cognizance. Hq USAF directed Sacramento Air Material Area (SMAMA), current procurement office for the F04606-71-C-0002 contract, to be responsible for the contract consolidation project.”

This contract had already been concluded between Air America and the US Air Force (DEPCHIEF) on 1 July 1970, but at that time, it covered primarily Air America’s UH-34D operations out of Udorn. Already in 1971, the CIA “had formally declared its inability to handle the logistics” for the ever growing Lao program, and so, “the session arrived at an agreement on one thing: the Defense Department would begin to provide all equipment and conventional military supplies to both FAR [= Royal Lao Armed

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46 Connie Seigrist, Memoirs, pp.84/5, in: UTD/Leary/B21F11.
Forces] and Laotian irregulars.” Consequently, “the estimated total FY73 value of the consolidated Air America contract program is $40,479,000.” The combined contract was officially called “Modification no. P00054” to Contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 and was dated 1 July 1972. In the section “Flying services”, it lists aircraft based at Udorn (U) and aircraft based at Vientiane (V). These were: 21 UH-34D (U); 12 C-123K (V); 4 C-7A (V); 2 C-130E (U); 2 C-46 (V: the Lao Government-owned Grant aircraft); 1 U-4 (V: also a Grant aircraft); 11 PC-6 (V); 7 Bell 204B/205 (U); 5 S-58T (U); 3 DHC-6 (V); 4 Volpar (2 U, 2 V); 2 Hughes 500 (U); and 1 C-47 (Bangkok). The contract also includes C-123, C-7A, and UH-1 maintenance at Udorn.

Another modification (P00061) that converted certain parts of the contract into “the uniform contract format” was issued on 9 August 72. However, as can be guessed from the distribution of aircraft, this new contract and its subsequent modifications did not very much change the theater and ways of operations: Peppergrinder-missions were continued as usually, and immediately before the cease-fire agreement signed for Laos on 21 February 1973, the number of Peppergrinder-missions flown out of Udorn into Laos was increased once more, as for 7 January 73, the daily flight schedule of Udorn shows no less than three C-123Ks and one C-130 operating for “PPG”, and for 24 January 73, it shows four C-123Ks.

Project missions:
As to the project missions, by which two USAF C-130As bailed to Air America from the USAF, i.e. “605” and “704”, carried large supplies of ammunition from Takhli (T-05) to Long Tieng, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Sam Thong, Pakse, Savannakhet, and Saravane under cover of darkness, some C-130A missions linking Udorn with Luang Prabang were added in 1969.

Air America C-130A “605” at Takhli RThAFB, taken by Ken McClintick (with the permission of the photographer submitted by Bob Vaughn)

48 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.422 (both quotations).
50 The new contract no. F04606-71-C-0002, i.e. Modification no. P00054, can be found at: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.23.
51 Modification no. P00061 (dated 9 August 72) to contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 at: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.24.
53 Robbins, Air America, pp.126-33; Bowers, The USAF in South-East Asia, pp.448-50.
However, these projects, which only lasted a couple of days, could also include flights to other destinations. For example, from 16 to 19 April 1969, C-130A “605” flew from Takhli (T-05) to Luang Prabang (L-54) and Moung Soui (L-108) under project “69-20D”, or between 23 and 24 June 69 from Takhli (T-05) to Long Tieng (LS-30) and Nam Lieu (LS-118A) under project “69-34F”, or between 24 June and 1 July 69 from Udorn (T-08) to Vientiane (L-08), Luang Prabang (L-54), Long Tieng (LS-98), Xieng Dat (LS-26) and Korat (T-13) under project “69-35F”, or between 6 and 10 October 69 from Takhli (T-05) to Long Tieng (LS-98) and Savannakhet (L-39) under project “69-48K”. During the same period of time, the second C-130A, “704”, was operated between 7 and 13 January 1969 from Takhli (T-05) to Long Tieng (LS-98), Savannakhet (L-39), Houei Ki Nin (LS-38) and Nam Lieu (LS-118A) under project “69-02A”, and to the same destinations between 21 and 23 February 69 under project “69-09B”, or between 24 and 26 February 69 from Takhli (T-05) to Moung Soui (L-108) and Luang Prabang (L-54) under project “69-10B” and again from 9 to 13 April 69 from Takhli (T-05) to the same destinations under project “69-21D”, and so on. But while “704” returned to the USAF in 1970 or 1971, Air America’s C-130A “605”, whose official USAF identity was 56000510 or 56-510, apparently was too far to the East upon descending on its flight from Takhli to Long Tieng carrying 34,000 lbs of fuel and ammunition and crashed into the 7500 foot level of the northwestern slope of Phou Bia mountain range on 10 April 70, killing Captain Kevin N. Cochrane, First Officer Huey D. Rogers, Navigator Roger B. McKean, Flight Engineer Milton E. Smart and Air Freight Specialists Gerald L. De Long and Billy K. Hester.

All information about the project missions flown by C-130As “605” and “704” comes from the log book of Donald D. Wharton, in: UTD/WhartonB1F2. See the Memorandum of 7 October 71 (in: UTD/CIA/B19F1), the Board of review reports to this accident (in: UTD/CIA/B34F4), and the Memorial file (in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3). Additional info comes from Dan Gamelin: “What happened that day (April 10, 1970) is 2 of our Air America C-130 crews were in Takhli for our
The USAID-439-713 contract:

As has been shown in Part I of this file, the contract document of contract AID-439-713 was changed in May 68, replacing the old 1965 contract between the US Government acting thru USAID and Air America by a new contract AID-439-713 between USAID and Air America that was retroactively effective 1 July 67. Nevertheless, the new contract still had the

Contract no. AID-439-713: Dated 3 May 68, Amendment no. 6 to the old contract requests to delete the 19 page document of the old 1965 contract between the United States of America and Air America and to replace it by a new 28 page contract document (left) and (right) the cover of the new contract no. AID-439-713, now a contract between USAID and Air America, also signed on 3 May 68, but effective already 1 July 67 (in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 30)

US Government as its main party, for, when the contract was to be extended from 1 July 68 to 30 June 69, the letter contract dated 26 June 68 says: “The United States Government, through its Duly Authorized Contracting Officer, hereby elects to extend the term of Contract No. AID-439-713, as amended, for a one year period from and after 1 July 1968.”56 When the CIA’s Aerial Survey Program, which had been covered by Contract No. AID-439-713, was

annual Standardization-Evaluation tests and the first crew of guys that completed the tests in the morning took the first C-130A with a load up to Long Tieng. I was on the second C-130A out that morning with Kicker Cliff White and our captain was Don Wharton. We took off to the East as all A/C did and turned South heading to Takhl. The cockpit crew saw the other C-130A, which was on their second trip off to the East of us and 1 of them made mention – wondering why they were so far off to the East of us. When we picked up our second load at Takhl and headed back to Long Tieng we were informed that the other A/C had not shown up at Long Tieng yet and they had AAM aircraft already searching for the missing C-130. Apparently the C-130 was a little too far to the East and started to descend before turning West to approach Long Tieng. Normal takeoff from Long Tieng (LS20A) in the C-130 would be to turn South immediately after clearing the Long Tieng bowl. Why the other C-130 was so far to the East we do not know” (E-mail dated 1 February 2015, copy kindly sent to the author by Dan Gamelin).

56 Letter Contract dated 26 June 68 in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.27. It was signed by Anthony C. Labor (Contracting Officer) and George Doole (Air America), so apparently came from Washington and not from the field in Laos.
ended effective 24 December 68, it was again the Government who made that decision, and not the field in Laos. This time, the letter head says: “Department of the Air Force, U.S. Government Representative” with his address at Taipei inside Air Asia.57 Interestingly, Amendment 2 to Contract No. AID-439-713, extending the period of performance to 30 June 70, again calls it a “contract between The United States of America and Air America, Inc.”58 And the person who, on 4 March 70, sent Air America some RFP’s [=Requests for Proposal] “for FY-71 contracts -713 and -66” (i.e. AID-493-66, which was CIA contract for Thailand), was the same US Government Representative at Taipei who already terminated the Aerial Survey Program.59

Contract no. AID-439-713: extension to 30 June 69 and end of the Aerial Survey Program (both documents in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.27)

As to the aircraft assigned to contract AID-439-713 in May 68, C-123 “576”, Caribou B-851, and 5 Bell 205s (XW-PFF/G/H/I/J) were assigned to this contract for operation out of Udorn, while a total of 7 Turbo Porters (N193X, N195X, N196X, N197X, N359F, N392R,

57 Letter dated 24 December 68 from the Administrative Contracting Officer, Department of the Air Force, U.S. Government Representative at Air Asia, to James Walker, Air America’s Vice President, Flying Contract Affairs, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.27, where Walker’s “ok” of 27 December 68 can also be found.
58 Amendment 2 to Contract No. AID-439-713 of 1 July 69, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.27.
59 Letter of 3 March 70, US Govt. Representative to Air America, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.27.
and XW-PCB) and 6 Volpars (N9542Z, N3728G, N7770B, N9577Z, N9664C, and N9671C) were assigned to contract AID-439-713 for operation out of Vientiane. While most of the Udorn-based Volpars were used in the Aerial Survey Project that ended in December 68, one of them was often used on standby for emergency flights. “We often had standby for the Volpar”, Frank Bonansinga says, “and I remember taking injured to Bangkok in the VTB. Also sometimes we were asked to make an unexpected flight to somewhere up country for USAID or the AB-1 customer.” But by 1968, all Helios had been dropped from the -713-contract. In August 69, one C-123K (this time “293”), Caribou B-851, Volpar N9542Z, 3 Bell 204Bs (N1196W, N8511F, and N8513F) plus the remaining 4 Bell 205s were still assigned to contract AID-439-713, and in July 71, all fixed-wing aircraft assigned to contract AID-439-713 (DHC-6 N774M, Volpar N9542Z plus 7 Turbo Porters) were based at Vientiane, leaving at Udorn only the helicopter fleet assigned to that contract, that is 5 Bell 204Bs, 3 Bell 205s, and 5 S-58Ts. Probably most of these aircraft – especially the C-123K – were used on paramilitary support-missions for AB-1, that is the CIA’s program to support the irregulars operating in Laos, which could also include liaison flights between the CIA stations. Probably, most of the smaller aircraft were used to fly around USAID and CIA advisers and to move small groups of irregulars.

**AB-1 missions**

Quite often, the sole C-123K assigned to USAID-contract AID-439-713 was not sufficient to satisfy the needs of AB-1, and then additional C-123s were called from Vientiane. As will be recalled, in 1966, AB-1 missions were flown by Vientiane-based C-123s operating under USAID-contract no. AID-439-342; they would fly from Vientiane to Udorn, pick up their cargo at the “Q-warehouse” located within the AB-1 area at Udorn Air Base and then deliver it “as directed”. As AB-1 was the designator for CIA operations in Laos, these flights supported General Vang Pao’s irregulars as well as other CIA-programs or covert missions in Laos. In 1969, missions for AB-1 were flown by the C-123K regularly assigned to USAID contract no. 439-713 and based at Udorn, that is by “293”, as well as by any further C-123K taken from contract no. -342 that might be required for additional transportation. In 1970, AB-1 missions continued to use C-123Ks, but on 1 July 1972, these AB-1 missions were also integrated into USAF contract no. F04606-71-C-0002. After the CIA missions formerly operated by aircraft assigned to the -713 contract had been absorbed into that consolidated USAF contract, the Udorn Flight schedules sometimes also indicate other Air America aircraft that flew “as directed by AB-1” – like Air America’s S-58Ts and even the Hughes 500s of the Company. As to the destinations, one of them continued to be Long Tieng, but Vang Vieng (L-16) and Bun Taio (L-20) are also known to have been served. These

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60 The Aircraft status report of 1 May 68 (in: UTD/Herd/B2) notes N3728G, N7770B, N9577Z, N9664C, and N9671C. This project has been described above.

61 Minutes of Meetings of the Executive Committees of Air America Inc and Air Asia Co Ltd of 7 January 69, in: UTD/CIA/B8F3

62 E-mail dated 28 June 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

63 Aircraft status of 1 May 68, in: UTD/Herd/B2; Flight Operations Circulars of 15 August 69 (in: UTD/Hickler/B1F1) and 1 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B).

64 Udorn flight schedules of 11, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, and 28 June 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B6F3 + B3F14 + B8F1.

65 On 18 September 70, for example, C-123K “374” picked up its cargo at the Q-warehouse located in Udorn’s AB-1 area and flew shuttle between Udorn and Long Trieng (Udorn daily flight schedule for this date, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F1).

66 The Udorn flight schedule for 1 September 72 (in: UTD/Severson/B1F7) shows that that day, Hughes 500 N354X and no less than 3 Sikorsky S-58Ts picked up their cargo at the Q-warehouse in Udorn’s AB-1 area and shipped it to Long Trieng.

67 The Udorn flight schedule for 1 September 72 (in: UTD/Severson/B1F7) shows that that day, C-123K “545” picked up passengers at the Q-warehouse in Udorn’s AB-1 area (it was equipped with centerline seats on that flight) and flew them to Vang Vieng (L-16) and Long Trieng (L-20A).
activities were even increased in early 1973, when not only several C-123Ks – some of them equipped with centerline seats for transporting troops –, but also several helicopters were ordered to pick up their cargo at the Q-warehouse in Udorn’s AB-1 area and fly to destinations like Long Tieng (LS-20A), Vang Vieng (L-16) or Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69).68

An Air America C-123K carrying troops, with centerline seats installed (with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

There was still another type of missions flown by Air America for the CIA that were probably also called AB-1 missions, although no daily flight schedule has survived to list them as such: the transportation of irregular (Hmong, Mien, Unity etc.) troops from their home base at Nam Lieu (LS-118A), Pakse (L-11), Savannakhet (L-39), Long Tieng (LS-20A) or elsewhere to a location close to the fighting, i.e. to a location from where they walked or were heli-lifted to the actual front line. As very often, especially in the later years of the war, one CIA unit asked another unit for help, Air America very often transported irregular troops that were on loan to another unit. In this way, Pakse (L-11) in MR 4 very often got help from Savannakhet (L-39) in MR 3. Particularly Vang Pao at Long Tieng (LS-20A) and later at Ban Xon (LS-272) very often asked for help, i.e. for irregular units to arrive on loan from CIA units in MR 1 (Nam Lieu at LS-118A), from MR 3 (Savannakhet at L-39), or from MR 4 (Pakse at L-11).69 Air America also did the same type of flying, i.e. the transportation of irregular units, from their home base in Laos to their training location in Laos (e.g. Moun Cha (LS-113) in MR 2 or Whiskey 3 east of Savannakhet)70 or in Thailand (Pitt’s Camp at T-603 or elsewhere).71 From 1969 onwards, some sort of “Lao-ization” could be observed, i.e. the tendency to build new training centers in Laos instead of sending troops to Thailand: In

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68 On 7 January 73, Hughes 500 N354X and C-123Ks “545” and “617” picked up their cargo at the Q-warehouse located in Udorn’s AB-1 area and flew to LS-69 (Udorn daily flight schedule for 7 January 73, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7). On 24 January 73, C-123K “671” had centerline seats installed, picked up passengers at AB-1’s warehouse, and flew them to LS-20A and L-16 (Udorn flight schedule, in: UTD/Dexter/F1), and on 26 January 73, Bell 204Bs N8513F and N8535F, Bell 205 XY-PFG, UH-34D H-80, and S-58T XY-PHD all picked up their cargo at Udorn’s Q-warehouse (Udorn flight schedule, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

69 Just one of many examples: In mid-September 72, Vang Pao would have available 11, possibly 13 Groupements Mobiles. “Six of these were from MR 2. One was promised from MR 1. Two, maybe three would come from MR 3. And three would be ad hoc regiment groupings of Task Force Vang Pao” (Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.345).

70 Whiskey 3 was a training camp located about a 15-20 minutes drive northeast of Savannakhet. It had a STOL strip that could take a Caribou. The training officers came from Camp Peary (William D. Miller, Interview, conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at McLean, VA on 7 December 94, formerly in: UTD/Leary/Ser.I, B21F8, now possibly in UTD/Leary/B35).

71 For details of the Thai locations serving as training camps for Laotian troops, especially irregulars, see my file Air America in Thailand within my History of Air America.
September 68, a Commando training center had been established at Dong Hene (LS-54) in MR 3. On 29 October 70, a new Combat Arms Training Center (CATC) was opened at Phou Khao Khouai in MR-5, just north of Vientiane. Prior to the onset of the 1972 dry season, one third of the existing RLG regular battalions was reequipped and retrained. For this, the airborne base at Seno (L-46A) and the dormant SGU training center at Wat Phu (L-107) were rehabilitated, and a new regional training center was opened at Moung Khai, 8 kilometers southwest of Luang Prabang in MR 1. As the photos published in this file prove, the main type of aircraft used for the transportation of irregular units were Air America’s C-123s and – later especially for the Thai Unity troops – the C-130Es.

Thai assistance – the Unity SGUs:

Since 1969, Thai volunteer troops, and between 1970 and 1974 even several battalions of Thai volunteers, called project Unity, served in Laos. In June 70, Bangkok had declared that it would send Thai volunteers into the new Khmer Republic, but when it became clear that Phnom Penh did not have the money to feed them, the hundreds of Thai volunteers who had already been trained at the Pentagon’s expense were sent to Laos. “More than a battalion or even a regiment, the envisioned force was to total one artillery battalion and nine infantry battalions. Each infantry battalion would consist of 22 cadre and 33 medical personnel seconded from the RTA, plus 495 Thai volunteers with prior military service. Volunteers would serve a one-year tour in Laos. […] The Pentagon was to foot the entire bill – including the provision of uniforms and equipment from U.S. military stocks – while the CIA would administer the program in the field.” Initially, two battalions were trained at Prachinburi (T-31), and both entered Laos on 15 December 70. They were then lifted to Houei Sai (LS-284), 19 kilometers northeast of Pakson, where they successfully repulsed a North Vietnamese sapper attack in the early morning of 8 January 71. Also in early 1971, the Unity training center moved from Prachinburi (T-31) to more spacious facilities east of Kanchanaburi (T-706), which had a four-battalion capacity. Here, a total of 44 men from the US Special Forces served as trainers. Battalion instruction was standardized at 3 weeks for cadre and 12 weeks of basic training for the remainder of troops. Unlike the Royal Thai Army men of Task Force Vang Pao, “these Unity battalions from the start were intended for mobile operations, not simply static defense.” In the spring of 1971, the first Unity artillery battalion (BA 635) arrived at Long Tieng: “Trained at the RTA Artillery Center at Kokethiem, BA 635 and all subsequent Unity artillery battalions contained 20 officers seconded from the RTA and 380 volunteers. Each battalion was allotted a 105mm and 15mm howitzer battery of four tubes apiece with supporting Fire Direction Centers for each; a survey unit; a forward observer team; and a security company of four rifle platoons.” Since October 1971, Unity volunteer battalions were trained at Nam Phong (T-712). In June 72, the Unity program began to accept volunteers without prior military service. In that way, Unity increased from 10,028 men in June 72 to 21,413 men in September 72. But from October 72 onwards, US Special Forces training teams began downscaling and returning to Okinawa.

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72 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.367/8.
73 See below in this file.
74 Castle, At war, pp.2/3; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.444.
75 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p. 284.
76 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p. 285.
77 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p. 296.
78 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.297.
79 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.334 note 10.
80 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.353/4 note 11.
81 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.405.
Supporting the “Secret War” on the ground:

For Laos, the Tet Offensive organized by the Communists in South Vietnam in 1968, first of all meant an increase of military activities in the South. Here, in MR 4, Communist troops began their prolonged siege of Saravane and Attopeu in February 68. Both towns, isolated from the surrounding countryside, soon had to rely almost entirely on Air America airplanes for military and civilian supplies. The Lao troops were nearly unable to advance beyond their own defense lines. In the same period, the Communists drove government forces out of the Done River Valley, reopened only two or three years before, and, in spite of small victories obtained by the Royal Lao forces like the battle of Lao Ngam, 25 miles southwest of Saravane (L-44), where government troops defeated an enemy force twice as large on 22 February 68, the Communists spread all over of the Bolovens Plateau, as this terrain was considered to be covered by potential supply routes. Equally important was Route 9, running from Savannakhet (L-39) in MR 3 to Dong Ha in South Vietnam. In early 68, the North Vietnamese overran a number of outposts on Route 9 – Lahanam, for example, located in Southern Savannakhet province was taken on 13 April 68 –, whereas the town of Tchepone (L-38), some 25 miles west of the border on Route 9, was a central base area, from where the Communists directed movement on the trails to South Vietnam, and between April and October 1968, its airfield was restored to operational status by the North Vietnamese military. In mid-68, probably some 25,000 North Vietnamese and some 5,000 Pathet Lao troops were in southern Laos. A number of outposts north and south of Pakse were attacked with new 106mm cannons, never before used in southern Laos, and six North Vietnamese battalions were surrounding Attopeu, whose 3,000 inhabitants and 1,500 defenders entirely relied on parachuted airdrops for all of their supplies; helicopters ferried troops in and out

Pakse, Laos

(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

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when absolutely necessary, but even this form of transportation was dangerous. Since November 68, the fighting on the Bolovens Plateau focused around the town of Thateng, 15 miles south of Saravane on Route 23.

But in the **North**, the situation was in no way better: In the evening of 10 March 1968, the secret TACAN-TSQ-site on top of Phou Pha Thi (LS-85)\(^{85}\) was attacked. After that news had reached General Vang Pao, he ordered a Long-Tieng-based reserve battalion to be sent to Na Khang (LS-36), and so during the whole night, Air America helicopters ferried those troops from LS-20A to LS-36, in case a counterattack was needed.\(^{86}\) But shortly after midnight in the first hours of 11 March 68, North Vietnamese ground troops definitely overrun the site, killing a dozen US airmen and forcing it to close, and the next morning, several Air America helicopters and aircraft and some USAF H-3s evacuated the site. Especially noteworthy is the heroism of Air America Captain Ken Wood and his Flight Engineer L.M. “Rusty” Irons who, in the early morning of 11 March, hovered on the western edge of the mountain in an Air America “Huey” and in this way saved the lives of several of the men who had served on top of Phou Pha Thi mountain.\(^{87}\) By March 68, the Communists had also captured some strategic valleys north of Luang Prabang and had pressed the Hmong very hard, so that General Vang Pao had to give up Sam Neua Province. Air America evacuated over 9,000 Hmong people within less than two weeks, many of them passing thru Pop Buell’s headquarters at Sam Thong (LS-20), which handled 125 takeoffs and landings a day, marking the beginning of an endless series of migrations that turned dependsents of the Hmong soldiers into refugees flown by Air America from one destroyed village to the next – most of these dependents fled from one village to another at least five times, and in certain villages, the whole population was airlifted even up to sixteen times. By 1968, there were nearly 600,000 refugees in Laos, many of whom had tried to set out on long marches and many of whom were brutally murdered when fallen into enemy hands. And while the civilian dependents of the Hmong soldiers had to endure constant relocation or even death, Vang Pao’s army was also decimated dramatically: First, Air America helicopters had the sad task of transporting the dead Hmong soldiers back to their villages. Then, as Vang Pao had lost more than 1,000 men since January 68, Air America helicopters flew again to native villages to recruit soldiers for the irregular army. But these recruitment drives turned up only 300 replacements, all very young (16 years or below) or over 35, so that the Hmong were threatened to be pushed out of their mountaintop posts surrounding the Plain of Jars.\(^{88}\) During the rainy season beginning in May 68, government troops reopened Route 9 as far as Moung Phalane (LS-61) and ventured over some of the roads on the Bolovens Plateau. Only in central Laos, the Communist offensive of 1968 did not exceed the routine dry-season level. North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces overrun outposts in Xieng Khouang Province held by General Vang Pao’s Hmong people. Air America planes and helicopters regularly supplied outposts located in insecure territory, using the well developed technique: Sometimes supplies were dropped and sometimes they were landed at outposts within hostile territory. In order to know if a camp had been overrun, code letters made of cerise panels were laid out on the ground. These signal codes were changed daily, so if a signal had not been changed it meant that a camp was overrun, and the plane would not land. However, Vang Pao’s Hmong guerrillas not only lost a number of outposts, but also recovered dozens of small positions abandoned during the dry season, and in November 68, Vang Pao had even occupied an outpost within 12 miles of the Pathet Lao

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85 Construction of the TSQ-81 station on top of Phou Pha Thi had been commenced on 10 August 67 with supplies delivered from Udorn to Na Khang (LS-36) by Air America C-123s and Caribous and from there to LS-85 by helicopter (Leary, Manuscript, ch. VI, p. 608, in: UTD/Leary/B19F5).
headquarters of Sam Neua.\textsuperscript{89} The bulk of the air transportation for the irregular army and much of the air transportation necessary to support the regular Royal Lao troops was carried out by Air America planes, which nearly became a supplement to the Royal Lao Air Force transport fleet.

In \textbf{1969}, the situation became even more dramatic: In order to encounter the increased Communist activities in the southern parts of Laos, the USAF increased the number of sorties from 10 to 20 per day in 1968 to 300 per day in 1969\textsuperscript{90} and later to 600 per day. From 1 September 1968 on, US Navy AP-2H Neptune gunships, based at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam, carried out strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, followed by USAF AC-130As “Spectre” gunships based at Ubon, Thailand, and, since late 68, by USAF Fairchild NC-123K “Black Spot” gunships equally based at Ubon; USAF B-52s had bombed the Mu Gia Pass and the Ho Chi Minh Trail for the first time on 11 December 65 and Northern Laos for the first time on 17/8 February 1970.\textsuperscript{91} In \textbf{MR 3}, a major Pathet Lao installation was located south of Route 12 that linked Thakhek and the Mu Gia Pass. “On 25 March 1969, 17 helicopters, some of them US Air Force and others Air America, flew two companies of irregulars to landing pads near the karst formation whose network of caves sheltered the enemy headquarters. Four SGU assaults, each preceded by USAF bombardment with 2,000-pound bombs, napalm, and cluster-bomb units, failed to suppress the communist fire, and when two irregulars braved one cave entrance, they were shot dead as they entered. The irregulars drew blood when 13 Pathet Lao emerged from cave openings on the face of the cliff and tried to climb ropes suspended from a ledge above. Two were shot from their ropes during the climb, and five more died on the ground below. But the advantage lay with the defense. A monstrous thunderstorm was now approaching, and all concerned – the Lao unit commanders, their case officer flying overhead, and the US Air Force – agreed to call it a day.”\textsuperscript{92}

In September 69, rumors came up of American prisoners held in the Moung Phine area in southern MR 3. So operation \textit{Junction City Junior} was launched, occupied Moung Phine on 7 September and captured 2,000 tons of ordnance, including heavy mortars and machineguns. But the success was short-lived: In late 1969, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops managed to push the occupying government troops back to the west.\textsuperscript{93} To sum up, in 1969, the all-time high of 144,323 sorties were flown against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos by all types of aircraft. As a result of all these attacks against the North Vietnamese troops in Laos, in April 69, some 40,000 mountain people were slowly walking across the north-eastern hills of the Bolovens Plateau to escape the fighting and to look for food and medicine in USAID camps. But Attopeu and Saravane were still able to hold on during the rest of the year, nearly entirely depending on supplies flown in by Air America.\textsuperscript{94}

In the \textbf{North}, the situation was by no means better in the early months of \textbf{1969}: The 1969 dry-season attack was much more virulent than usual, and the 140-bed hospital at Sam Thong (LS-20), where more than 200 wounded were treated, was more overcrowded than ever. But there was another bad surprise, when, for the first time, the North Vietnamese prosecuted their dry-season offensive well into the wet season, finally forcing Laotian government troops, on 28 June 69, to evacuate Moung Soui (L-108) on Route 7, which had been recaptured from the Pathet Lao in the summer of 1964.\textsuperscript{95} On 30 April 69, Vang Pao was able to take Xieng Khouang town (L-03), which had been a Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese army warehouse

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{89} Kirk, \textit{Wider war}, pp.226/7.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Leary, \textit{CIA Air Operations}, p.63.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Davis, \textit{Gunships}, pp.53, 16, 19, and 50; Dorr/Bishop, \textit{Vietnam air war debrief}, p.109; Robbins, \textit{Ravens}, pp. XII/XIII.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Ahern, \textit{Undercover armies}, p.358.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Ahern, \textit{Undercover armies}, pp.359-60.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Kirk, \textit{Wider war}, pp.228-31.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Kirk, \textit{Wider war}, pp.230-32 and 240/1; Ahern, \textit{Undercover armies}, p.318.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
for ordnance and supplies. So his troops captured 25 trucks, 13 artillery pieces, and 300 tons of medical supplies. A cave close by, which had served as headquarters of the North Vietnamese army, was already empty. However, in late May 1969, North Vietnamese troops expelled Vang Pao and his men. And the Embassy became very concerned about the Chinese Road, which started to cross Military Region 1 from the north: “The Chinese were building a super highway that ran from China down into Laos. The road passed through Moung Sing in Northwest Laos to Nam Tha, then down to Moung Sai and from Moung Sai it followed the Beng River south down the valley to Pak Beng on the Mekong River. This road was considered one of the major construction feats in Laos and had received increasing attention of both the Thais and the Laotian Governments. This was mostly because there had been no stated purpose for the road.”

It had all begun in 1962, when Souvanna Phouma officially allowed the Chinese to build a road from Meng La in Yunnan Province to Phong Saly (L-15) in northern Laos, which was completed in May 63. In January 68, work was resumed, and by the end of the year, a new road ran from Meng La via Pathet Lao-held Batene inside northern Laos further southeast to Moung Sai (L-27), extending the Chinese Road 412 into Laos and merging with the old Laotian Route 4. In October 68, some 3,000 Chinese were in Laos, one-third of them combat troops. In January 69, the Chinese proceeded northeast to Moung La until April 69, extending the old Route 45. After the monsoon break, they concentrated their forces on improving the old Route 46, which ran from Moung Sai (L-27) southwest down the Nam Beng valley to the Mekong town of Pak Beng, reaching Moung Houn (L-34) in November 69, located half-way between Moung Sai and Pak Beng. This old Route 46 was what most people called the Chinese Road, and it was protected by heavy antiaircraft artillery. The purpose of this road was not clear: Was it to strengthen the Chinese influence onto the Pathet Lao or to apply pressure on the North Vietnamese? Bangkok was afraid that it was to increase the flow of Chinese supplies to the Communist party of Thailand and so to raise pressure on the pro-western Thai government. So, in the summer of 1969, a Raven U-17 based at Luang Prabang made photos of the road, counting 50 trucks in the 20-mile stretch photographed. As the U.S. Embassy wanted more pictures, they determined that Don Moody, commander of the

![Illyushin 14 “709” of the Red Chinese CAAC somewhere in Laos in the mid-sixties](UTD/Anthony)

97 Moody, *The great adventures*, Episode 3, p.3; see also Castle, *At war*, p.72; (Anonympis), “Road from China”, in: The Nation (Bangkok), 12 May 72, p.11, preserved at: UTD/Miscellaneous Materials/B4F5.
99 Apparently, this particular IL-14 was former CAAK “709” still bearing its North Korean serial, for all regular CAAC IL-14s were registered between “600” and “678”, even numbers only from “626” onwards.
AOC at Luang Prabang, should fly a photo reconnaissance mission over the Chinese Road, using a RT-28 Guppy\textsuperscript{100} photo bird that was normally based at Udorn.\textsuperscript{101} Four Luang Prabang-based armed T-28s flew cover, and in spite of heavy triple-A fire none of the aircraft that participated in this extremely dangerous mission took a hit.\textsuperscript{102} A couple of months later, in September 69, RLAF T-28s from Luang Prabang destroyed a huge supply area located in the Nam Beng valley whose purpose had been to allow an extension of the Chinese Road further to the south.\textsuperscript{103}

This deteriorating military situation may explain why, since 1969, sometimes even pro-Western Laotian troops got nervous, turning against their American allies. Robbins\textsuperscript{104} tells the story of native soldiers in Laos who shot an Air America pilot dead, when he refused to take them on board of his helicopter – circumstances probably referring to the death of William J. Gibbs, who was shot into his head by a sniper round coming through the window on take-off near Ban Dong Hene (LS-54) east of Seno in southern Laos, on 13 May 69 in Air America UH-34D H-68. Talking about Captain Gibbs’ death, the Minutes of Meetings of the Executive Committees of Air America Inc and Air Asia Co Ltd of 13 May 69\textsuperscript{105} describe the circumstances as “hostile ground fire during climb-out from a friendly pad”. But the morale in the northern parts of Laos was by no means better. Some months later, on 19 August 69, Air America PC-6 N196X was shot down by a Hmong (“Meo”) soldier, i.e. a Laotian ally, while on flight from Long Tieng (LS-20A) to Sam Thong (LS-20), killing the pilot, Ralph S. Davis, an army major, another American and 10 Lao passengers. It is interesting to note how the circumstances of this accident change in the descriptions given of this accident: While the accident report of 19 August 69 states that “the probable cause of this accident was a fatal wounding of the pilot by a bullet fired from a source outside the aircraft resulting in the loss of control”\textsuperscript{106} the list of “Air America Employees killed in South East Asia”\textsuperscript{107} gives only “mechanical failure or rotor hit hill in bad weather”. Closer to the original version are the remarks “reportedly shot down by Meo” given in the Memorial file,\textsuperscript{108} but the psychological explanation added by Robbins to his version of this accident, namely that the Meo soldier “in a moment of boredom fired off a shot”, but was “executed on the spot by Vang Pao”,\textsuperscript{109} is less convincing than to assume an act of over-nervousness in a situation of high tension. On 8 October 1969, Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist premier of Laos, requested increased American aid to meet pressure from North Vietnamese forces operating in his country. The request drew almost no public notice, like the continued bombing missions being flown in that country.\textsuperscript{110}

A little later, in August 1969, even the weather became an enemy to the country, when flood conditions at Vientiane Airport resulted in a temporary closing of the field to scheduled commercial service. However, Air America was able to continue its operations from the

\textsuperscript{100} “The bulge from the way the cameras were mounted gave a pregnant look to the unarmed T-28, thus its Guppy name. The airplane had a great camera system. It had a large format 12” Forward Oblique, a 9” vertical and a 9” Right Oblique” (Moody, \textit{The great adventures}, Episode 3, p.5).
\textsuperscript{101} Possibly RT-28D “0-13531” (msn 174-69), which had been transferred to the Military Assistance Program for Laos on 29 April 65 (USAF Assignments Records, Maxwell AFB, AL) and was still flying out of Udorn under the command of AIRA in April 72 (List of Assigned and maintained aircraft at Udorn of 1 April 72, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2).
\textsuperscript{102} The mission is described in Don Moody, \textit{The great adventures}, Episode 3, pp.5-7.
\textsuperscript{103} Moody, \textit{The great adventures}, Episode 3, p.8.
\textsuperscript{104} Robbins, \textit{Air America}, p.162.
\textsuperscript{105} Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committees of Air America Inc and Air Asia Co Ltd of 13 May 69, p.4, in: UTD/CIA/B8F3.
\textsuperscript{106} In: UTD/Dreifus/B1F10, p.1.
\textsuperscript{107} In: UTD/CIA/B19F1.
\textsuperscript{108} In: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3.
\textsuperscript{109} Robbins, \textit{Air America}, p.125.
\textsuperscript{110} Dorr / Bishop, \textit{Vietnam air war debrief}, p.152.
airport, as the Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committees of Air Asia Co Ltd and Air America Inc of 26 August 69\textsuperscript{111} note with a certain pride. The situation changed in the first two-and-a half weeks of September 69, when Vang Pao launched a major offensive against the Communist forces advancing in MR 2 (Operation About Face). For the first time, irregular units were also “loaned” from other Military Regions, this time from Savannakhet in MR 3 – a procedure that would become standard until the end of the war in February 73.\textsuperscript{112} The schedule of Operation About Face (6 August-October 69) was as follows: “Objective: Capture the Plain of Jars. Three phase operation: 1) Interdict Route 7 near Nong Pet. In early August, two task forces approach Route 7 from San Tiau (LS 2) and Bouamlong (LS-32). 2) Government units move onto southern Plain of Jars (PDJ), and move north. 3) In late September, government forces move into Muong Soui. Units involved: Commando Company – parachutes into San Tiau area to secure landing zones. GM 21 – helicopters into San Tiau area. Captures Phou Nok Kok overlooking Route 7. Battalion 224 (zone) – operating in San Tiau area with GM 21. GM 22 – walks from Padoung (LS-5) to southern PDJ, and then across PDJ. BG 202 (detached from GM 21) – operating with GM 22. GM 23 – moves into Xiengkhouang Ville area. SGU Battalion (from Savannakhet) – helicoptered into Bouamlong, move into Nong Pet area. Two zone battalions – operating in Bouamlong area, move toward Nong Pet. Two zone battalions – operating in LS57 area, move south into Muong Soui. Four volunteer battalions (FAR) – move from Ban Na toward PDJ. Parachute Battalion 101 (from Savannakhet) – operate with volunteer battalions.”\textsuperscript{113} Since many Douglas B-26Ks of the 606\textsuperscript{th} Special Operations Squadron based at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, had been replaced over the Ho Chi Minh Trail by faster gunships and bombers, they were used in Northern Laos to support General Vang Pao in 1969, when his troops, supported by massive Air America supply drops and by probably about 200 US air strikes a day, reoccupied Moung Soui and drove the last Communist troops from the plain, including the town of Khang Khai, which the government had not held since the defeat of Kong Le’s forces in 1963 and 1964. The town was largely destroyed by the assault, and about 6,000 rifles, 25 Soviet PT-76 tanks, 50 anti-aircraft guns, 200 trucks and 6,000 tons of ammunition and 1,700 tons of food were captured. For the first time since 1960, the Hmong reclaimed the entire Plain of Jars.\textsuperscript{114} But as the B-26s had poor performance above 12,000 feet, they were deactivated in November 69.

However, that victory gained by Vang Pao in late 1969 was not to last for a very long time. On 13 September 69, General Nguyen Vo Giap, the North Vietnamese Minister of Defense, issued orders for a new dry season offensive into MR 2 in the North, appropriately called Campaign 139, which began the following day.\textsuperscript{115} Among the first targets of the Communists were Phou Nok Kok, which was taken on 12 January 1970,\textsuperscript{116} and Xieng Khouang, while Vang Pao faced the problem that an entire generation of middle-aged Hmong males had already died in the war, so that he had to rely very much on air support, which was difficult in bad weather. Then, Vang Pao’s troops had ventured so far east during the previous months that US pilots found it difficult to maintain an interdiction buffer along the border, as they did not want to hit friendly forces operating in the same area. Vang Pao did not want to retreat, however, and only allowed the evacuation of the last Hmong outpost in Sam Neua Province.

\textsuperscript{111} In: UTD/CIA/B8F3.
\textsuperscript{112} Ahern, Undercover armies, p.322.
\textsuperscript{113} Anonymous list of Vang Pao’s campaigns 1968-73, in: UTD/Leary/I B9F2 (now probably in: UTD/Leary/B47F5).
\textsuperscript{114} Leary, CIA Air Operations, p.63; Moody, The great adventures, Prelude, p.9. In late September 69, Vang Pao captured some more enemy supply caches, one of them containing 22 trucks and 100 tons of ammunition, and several artillery pieces were captured on mountain positions around the Plain of Jars (Ahern, Undercover armies, p.328).
\textsuperscript{115} Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.248.
\textsuperscript{116} Ahern, Undercover armies, p.333.
i.e. Houei Tong Ko (LS-184). So between 4 and 15 January 70, 10 USAF CH-3 Knives and several Air America helicopters airlifted 8,115 refugees from there to Ban Xon (LS-272), a resettlement area 31 kilometers southwest of Long Tieng, while Sam Neua’s last four ADC companies were flown by Porter from Houei Tong Ko to Moung Cha (LS-113).\(^\text{117}\) On 22 January 70, several Air America C-123Ks brought an entire Hmong-Lao Theung SGU battalion from the training camp at Xieng Lom (LS-274) to Lima 22.\(^\text{118}\) On 17 January 70, Air America Bell 205 XW-PFF lost power after being hit by ground fire and autorotated to a safe landing, but was hit by mortar fire and destroyed after landing at “Echo” pad in the vicinity of Lima 22. The crew – PIC French Smith and his crew chief – and his passenger, CIA adviser Chuck Campbell, were evacuated by Air America UH-34D H-59. The rescue helicopter and the observation aircraft, Porter N358F, were also hit by ground fire during those rescue operations, proving the presence of North Vietnamese troops near Lima 22.\(^\text{119}\) On 11 February 70, Lima 22 itself was attacked, and on 21 February, it was taken by the Communists.\(^\text{120}\)

In January 1970, the North Vietnamese Army brought in two divisions that quickly recaptured the lost territory and even threatened the major Hmong base at Long Tieng. By now, the North Vietnamese strength in Laos had reached 67,000 men.\(^\text{121}\) One of the results of this situation was that, in early 1970, Air America C-123Ks and C-130s bailed to USAID evacuated some 20,000 refugees from villages on and around the plain and resettled them in camps in the lowlands. On 8 February 70, North Vietnam’s 144th Regiment attacked the airstrip of Xieng Khouang village (L-03), which Vang Pao had captured in April 69 and which, from April 69 to February 70, had been available to reconnaissance and cargo planes. While, for the next ten days, some 6,000 North Vietnamese troops attacked other positions along Route 7, gathering for the main battle for Xieng Khouang, the USAF, for the first time, used B-52s against the Plain of Jars.\(^\text{122}\) But their effectiveness was in part hindered by smoke coming from trees and tall grass which were burnt down by local mountain people, as they had always done, so that it was sometimes impossible to see the targets. And then, North Vietnam introduced a fresh division, the 312th, with some 10,000 men supported by more trucks, tanks and other heavy equipment than any other North Vietnamese division in Laos, so that the help of Pathet Lao forces was no longer needed, and on 21 February 70, some 3,000 North Vietnamese recaptured Xieng Khouang Ville. Most of the Hmong defenders that had escaped later rejoined Vang Pao’s forces near Sam Thong and Long Tieng.\(^\text{123}\) Among the counter-measures recommended by the White House was an operation against Dien Bien Phu: “The Dien Bien Phou operation, against the rear headquarters of the 316th Division, took place on 22 February 1970. The Hmong raiders set several administrative and storage buildings ablaze, and the operation’s success, however modest, overrode any further objections. So-called Commando Raider operations now became a staple of the Vientiane station agenda.”\(^\text{124}\)

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\(^{117}\) Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.248-51.

\(^{118}\) Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.252.


\(^{120}\) Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.252/3.

\(^{121}\) Leary, CIA Air Operations, p.63.

\(^{122}\) On 12 February 70, Ambassador Godley asked for B-52 strikes against the North Vietnamese in MR 2. On 16 February 70, President Nixon authorized Operation Good Look, and the following evening, 3 USAF B-52s rained streams of bombs onto the eastern end of the Plain of Jars against a suspected North Vietnamese Army headquarters. The following morning, on 18 February 70, 4 Air America UH-34Ds lifted a Hmong team to a landing zone northwest of Tha Lin Noi (LS-18), to make a poststrike assessment. When the 3rd Air America helicopter, H-67, climbed out over the landing zone, copilot Jon Christian Merkel was killed by a single round that came through the cockpit; PIC John D. Ford returned the aircraft to Long Tieng (XOXO of 18 February 70, in: UTD/ Hickler/B25F10; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.253 and 260, note 35; Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.334/5).

\(^{123}\) Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.253.

\(^{124}\) Ahern, Undercover armies, p.350.
Nevertheless, on 25 February 70, Moung Suoi, which since its recapture in the fall of 1969, had become an important staging base for Hmong and B-Team T-28s,\textsuperscript{125} was captured by the North Vietnamese, and by 17 March 70, some 3,000 North Vietnamese troops had occupied several Hmong outposts in the mountains and were within 5 miles of Sam Thong. On the same day, Air America aircraft evacuated some 200 patients from the wooden refugee hospital at Sam Thong, together with some 20 US attachés, CIA advisers, and refugee workers. “Pop” Buell, who had run the hospital for many years, was flown out at dusk by an Air America helicopter – eight hours before the airstrip (LS-20) was seized by two elite North Vietnamese companies and the hospital and other buildings were burnt down. An estimated 110,000 refugees, who had settled near Long Tieng and Sam Thong, were forced to flee into the surrounding area. The same day the Communists began launching rockets against Long Tieng, thus showing their intention to continue their march against government positions on and around the plain. However, supported by two battalions of Thai troops newly arrived at Long Tieng, by irregular reinforcements that had arrived from Nam Yu, Savannakhet and Pakse, by relentless night attacks flown by USAF AC-47, AC-119, and AC-130 gun ships, by attacks flown by RLAF B-Team T-28s, and by a massive BLU-82 bomb dropped from a USAF C-130 on 22 March, Vang Pao was able to re-enter the deserted ruins of Sam Thong on 27 March 70. Apparently, increasing difficulties held the Communists back from further defending the town or continuing their attacks, and so, on 25 April 70, Hanoi officially finished Campaign 139.\textsuperscript{126}

This had been the first time that a combination of North Vietnamese armor, infantry, Dac Cong, engineers and heavy weapons not only attacked and then re-occupied the Plain of Jars, but also went beyond that area, “keeping pockets of resistance alive southwest of the Plain of Jars, firmly holding the plain itself, and launching a small offensive against the only RLG target of note northeast of the plain: the garrison of Bouamlong.”\textsuperscript{127} First attacked on 23 March 70, Bouam Long (LS-32) fell on 18 June 70, motivating Vang Pao to have two 105mm howitzers airlifted to the top of Skyline Ridge in mid-April to form the unit’s first fire support base (FSB) overlooking Long Tieng and two 155mm howitzers to Zebra Ridge at the end of April to form FSB Zebra. In the summer, Thai irregulars filled the void at Sam Thong and other places that were created by irregular infantry units from other regions returning home.\textsuperscript{128} At the same time, Vang Pao lost a part of the “air power” he had always relied on: In June 70, the RLAF T-28 Eagle detachment on loan from Savannakhet returned to their home base; on 18 July 70, the A-1E Zorros from the Nakhon Phanom-based 22\textsuperscript{nd} SOS were disbanded, as were, on 20 December 70, the A-1 Fireflies from the 602\textsuperscript{nd} SOS, leaving only the A-1E Hobos from the Nakhon Phanom-based 1\textsuperscript{st} SOS to support ground operations in Laos. Graduation of Thai B-Team T-28 pilots was discontinued in April 70, and the last B-Team T-28 sortie in Laos was flown on 4 September 70.\textsuperscript{129} On the other hand, an F-4 quick reaction strike force was established at Udorn on 27 May 70, and in early April 70, MR 2 became the first region in Laos to have its Raven Forward Air Controllers fly T-28s. At the same time, however, the deputy commanding general of the 7/13 Air Force at Udorn tried to get control of USAF operations in Laos, sending in the OV-10 equipped Nail FACs from the 23\textsuperscript{rd} TASS.\textsuperscript{130} Between July 70 and January 71, Vang Pao tried to recapture the Plain of Jars (Operation Leapfrog, i.e. Thanong Kiet). The schedule was as follows: “Two phase operation: 1) Operation along the southern and northern rims of the PDJ (July-September). 2) Operation

\textsuperscript{125} Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.253/4.
\textsuperscript{126} Kirk, Wider war, pp.242-45; Castle, At war, pp.106/7; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.254-58; Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.335-37.
\textsuperscript{127} Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.261.
\textsuperscript{128} Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.261-63.
\textsuperscript{129} Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.264 and 279 note 13.
\textsuperscript{130} Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.264/5; MR 3 began to fly Raven T-28s in mid-July 1970 (p.279 note 29).

But Vang Pao’s gains during the second half of 1970 were meager: Operation Thanong Kiet (= Operation Leapfrog), beginning on 3 August, tried to retake Ban Na (LS-15), then turned to Moung Soui (L-108) on 27 August, but was pushed back in both cases. On 26 September, Vang Pao started a new campaign and finally retook Moung Soui on 11 October and Ban Na on 17 October; his last gain was the east end of Ban Ban valley, which his troops reached on 23 December, always supplied by Air America UH-34Ds and CH-3Es as well as CH-53s of the 21st SOS. Operation Leapfrog was concluded on 1 January 71, after Ban Ban could not be captured.

In MR 3, “so-called Commando Raider operations [also] became a staple of the Vientiane station agenda. On 10 March, a similar operation sabotaged a pipeline north of the Mu Gia Pass inside North Vietnam. The team worked its way through the massive NVA presence there to an exposed segment and planted time-delay explosives, one of which it reported hearing go off as it withdrew.” The problem was, however, that this type of commando operations became too expensive compared to its results, as “minuscule raiding parties, no matter how competent and courageous, were not going to represent more than a minor nuisance. The early casualty rate aggravated the problem. A mission launched from Hmong country in May 1970 ended in disaster after Air America helicopters landed a raiding party at the border of Route 7. Its members were soon discovered, and all but four of its 21 members were captured or killed. Better intelligence and better planning reduced the casualty rate, but results were seldom if ever proportionate to the resources invested. Undertaken in May 1970, [...] the operation represented the third attempt to cut a pipeline inside North Vietnam near the Mu Gia Pass. Like most such efforts, it involved infiltration by Air America helicopters, themselves protected by USAF fighter aircraft, to a staging area far enough from the target to avoid revealing the operation’s target,” and then, Ahern exemplifies the unprofitable cost-benefit ratio of commando raids by analyzing this special case, i.e. the pipeline mission. However, it was only in May 1971 that the CIA came to this conclusion, and so there were more cross-border operations in 1970, most of which concentrated on to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and not on MR 2.

In MR 3, the unofficial government front line stood at Moung Phalane (L-61) and the Communist front line some 60 miles southeast from there at Moung Phine (LS-300). After some less successful fighting around Ban Houei Mun (LS-221) in the south, Operation Tchepone began on 19 October 70, but after a fierce battle on the western slope of Phou Katon mountain, the pro-western forces returned to Moung Phalane on 13 November, without having reached Tchepone. Military Region 4 practically had 3 thirds: The eastern third was dominated by the North Vietnamese, the western third with its CIA center at Pakse was held by the Royal Lao Government, and the middle part was contested by both sides. In the

132 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.265-67.
134 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.350.
136 Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.354-57.
137 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.268-72.
pro-western third, there were two important centers: PS-22 (Ban La Tee, = LS-190), home of a Guerrilla Battalion and an important avgas station for Air America, CASI, the Ravens and several other USAF operations, and PS-38, home of another Guerrilla Battalion and several big guns that was to become a regional guerrilla training center. Heavy bombing continued all the time in the south, as Operation Good Luck, launched on 17 February 1970, kept B-52s busy bombing targets in Laos until 20 April 72, so that in late 1970 and early 1971, some 1,000 sorties a month were flown by B-52s over southern Laos and northern Cambodia. “The White House intensified the pressure after the change of government in Cambodia in March 1970. The military coup in Phnom Penh severed the supply line that fed Chinese communist war materiel from the port of Sihanoukville (Kompong Som), on the Gulf of Thailand, to the sanctuaries along the border with South Vietnam. In so doing, it made the Corridor the only channel for the long-scale movement of supplies to NVA and Viet Cong forces in the south. Commando raider operations, originally launched essentially to shake the enemy’s confidence in the security of the trail network, were now supposed to contribute to its interdiction. [...] After the fall of Prince Sihanouk, the CIA discovered that, from December 1966 to April 1969, the Chinese had delivered over 21,000 tons of ordnance through the port of Sihanoukville, enough light weapons to equip 585 battalions and enough crew-served weapons for 240 battalions.” So, Attopeu, which was very close to the Sihanouk Trail, i.e. to the Communists’ resupply line leading to the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia, was attacked in early April 70 and fell to the Communists on 29 or 30 April 70, followed in mid-May by other pro-western sites on the Bolovens like PS-42, PS-23 and even PS-38.

North Vietnamese traffic on the Trail were especially high after Lon Nol had taken power in Cambodia, because this meant that the Sihanoukville-pipeline was in jeopardy. The next Communist target was Saravane, also located close to the Trail. When the North Vietnamese built up pressure, an evacuation of 2000-plus dependents began on 10 May, and soon after, the administrative control of Saravane province was transferred from Saravane (L-44) to Khong Sedone (LS-289). Saravane fell on 9 June 70, followed by Ban Khok Mai (LS-171) on 16 June, by the TACAN site on Phou Kate on 18 June, and by PS-39 on 22 June 70. Neither of these towns or outposts had been under Pathet Lao control in 1962. North Vietnam apparently struck them as part of an effort to expand their infiltration routes into northern Cambodia in order to support North Vietnamese jungle sanctuaries in Cambodia located close to the border to South Vietnam. While Attopeu was conceded to the enemy, Royal Lao Government troops launched a disastrous counteroffensive to retake Saravane in June 70, in order to prevent North Vietnam from annexing the south of Laos. The Lao troops were cut off from their supplies, and their reinforcements were ambushed. So at Vientiane, CIA Chief of Station Larry Devlin opened “Phase I of the South Laos Interdiction Program” on 29 August 70, which committed 5,700 irregulars to several operations against the Trail. Among them was the successful attempt to retake PS-26 called Operation Honorable Dragon. This was launched by Pakse’s CIA Unit on 31 August and ended with the capture of PS-26 on 25 September – only to be taken again by the Communists on 21 November 70; PS-38, retaken

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138 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.273/4.
139 Department of Defense, “Report on selected air and ground operations in Cambodia and Laos”, dated 10 September 73, pp. 3+19-20, in: UTD/Leary/B53F1.
140 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.274/5
141 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.350 plus note 5 there.
142 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.274/5; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.361.
143 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.377.
144 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.275/6; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.361.
145 Kirk, Wider war, pp.252/3; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp. 274/6.
146 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.365.
by irregulars on 23 May, was definitely lost on 27 November 70, while PS-22 (Ban La Tee, = LS-190) at that time still held on.147 And, 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.148 Nevertheless, Air America managed the situation and was able to airdrop or land 46 million pounds of foodstuff — mainly rice — in Laos during 1970.149

In the fall of 1970, the Lon Nol-government at Phnom Penh agreed to plans for a CIA-managed, Department of Defense-funded project in Laos named Copper whose purpose was to interdict the Communist trails inside Laos leading down to Cambodia, using Cambodian troops to be trained in southern Laos, i.e. at PS-18 (Phou Lat Seua) in MR 4. So, in September 70. 2 raw battalions of recruits were raised at Phnom Penh, flown to Pakse (L-11) in Air America C-123s and then shipped up the Mekong river to PS-18. By year’s end, both battalions graduated at PS-18, and the first of them was shipped to Pakse, then flown by Air America C-123s to PS-22, from where USAF CH-53C Knives lifted them to PS-43, from where – a week later – they were shuttled 20 kilometers east, from where they took PS-38 without resistance. Still in January 71, the second battalion from PS-18 relieved the first one at PS-38, but shortly thereafter, 80 Cambodians were killed at PS-38 during a North Vietnamese night attack; the following day, all remaining Cambodian troops walked overland to Paksong (L-05), from where they were lifted back to PS-18. Meanwhile, the first battalion was lifted back to Phnom Penh for a brief rest and deserted, and the mutiny of a third battalion, whose training at PS-18 had just begun, practically ended Project Copper in late January 71. A second wave of Copper was begun in February 71, and again, Air America C-123s flew the Cambodian recruits from Phnom Penh to Pakse (L-11), from where some were helliflipped to PS-23, while others retook PS-43 and PS-38, until all Cambodian troops were called back to Phnom Penh in May 71.150

The early months of 1971 were determined by what was to become a disaster for the pro-Western forces: operation Lam Son 719. In late December 1970, the US Congress had passed the Cooper-Church Amendment that forbade US military forces to operate “on the ground inside Cambodia or Laos”. So it was the South Vietnamese military who had to do the job. On 8 February 1971, some 16,000 South Vietnamese troops, supported by US Army and USMC AH-1G Cobra gunships, US Army CH-54 Skycrane, CH-47 Chinook and UH-1H transport helicopters, and USAF AC-130A “Spectre” and AC-130E “Surprise Package” gunships, had crossed the border into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and interdict the flow of supplies from the North. The thrust was directed against that portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that was situated in the area of the Laotian town of Tchepone. But in spite of more than 8,000 US tactical air strikes also flown by USAF B-52s and F-4s, by USN A-4s and USMC aircraft against the Tchepone area, the South Vietnamese troops were forced to conduct a fighting withdrawal from Laos in March 71, when 6 USAF, 1 USN, 1 USMC aircraft and no fewer than 107 US Army helicopters had been lost in operation Lam Son 719.151 Immediately after Lam Son 719, Communist activity on the Trail was very high, and in March 71, the first surface-to-air missile (SAM) site was identified in Laos just west of the Ban Karai Pass.152

147 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.276-78.
148 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.
149 Leary, CIA Air Operations, p.51.
150 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.282-84.
151 Dorr/Bishop, Vietnam air war debrief, pp.172/3; Castle, At war, pp.108/9.
152 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.377.
In the south of the Laotian Military Region 3, the CIA’s Savannakhet unit began Operation Silver Buckle on 5 January 71, aimed to interdict Route 92, an important portion of the Trail. So Air America helicopters transported Groupement Mobile 30 to Phou Doutuy, from where 2 battalions were to attack the Trail at 2 points, even supported by Saigon’s MACV-SOG. Evidently, Silver Buckle’s true purpose was to divert North Vietnam’s attention from Lam Son 719 and to stop North Vietnamese reinforcements on Route 92. But North Vietnam was well prepared, and both battalions were crushed and forced to flee, ending Silver Buckle in late February 71.153 On 16 February 71, another diversion for Lam Son 719 was launched by Savannakhet Unit, Operation Desert Rat, aimed to halt traffic along Routes 23 and 238 and then to seize Communist-held Moung Phne (LS-300). While the interdiction worked until mid-March, the pro-western troops were called back to Moung Phalane in late March 71, when, after the end of Lam Son 719, the North Vietnamese could concentrate all their forces against Desert Rat. Moung Phalane, however, had been taken by the Communists in January 71 and was still in Communist hands in September, when the RLG front line stood at Dong Hene (LS-54) east of Seno.154

But this was not the only area in southern Laos where things went bad. In 1971, heavy fighting also took place for control of the strategic Bolovens Plateau (MR 4), where the CIA recruited, trained, and paid indigenous personnel organized into Special Guerrilla Units. Operation Paksong (L 300) was only taken on 14 September 71, and this time, air transportation was mostly made by Air America aircraft. Operation Sayasila was officially terminated on 30

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153 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.288-90.
154 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.290-92.
155 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.286-88.
156 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.241; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.417; see also http://aircommandomaman.tripod.com/id11.html. Known CH-3E Knives of the 21st Special Operations Squadron include: 62-12579 (destroyed in Laos, 6 Nov 69); 63-09676 (survived, to Wright-Patterson AF Museum); 63-09681 (destroyed, 13 Aug 70 ground fire near Ubol, Thailand); 63-09689 (destroyed in Thailand 19 Jan 69); 63-09691; 64-14222 (destroyed in Laos, 6 Oct 69); 64-14223; 64-14237 (destroyed in Laos, 26 Feb 69 last sensor drop mission loss); 65-5691 (destroyed 27 June 69); 65-15692; 65-15695; 66-13287 (destroyed in Laos, 24 Oct 70); 66-13288 (destroyed in Laos, 3 Feb 70); 66-13291; 66-13292 (destroyed, to Tunisian AF); 66-13293; 66-13294 (destroyed in Laos, 30 Mar 68); 66-13295 (destroyed in SVN, 23 May 68); 66-13296; 67-14702 (destroyed in Laos, 15 Jan 69); 67-14703 (survived, to Warner Robbins AFB Museum); 67-14718 (survived, to Tunisian AF) – Known CH-53C Knives of the 21st Special Operations Squadron include: 68-10925 (destroyed 15 May 75 during Mayaguez rescue); 68-10926 (destroyed 15 May 75 during Mayaguez rescue); 68-10929 (destroyed 18 Feb 71); 68-10931 (destroyed 01 Mar 71); 68-10933 (destroyed 13 May 75 Udorn, Thailand); 70-1627 (destroyed 15 May 75 during Mayaguez rescue); 70-1628 (destroyed 24 Jan 75) – see http://usafhpa.org/experiences/knife tales/21stknife tales.html and http://www.helis.com/database/sqsd/1017.
157 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.419,
September 71. The next plan was to capture Thateng (LS-210): On 19 November 71, Air America C-123Ks flew 1,150 troops from the training center at Nong Saphong north of Savannakhet (MR 3) to Saravane (MR 4). Two days later, USAF CH-3s and CH-53s flew them to a landing zone north of Ban Phone, and on 26 November 71, Thateng was finally captured. But these gains were short-lived: On 6 December, Saravane fell to the Communists, and so, by the end of the year, especially after the capture of Paksong, 25 miles east of Pakse, on 28 December 71, the North Vietnamese held the upper hand: They firmly controlled the entire Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In the northern parts of Laos, the rainy summer months of 1971 saw, for the first time since 1954, a threat to Luang Prabang (L-54) in MR 1, which had always been spared from serious ground attack. To defend the royal capital, Operation Xieng Dong began on 7 April 71 with an Air America infiltration of 2 battalions into the mountains 17 kilometers east of Luang Prabang. Slowly, the North Vietnamese were pushed back, and in June 71, the threat to Luang Prabang was gone. However, further west in MR 1, the threat of the Chinese Road continued since 1969: During the first week of January 70, two Thai-piloted RLAF T-28s from Vientiane dropped their bombs low over Route 46, destroying 15 trucks. Pushed by the US Government, Souvanna Phouma finally publicly declared that he was against the Chinese Road, and so, the US agreed to operation Snake Eyes, which was to be launched against the Chinese Road only by July 70, i.e. after a massive cross-border sweep of US and South Vietnamese troops into Cambodia. But when, as a consequence of these attacks, anti-war protests in the US became too loud, the US Government, looking to minimize any other controversy in SEA, canceled operations against the Chinese Road. So unopposed by any US military support to the Laotians, the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese swept away all paramilitary forces west of Route 46, so that in early 1970, the entire Nam Beng valley down to the Mekong was under Communist control; in March 70, Pathet Lao troops even reached the Thai border. By April 1971, Route 46 had been expanded into an all-weather, two-lane asphalt strip, guarded by some 400 antiaircraft guns and reaching as far south as Moung Houn. On 15 June 71, three new Unity battalions arrived at Xieng Lom (LS-69), some 60 kilometers southwest of Pak Beng, whose purpose was to recapture the Lao Government outposts west of the Mekong lost the year before and to stop the Chinese, should they try to cross the Mekong and to enter Thailand. When these Unity troops lifted two howitzers to a pair of newly established mountaintop outposts on the southern bank of the Mekong opposite Pak Beng, Communist forces crossed the river and laid siege to the 2 positions. On 19 March 72, Air America flew a two-ship medevac mission to the Unity sites. Damaged by small-arms fire, UH-34D H-73 was forced to ditch in the jungle 12 kilometers short of Xieng Lom. Supported by elements of the Unity troops, Air America could finally recover H-73 on 6 April 72. When in June 72, 80 men of the same Unity battalion were surrounded near Ban Houei Lao (LS-147), some 45 kilometers northwest of Xieng Lom, Air America UH-34D H-85 tried to medevac the wounded from the trapped unit on 12 June 72. Attempting the medevac mission, the pilot, Capt. James E. Rausch, was killed in H-85 on 12 June 72, when hit by small arms fire that came through the windshield; copilot Disoum landed H-85 safely at Ban

163 Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.319-20; it was recovered to Udorn by heavy lift helicopter only on 6 April 72 (XOXOs of 19 to 21 March 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B61F2).
By the fall of 1972, the Chinese Road, mostly 2 paved lanes, stood some 14 kilometers in front of Pak Beng, with some 25,000 Chinese on Lao soil including an infantry regiment posted at Moung Sai and more than 400 antiaircraft guns along the Road.

In MR 2, the rainy summer months of 1971 also saw the last major offensive operations of Vang Pao’s Hmong, now largely reinforced by many Thai volunteers trained and paid by the CIA. In the night of 2 February 71, the North Vietnamese opened their dry season attack – named Campaign 74B – attacking Moung Soui (L-108) and driving the Neutralists out of town. Moving south, the North Vietnamese then attacked FSB Puncher at Ban Na (LS-15), hindering resupply helicopters by anti-aircraft guns and also bombarding Thai positions on the Western Plain of Jars like Phou Long Mat and Zebra Ridge with heavy-weapons fire. On 7 February, they were in the valley east of Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72), and by midnight on 13 February 71, part of a Dac Cong sapper battalion had climbed atop the southeastern end of Skyline Ridge above Long Tieng. From there, the North Vietnamese fired recoilless rifle shells and even some 122mm and 140mm rockets into the valley, while another part of the sappers entered the valley, destroyed a howitzer and set up a mortar near the king’s villa to shell Long Tieng. As Vang Pao was at Udorn for the night, the Hmong units awaited his return, but CIA man Burr Smith called for a USAF attack onto the North Vietnamese manning the mortar. When an F-4 armed with cluster bombs arrived over Long Tieng, morning fog was hanging over the valley, causing the pilot to misjudge his target. So, the pilot accidentally released his cluster bombs across the northern side of the Long Tieng valley, destroying a rice storage house, an ammunition dump, the CIA’s living quarters, a mess hall, and the Union of La races radio station. When word of the bombing came over the radio, Vang Pao and the Vientiane station chief were on their way from Udorn in an Air America C-123. Upon landing at Long Tieng, the General toured the destruction. The following night, all Americans except CIA man Hog Daniels withdrew to Vientiane or Udorn; at the same time, 2

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164 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.320; XOXO of 12 June 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B61F5.
165 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.320.
new Thai *Unity* battalions arrived at Long Tieng and were deployed atop *Skyline Ridge*, but nothing happened the following night. On 3 March 71, two more *Unity* battalions arrived at Long Tieng, and they moved from *Skyline Ridge* to Sam Thong (LS-20), continuing northeast to Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) and Phou Tham She, but were unable to take Ban Hintang and so withdrew on 27 March 71 to the Thai garrison atop *Zebra Ridge*. At that time, the North Vietnamese had gained control over Ban Na, and Vang Pao knew that this force would be a direct threat to Long Tieng for several months to come – and that with a reduction of USAF sorties to be expected after 1 July 71. However, during April 71, Vang Pao’s irregulars conquered several hills on *Zebra Ridge*, and on 30 April 71, *Campaign 74B* was officially terminated. However, at Bouam Long (LS-32), the Communist siege ended only in late May 71. 

Although the US Government had vetoed a repetition of Vang Pao’s 1969 campaign (*About Face*), the General had *Groupement Mobile* 21 lifted to Khang Kho (LS-204) by Air America helicopters between 1 and 4 May 71, and 45 Commando Raiders were parachuted at night from an Air America DHC-6 Twin Otter into the Nam Mat valley south of Phu Se Bott (LS-82). In June 71, Vang Pao’s army advanced, airlifting troops and howitzers to positions further northeast. In July 1971, with the help of Air America helicopters and USAF *Knives*, Vang Pao again captured the Plain of Jars including Lima 22 and Ban Na (Operation *About Face II*) and established a network of artillery positions, manned by Thai gunners. The schedule for Operation *About Face II* was: “Objective: Capture PDJ. Units involved: GM 21 – Move from Padoung to southern PDJ. GM 22 – Blocking force at Phou Pha Sai. GM 26 – Move into Xiengkhouang Ville. GM 24 – Move from Bouamlong to Khang Khaí area. GM 25 – Blocking Force at Moung Moc. GM 23 – Retraining at time. Four Thai Battalions – move onto PDJ after SGU’s have captured objectives.”

The contribution of the Thai *Unity* forces was so essential to operations in MR 2 that the Thai received their own medevac helicopters to be flown by 26 Thai pilots. So, in the fall of 1971, the commander of the new unit, Major Bob Moberg, brought the Thai pilots from Kokethiem (T-15) to Vung Tau (V-05) in South Vietnam for 8 weeks of rotary wing instruction. The Thai pilots then ferried 10 *UH-1M* heli-
cicopters from Kontum (V-15) in South Vietnam to Udorn RThAFB (T-08), from where the fleet began flying daily to their operational base Ban Xon (LS-272), returning to Udorn every evening.\footnote{Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.303/4; for more details, see the file about the RLAF UH-1 within my The Aircraft of Air America.} This Thai medevac armada used the call-sign \textit{White Horse}.

But when the dry season approached, the Hmong were unable to retain the area. In November 71, 6,400 new North Vietnamese soldiers entered \textit{MR 2}, in addition to those who, this time, had remained in Xieng Khouang Province despite of the summer rains, some of them garrisoned at Khang Khai (LS-08). Others penetrated the area east of Long Tieng, while, at the same time, many Hmong officers left their forward units, preferring to stay home at Long Tieng.\footnote{Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.323.} In December 1971, the North Vietnamese launched a coordinated attack to retake Plain of Jars, named \textit{Campaign Z}. It began on 17 December 71 with infantry and tank attacks against the Hmong front lines north of Long Tieng. “On the front line, the Hmong regiments, many of them with commanders at Long Tieng, dropped their weapons and began filtering back past the \textit{Unity} firebases,” and neither Vang Pao himself, who took an Air America helicopter to Phou Seu, nor the CIA case officers were able to stop them.\footnote{Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.324.} The next North Vietnamese target were the \textit{Unity} fire support bases (FSBs), i.e. the artillery positions located on top of the mountains around the Plain of Jars and especially north of Long Tieng, using infantry, tanks, and 130mm guns. However, one after another, FSB \textit{Lion}, FSB \textit{Mustang}, FSB \textit{Stingray}, FSB \textit{Panther}, and FSB \textit{Cobra} fell to the enemy, although they had been supported by Air America helicopters and CASI Twin Otters.\footnote{A detailed description of the PDI battle of 17 to 20 December 71, written by CASI Twin Otter pilot Ed Dearborn, can be found in my file \textit{Cooperation with other airlines} within the section about CASI.} On 20 December 71, the North Vietnamese had retaken the Plain of Jars.\footnote{Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.324-27.} Although, at the same time, Air America C-123Ks brought 3 new \textit{Unity} battalions from Kanchanaburi (T-706) to Long Tieng (LS-20A), the North Vietnamese continued their march towards the south, attacking Ban Na (LS-15) and taking Moung Soui (L-108), and during that night, sappers even infiltrated into Long Tieng, destroying two O-1s\footnote{Probably O-1Fs 57-2865 and 57-2869 (see my file about RLAF and \textit{Raven} O-1s within my The Aircraft of Air America).} and damaging Vang Pao’s house. But from 22 December 71 onwards, reinforcements to the defenders of Long Tieng came from Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, and from \textit{Unity}.\footnote{Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.327/8.} In spite of these North Vietnamese attacks, however, Long Tieng could still hold on.\footnote{Leary, \textit{The CIA and the ‘Secret War’ in Laos}; Moody, \textit{The great adventures}, Prelude, p.9; Castle, \textit{At war}, p.107.} But by the end of December 71, air operations moved from Long Tieng to Vientiane: The T-28s flew out of Vientiane, while the O-1s and the helicopters staged out of Ban Xon.\footnote{Leary, Note “Battle for Skyline Ridge, 1972”, pp. 2+6, formerly in: UTD/Leary/Ser.I, B23F6, now probably in: UTD/Leary/B4F1 or B54F2.}

In the first week of January 1972, the North Vietnamese moved southwest of the plain to the vicinity of Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72), and by 5 January 72, \textit{Skyline Ridge} had been taken, while Vang Pao was taken to hospital at Udorn on 4 January.\footnote{Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.329.} Also in the first week of January 1972, the CIA decided to move its regional headquarters and its highly sophisticated electronics equipment to Ban Xon (LS-272) in \textit{MR 5}. Since March 70, when Sam Thong was overrun, Ban Xon had been the main refugee center. Also, by the offensive against Long Tieng, a new 40-bed facility that had been built especially as a backup for Long Tieng and put into operation at Nam Moh (LS-207) earlier, was isolated, and everything – hospital, refugees,
Vang Pao’s soldiers and CIA – moved to Ban Xon – a big task for Air America. Since the last week of 1971, Ban Xon had become the staging base for Air America, CASI and RLAF T-28 operations that had previously been at Long Tieng, where only Air America’s helicopter operation remained. But on 9 January 72, Long Tieng air operations resumed, when Caribous and Porters were invited to take off and land there again. In MR 2, sappers again infiltrated Long Tieng on 7 and 9 January 72, destroying ammunition, the CIA quarters and the ULR radio station, but on 18 January 72, most of Skyline Ridge was again in RLG hands. On 19 January 72, Vientiane station invited the western media – 2 helicopter loads – to tour Long Tieng so that they could see themselves that the enemy around Long Tieng was all North Vietnamese. Although the enemy opened a new battle field at Sala Phou Koun (LS-260) the following day, new Unity battalions arrived from Nam Phong on 24 January Phan, and they created new Fire Support Bases 9 kilometers south of Long Tieng, so that – against all expectations – Long Tieng would live to see February 72. However, Ban Xon remained the center of military support for Long Tieng, where soldiers, ammunition, and supplies streamed into the valley in everything from C-130s to UH-34Ds.

At that time, there was still some hope to return one day to Long Tieng. In spite of CIA protests, Vang Pao launched Operation Strength out of Pa Doung (LS-05) on 1 February 72. On 3 February 72, Air America began ferrying irregulars to Pa Doung, and on 4 February, Groupement Mobile 33 was shuttled from Ban Xon (LS-272) to Pha Khao (LS-14) by Air America Caribous. During approach to Pha Khao, Caribou “393” crashed. Pilot Gordon V. Smith suffered spine injuries, copilot D. M. Houston fractured skull, AFS M. S. Bailey minor injuries, and kicker Khamouth Sousadalay was killed; 34 Lao soldiers were injured. The aircraft sustained major damage and, after the recovery of several components, was abandoned at the crash site. Operation Strength was a diversionary strike that was to draw some North Vietnamese battalions out of the immediate Long Tieng vicinity and that even included maneuvers that were to feign the landing of a huge assault army (Operation Moonmark) “as Twin Otters overflowed the vicinity to play the sound of helicopter rotors through loudspeakers and drop phantom-rigged parachutes.” Apparently uncertain of Vang Pao’s intention, the North Vietnamese reacted very slowly, and Vang Pao’s forces were back at Pa Doung in early March. By that time, the operation had already diverted 11 North Vietnamese battalions from the Long Tieng-Sam Thong sector. In March, Vang Pao launched an operation named Strength II that was to hit the Communists south and northeast of the Plain: Beginning on 6 March 72, three Groupements Mobiles were airlifted to Bouam Long (LS-32) from where they were to again try to cut the Route 7-71 junction. During the third week of March, two Groupements Mobiles were heli-lifted to the hills immediately north of Xieng Khoung Ville (L-03). While this second group operated with little effect and against little opposition, the northern group faced mutiny and desertion, so that, as a diversion, Strength II, which ended in late March 72, was a failure. At the same time, Vang Pao tried to reinforce his Long Tieng defenses with new Unity battalions that arrived on 11 March, but the same day, 130mm artillery began raining into Long Tieng valley, and Skyline Ridge was

181 Starner, Flight of the CIA, pp.23 and 25.
182 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.330.
184 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.330-34.
186 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.449.
187 XOXOs of 4 and 5 Feb. 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B61F1.
188 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.335/6.
190 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.337/8.
again in North Vietnamese hands. A few days later, on 18 March 72, Sam Thong, which had been defended by a *Unity* battalion, was overrun. However, at least helipad *Charlie Alpha* on top of *Skyline Ridge* was recaptured by Hmong troops on 28 April 72. In this situation, task forces in *MR 1* and *MR 5* teamed together, trying to liberate Route 13, leading from Vientiane to Luang Prabang and further north. Their purpose was to clear the Route of Communist troops who held Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260) — a typical “Leapfrog” type operation called *Maharat* that lasted from 10 to 16 March 72, when the town was taken. On 1 May 72, Long Tieng, where Vang Pao had already brought back the T-28s in late February 72, reopened its runway for the C-130s, where, by June 72, again 12 T-28s, 6 O-1s, and 2 RLAF UH-34Ds were stationed. In mid-May 72, Vang Pao recaptured Sam Thong (LS-20), then tried to take the North Vietnamese position on Phou Phasai, but had to secure Pa Doung (LS-05) instead. These gains were modest, if confronted with the Communist 1972 plans “to turn the *Plaine des Jarres* into an all-season *strategic base of operations.*”

In the spring of 1972, the CIA “worked out a tactic that kept the enemy at bay without exposing the sometimes unsteady volunteers to human-wave ground assault. Heavy helicopters, each carrying 40-50 combat-equipped troops, would deposit a detachment of perhaps company strength on a selected height between Long Tieng – or another Hmong base – and a known enemy concentration. The NVA would prepare an attack, signaled by ground probes or artillery or perhaps spotted from the air, and just as the assault looked imminent, the airlift would return. The troops would be flown to another peak or ridgeline, and the game would begin again. Case officer [erased] recalled that the NVA never decided simply to stop playing this game, with the result that entire communist battalions were deterred for months from posing serious threats to major bases.” Probably at about the same time, General Creighton W. Abrams, head of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, whom Ambassador “Mac” Godley and Vientiane CIA Chief of Station Hugh Tovar had visited at Saigon a couple of weeks before, visited Laos, “going to Long Tieng as well as to Vientiane and Udorn”. At Long Tieng, he spoke to Vang Pao, who asked for more air support. This meeting was successful, as soon afterwards, the USAF delivered more B-52 air strikes and, within a few months, even some new F-111s in support of MR 2, which, “carrying 36 500-pound bombs each,” helped “suppress enemy artillery and disrupt troop concentrations.”

Further south, in March 72, the dispensary of Ban Xon in *MR 5* had to service more than 150,000 people, of whom some 130,000 were refugees. But as Ban Xon was not considered to be safe at night, American officials and contract personnel commuted daily from Vientiane to Ban Xon by Air America aircraft. In April 72, it became clear that the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao had withdrawn only a day’s march from Long Tieng, so that it became impossible to regain the Plain of Jars during the rainy months. On 21 April 1972, the CIA decided to give up the ownership of its entire air complex, and Air America would be retained only until the end of the war in Southeast Asia. Then, after a massive POL fire on 19 July 72, on 20

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193 Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.337.
197 Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.455.
199 *Starner, Flight of the CIA*, pp.23 and 25; Castle, *At war*, pp.112/3; President Nixon congratulated Ambassador Godley upon blunting the Communist dry season offensive in 1972, and the Ambassador commended Air America and Continental Air Services for this achievement; see document no. c05266408, online readable on the CIA website at [http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05266408.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/15/c05266408.pdf).
and 21 July 72, the airstrip of Ban Xon was severely damaged by a flash flood. As, in the meantime, it had become clear that there would be no return to Long Tieng and that Ban Xon was not adapted for the mission, because intelligence collection and caring for refugees had been in each other’s way at Ban Xon, the CIA decided to move to Vang Vieng (L-16).\textsuperscript{202} In August 72, the airstrip of Vang Vieng was upgraded, and there was heavy Air America traffic (Porters, Twin Otters, Caribous, helicopters) at the same time. Speaking in more general terms, the political situation in Laos had very much deteriorated in 1972: Only 20% of the country was under government control; all public traffic north from Vientiane had to stop at Vang Vieng, which, in late 72, cared for 12,000 refugees.\textsuperscript{203}

After retraining his troops and recruiting new irregulars, Vang Pao flew to Udorn on 26 July 72, meeting CIA’s Pat Landry and the Thai commanders of\textit{ Headquarters 333} to discuss about his most ambitious rainy season offensive, i.e. about\textit{ Operation Phou Phiang II} that was to retake the Plain in MR 2 in August and September 72.\textsuperscript{204} On 13 August 72, an armada of Air America Bell 205s and UH-34Ds as well as USAF CH-53\textit{ Knives} flew\textit{ Groupement Mobile} 23 to Ban Pha south of the Plain, but the North Vietnamese did not react the way the operation’s planners had anticipated. On 20 August 72, an Air America S-58T “carrying Hog Daniels and four Hmong raiders departed Long Tieng after last light and headed for Moung Kheung. Landing the team unopposed, the chopper crew relayed the exact LORAN coordinates of the landing zone back to Long Tieng. Daniels and the Hmong detachment then unpacked an assortment of flashlights, phosphorus tubes, and wand beacons to await the C-130.”\textsuperscript{205} No less than 72 volunteers who had stepped forward for an airborne commando contingent were then shuttled down to Vang Vieng (L-16), the new rear logistical support base for MR 2, where a single Air America C-130E picked them up at night, “with flamethrowers lining the runway. […] To guide the C-130 to Moung Kheung, a LORAN had been installed in the cockpit. Using the coordinates relayed by the S-58T, the crew vectored toward the drop zone. After sighting flashlight signals from Daniels’ ground detachment, they lowered the tail ramp and entered a racetrack orbit. In multiple passes between 0030 and 0100 hours, 21 August, all the commandos were dropped without incident.”\textsuperscript{206} However, after other units had been flown in by USAF CH-53\textit{ Knives}, a certain lack of discipline – crates of mortar ammunition left behind on the field, machine guns fired for fun by soldiers who had not been trained on that weapon, and desertion – showed up, and when the North Vietnamese arrived with tanks, both\textit{ Groupements Mobiles} streamed back in full retreat. To further discourage the troops, on 9 September 72, an accidental T-28 bombing 37 and wounded 43 Hmong, and a week later, a T-28 dropped short killing another 27 irregulars. Some reinforcements that arrived from MR 3 and MR 1, were soon pushed back by the North Vietnamese so that, by the end of September 72,\textit{ Operation Phou Phiang II} was dead.\textsuperscript{207} And the victories of the Communist forces continued: Reportedly, on 9 October 1972, 2 North Vietnamese IL-28 bombers attacked the “US base” at Ban Louang in Laos, about 30 kms east of Xieng Khouang, putting the base into flames; although attacked by USAF F-5s, the IL-28s returned to their base at Noi Bai, North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{208} In reality, there was no such US base at the location indicated,\textsuperscript{209} but the 2 IL-28s bombed the Royal Lao Government-held town of

\textsuperscript{201} Conboy / Morrison,\textit{ Shadow war}, p.354 note 20.
\textsuperscript{202} Starner,\textit{ Flight of the CIA}, pp.23 and 25.
\textsuperscript{203} Starner,\textit{ Flight of the CIA}, p.23; Conboy / Morrison,\textit{ Shadow war}, p.347.
\textsuperscript{204} Conboy / Morrison,\textit{ Shadow war}, pp.345/6.
\textsuperscript{205} Conboy / Morrison,\textit{ Shadow war}, p.347.
\textsuperscript{206} Conboy / Morrison,\textit{ Shadow war}, p.347.
\textsuperscript{207} Conboy / Morrison,\textit{ Shadow war}, pp.347-49.
\textsuperscript{208} Toperczer,\textit{ Air war over North Vietnam}, p.49.
\textsuperscript{209} As Laos was neutral, the US did not have bases there. As to the name, there was a Ban Na Luang (LS-66), but this was in the western part of Laos. In 1972, the area around and east of Xieng Khouang was Communist territory since many years. See the map by Jim Henthorn at http://www.nexus.net/~911gfx/sea-ao.html.
Bouam Long (LS-32). In October 72, there was also some fighting near Lat Sen (LS-276) just east of Sam Thong: Between 22 and 25 October, CIA’s Savannakhet Unit sent there no less than 1,460 men to reinforce the troops in MR 2, but on 26 October, at several places on the southern Plain of Jars, pro-western and even Unity troops were beaten, had to retreat or even deserted. In November 72, only the introduction of the F-111 capable of night and all weather attacks saved Long Tieng from being overrun another time. Then, 4 new Thai battalions arrived at Long Tieng in November, and on 6 December 72, Air America Chinooks lifted Thai troops into the Tha Tam Bleung valley, but the North Vietnamese defenders successfully countered the Royal Lao Government advances.

Air America Chinook 019 at Udorn in 1973

By mid-January 73, there were strong hints of a cease-fire coming up soon. But for Vang Pao, this would have meant that the Plain of Jars and the territory east of Long Tieng like the Tha Tam Bleung valley in MR 2 would be legally under Communist control. Worse, since mid-December 72, one of the last Royal Lao Government strongholds in MR 2, Bouam Long (LS-32), was attacked from all sides by North Vietnamese troops. “As more Vietnamese antiaircraft artillery was added to the ring around the site, Air America crews were forced to experiment with free-dropping 250-pound palletized loads off the rear ramps of Chinooks, significantly decreasing the amount of time spent in the sights of PAVN gunners.” To divert North Vietnamese attention from LS-32, Operation Phou Phiang III moved several Groupements Mobiles towards Xieng Khouangville, while Unity troops – Task Force Alpha – were to retake Moung Soui. However, the Groupements Mobiles did not come closer to their target than 7 kilometers. As to Task Force Alpha, Air America Chinooks lifted four Thai battalions from Sam Thong to a commando-secured landing zone on 3 February 73, from where they had to march towards Moung Soui. But due to a complete lack of discipline, the troops barely advanced, and when they were hit by North Vietnamese 130mm artillery, the Unity troops all fled further north. “With troop discipline gone, Air America Chinooks began an evacuation of the weak northern Unity battalions during the second week of February.

210 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.398 note 1.
211 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.387/8; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.469.
212 Castle, At war, pp.113/4.
213 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.388/9.
214 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.390.
Among the pilots was Charlie Weitz, who remembers: ‘A five-ship fleet was assigned with the evacuation north of Moung Suoi. As soon as we landed, the Thai started mobbing the choppers. When we were half full, we started bringing up the ramp. I had about 140 men aboard, and even thought the Chinook had lots of power, we had to curl up very slowly.’

With fighting southwest of the Plain of Jars in MR 2 dropping off in December 72, the North Vietnamese pushed west on Route 7, threatening Sala Phou Koun (LS-260) located in MR 1 near the junction of Route 7 and Route 13 that linked Vientiane with Luang Prabang. To reopen the road, Operation Maharat II was launched in early January 73. On 19 January 73, an Air America Twin Otter dropped a pathfinder team in a pair of rice paddies 5 kilometers east of the road junction. The following morning, 2 Air America Chinooks and 7 Knives brought troops from Vang Vieng to the landing zone prepared by the pathfinder team. As the Communists retreated into the mountains, Route 13 was cleared by month’s end.

But another place in northern Laos fell to the enemy: Already attacked since November 72, Nam Lieu (LS-118A) had to be abandoned on 7 February 73 in spite of heavy defense by USAF jets and RLAF T-28s and in spite of heavy weapons brought in the day before by an Air America C-123K. – In northern Laos, there were also some towns that, on the surface, were completely isolated from the rest of the country and had to be supplied by air. One of them was Ban Houei Sai (L-25) on the Mekong River in MR 1, completely cut off from surface contact with the rest of the country, since the whole province was controlled by the Pathet Lao. So, while postal communication and some urgent supplies arrived from Vientiane by air, the principal supply route for that town went thru Thailand. But if the war had isolated Ban Houei Sai, it had equally made it the headquarters of spy network, as it was a good place to survey the construction of the Chinese Road, which already went from China to Moung Sai (L-27) in Laos and on to Pak Beng and was to reach the Thai border, and where, in late 72, some 20,000 Chinese workers were engaged.

In the south, MR 3 had been spared the worst of the war for several months in 1972. That changed in October 72, when a North Vietnamese regiment pushed west to Dong Hene (LS-54) and then turned south, driving the resident Royal Lao garrison from Keng Kok (LS-139). Although both positions were reconquered by government troops on 2 and 14 November respectively, followed by Moung Phalone (L-61) on 22 November, this victory was only temporary, as Moung Phalone was recaptured by the Communists on 6 February 73 and still was in their hands by the 22 February 73 cease-fire date. Less fortunate were several North Vietnamese attempts to conquer Thakhek (L-40) in MR 3, which remained in Royal Lao Government hands thru the 22 February cease-fire. It was indeed in the Thakhek area of MR 3 that Air America C-123K “374” was shot down on 9 February 73, when en route from Vientiane (L-08) to Savannakhet (L-39) with 12,000 pounds of general cargo. The remains of pilot Howard H. Boyles Jr. and his co-pilot Jack W. Cavill “have not been positively identified although certain remains were recovered at a much later date. It is presumed that these are the remains of both the PIC and the F/O.” Kicker Prasit Chaichana was killed when he jumped without a parachute; the other kicker, Sourinh, parachuted from the aircraft and survived.

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215 According to Air America’s Flights Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-73-010 of 1 April 73, an Air America Chinook was designed to carry 32, not 140 passengers.
216 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.390/91 (quotation p.391).
217 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.389/90.
218 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.391-93; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.489.
220 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.393-95.
222 XOXO of 9 Feb. 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12; Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B62F1; Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3; Accident note to the USAF, dated 10 Feb. 73, in: UTD/CIA/B32F1; Board of review report dated 5 March 73, in: UTD/CIA/B34F5.

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At the same time, there was heavy fighting in other parts of southern Laos. Especially in
the Pakse (L-11) and Saravane (L-44) areas of MR 4, the pro-western forces lost many lives
while Air America lost some of their aircraft. While Operation Fa Ngum, whose purpose was
to loosen the North Vietnamese (= PAVN) grip on Route 23 leading from Pakse (L-11) east to
Paksong (L-05), succeeded in forcing the entire North Vietnamese 9 Regiment to withdraw 15
kilometers east of Laongam in April 72, other operations were less successful. But a couple
of days after the end of Operation Fa Ngum, the North Vietnamese pushed the Royal Lao
troops 9 kilometers to the west, and during the third week of May 72, they even conquered
Khong Sedone (LS-289) further north. As this meant the loss of the town, where the Saravane
provincial government had been relocated, and also an interruption of Route 13 linking Pakse
with Savannakhet, Operation Black Lion was to retake control of Khong Sedone. So, on 15
June 72, Groupement Mobile 32 boarded 8 USAF CH-53 Knives at PS-18 and landed at
abandoned PS-47, 11 kilometers north of Khong Sedone, damaging two helicopters in the
rain-soaked airstrip. Another unit was inserted into the hills west of Khong Sedone, and on 19
June, both units entered the town, which had already been left by the North Vietnamese, who
had withdrawn west to an abandoned FAR camp at the eastern foot of Phou Khong. There,
the North Vietnamese stiffened, and their resistance cost them “almost an entire regiment –
the 39th – as they first tried to hold Khong Sedone and then conducted a fighting retreat up the
slope of the mountain to the west.” In June and July, some Unity units left Long Tieng, and
after refitting at Nam Phong (T-712), they returned to Pakse (L-11), from where they retook
Laongam on 5 September. On 20 October 72, Khong Sedone was lost again, but recaptured
3 weeks later by troops of the Royal Lao Government. Laongam also fell to the enemy,
until it was retaken by Unity troops on 18 November 72. As to other towns in the Bolovens
area, which had been in Communist hands since December 71, Thai Unity troops and
irregulars from Savannakhet recaptured Houei Sai (L-25) on 26 November and Paksong (L-
05) on 27 November 72 in Operation Black Lion V. This was not the last word, however, for
Paksong fell again to the enemy on 7 February 73, was recaptured by pro-western forces three
days later and became definitely Communist territory on 22 February 73.

During the battle for Paksong, Air America had to face some of its most spectacular losses
of aircraft. On 6 December 72, C-123K “648” was shot down, when it was en route from
Pakse (L-11) to several forward drop zones in the New Paksong (LS-180) area. “648” had
been loaded with several pounds of cargo – a mixed load of fresh produce and ammunition,
loaded onto 14 pallets – which was destined for drop zones known as “I” pad, “A” pad, and
“V” pad. Then, about 3 kms south of Paksong (LS-449), in the New Paksong (LS-180) area,
Laos, “648” was hit by several rounds of hostile ground fire. Immediately, the crew noted
several large holes in both wings and a failure of the hydraulic system, making rudder control
of the aircraft impossible. With the aircraft struggling to climb, even with full power, the crew
jettisoned all but one or two pallets of the remaining cargo. Then, over LS-449, the Pilot in
Command of “648”, Captain Neil G. Hansen ordered the crew to bail out. After some
discussion, the First Officer and the two Thai kickers parachuted out. Captain Hansen made

223 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.340/1.
224 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.349-51.
226 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.351/2.
227 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.395/6.
228 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.396.
229 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.396-98; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.490.
230 An amusing version of this discussion appears in Robbins, Air America, pp.217-18. However, in his statement
about this accident dated 7 December 72 (p.3, in: UTD/CIA/B61F15), Captain Hansen himself notes the
following: “The F/O left the cockpit and joined the kickers by the left troop door, I unbuckled and planned going
with them when I rang the bell. I rolled out on final, rang the bell and started to get up when I noticed the F/O
coming back to the cockpit for his survival radio; ok abort. Next time around on final, I discovered the F/O back
one more circle of LS-449, secured and reduced left engine power in an attempt to regain flight control, but then left the cockpit, ran thru the cabin hanging onto the static line and exited the aircraft thru the right rear cabin door. He still observed the aircraft impact in a 5 degree nose down attitude and 15 degree right bank. It first appeared to break up with clouds of dust and smoke, and then flames rose from the wreckage, as the last noted fuel reading had been 3,600 pounds of remaining fuel – enough to destroy the aircraft by fire. All of the crew received only minor injuries, but the rescue proved to become another Odyssey: The first Air America rescue chopper to arrive on scene was UH-34D H-52, which picked up one kicker and the First Officer on the ground and used the cable hoist for Captain Hansen. But in picking up the Captain, the tail rotor of H-52 contacted nearby trees and the aircraft was forced to set down prematurely near Pakson in a mine field. A second Air America UH-34D, H-53, completed this rescue, but, some twenty-five minutes out of the Pakson area enroute to Pakse (L-11), it was forced to land with low fuel. So, a third Air America rescue helicopter arrived, this time S-58T XW-PHE, and now finally, the ill-fated crew could be safely returned to Pakse (L-11). In the meantime, a fourth Air America chopper, that is UH-34D H-81, had picked up the other kicker and returned him to Pakse.231

As to Saravane (L-44), the town was to be retaken in Operation Black Lion III. After an Air America Twin Otter had parachute inserted an MR 4 Commando raider pathfinder team near Saravane airfield in the night of 18 October 72, the following morning, 8 USAF CH-53 Knives picked up troops at PS-18 and landed them in the paddies off the western side of Saravane airstrip. When this armada came back from PS-18 with a second load of troops, the helicopters were greeted by heavy-automatic weapons fire upon landing. As all Knives were crippled and had to return for maintenance, a third airlift that day was taken over by RLAF H-

in the cockpit getting his camera. I informed him rather severely to return to the posterior of the A/C. On short final, I rang the bell again and observed AFD [...] go first, F/O [...] second, and AFD [...] going last. By this time, I was too late for me to get out and still be in friendly ground, so back around again...”.

34s, while 4 Air America UH-34Ds were to pick up the wounded. The official Accident Report gives a more detailed picture of what happened in the afternoon of 19 October 72: “In the afternoon, the Customer at L-11 briefed the aircrews of four UH-34D aircraft, including H-62, to conduct a troop transport from Phou Lat Seua (referred to as either LS-418 or PS-18), Laos to Saravane (L-44), Laos. This was to be the fourth troop lift of the day into the L-44 area. The first lift was uneventful. On the second lift, six helicopters (not AAM operated) had received battle damages and on the third lift, two (not AAM operated) helicopters had been hit at low level south of the runway at L-44. The Customers, however, felt that the area south and southwest of the runway at L-44 (the HLZ) was now neutralized and should probably offer the safest approach. There were supposedly eight hundred friendly forces in and around the HLZ at the programmed time of arrival of the four UH-34Ds. The PIC of H-59, as senior AAM Captain on the scene, planned the actual flight into L-44. It was to be a three helicopter transport to the HLZ consisting of, in order, H-59, H-52 and H-62 with the empty H-89 remaining high to act as a SAR (Search and Rescue) aircraft if required. Two covering aircraft (‘Hobos’) and a FAC (Forward Air Controller – ‘Raven’) were in the area providing cover. The general plan was for each aircraft to drop the passengers and pick up wounded for evacuation. H-59 made the first landing coming in at tree top level directly along the runway at 060°. The PIC received the proper ground signal, landed, dropped the passengers, picked up nine wounded troops and executed a 180° turn proceeding basically out the reciprocal route. There were incoming mortars at the time but no problems were encountered. The second aircraft, H-52, proceeded along the same path and brought out several (seven or eight) passengers. A mortar attack occurred as H-52 was on the ground and it was later found that one main rotor blade had been damaged. The third aircraft, H-62, landed the same way, dropped the passengers, picked up seven passengers and departed along the southern side of the runway. He completed about three quarters of a turn to the southwest when hit by numerous small arms (probably 12.7 MM) fire. H-62 immediately lost power and, on fire, was autorotated into a marshy area just south of the western end of the runway. The PIC of H-62 called that this aircraft was hit and going down which alerted the SAR aircraft, H-89. The PIC of H-89 landed beside H-62, also started to take fire, but picked up the three crew members and five of the seven passengers from H-62. This PIC felt that he could not carry all the load and called for further assistance with H-59 responding. H-59 also took fire seriously wounding the SIC and fatally wounding two passengers. H-89 took all but two from H-62, who reportedly were fatalities, and departed the area. In summation, four passengers were fatalities. The UH-34Ds, H-52, H-59 and H-89 received minor shrapnel / bullet strikes but were successfully flown from the scene, and one UH-34D, H-62, was destroyed on the site by fire. Three Air America, Inc. aircrew members received minor and serious wounds from which they are recovering.”

As to the battle of Saravane, more troops were landed during the following days so that the town was retaken, as the North Vietnamese

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232 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.352/3.

233 The PIC of H-52 was Capt. F. L. Stergar, the SIC (Second in Command) was M. D. Walker, the name of the Flight Mechanic is blackened in papers (Accident material at: UTD/CIA/B61F12).

234 When H-62 was shot down near Saravane (L-44) on 19 October 72, the PIC, Capt. Boonrat Com-Intra, suffered from a shock, the left foot of SIC S. Swangpunt was badly lacerated, but F/M S. Sittisongkram remained uninjured (XOXO of 19 Oct. 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2).

235 H-89 suffered battle damage near Saravane (L-44) on 19 October 72, while rescuing personnel from the downed UH-34D H-62, damaging the carburetor; the crew of PIC H. K. Thompson, SIC A. Spelios, and F/M S. Jantavee remained uninjured (XOXO of 19 Oct. 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2).

236 H-59, flown by PIC J. A. Lopes, SIC R. N. Huntsberger, and F/M P. Ramos, suffered battle damage (numerous hits) near Saravane (L-44) on 19 October 72, while rescuing personnel from the downed UH-34D H-62; SIC Huntsberger was seriously wounded, the rest of the crew remained uninjured (XOXO of 19 Oct. 72 ; in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2).

faded east without a fight.\textsuperscript{238}

However, this was not the end of the story. By mid-November 72, North Vietnamese pressure was on the rise, and on 15 November, Saravane airport (L-44) had to be closed because of several anti-aircraft guns that had been positioned in the vicinity. By 8 December, combined infantry/weapons assaults began, but the MR 4 troops held in spite of a direct hit that struck GM 41 headquarters. It was not until 9 January 73, after several weeks of heavy artillery attacks, that the MR 4 defenders began to edge westward. But when the North Vietnamese arrived with tanks in mid-February, the last defenders fled to Khong Sedone, where they arrived by the time of the cease-fire.\textsuperscript{239} During this long fighting for Saravane, Air America lost Caribou “401” in the vicinity of this town on 23 November 72. The aircraft had been on a scheduled flight from Pakse (L-11) to a forward drop zone, loaded with eight pallets of mixed foodstuff and ammunition and operating under the provisions of Contract F04606-71-C-0002, when it was shot down near Saravane on 23 November 72, killing Captain John M. Bannerman, First Officer Charles J. McCarthy, and Air Freight Dispatchers B. Somchai and Suthi Chimpaibul.\textsuperscript{240}

**Supporting road watcher and spy teams**

As to covert missions flown out of Udorn under the provisions of contract AID-439-713, a very interesting example was probably operated by Caribou B-851. In mid-September 1968, this aircraft had been modified to be able to better carry the Fulton Skyhook recovery system,\textsuperscript{241} which could be used for snatching individuals and packages from the ground – a photo appeared in William Leary’s article.\textsuperscript{242} But it was not mounted permanently, and seems not to have been used very often.\textsuperscript{243} In most Udorn daily flight schedules of these days, B-851 appears as used as a standby aircraft at Udorn during daytime\textsuperscript{244} – probably because most of

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\textsuperscript{238} Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.353.

\textsuperscript{239} Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.396/7.

\textsuperscript{240} XOXO of 23 November 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B61F14; Board of Review report dated 19 January 73, in: UTD/CIA/B34F5.

\textsuperscript{241} Flight Operations Circular of 15 August 68 in: UTD/LaShomb/B1F13.


\textsuperscript{243} E-mail dated 11 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

\textsuperscript{244} See Udorn daily flight schedules of 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, and 26 June 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B6F3 + B3F14 + B8F1. On 11 June 69, B-851 was used for local training only.
its rescue or “infil” missions to pick up spies from hostile territory were flown at night. But probably, B-851 – the only Udorn-based Caribou between 1965 and 1970, which was assigned to the CEECO-contract 59-069 and to its successor AID-439-713 all the time – was also the aircraft that, in 1967/8, took over from the OnMark the night-drop-missions to the road watcher teams, who were always supplied from AB-1’s Q-warehouse at Udorn. In 1971, however, B-851 was transferred to Saigon, when the first Twin Otter arrived to replace it. In the late sixties, road watcher teams were resupplied out of Savannakhet in MR 3, where Tom Fosmire was the CIA-man in charge between 1966 and 1969. He had 3 CASI Porters flown by Thai pilots and 2 Air America UH-34Ds also flown by Thai crews stationed at Savannakhet. The CASI Porters were used to drop bundles to a single team. The “Air America Caribou could carry enough to drop to 2 or 3 teams in one night. Gene Hughey flew a lot of these missions. The drops usually consisted of food, batteries for radios, cigarettes, and other ‘comfort’ items in specially rigged parcels […]. Photo recon was nice, but it was no substitute for men on the ground. At one point, a team stumbled over a pipeline. They could hear it pumping at night. Pls at Udorn said that the team must be lying. The next time the team went out, it took hacksaws. It returned three weeks later with a three-foot section of four-inch pipe. Fosmire took it to Udorn and put it on Pat Landry’s desk. Before the pipeline, one truck would have to carry the fuel for three trucks transiting the Trail; the pipeline increased efficiency by 25 percent. In another incident, a team found that the NVA had trellised a road for 15 kilometers, changing the vegetation every few days. These kind of tricks deceived the Pls.** During those night-missions, Caribou B-851 probably was one of the aircraft used on another top-secret CIA project that involved dropping millions of dollars in forged Pathet Lao currency, trying to ruin the Pathet Lao economy by flooding them with paper money. Pilots on routine night drops were asked to return over Communist territory and drop several packages – but apart from sometimes covering an airplane floor with counterfeit money from one end to the other, when a money bag had burst while still in the plane, little effect is known.

“In January 1967, Fosmire directed the only significant POW rescue during the war in Southeast Asia. A Lao farmer came in to Savannakhet and said that he had just escaped from a POW camp near Mahaxay. He said that the people there could be rescued by a small force, and he offered to lead it to the camp. After an extensive debriefing, Fosmire was convinced that he was telling the truth and decided to proceed. He selected Sergeant Te, his best team leader, for the assignment. Te was brought in, talked to the farmer, and agreed that it could be done. His team then was put into quick training. […] Te’s 10-man team was inserted by helicopter northeast of the camp, below MuGia Pass. Te crossed Route 12 and came in from the east. He followed a creekbed, as briefed, into the middle of the camp for a nighttime

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245 In his memoir about the Aerial photography project (in: UTD/Bonansinga/Sm.Coll.1), Frank Bonansinga confirms that at Udorn, there “was a small number, about ten, of fixed wing aircraft that primarily operated at night” (p.1).
247 DHC-6-300 N774M was leased from Aviation and Inland Marine Rentals Inc on 25 February 71 (Aircraft status as of 12 August 74, in: UTD/CIA/B56F4) and put under the AID-439-713 contract out of Vientiane (see Flight Operations Circulars of 1 July 71 and 15 July 71, both in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); later in the year, it was joined by Twin Otter N5662, which had been equipped by Texas Instruments with special electronic equipment, including a terrain following radar, the Teledyne Loran C (Leary, Outline - Air America in Laos, for 13 November 71).
248 Pl = CIA photo interpreter.
249 Thomas G. Fosmire, Interview, conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at Florence, SC, on 28 December 92, transcript, in: UTD/Leary/B82F21.
250 Robbins, Air America, p.135.
assault. The prisoners were being held in cages that were dug into the sides of limestone karst, sealed by wire, bamboo, and locks. Te’s team came out of the creekbed and opened fire on the sentries, who ran away. There were few if any casualties among the guards. Te then lit the thatched roofs of several hooches used by the guards and illuminated the area. Using bolt cutters, the team released the prisoners. The plan was to take a circuitous route through the jungle during the day to reach an area of high ground and be picked up by Air America helicopters. There were about 50 POWs in all, but some of these were common criminals and quickly disappeared. In leading the group, Te soon realized that the POWs were in such poor physical shape that they would be unable to make it through the jungle. Taking a chance, he marched the group down Route 12 to the pickup point, as the sun began to set. He finally reached a clear area and radioed for the pickup. Two Air America helicopters picked up the group. One of the POWs was Pisidhi Indradat, a former PARU and AAM kicker who had been shot down in 1963. […] Pisidhi later became head of AAM security at Udorn.\textsuperscript{251}

Watching Communist traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was an effort that, in 1971/72, was mostly conducted by the CIA’s Savannakhet Unit in MR 3. In 1972, activities focused on harassing Trail traffic, and the CIA teams along the eastern panhandle were often inserted and exfiltrated by CH-53C \textit{Knives} of the USAF’s 21\textsuperscript{st} SOS from Nakhon Phanom RThAFB that picked up the troops at Nong Saphong training center north of Savannakhet. “Climbing to avoid antiaircraft fire, the \textit{Knives} would be joined by Air America or CASI fixed-wing (often a Beech Baron or Porter), which on infiltrations dipped low to troll for ground fire or, during exfiltrations, called on the ground team to signal its exact location with flares, panels, flashlights, or via radio.”\textsuperscript{252} Besides the USAF, Air America was heavily involved in Trail operations, in the 1970ies especially the Special Projects S-58T Twin Pacs, which seemed to be ideal for Trail operations because of the added reliability gained from the second engine. To assist with long-range infiltrations, these S-58Ts had a Teledyne LORAN C fitted between the pilot and copilot seats. With LORANs pointing the way, Air America S-58Ts flew first daylight team infiltrations in the spring of 1971, and, shortly afterwards, equipped with night-vision goggles, Air America crews began night infiltrations. Other devices that were added later included an aerodynamic 150-gallon gasoline tank on the side, and one of the helicopters reportedly even had a mini-gun out the side door.\textsuperscript{253}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{airamerica_s-58t_xw_phe_udorn_1973.png}
\caption{Air America S-58T XW-PHE at Udorn in 1973 (courtesy: Ward Reimer)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{251} Thomas G. Fosmire, Interview, conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at Florence, SC, on 28 December 92, transcript, in: UTD/Leary/B82F21.
\textsuperscript{253} Conboy / Morrison, \textit{Shadow war}, pp.379-80; while the external fuel tank is mentioned in Flight Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-73-10 of 1 April 73 (in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14) as an additional equipment, the mini-gun is not mentioned.
Intelligence work: the Aerial photography project

Although Air America’s Volpars were officially assigned to Vientiane and mostly operated out of Savannakhet, the Volpar operating for the Aerial photography project since late 1966, that is N9542Z, continued to do so out of Udorn throughout these years, and a second Volpar, N9671C, was added to the Photo project in 1968 or 1969, as is testified by the Udorn Daily Flight Schedules of 1969, 1970 or 1972. In November 1967, N9542Z took the first photos of the infamous “Chinese Road”. In February 71, the first 1,000 photo missions were completed taking over one million feet of film from the cameras in N9542Z. But then, on 15 January 72, a tragedy struck the photo missions and their crews: While dropping reward leaflets for information on the missing C-123K “293” which had disappeared on 27 November 71, Volpar N9671C received a 100 millimeter anti-aircraft artillery round that almost killed Jim Rhyne and severely damaged the aircraft. N9671C had received a hole approximately 32 by 26 inches in the left hand side of the fuselage. Large sections of the floor beams and other major structural components were destroyed or extensively damaged, and the fuselage had many small exit holes thru the cabin roof, sides, and door frames.

Nevertheless, the Pilot in Command, “Bob Main did a masterful job of flying 71C and safely returning to Udorn and landing 71C without further damage / injury. The Air Force ambulance and medical crew met 71C immediately after landing, taking Captain Rhyne to the base hospital saving his life. Unfortunately Captain Rhyne was to lose part of one leg; but to his credit, he not only returned as Air America’s Fixed Wing Chief Pilot, he flew anything [...]. He truly is a most remarkable person.” And the Photo project continued.

255 According to the Udorn daily flight schedules (in: UTD/Hickler/UTD/Hickler/B6F3 + B3F14 + B8F1), these aerial photography missions, being part of contract AID-439-713, were operated “T-08/as directed” by Volpar N9542Z on 20 June 69, 21 June 69, 27 June 69 or 28 June 69, while on 23 June 69, 24 June 69, 25 June 69 or 26 June 69, they were carried out by Volpar N9671C. On 11 June 69, both Volpars flew “T-08/as directed”.
256 The Udorn daily flight schedules of 18 and 20 September 70 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F1) show both Volpars (N9542Z and N9671C) “T-08/as directed”, as does the Udorn flight schedule for 1 September 72 (in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).
257 Frank Bonansinga remembers: “In November of 1967 Sam Jordan and I were flying VTB 42Z the Air America photo recce bird and saw a new road coming out of China south into the Northwestern Laos. We weren’t the first to see the ‘road’ but supposedly were the first to get photographs of it, we were told by the PI (photo interpreters from the NSA), who read our photographs. The road was never acknowledged by the Chinese. It was heavily defended. One time a year or so later filming the road with Dave Waters as FO, I accidentally crossed the Chinese boarder (they don’t have road signs or color their boundaries). When the film was seen by the PI’s, I got chewed out for this unintentional action. We were supposed to know better. Fortunately, there were no repercussions about my intrusion and the PI’s and the ‘customer’ were actually happy to see the pictures. The road was well built and slow in building. They had gardens and basketball and volleyball courts as they moved south. Their families were with them and they also brought along mobile anti-aircraft guns of various sizes to protect and defend their road. They were obviously very proud of their road and aircraft flying over sometimes drew fire but it wasn’t consistent. In my nearly six years of PI work, the most anti-aircraft fire was around and over the road while we were photographing it. Often the co-pilot FO would see they were shooting at us seeing the bursts while he was in the cabin reloading the camera’s magazine or when looking out of his cockpit sliding side window. The pilot was usually looking ahead trying to follow the road and trying to keep the wings level as the shutter opened every few seconds to ensure overlapping pictures to give the our pictures the 3D effect. We were never hit by AA, in about two thousands photo missions that I know of. This was amazing. Tragically, we had one pilot killed from ground fire on a photo mission over the PDJ at low level.” (E-mail dated 8 July 2006, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga).
259 Frank Bonansinga, Personal memo of the Aerial photography project, in: UTD/Bonansinga/Sm.Coll.1. The whole description of the project is based on Captain Bonansinga’s report, the quotation is taken from p.14.
The wiretap mission to Vinh, North Vietnam

Probably the most dangerous intelligence mission ever flown by Air America was the secret wiretap mission to Vinh in North Vietnam. Captain Jim Pearson recalls: “Shortly after 74M went into service, another newly manufactured Twin Otter arrived on the scene: N5662. This aircraft had been worked over by the customer after the company accepted delivery from the manufacturer. It had installed a Texas Instruments Terrain Following Radar – the same as on the US F-111 low level fighter bomber aircraft. Of course due to the infinitely different operating characteristics the unit in the Twin Otter had a modified templet installed to accommodate its somewhat lackluster performance compared to the massive F-111.”

Probably from the very beginning, this modification was made with something like the wiretap mission to Vinh in mind. In that mission, an Air America Hughes 500P was to fly into North Vietnam where a wiretap was to be installed on the main phone lines running from Hanoi to the south. Two S-58Ts were to act as rescue aircraft for the commandos and for the Hughes 500P in case it was downed, and a Twin Otter was to act as an airborne command post. The mission was so secret that even Air America’s Chief Pilot of Special Projects on the Twin Otter, Captain Jim Pearson, had not been informed. He recalls: “Unknowingly I had been involved with this mission since 7 January 72 when I flew a Twin Otter from Vientiane, Laos to Taipei, Taiwan. We had range tanks installed and only had to uplift fuel from Pakse, Laos then flew nonstop to TPE for security reasons. As was the norm in the Special Project Operation, I had no idea what for or why I was flying the plane to Taipei. Our uniform instructions were, no uniform, only civilian clothes. The First Officer was Capt Clyde Morehouse. On arrival TPE we deplaned and I was taken aside and given a short briefing. Capt Morehouse was sent to the Hotel as he was not in the Special Project portion of the Twin Otter program. I was to continue on to RCPO, a Chinese Military base where Chinese Special Projects were operated from by 555 Squadron. The aircraft was N5662 which at this time was

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260 E-mail dated 5 September 2005, kindly sent to the author by Jim Pearson.
261 See Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.379-86; Conboy / Morrison, The Quiet One.
the only aircraft equipped with the Terrain Avoidance/Following Radar manufactured by Texas Instruments.

On landing at Poppa Oscar I was met by a Chinese contingency and was informed I was to check them out on the aircraft and the Radar system. We flew 8 January 72 through 11 January 72 logging 91 take offs and landings in nearly zero/zero conditions. This really improved my confidence in the radar system as we could actually pick up the runway on instruments and fly down and land zero/zero. Little did I realize that at the conclusion of this assignment I would be privileged with meeting these gentlemen again. Capt Moorehouse and I returned to Vientiane, Laos and commenced normal operations on 12 January 72.

My next contact with these Chinese Gentlemen commenced on 17 January 72 and continued through 3 February 72. At the completion of my daily flight assignment I was instructed to proceed to PS-44 and commence night TFR training. No questions asked, I just proceed to PS-44 and linked up with the same people I trained on the aircraft at Poppa Oscar. This period of training resulted in 123 plus night landings. [...] My next Vinh mission assignment was on 21 October 72. Again with no knowledge as to the purpose of the mission, Capt Jason Broussard and I flew the Twin Otter that day out of Pakse, Laos. Upon arrival in Pakse (Lima 11) we noticed a USAF C-130 off loading two Hughes helicopters. Not being familiar with the Hughes other than noticing some had showed up a few months earlier at Udorn and were seen flying all over Laos we were not particularly aware of any modifications. A couple young men approached us wearing the khaki colored nomex flight suits with breast patches that said Air America on them. They seemed to be very anxious to make the point that they were with Air America also. Naturally we had never seen them before.

Then we found out that two of the black Hughes Choppers and two AAM Choppers were going to fly a night mission and we would be the command ship. Where they were going, we had no idea. We left Pakse and flew to PS-44 to pick up a load of commando raiders and then flew to an airstrip east of Thakhek, Laos (Lima 40). I notice it was surrounded with barbed wire and had sentries posted all around. We then took off and flew an orbit just west of the North Viet Nam border then back to the airstrip east of Thakhek. We then flew to T-55 and back to L-40 and flew another orbit mission landing back at the strip east of Thakhek. Then we flew to L-39 Savannakhet, Laos and then to PS-44 off loaded the raiders and then to L-11. Due to the security and compartmentalization involved we did not have any idea if the mission was a success or failure. We only knew, if a chopper went down we were to go in and drop the commandos and become the Command ship. The aircraft was N774M, which was now equipped with the Terrain Following radar system due to the destruction of N5662 killing its flight crew. The routing began in L11 thence, PS-44, L-39, L-40, Orbit east of Thakhek, near the Ho Chi Minh road, L-40, T-55, L-40, Orbit, L-40 L-39, PS-44, L-11.

When the real mission was flown, Jim Pearson happened to be engaged elsewhere, so that his eye-witness reports ends before the actual mission. From other sources, the following details can be added: The 2 Hughes 500P were loaded into an Air America C-130 and flown to Takhli (T-05) about June 72 and then down to PS-44. At PS-44, the Hughes 500Ps were “kept out of sight about 600 yards northwest of PS-44’s main building, reachable down an

262 In his e-mail dated 5 September 2005, Jim Pearson describes the training as follows: “I was ordered to fly the primary radar aircraft to Taipei, drop the American First Officer and proceed to Hsin-chu, Taiwan for further orders. Up on arrival at Hsin-chu, I learned I was to train two indigenous pilots on the operation of the Otter on night low level missions. The weather cooperated beautifully. The next morning it was zero zero. The runway was beautiful, very long and extremely wide, especially for the Otter. We went out and I just trained the pilots in instrument conditions as I could give us a GCA from the right seat. They were experienced pilots, so the flying part was easy.”

263 On 21 October 72, a mission attempt had to be cancelled because of problems with the infrared camera (Chiles, “Air America’s black helicopter”, p. 3, at: http://www.airspacemag.com/issues/2008/february-march/the_quiet_one.htm).

264 E-mail dated 1 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Jim Pearson.
unmarked, narrow forest trail.” Until early September 72, two Agency pilots who had joined Air America for that purpose, Lloyd George Anthony Lamothe Jr. and Daniel H. Smith, trained Taiwanese crewmen from the RoCAF’s 34th Squadron for night missions in those 2 Hughes 500Ps. But after the trainees had demolished one of the Hughes 500P, they were sent home, and Lamothe and Smith were to fly the mission themselves. At the same time, the project was placed under a new management, headed by James Glerum. When the Taiwanese crewmen had been sent home, Lamothe and Smith practised by using LORAN to navigate from the hangar at PS-44 to a nearby training ground that seemed to be like a duplicate of the actual wiretap site, dropped the commandos near a simulated telephone pole, flew to a selected tree where they practised to lay out the relay, and then flew back to the landing pad, where they landed without landing lights, just using infrared. After several failures, the mission was successfully completed in the night of 6 to 7 December 72. The crew flew to Thakhek East and refueled. Then, accompanied by 2 Laotian commandos, Lamothe and Smith boarded the Hughes 500P and took off at midnight, heading northeast at an altitude of 62 meters, later lowered to 31 meters and climbed the more than 2,000-meter tall Annamite mountain range. Two of Air America’s S-58Ts – one of them flown by Dick Casterlin and Julian “Scratch” Kanach, followed them, but entered large orbits at the Laotian border. They were to serve as rescue aircraft for the commandos and for the Hughes 500P, should the mission fail. Part of the mission was also Air America Twin Otter N6868 with more commandos aboard that served as a command post and relay station. After reaching the wiretap spot, the Hughes 500P dropped the 2 commandos and then flew to a 1,000-foot-high mountain to set the spider relay in the tree that had been selected after months of photo-reconnaissance work. When Lamothe and Smith heard that the transmission worked, they picked up the commandos and returned to Laos. Former CIA man Kent O. Williamson recalled: “I had nothing to do with modification of the airframes but on penetration missions

Request of 15 June 1973 to cancel the registrations of the 2 Hughes 500Ps (N351X and N352X) and the 2 “regular” Hughes 500s (N353X and N354X) (both in: UTD/CIA/B15F5)


266 Dick Casterlin recalls: “Vinh: Everything was need to know and highly compartmentalized. I had no knowledge of two ships until I read about it in Conboy’s work. As Senior Instructor Pilot in the S-58T and a member of the Special Project, along with others, I was SAR cover for the Hughes-500 crew. We conducted several varied night missions afterward. Fun, a challenge, and very scary at times. Not many of us still around today” (E-Mail dated 17 February 2015, kindly sent to the author by Dick Casterlin).

would be called down to do the last minute hostile radar avoidance plots to the mission track, so was down there for the Dec. 72 wiretap mission and watched the aircraft launch for the mission. The sensor was implanted in an insulator which would be substituted by the team for the standard unit on one of the poles supporting the line wires which carried the signals to the main North Viet Nam communications center in that area. The sensor would then relay the information to satellite of an airborne collection platform – I don’t remember which. The team was not composed of Air America employees. The mission was launched and […] the penetration was successful. The chopper landed on a sandbar in a small river close to the line of poles and the team quickly climbed a pole and substituted the insulator and returned to the chopper where the pilot had kept the engine running so there would not be a fatal re-start problem and then returned to base. Naturally we all breathed a sigh a relief!”

Kent O. Williamson recalls: “Now the kicker: A few days after the mission for some reason our operations people asked the USAF to photograph the area but not disturb it and gave them the coordinates. The next day we found out that the Air Force had mounted a mission and completely destroyed the camp and surrounding area. As you might guess there was quite a bit of unhappiness and another illustration of cooperation or should I say, the lack thereof.”

The one flyable Hughes 500P was transported to Edwards AFB, California, where Air America pilots Allen Cates and Robert Mehaffey trained on it in early 73, but before any special mission training was done, the project was abandoned. Apparently, the CIA did not want to use those helicopters any longer. Both aircraft were sold to Southern Sky Inc, Dallas, TX, on 27 June 73. Later wiretap missions in North Vietnam did not use the Hughes 500P, but Air America’s S-58Ts, as did the successful mission flown on 12-13 March 73.

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268 E-mail dated 11 February 2011, kindly sent to the author by Kent O. Williamson.
269 E-mail dated 11 February 2011, kindly sent to the author by Kent O. Williamson.
270 Hughes 500Ps N351X (msn 900257S) and N352X (msn 800248S).
271 Invoice of 27 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5; Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Directors of Air America Inc of 15 November 73, in: UTD/CIA/B4F3; Minutes of the Pacific Corp. of 30 October 73, in: UTD/CIA/B1F6.
272 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p. 385; Conboy / Morrison, The quiet one, pp. 46-49. The 2 Hughes 500Ps had been painted in US Army markings and serials painted over (see the photo on p. 46), possibly to make believe that they had been stolen from the military. Chiles (Chiles, “Air America’s black helicopter”, pp. 4/5, at: http://www.airspacemag.com/issues/2008/february-march/the_quiet_one.htm) gives 5 December 72 as date.
II) From the Cease-Fire Agreements to the phase-out: Air America in Laos 1973-74

In Laos, fighting continued, until a cease-fire agreement similar to that for Vietnam was signed for Laos at Vientiane on 21 February 1973, effective 22 February 1973.273 This Vientiane Agreement had an impact on the US military aid program to the Royal Lao Government and also to Air America. For Article Two prohibited all foreign military activities in Laos, in which, according to Article Three, “espionage by air and ground means” was included, and Article Four even required that “within a period no longer than 60 days, counting from the date of the establishment of the Provisional Government of National Union […] the withdrawal of foreign military personnel, regular and irregular, from Laos, and the dismantling of foreign military and paramilitary organizations must be completed. ‘Special Forces’ – organized, trained, equipped and controlled by foreigners – must be disbanded; all bases, military installations and positions of these forces must be liquidated.”274 But a protocol on the formation of the PGNU, which repeats the prescription of the withdrawal of foreign combat troops, was signed only on 14 September 73, and the new government was promulgated only on 5 April 74.275 All bombing including all Raven activities stopped immediately, while other aspects of the US military aid like reconnaissance missions still continued for some time, until they were phased out.276 A third coalition government was formed in Vientiane with two thirds of the territory assigned to the Pathet Lao. But those who had hoped that this might mean the end of fighting in Laos were deceived. The third coalition government formed in 1973 was only a cover that allowed the Pathet Lao to take possession of the rest of the country. In late 1973, the 919th ATR of the North Vietnamese Air Force operated regular flights from Gia Lam near Hanoi to Sam Neua (L-04), Na Khay and Phong Savan (L-21) in Laos.277 So, as the Pathet Lao did not respect the cease-fire agreement, the US bombardment in Laos was resumed for some time upon request of the Royal Lao Government.278

As to Air America, communist propaganda had longtime considered the Company part of the CIA’s paramilitary operations.279 About a month after the Vientiane Agreement, on 23 March 73, Air America’s Vice President Laos James Cunningham informed the Company’s Managing Director Paul Velte that a decision had been made in the Embassy to “reduce Air America’s profile in Laos” thru the machinery of rather rapidly turning over to CASI almost all that remained of Air America’s flying requirements for 1973. “Apparently the political sphere locally decided that of the two alternatives offered by Air America and CASI, the latter was the least potentially offensive to the Prime Minister and the Pathet Lao.”280 As there was also a sharp reduction in USAID requirements after the cease-fire, a growing number of Air America aircraft had to be put to storage at Udorn or was transferred to Saigon. In November 73, only 2 out of 5 C-130Es, 4 Caribous, the 2 Grant C-46s, 3 Twin Otters, 4 Volpars, 3 out of

273 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.490.
275 Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.501 and 504.
276 Castle, At war, pp.118/9.
277 Toperczer, Air war over North Vietnam, p.54
278 On 23 February 73, B-52s attacked encroaching North Vietnamese units in southern Laos, and in April 73 they struck communist forces attempting to overrun a Vang Pao position on the Plain of Jars (Castle, At war, p.118/9; Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.491 and 499).
279 Castle, At war, p. 119.
6 Porters, 3 out of the original 8 Chinooks, 3 out of 5 S-58Ts, 5 Bell 204B/205, and 7 out of 18 UH-34Ds were operated daily on the –0002 contract, 281 with further reductions to follow.

Although, in January 73, 10 C-123Ks, which had been operated by Air America, had been given to the Royal Laotian Air Force 282 and had received the Royal Laotian Erawan insignia, they continued to be operated by Air America for some time. Only 12 days before the official cease-fire agreement, C-123K “374” was shot down by ground fire near Thakhek (L-40), Laos, 150 miles southeast of Vientiane, on 9 February 73. The pilot (Howard H. Boyles Jr.) and his co-pilot (Jack W. Cavill) were never found; one of the kickers (Prasit Chaichana) was killed when he jumped without a parachute, the other kicker (Sourinh) parachuted from the aircraft and survived. But the cease-fire agreement of 21 February 73 did not make a change. Upon request by Souvanna Phouma, in MR 4, enemy gunfire in the outskirts of Vientiane once more silenced B-52s and a dozen fighter-bombers during the 24 hours after the cease-fire. 283 Only 2 weeks after it had been signed, C-123K “524” disappeared en route from Luang Prabang (L-54) to Ban Houei Sai (L-25), Laos, on 7 March 73. The whole crew – James H. Ackley, Clarence N. Driver, Chudchai Chewcherngsuk, and Keneko Narissak – disappeared, and as the wreckage was never found either, it can only be presumed that the aircraft was shot down over the Chinese highway. 284 Although a replacement C-123K (“577”) joined Air America’s fleet in March 73, the number of C-123Ks operated, maintained or supported by Air America in Laos, was reduced to 7 on 1 July 73, then to 4 on 1 August 73, and the last three C-123Ks, which had been used at Vientiane for training Royal Lao Air Force pilots as a part of Air America contract F04606-71-C-0002, i.e. “617”, “671”, and “576”, were definitely handed over to the Laotians on 30 November 1973. 285

However before those last C-123Ks were handed over to the RLAF, a decreasing number of C-123Ks had been used in a training program for RLAF pilots between 16 April and 30 September 73. 286 This program is well described by G. L. Christian: “One of Air America’s current tasks in Laos is to train four groups of eight Royal Lao Air Force pilots, who have been C-47 pilots, on the much heavier, four-engine (two Pratt & Whitney R-2800 reciprocating engines and two General Electric J-85 auxiliary jet engines) C-123K aircraft. The program is headed by Air America’s ACP-HA (Assistant Chief Pilot-Heavy Aircraft) Captain W. J. Cooper; Administrative Manager of the Lao Pilot Training Program Captain E. G. Adams. Other Air America pilots involved in this training program are: Captains E. H. Mooreland, A. J. Rischman, E. P. Thurston and R. G. Vikre. According to Captain Cooper, the real objective of the RLAF Pilot Training Program is to make all-around pilots out of the 32 trainees. To this end, they will each receive both transition training and instrument training, including instruction in air drops. Duration of each class is 55 hours of flight time plus ground school. Shown on these pages are photos of Captain Adams checking out RLAF Lieutenant Colonel Chanpheng, head of the first group of trainee pilots and the first RLAF pilot to check out on the C-123K; he is the pilot who presumably will become the Squadron

281 Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-73-015 of 1 Nov.73, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
283 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.401; Ahern, Undercover armies, p.491.
284 Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B62F2; Accident note to the USAF, dated 8 March 73, in: UTD/CIA/B32F1; Memorandum dated 22 March 73, in: UTD/CIA/B32F1; Board of review report dated 23 March 73, in: UTD/CIA/B34F5; XOXOs of 7 to 14 March 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12.
285 Memo nos. SPLNG-VTE-73-107 of 1 July 73 and SPLNG-VTE-73-118 of 1 August 73, both in: UTD/CIA/B31F10; Air America’s C-123Ks “617”, “671”, and “576” are still listed in Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-73-015 of 1 November 73 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C) as used for “RLAF Training” at Vientiane under Contract no. F04606-71-C-0002, but are missing in the subsequent Flight Operations Circular, i.e. in no. DOC-C-73-016 of 1 December 73 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).
Commander of those RLAF pilots who check out on the training program.\textsuperscript{287} In March 73, H-34 helicopter training for the RLAF was shifted from Udorn to Savannakhet.\textsuperscript{288} Another reduction of Air America’s fleet took place, when, on 1 December 1973, the two “Grant” C-46s owned by the Royal Laotian Government, that is XW-PBV and XW-PBW, were handed over to Royal Air Lao.\textsuperscript{289}

**Peppergrinder 1973-74:**

In anticipation of the imminent cease-fire agreement, the Royal Lao Government had ordered that the 18,000 Lao irregulars funded and directed by the CIA were to be integrated into the Royal Lao Army. Changing their name to *Lao Irregular Forces*, but maintaining their unit integrity, they were no longer considered to be “paramilitary forces”, and Vang Pao remained the commander of *Military Region 2*.\textsuperscript{290} Already in mid-February 73, DEPCHIEF had proposed the creation of a uniformed Defense Attaché Office at Vientiane to coordinate the responsibilities previously shared by the USAID *Requirements Office*, Project 404, and DEPCHIEF. In April 73, Brigadier General Trefry took operational control of the *Requirements Office* and merged his duties with the responsibilities of Project 404 and DEPCHIEF. On 5 September 73, with the approval of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, he

\textsuperscript{287} Christian, “AAM is training RLAF pilots in C-123K flight training program”, in: *Air America Log*, vol. VII, no. 7, 1973, pp. 4/5.
\textsuperscript{288} Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.403.
\textsuperscript{289} Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-73-016 of 1 December 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.
\textsuperscript{290} Castle, *At war*, p.121; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.403/4.
moved from Udorn to Vientiane to become the first US Defense Attaché to Laos, prepared to administer an official Military Assistance Program in Laos. All this explains why, with the conclusion of the cease-fire agreement, signed at Vientiane on 21 February 1973, things did not really change: Although most of Air America’s C-123Ks had been turned over to the Royal Lao Air Force in early 1973, had been painted in RLAF colors, and were now used at Vientiane and Udorn to train the Laotian pilots, the Peppergrinder-missions, which had carried arms and ammunition to the Royal Lao Air Force and to the Royal Lao Army and had been operated under the USAF contract F04606-C-71-C-0002 since July 72, did not disappear after the cease-fire agreement, but for some time, these missions were continued out of Udorn on a smaller scale, using only one of the C-123Ks still operated by Air America or even one of their C-130s per day. This may explain, why, shortly after the cease-fire agreement, Air America lost C-123K “524”, as has been shown above.

AB-1 missions

But Air America’s Peppergrinder-missions were not the only military support operations that continued after the cease-fire agreements. AB-1 missions in support of the CIA’s covert operations in Laos including General Vang Pao’s irregulars, were also continued. It is known, for example, that on 18 April 73, Air America’s DHC-6 N774M picked up its cargo at Udorn’s Q-warehouse and then flew a real “Kangaroo” route from Udorn (T-08) to Vientiane (L-08), and on to Luang Prabang (L-54), Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A), and to Ban Houei Sai (L-25), before it returned the same way back to Udorn (T-08) via Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A), Luang Prabang (L-54), and Vientiane (L-08). These supply missions continued using Air America Twin Otters. Former Twin Otter captain Jim Pearson recalls: “In April 1974, we lost another Twin Otter. It came in as a replacement for N5662, and its tail number was N389EX. Captain Watson was making a landing on a mountain top strip south east of Luang Prabang and on the west side of the PDJ in high winds. The aircraft overshot the runway and flipped over on its back and slid down the side of the mountain for some distance, coming to a stop in two pieces. The crew survived and the pilots received minor injuries. However the kicker Jack Brennan received a serious back injury and spent much of his last days with AAM undergoing back surgery. This proved my initial selection of crews, when I told the Chief Pilot that the guys were excellent pilots, but not of the aggressive nature I wanted in the STOL program. Much to his not wanting them to fly STOL operations, the operation developed around the necessity. N389EX never flew after that. It was evacuated by an AAM CH-47 Chinook helicopter and the empennage broke off in flight, causing the helicopter to land at Vang Vieng, Laos and set it down. That evening, vandals entered the plane and destroyed the instrument panel and radios. It was replaced by N6868, which made it up to the Air America shut down in Udorn in 1974. During the first half of 1974, it was heartbreaking to watch old friends being laid off and the equipment disposed of, as the contracts began expiring. Finally, we got the word. The customers’ operations were being terminated due to new intelligence gathering assets on the scene. Satellites and the SR-71 were making us obsolete.”

Pages 57
Aerial photography project of former contract USAID-439-713

Although being part of USAF contract F04606-C-71-C-0002 since 1 July 72, Air America’s Aerial photography project lasted until the spring of 1974, now also using Volpar N3728G. After February 73, one of its goals was the detection of cease-fire violations by the North Vietnamese Army. This explains why these photo birds were attacked by ground fire. On 31 July 1973, Captain Frank G. “Pat” Thorsen, who had joined the program in 1972, was killed from enemy ground fire 13 kms north of Pa Doung (LS-05) while flying a photo mission over the Plain of Jars in Volpar N9542Z; First Officer D. D. Thomas landed the aircraft which was later repaired. The final photo flight was flown in March 1974 by Jim Rhyne and Berl King, the two men who made the first Air America photo flight some 7 ½ years before. But it was not until 30 June 1974 that Volpars N9542Z and N3728G were ferried from Udorn (T-08) to Saigon (V-01).

Other special operations

While most irregular and Unity forces remained on defensive footing after the cease-fire, special operations using Commando Raiders continued. For example, between January and March 73, there were several attempts to place a tap on the telephone line along the north side of Route 65 leading into the Pathet Lao headquarters at Ban Nakay Neua located east of Sam Neua in northern MR 2. Several times, Air America S-58Ts had to bring Commando Raider teams, until the tap was well installed on 12 March 73, but a relay station that was to be installed on top of Phou Nia east of Ban Nakay Neua some days later never worked, as the rotor wash of the S-58T helicopters always blew the relay off the tree. It was only during the night of 17 December 73 that an Air America S-58T successfully deployed the relay.

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296 See, for example, Udorn daily flight schedule for 7 January 73 (in: UTD/Severson/B1F7), where Volpar N3728G is marked “T-08/as directed/T-08”.
297 Ahern, Undercover armies, p.492.
298 Memoir of Frank Bonansinga in: UTD/Bonansinga/Sm.Coll.1; Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3; XOXO of 31 July 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12.
299 Udorn daily flight schedule for 30 June 74, in: UTD/Abadie/B1F6; Memoir of Frank Bonansinga in: UTD/Bonansinga/Sm.Coll.1.
300 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.401/2.
301 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.415/6 note 5.
MR 2, North Vietnamese pressure on Bouam Long (LS-32) and especially Ta Viang (LS-13) in April even caused Souvanna Phouma to ask for B-52 reprisal strikes, which took place on 16 April 73 near Ta Viang. In the south, an Air America Chinook landed two loads of raiders south of the Mu Gia Pass in MR 3 on 23 March 73, discovering that, in spite of Hanoi’s promises, North Vietnamese army traffic continued flowing along the Ho Chi Minh Trail toward South Vietnam. Indeed, in the south, the most serious cease-fire violation remained the ongoing North Vietnamese Army use of the Trail. “To signal its disapproval, the U. S. Embassy in early May sanctioned another Commando Raider strike. Sixty commandos were to be used on the operation, inserted at night into the hills just north of Tchepone. As in the March raid, an Air America Chinook would be used for the infiltration. Though exceedingly noisy, the Chinook allowed all the troops to be carried in a single ship on a single lift. In a novel experiment, the commandos were to be lowered through the dense foliage via the chopper’s supply cable: as the cable spooled out the belly hatch, the commandos would step forward, attach plier-like Chicago Grip harnesses to the cable, and be lowered to the ground on a single feed. After four nights of practice with the Chicago Grip at Udorn, the Chinook flew to Nong Saphong and loaded the raiders on the night of 7 May. Using a LORAN C for guidance, the crew approached Tchepone and infiltrated the commandos. Despite the noise generated by the twin-rotor helicopter, radio intercepts later indicated that PAVN [= the North Vietnamese Army] did not detect the insertion. The strike force subsequently attacked a Vietnamese command center near Tchepone and successfully exfiltrated to RLG [= Royal Lao Government] lines near Moung Phalane.”

Bringing back the Thai SGUs

In February 73, the CIA and Thai Headquarters 333 had 27 infantry and 3 artillery battalions in Laos, making a total of 17,000 Thai soldiers. In accordance with Article IV of the Vientiane Agreement, they also had to leave the country, although initially there had been the idea to let them in Laos for the case that the North Vietnamese would not withdraw from Laos. But after the Watergate revelations the Nixon administration did not want to continue a program that would probably exceed the “Symington Ceiling”, that is the $350 million limit on all US aid to Laos, imposed by the US Senate in 1971 upon request of Senator Stuart Symington, and that could possibly draw the United States back into war in Indochina. So on 1 July 73, the Thai SGU program was reduced to 17 battalions, to be cut to 10 battalions by 1 January 74 and to be completed by 30 June 74. Already in March 73, Air America’s Vice President Laos James Cunningham told the Company’s Managing Director Paul Velte that two C-130Es were to be used even in May and June 73, especially to withdraw the Thai irregular troops and all their equipment still operating in Laos at that time. Former Air America pilot Connie Seigrist recalls that the C-130E program flying out of Udorn “was basically a daylight operation flown in support of the Thai Army Ground Forces plus some flying support for the Laotian Armed Forces and USAID. […] When needed I flew as much as 13 hours + in a day plus making 16 or more landings and take-offs a day when transporting troops between their stations. I have had as high as 280 Laotian troops aboard on a single flight (stand up room only) when transporting them around to different areas.” Some of the C-130 flights mentioned in the Daily Flight Schedules as operating out of Udorn for ASB-044

302 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.402.
303 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.402.
304 Castle, At war, pp.104/5.
305 Castle, At war, p.121; Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.405.
Lao troops transported in an Air America C-130E in the early seventies
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

do mention that centerline seats had been installed, so they probably moved Thai troops –
within Laos and from Thailand to Laos in 1972,\footnote{The Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 1972 preserved in UTD/Severson/B1F7 note the following C-130E flights for ASB-044 with centerline seats installed, so probably moving Thai troops: 24 May: “786” shuttled between Seno (L-46) and Pakse (L-11) with centerline seats installed; 18 Aug.: “786” shuttled between Pakse (L-11) and Keng Ka Boa (LS-235) with centerline seats installed; 19 Aug.: “218” from Udorn to Nam Phong (T-712) and Phitsanulok (T-01), then as directed with centerline seats installed; 3 Sept.: “786” Udorn-Nam Xieng Lom (LS-69)-Udorn with centerline seats installed; 12 Sept.: “218” flew Udorn-Seno-Ban Xieng Lom-Udorn-Seno-Ban Xieng Lom-Udorn with centerline seats installed; 5 Oct.: “787” and “405” shuttled Phitsanulok (T-01)-Pakse (L-11), both with centerline seats installed; 21 Oct.: “218” shuttled Udorn-Nam Phong-Pakse and Udorn-Luang Prabang, and “786” shuttled Udorn-Nam Phong-Pakse, Udorn-Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A), and Udorn-Luang Prabang, both with centerline seats installed; 11 Nov.: “786” shuttled Udorn-Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A) with centerline seats installed.}
and from Laos to locations in Thailand in

(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)
1973: On 18 June 73, for example, C-130Es “404” and “405” as well as C-123Ks “617” and “671” flew for ASB-044 and apparently carried back the Thai irregular troops mentioned above, as these aircraft shuttled between unknown locations in Laos and T-712, that is Nam Phong (the C-130s) and T-338, that is Nong Saeng (the C-123s). 309 While on 23 August 73, C-130E “786” shuttled and dropped aviation fuel for ASB-035 all day long. 310 4 June 74 was also the deadline for the withdrawal of all Unity troops, and on 22 May 74, “the final three Thai battalions were recalled from Skyline and Zebra Ridge for a small parade at Long Tieng, then loaded aboard C-123s and flown home. At a cost of 1,944 dead over three and a half years, Unity had come to a conclusion.” 311

The end

In April 1974, another coalition government was set up in Vientiane with Prince Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister and his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, as head of the Joint National Political Council. On 5 April 74, the Provisional Government of National Union was finally promulgated by royal decree, and so all foreign military personnel not assigned diplomatic status had to leave Laos within 60 days, and on the deadline of 5 June, the US military presence in Laos consisted of 30 military personnel and 15 civilians, all duly registered with the new government. For the next months, the DAO did what it could to resupply the Royal Lao Army, without supporting Pathet Lao forces. 312 But there were massive cuts of US assistance to Laos and sharp troop reductions of the Royal Lao Armed Forces, which also caused some internal problems. 313 Air America’s Udorn Flight Operations Schedule for 28 April 1974 has survived, 314 and it clearly shows that much of Air America’s Udorn-based operations was Thailand-oriented at that time: Volpar N9542Z came in from Bangkok-Don Muang (T-09), Twin Otter N6868 flew to Pitt’s Camp (T-603), where it was to remain stand-by for the whole day, and PC-6 Porter N3612R returned to its operational base at Chiang Mai (T-11). Three aircraft were Laos-bound that day: Bell 205 XW-PFH went to Long Tieng (LS-20A) for customer USAID-439-713, that is the CIA; Twin Otter N389EX, which ran off the end of the runway at Sala Phou Koum (LS-260), Laos, that day and was substantially damaged, 315 had mostly worked out of Long Tieng before; but the most interesting aircraft on that Schedule is C-130E “404”: Its first mission was to deliver food to Long Tieng, but the next 2 flights out of Udorn (T-08) were for the DAO – one to Pakse (L-11) and one to Savannakhet (L-39). Apparently these were resupply flights for the Royal Lao Army and Royal Lao Air Force. For on 1 April 74, all undergraduate pilot training for the RLAF shifted from Udorn to Savannakhet. 316 But things didn’t last very long: The pro-Communist tendency of the new government became obvious, when the North Vietnamese were allowed to remain along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, while all other foreign troops were given 2 months to leave the country. In 1974, the Laotian base at Na Khay was used by the North Vietnamese AF (919th ATR) as a base for international missions; the Hanoi-Na Khay-Peking route was also served in conjunction with the Laotian Civil Aviation Department. 317 So, on 20 May 74, all Air America operations at Vientiane were phased out, and on 3 June 74, the last Air America aircraft – C-7A “389”,

309 Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 73, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7. Officially, however, the last Thai SGUs had left Laos already on 22 May 74 (Castle, At war, p.124).
311 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.411.
312 Castle, At war, p.124.
313 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.409-11.
314 In: UTD/Walker/B31F7.
315 For details see the DHC-6 file of The Aircraft of Air America.
316 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.409.
317 Toperczer, Air war over North Vietnam, p.55.
piloted by Captain F. F. Walker and Captain M. W. Shaver—crossed the border from Laos into Thailand at TE5878 at 1113Z en route from Vientiane to Udorn.\(^\text{318}\) Udorn, with its excellent maintenance facilities, could have been a good place for postwar US support to the aircraft of the Laotian Air Force. But the Thai government was opposed to the continued presence in Thailand of Air America, so that the Company sold its Udorn facility and turned

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<td>KIATTIYO/TAHONGHAI</td>
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<td>TO9/AS DIRECTED</td>
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<td>09:00</td>
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<td>(UNTIL 17:00)</td>
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<td>N4527</td>
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<td>15:00</td>
<td>TO9/TO8</td>
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| N3986 | WATSON/WILLIAMS | 08:00 | TO8/LO9/1820A | FULL | NTOM TO WH 07:00 |}

Udorn Daily Flight Schedule of 28 April 74 (in: UTD/Walker/B31F7)

the whole complex over to the Thai government-affiliated Thai-Am Corporation on 30 June 74.\(^\text{319}\) That day, contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 expired and all Air America operations were

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\(^{319}\) Castle, *At war*, p.119.
phased out at Udorn. The last flight schedule “was dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny”, as was noted on the schedule by W. R. Leonard (C/ASB/USAID), C. J. Abadie Jr. (VP-NTD), E.W. Knight (DO-NTD), and W.F. Palmer (MGS-NTD). And the last Air America flight out of Udorn was Beech Volpar N3728G, which, piloted by Jim Rhyne, left Udorn at 1000L for the ferry flight to Saigon. After that date, all Air America flights out of Udorn had destinations in Thailand. The Udorn Flight Schedule for 14 June 74 has survived. It shows only 4 flights – Volpar N9671C and Twin Otter N6868 both flying to Bangkok-Don Muang (T-09) on VIP flights for ASB-044, and Volpar N9542Z as well as PC-6 Porter N3612R both flying to Chiang Mai (T-11) for work out of that air strip in Northern Thailand.

Telex of 3 June 74 in: UTD/CIA/B31F10

After the end of Air America operations in Laos, supply deliveries for Laos had to be picked up in Thailand by RLAF transports or ferried across the Mekong in boats. Inside Laos, CASI

320 Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Company Limited of 9 July 1974, in: UTD/CIA/B10F2.
322 In: UTD/Walker/B31F7.
aircraft and Birdair helicopters could still distribute USAID supplies, until on 24 May 75, CASI was told to never come back to Laos.323

After the creation of a Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) in Laos on 4 April 74, the US Embassy at Vientiane decided to reduce the number of T-28s to 40, which were distributed among Long Tieng, Pakse and Savannakhet, as Vientiane and Luang Prabang were declared neutral towns that had to remain off limits to RLAF strike aircraft. The number of AC-47s was reduced to 6. Then all AC-47 miniguns were removed, so that all AC-47s became C-47 transports. But while flight time for T-28 pilots was cut to just two hours a month, RLAF C-47s and helicopters were mainly used to transport paying passengers.324

During the second half of 1974, there were two prisoner exchanges between the Lao and the Thai Governments, the CIA’s 4802nd JLD at Udorn closed its doors, after all case officers who had worked inside Laos had been recalled.325 In January 75, Thakhek became the first major population center to fall under Pathet Lao control. Under orders from PGNU Defense Minister Sisouk, Vang Pao ordered 9 of the T-28s at Long Tieng to strafe and bomb a Pathet Lao column into retreat on 14 April 75, but after the fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon, Communist pressure became stronger in Laos. In early May 75, the old Royal Lao Armed Forces leadership started throwing in the towel. When on 10 May 75, Souvanna Phouma announced that General Vang Pao would be replaced as MR 2 commander by the Prime Minister’s nephew, “Vang Pao ripped off his general’s stars in disgust and threw them on Souvanna Phouma’s desk”326 and went into exile.327 On 14 May 75, when the Hmong airlift from Long Tieng ended, more than 2,400 Hmong had arrived at Nam Phong in Thailand, and by late July 75, the Hmong population at Nam Phong had grown to almost 13,000, with 10,000 more in Nan Province, adjacent to Sayaboury, plus another 7,000 at Nong Khai opposite Vientiane. Some 35,000 Hmong had arrived in the United States by mid-1980; in 1981, Vang Pao became a US citizen; and in 1989, estimates put the Hmong population in the United States at 100,000.328

Following Vang Pao’s example, the remaining generals of the Lao Armed Forces were either removed from their posts or escaped across the Mekong. On 23 August 75, “an artillery unit composed of 50 Pathet Lao female combatants entered Vientiane, symbolically declaring the town liberated.”329 Already on 23 May 75, the US Embassy began flying most of its 870 employees to Thailand, and the airlift was completed by month’s end without incident.330 But contrary to what happened in Phnom Penh and Saigon, the US Embassy at Vientiane remained open: US Ambassador Charles S. Whitehouse remained in office until 12 April 75, when he was replaced by Chargé d’Affaires Christian A. Chapman who remained until 2 June 75, date of student riots at the USAID compound, when “some 140 American families living in the suburban-style residential complex for USAID workers outside Vientiane were being held virtual prisoners. Pathet Lao and rightist troops, brandishing potent-looking grenades, were searching cars at the compound gate and preventing nearly all Americans from leaving”.331 After the Pathet Lao took over the government in 1975, the US Information Service, USAID and Defense Attaché Office closed. In August 75, Chargé d’Affaires ad interim Thomas J. Corcoran took office at Vientiane. So, the US Embassy at Vientiane was run by a series of Chargés d’Affaires, until a new US Ambassador took office in 1994.

323 E-mail dated 10 February 2014 kindly sent to the author by Les Strouse.
324 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.412 and 414.
325 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.411/2.
326 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, pp.413-15; Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.509-10.
327 See the chapter about CASI in my file Air America - cooperation with other airlines.
328 Ahern, Undercover armies, pp.515, 517, and 521.
329 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.415.
330 Conboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.415.
December 75, King Savang Vatthana was forced to abdicate his throne and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic was established. He was sent to a re-education camp near Hua Phan, Laos, along with his wife and children, where he died from starvation on 13 May 1978. He was buried in a commoner’s grave, and his death was not made public until 10 years later. Prince Souvanna Phouma was allowed to remain in Vientiane. The new Communist government led by Kaysone Phomvihane as Prime Minister imposed centralized economic decision-making and incarcerated many members of the previous government and military in re-education camps, which also included the Hmong. Prince Souphanouvong, the “Red Prince”, was appointed President of the newly established People’s Democratic Republic of Laos.332

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