

ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE / *RAVENS*: CESSNA U-17s

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RLAF U-17B “69-7306” taken by Tom Lum, probably at Udon in the early seventies (photo no.VA024822, No Date, Allen Cates Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, with kind permission from Steve Maxner)

The types of missions flown by the U-17s:

Although some Air America pilots like Paul M. Severson actually flew Cessna U-17s in Laos, no Air America inventory mentions this type of aircraft. The U-17 was the military version of the Cessna 185, and the aircraft mentioned here did not belong to Air America, but to the Military Assistance Program for Laos. So they were USAF aircraft painted in the colors of the Royal Laotian Air Force. The first pair of U-17s was transferred to the RLAF in October 64. In the early days, they were used to train pilots at Savannakhet (Conboy, *War in Laos*, pp. 37 and 54), but already in 1966/67, U-17s were also used on FAC missions, Strike missions, Armed Recce missions, and Psy Ops missions, that is to drop surrender leaflets (Moody, *The great adventures*, Episode 1, pp. 5/6). Some U-17s were modified by the USAF to carry smoke rockets and were used by the *Ravens* at places like Na Khang (LS-36) where one of them crashed (Robbins, *Ravens*, p. 56). Beginning in 1968, however, all *Raven* U-17s were periodically maintained by Air America’s Udon facility (Robbins, *Ravens*, pp. 77/8), so that they appear on Air America’s “List of assigned / maintained aircraft at Udon” (as in the list of 1 April 72, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2). But in spite of their RLAF colors, all U-17s maintained by Air America personnel at Udon (and elsewhere) belonged to the USAF and were operated under the control of AIRA, i.e. the US Air Attaché in Laos, which means the US Ambassador at Vientiane (Fax dated 7 August 2000, sent by B.G. H. Aderholt to the author).

Statistics:

From National Archives sources, the following details of MAP Grant Aid deliveries to Laos were submitted to the author by Sid Nanson (e-mail dated 30 May 2013, kindly sent by Sid Nanson to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it to me); it should be noted, however, that these are deliveries that were programmed – they may not necessarily have taken place that way:

RLAF U-17s

3 U-17s received 2nd quarter FY 64 (1 Oct 1963-31 Dec 1963)
2 U-17s received 3rd quarter FY 65 (1 Jan 1965-31 Mar 1965)
2 U-17 received 1st quarter FY 66 (1 July 1965-30 Sep 1965)
1 U-17A received 1st quarter FY 67 (1 July 1966-30 Sep 1966)
1 U-17A/B received in FY 68 (1 July 67-30 June 68)
1 U-17A/B received in FY 69 (1 July 68-30 June 69)
3 U-17A/B received in FY 70 (1 July 69-30 June 70)

Also coming from National Archives sources, the following details of attrition for the RLAF were submitted to the author by Sid Nanson (e-mail dated 30 May 2013, kindly sent by Sid Nanson to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it to me):

RLAF U-17

U-17A/B, 1 (Operational) attrition in FY 68 (1 July 67-30 June 68)
U-17A/B, 1 (Operational) attrition in FY 69 (1 July 68-30 June 69)
U-17A/B, 2 Combat attrition in FY 70 (1 July 69-30 June 70)
U-17A/B, 1 Combat attrition in FY 71 (1 July 70-30 June 71)

The individual aircraft histories:

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
Cessna U-17A-CE	64-17796	185-0775	2 Oct. 64	USAF 64-17796, del. under MAP to Laos

Service history: official delivery ex Cessna on 31 July 64 to MAP Laos (e-mail dated 14 February 2009, kindly sent to the author by John Davis); according to the USAF Assignment Records transferred to the US Military Assistance Program for the Royal Laotian Air Force on 2 October 64; assembled in Bangkok (T-09); test flown by Joe Hazen, Air America’s Chief pilot of the STOL program, on 26 October 64 and ferried to Udorn (T-08) the same day (e-mail dated 9 September 2003 sent by Joe Hazen to Erik Carlson who kindly forwarded it to the author).

Fate: reportedly lost in Laos in December 64 – AIRA-controlled aircraft (“Aircraft All Loss by Tail number”, pages 135-287, no date, Folder 15, Box 10, Garnett Bell Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, details kindly sent to the author by Sid Nanson on 30 May 2011).



RLAF U-17A “64-17797”, taken at Vientiane in October 65 by John Anthony (photo no.VA031041, No Date, John Anthony Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, with kind permission from Steve Maxner)

Cessna U-17A-CE	64-17797	185-0776	2 Oct. 64	USAF 64-17797, del. under MAP to Laos
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Service history: official delivery ex Cessna on 15 July 64 to MAP Laos (e-mail dated 14 February 2009, kindly sent to the author by John Davis); according to the USAF Assignment Records transferred to the US Military Assistance Program for the Royal Laotian Air Force on 2 October 64; assembled in Bangkok (T-09); test flown by Joe Hazen, Air America’s Chief pilot of the STOL program, on 23 October 64 and ferried to Udorn (T-08) the same day; Joe Hazen checked out Air America captain Paul M. Severson on 21 January 65 or 25 February 65; there after, the aircraft sat on the ground at Udorn for quite a while (e-mail dated 9 September 2003 sent by Joe Hazen

to Erik Carlson who kindly forwarded it to the author); bore the Erawan (see the accident photos nos. VA031039 and VA031041 in the John Anthony collection at TTU); flown by Richard B. Crafts out of Udorn on 26 February 65 and on 6 and 14 September 65 (Log book of Richard B. Crafts, at: UTD/Leary/B44F6); flown by Paul M. Severson between 1 and 5 October 65 out of Vientiane (Flight crew member monthly movement report of Paul M. Severson, in: UTD/Severson/B3F26).

Fate: destroyed at Vientiane, Laos, on 11 October 65, when the aircraft took off with controls locked, as the check off list was not used (List “Company operated aircraft lost or destroyed”, in: UTD/CIA/B1F10, and in: UTD/CIA/B51F12; List “Aircraft accidents 1965”, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2; List “Aircraft destroyed or lost”, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2; photos of this accident can be found in the John Anthony collection at TTU (nos. VA031039 and VA031041).



RLAF U-17A 64-14867 taken at Thakhek (L-40A) on 17 June 1966 by Dr. Jonathan Pote
(with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

Cessna U-17A 64-14867 185-0647 64? USAF 64-14867

Service history: probably ex Cessna on 30 September 63; official delivery on 23 October 63 to MAP Thailand. Later transferred to Laos (e-mail dated 14 February 2009, kindly sent to the author by John Davis); photo taken at Thakhek (L-40A) on 17 June 1966 (e-mail dated 15 July 2008, kindly sent to the author by Jonathan Pote)

Fate: reportedly lost in Laos on 24 February 70 – an AIRA-controlled aircraft (“Aircraft All Loss by Tail number”, pages 135-287, no date, Folder 15, Box 10, Garnett Bell Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, details kindly sent to the author by Sid Nanson on 30 May 2011).

Cessna U-17A 64-14868 185-0648 64? USAF 64-14868

Service history: ?

Fate: reportedly lost in Laos on 26 January 65 – an AIRA-controlled aircraft (“Aircraft All Loss by Tail number”, pages 135-287, no date, Folder 15, Box 10,

Garnett Bell Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, details kindly sent to the author by Sid Nanson on 30 May 2011). This U-17 was probably the one destroyed at Vientiane on 25 January 65, when a fully armed RLAF T-28 exploded on the ramp of Vientiane airport; as a consequence of that incident several more bombs cooked off, and flying metal also caused damage to a number of other aircraft parked nearby (Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972*, p.38; Telegram dated 26 January 65 sent by the US Embassy in Thailand to the US Department of State, in: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d160>; Report "Blow up", that is document no. GML-65-036H sent by Dave Hickler to Air America's President on 28 January 1965; copy in the possession of Joe Hazen who kindly faxed it to the author on 9 May 2005).

Cessna U-17A 64-14869?? 185-0649?? 64? USAF 64-14869??

Service history: reportedly flown as 64-14894, but this was not a U-17

Fate: reportedly U-17 64-14894 was lost in Laos in October 64 – an AIRA-controlled aircraft; the correct identity is believed to have been 64-14869, a MAP U-17A ("Aircraft All Loss by Tail number", pages 135-287, no date, Folder 15, Box 10, Garnett Bell Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, details kindly sent to the author by Sid Nanson on 30 May 2011).

Cessna U-17A-CE 65-10853 185-0924 28 May 65 USAF 65-10853, del.
under MAP to Laos

Service history: probably ex Cessna on 28 May 65; official delivery on 29 June 65 to MAP Thailand. Later transferred to Laos (e-mail dated 14 February 2009, kindly sent to the author by John Davis); used by the US Military Assistance Program for the Royal Lao Air Force; flown by Air America captain Paul M. Severson on 15 November 65 from Vientiane to Udorn, on 2 January 66 out of Sam Thong, on 4 and 5 January 66 out of Vientiane, and between 3 and 7 March 1966 out of Vientiane (Flight crew member monthly movement report of Paul M. Severson, in: UTD/Severson/B3F26); FAC aircraft; flown by Raven Ed Gunter out of Luang Prabang (L-54) between July 69 and February 70 (e-mail dated 12 January 2004 sent by Ed Gunter to Larry Sanborn, who kindly forwarded it to the author); flown by Raven Ed Gunter flown by Raven Larry Sanborn out of Long Tieng (LS-20A) between 7 March 71 and 23 April 71 (e-mail dated 1 Sept. 2003, sent by Larry Sanborn to Erik Carlson who kindly forwarded it to the author).

Fate: was destroyed in a mid-air collision with Air America PC-6 N180K one kilometer north of Mounng Nham (LS-63), Laos, at 1544 hours local time on 29 April 71; both occupants of the U-17 (Raven pilot Dennis E. Morgan and his backseater) as well as the pilot of the Air America PC-6 (Captain Harry E. Mulholland) and 3 indigenous passengers were killed; the U-17 was destroyed and was no longer current on 1 April 72 (Accident synopsis, in: UTD/Anthony/F4; List of Assigned, maintained aircraft of 1 April 72 in UTD/CIA/B49F2; Thomas E. Lee, *Laos Incident list*, at: <http://www.angelfire.com/home/laoslist/cr170.html>).

Cessna U-17A-CE 65-10854 185-0926 29 June 65 USAF 65-10853, del.
under MAP to Laos

Service history: official delivery on 29 June 65 to MAP Thailand; used by the US Military Assistance Program for the Royal Lao Air Force; flown by Air America captain Paul M. Severson on 13 and 17 October 65 out of Vientiane (Flight crew member monthly movement report of Paul M. Severson, in: UTD/Severson/B3F26);



RLAF U-17B “69-7306” taken by Tom Lum, probably at Udorn in the early seventies (photo no.VA024821, No Date, Allen Cates Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, with kind permission from Steve Maxner)

Cessna U-17B	“69-7306”	185-1547	12 Aug. 69	USAF	69-7306,	del.
					under MAP	

Service history: according to the USAF Assignment Records transferred from Cessna to TL MAP on 12 August 69 (69224); delivered ex Cessna on 15 August 69 to MAP Laos (e-mail dated 14 February 2009, kindly sent to the author by John Davis); used as a Raven aircraft, owned by the USAF, but operated under the control of the US Ambassador at Vientiane (Fax dated 7 August 2000, sent by B.G. H. Aderholt to the author); flown by Raven Ed Gunter out of Luang Prabang (L-54) in January 70 (e-mail dated 12 January 2004 sent by Ed Gunter to Larry Sanborn, who kindly forwarded it to the author); flown by Raven Larry Sanborn out of Luang Prabang (L-54) between 19 June 70 and 22 January 71 and out of Long Tieng (LS-20A) between 24 March 71 and 8 June 71 (e-mail dated 1 Sept. 2003, sent by Larry Sanborn to Erik Carlson who kindly forwarded it to the author); maintained by Air America, Udorn, current at least 1 January 72 to 1 June 73, since March 73 with the RLAf only (Lists of Assigned, maintained aircraft of 1 January 72 to 1 June 73, in: UTD/Bisson/B5 reels 23/4); a photo probably taken at Savannakhet, where the aircraft was used for pilot training and FAC duties, and a drawing of “69-7306” can be found in Conboy, *War in Laos*, pp. 37 and 54; after landing at Savannakhet (L-39) on 23 October 72, U-17 “69-7306” taxied to the AOC area, when the engine stopped; when the pilot restarted the engine, fire broke out under the engine section, but could be extinguished (Report dated 27 Oct. 72, in: UTD/CIA/B29F2); photos of 69-7306, probably taken at Udorn in 1972/3, showing an Erawan painted on the aircraft, can be found in the A. Cates collection at TTU (nos. VA024821 and VA024822).

Fate: ?

Cessna U-17B	71-1046	18501921	22 Sept. 71	USAF	71-1046,	del.
					under MAP	

Service history: Cessna to TL MAP on 22 September 71 (71265); used as a Raven aircraft, owned by the USAF, but operated under the control of the US Ambassador at

