

Air America in Laos II – military aid

by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

Part I

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I) At the times of CAT: supporting the pro-Western forces for the PEO

In spite of all efforts of the sixties and early seventies to make Air America look like an operator whose flights had purely humanitarian objectives,¹ it was another aspect of Air America's activities in Laos that first became notorious and then famous: military and paramilitary support to pro-western forces said to have been done at the will of the CIA. Yet, it was not the CIA who came to Laos first, but the US military.

Already in 1950, the United States had signed an agreement to supply economic and military aid to Laos.² After the Geneva Accords of 6 August 54, which had given the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly to the Pathet Lao pending integration into the central regime, Washington decided to expand the aid program. By October 54, the Royal Lao Government had made a direct request for American military aid, bypassing the French.³ So, in December 1954, a United States Operations Mission (USOM) office was established in Vientiane to organize economic assistance. The size of USOM Laos increased from a "dozen or so at the end of 1954 to [...] over one hundred in December 1957."⁴ But the main purpose of USOM was defense related, and as the placement in Laos of an official U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was judged to be a contravention of Article 6 of the Geneva Accords,⁵ on 13 December 1955, the Program Evaluation Office (PEO) was set up within USOM to handle military aid.⁶ This had become necessary because France had announced that its near-total funding of the Lao National Army (ANL) would cease as of 1 January 55.⁷ According to U.S. understanding, this was permitted by Article 9 of the Geneva settlement that stated: "Upon the entry into force of the present Agreement and in accordance with the declaration made at the Geneva Conference by the Royal Government of Laos on July 20, 1954, the introduction into Laos of armaments, munitions and military equipment of all kinds is prohibited with the exception of a specified quantity of armaments in categories specified as necessary for the defence of Laos."⁸ The PEO was staffed by retired US military personnel, and had 2 missions: to advise the US Ambassador and USOM on the military needs of the Royal Lao Government and assist in preparing MAP funds and to provide end-use observers for the military material already furnished to Laos. The chief of PEO was a member of the Country Team who reported directly to the Ambassador, but on purely military

¹ The most spectacular effort of this type probably was the documentary *Flying men, flying machines* made in 1970/71. Although the purpose of this documentary is unknown, the tendency to underline Air America's purely humanitarian activities is obvious.

² On 23 December 1950, the United States, France, and the associated states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia signed the *Pentalateral Mutual Defense Assistance Act* and established procedures for the transfer of US military aid to French forces in Indochina (Castle, *At war*, p.9).

³ Arthur J. Dommen, "How Laos became involved in the Cold War", Paper presented at the symposium *After the Cold war: Reassessing Vietnam*, Texas Tech University, 18-20 April 1996, p. 4, formerly in: UTD/Leary/B24F3.

⁴ Charles A. Stevenson, *The end of nowhere: American policy toward Laos since 1954*, Boston 1972, p. 29, quoted by Castle, *At war in the shadow of Vietnam*, p. 146 note 9.

⁵ Article 6 of the Geneva settlement banned "the introduction into Laos of any reinforcements of troops or military personnel from outside Laotian territory" (quoted from Castle, *At war*, p.16).

⁶ Dommen, "How Laos became involved in the Cold War", p. 5.

⁷ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.17.

⁸ Quoted from Castle, *At war*, p.146, note 11.

matters he reported directly to the Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) and to the US Department of Defense. Within USOM Laos, the ratio of funds devoted to military purposes as compared to the amounts devoted to economic assistance was about 4 to 1.⁹ At the same time, Thailand was to become the base for future covert operations into Laos: For on 20 August 54, President Eisenhower approved National Security Council Policy Statement 5429/2 that recommended the US Government provide military and economic assistance to the Thais and “concentrate efforts on developing Thailand as a support of U.S. objectives in the area and as a focal point of U.S. covert and psychological operations in Southeast Asia.”¹⁰ So on 8 June 56, Secretary of State Dulles assured Crown Prince Savang Vatthana that US military power stood ready to intervene should the Communists attack Laos.¹¹ “In June 1956, CINCPAC moved to establish a PEO liaison office in JUSMAG, in effect placing the PEO under the military aid program office in Bangkok. [...] Without actually creating an appearance of alliance, the US military by this change in the status of the PEO was aligning its activities in Laos with Thailand, a country that had direct security interests at stake in Laos and whose government was an ally of the United States in SEATO.”¹² One of the first occasions of such a covert military aid to Laos occurred in 1957-58, when – with full cooperation of the US MAAG to Thailand and the Royal Thai Army, but without the consent of the American Ambassador to Laos – PEO arranged that small numbers of Lao army personnel were trained in Thailand under Project *Erawan*.¹³ In September 59, the Royal Thai Army trained some 1,400 Laotian paratroopers near Lopburi in guerrilla and anti-guerrilla tactics. Other Laotian troops and officers were trained in the Philippines in 1959.¹⁴

During that period, CAT was not that much involved in military activities in Laos, at best in supporting political propaganda. Between August 54 and late January 55, CAT was among the non-military operators that supplied the *maquis* or Hmong guerrilla forces of the *Servan* group in Sam Neua Province, still remaining from the days before Dien Bien Phu.¹⁵ When from mid-August to mid-October 1955 three CAT C-46s air-dropped rice bags along the Lao-China border and the Lao-North Vietnam border at remote places like Ban Ban or Phu Pha Thi, they also dropped propaganda leaflets over communist territory.¹⁶ As early as February 56, the Royal Lao Government and CAT signed an “Aircraft Charter Agreement”, but nothing happened to implement it until 1957.¹⁷ At that time, CAT returned to Laos on a permanent basis: James G. Parsons, US Ambassador to Laos 1956-58, did not trust Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who wanted Pathet Lao membership in the national union government, and he also feared corruption inside the Lao military.¹⁸ As, due to this political development, the US Embassy was alarmed, fearing that under the Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong as future Minister of Economic Planning, the Communists would have control of the

⁹ Castle, *At war*, pp. 9-17, plus p. 146 notes 9 and 10. But it was not until January 56 that the Lao military received its first big hardware contribution thru the PEO: 4 C-47s (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.17).

¹⁰ Quoted from Castle, *At war*, p.12.

¹¹ Dommen, “How Laos became involved in the Cold War”, p. 8.

¹² Dommen, “How Laos became involved in the Cold War”, p. 9.

¹³ Castle, *At war*, p.147, note 17.

¹⁴ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.24.

¹⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.7 and 15. CAT is said to have “had one DC-3, one Dragon Rapide, and one Nordwagon available for drops to *Groupement Mixte d’Intervention* (GMI, formerly known as GCMS) *maquis*”. The other operators were Air Laos and Laos Air Transport (ib., p.27, note 14). CAT probably chartered the smaller aircraft with crews from *Compagnie Laotienne de Commerce et de Transport*, who had Dragon Rapide F-OAIL (msn 6724) and Noorduyn UC-64A Norseman F-OACY (msn 794) and F-OALR (msn 643) at that time (Burnett / Slack / Davis, *South-East Asia Civil Aircraft Registers*, pp.238-45). See also, Leary, Manuscript, chap. IV, p. 368, in: UTD/Leary/B19F2.

¹⁶ Captain Fred Walker, who flew one of the C-46s, notes that in his log book (Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, p. 71).

¹⁷ Leary, Manuscript, chap. IV, pp. 371/2, in: UTD/Leary/B19F2.

¹⁸ Dommen, “How Laos became involved in the Cold War”, pp. 12-19 + 24.

distribution of US aid, which, at that time, was at more than two-thirds devoted to the defense support program,¹⁹ the US Ambassador organized his own distribution of US aid: And so, on 30 June 1957, the arrival of CAT C-47 B-817 at Vientiane to begin a new contract with the American Embassy marked the first permanent presence of Civil Air Transport in Laos.²⁰

In 1957, for Bruce Blevins, “the main ‘customer’ was Jack Mathews. ‘My boss was Jack Mathews.’ [...] Mathews was supporting Kong Le, and Blevins spent a good deal of time in providing logistical support to Kong Le’s forces. [...] Blevins mostly landed at old Japanese fighter strips. He flew into Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Attopeu, Savannakhet, [and] Pakse. [...] During his second year in Laos, Blevins began to do a lot of airdrops. These consisted of rice drops to outlying Lao army posts. He used Lao army personnel as kickers for the most part, with an American (Andy Anderson) every now and then. At Rousselot’s request, he took pictures of the DZs and sent them to Taipei.”²¹ On at least two occasions, CAT’s supply drops also had the political implication of supporting the Royal Lao Government side in forthcoming elections – during the months preceding the elections of December 55 and in Operation *Booster Shot* between 8 March and 27 April 58, preceding the 4 May 58 elections.²² On that occasion, CAT personnel also served as navigators in 2 USAF C-130s that dropped bulldozers into Laos.²³ In April 58, the PEO even sent a commendation to CAT for the “superior manner” in which some CAT crews “performed their duties as guides.”²⁴ And on at least three occasions, CAT Captain Fred Walker hauled military supplies to Vientiane: on 23 November 56, on 19 July 57, and in September 57.²⁵ In 1958/59 CAT Captain Neese D. Hicks did a lot of TDY flying in Laos: He flew C-46s, mostly landing loads on the Plain of Jars on a 3,400’ PSP strip at an elevation of 3,500 feet. At one point he was sent to Xieng Khouang Ville for a week to shuttle between there and Luang Prabang, five or six trips a day, carrying boxes of mortar shells.²⁶ Yet, in those years, much of US military aid devoted to Laos was military Advisory assistance.²⁷

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

¹⁹ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.203/4; Castle, *At war*, p.16.

²⁰ Leary, *CIA air operations in Laos*, p. 54.

²¹ Interview conducted with Bruce Blevins by Prof. William Leary at Elliston, MT on 11 July 1987, written summary at: UTD/Leary/B43F2.

²² Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp. 28 (note 34) and 18; during that period, Fred Walker not only flew medical supplies to the bush hospitals of *Operation Brotherhood* in his C-46, but he also air-dropped rice and salt at places like Muong Sai, Sam Chiau, Sam Neua, Ban Na, and Phong Saly, and occasionally he airlifted Royal Lao troops (Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp. 72/3).

²³ “In April Lee flew as navigator on two USAF C-130 missions. Two airplanes were initially involved, with Bill Shaver serving as navigator for the other. However, Shaver’s airplane was severely damaged. The project involved dropping bulldozers. Lee was onboard to identify [the] drop zone and insure that the aircraft did not stray over the border into North Vietnam. Two drops were made: April 27 at Nam Tha and May 13 at Nam Bac.” (John E. Lee, interview conducted by William M Leary at Watkinsville, GA on 27 May 1987; the notes of Prof. Leary are preserved at UTD/Leary/B46F10).

²⁴ PEO Liaison Office, Bangkok, letter dated 8 April 58, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.28.

²⁵ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, p. 71; in September 57, a number of CIA personnel was also on board.

²⁶ Interview with Neese D. Hicks conducted by Prof. William Leary at Ashland, OR on 3 August 1987, written resume at: UTD/Leary/B43F2.

²⁷ In Military Region I, for example, the Houa Khong Province, “the period from 1957-1960 was generally characterized by military Advisory assistance at Luang Nam Tha, the provincial capital” (Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 205).

guerrilla operations,²⁸ and in December 58, North Vietnamese forces occupied several villages in Laos' Tchepone district.²⁹ On 11 February 59, Phoui declared that his government

PEO LIAISON OFFICE
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ADMINISTRATION
BANGKOK, THAILAND
PHONE: 32951 - EXT. 60 - 61

2 April 1958

Manager, Bangkok Branch
Civil Air Transport Inc.
46/48 Patpong Road
Bangkok, Thailand

Dear Sir:

At the request of General H. H. Brown, Chief, PEO, Vientiane, Laos, I would like to express our appreciation for the superior manner in which Captain M. W. Shaver and First Officer T. H. Meish performed their duties as guides on the recent aerial drops from U. S. Military C-130 Aircraft.

Many problems had to be considered during the drops, such as weather conditions, terrain, etc. which were handled in a very efficient and diplomatic manner while working closely with U. S. Military crews.

Would appreciate their superiors in Taipei being so advised.

Very truly yours,



HARRY L. BECK
Chief, PEO Liaison Office

PEO Commendation dated 8 April 58, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.28

considered the application of the Geneva Agreements as fully accomplished and that, therefore, Laos was no longer bound by its provisions. At that time, the International Control Commission that had been established by the Geneva Agreements to oversee the implementation of the settlement had already halted their operations,³⁰ and so, some US newspapers viewed this statement as a prelude to sending additional military aid to the Royal Lao Government.³¹ This political instability in Laos led to a growing US presence in Laos and to an increasing amount of goods delivered to support the Royal Lao Army. By February 1959, the PEO received a new commander, General John A. Heintges, who planned to

²⁸ Kirk, *Wider war*, p.204; Castle, *At war*, p.17.

²⁹ Dommen, "How Laos became involved in the Cold War", pp. 26/7.

³⁰ Already in July 58, the ICC only reluctantly agreed to adjourn, and in February 59, it closed its doors (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.28, note 36).

³¹ Castle, *At war*, pp.17 and 147/8, note 24.

considerably expand the US training program for the Royal Lao military.³² By 1959, the original C-47 based at Vientiane had been joined by 2 more C-47s and 1 C-46, all based at Vientiane.³³ So, CAT's C-47s and C-46s made more and more urgent airdrops to the civil population as well as to isolated Royal Lao Army outposts, and since late 1958, CAT planes also flew around CIA case officers.³⁴ During that period of CAT's / Air America's operations, it is impossible to clearly distinguish between purely humanitarian work and military supplies, because the Company operated under the provisions of contracts that it had with USOM, but much of the cargo transported by Company aircraft at that time was actually delivered by order of the military aid organization within USOM, the PEO. One of the CAT pilots who flew in Laos in 1959 on temporary duty was Doc Johnson: On 18 August 59, he flew Air America C-46 B-866 from Bangkok to Vientiane, on 19 August, he took Air America C-47 B-829 on the Vientiane-Seno-Pakse-Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Vientiane route, and on 20 August, he took B-829 from Vientiane to Pa Doung, then made some air drops and returned to Vientiane, from where he took C-46 B-866 back to Bangkok the same evening.³⁵

³² Castle, *At war*, p.18. On 22 January 59, CINCPAC requested 12 Mobile Training Teams, that is 96 men, for six months' temporary duty in Laos beginning 1 April 59; their main task was technical instruction, while French teams would give tactical training (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.20).

³³ Leary, Manuscript, chap. IV, p.392, in: UTD/Leary/B19F2.

³⁴ Leary, *CIA air operations in Laos*, p. 55.

³⁵ Pages from Doc Johnson's log book kindly sent to the author on 14 September 2012 by James Johnson.

II) Air America in Laos 1959-62:

The starting-point in Laos: the North Vietnamese presence

It is unknown if the declaration made by rightist Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone on 11 February 59 had any influence on the decision made by the Board of Directors of CAT Inc. on 17 February 59³⁶ to rename CAT Inc. as Air America Inc. effective 31 March 59. But it is evident that the Company's new name sent a clear message to the people of Laos: The United States are here to support you. For in Laos, the political instability continued: Having received extraordinary powers on 13 January 1959, Phoui tried to put under stricter control the two Pathet Lao army units to be integrated into the Royal Lao Army, but one of them escaped to North Vietnam on 18 May 59, and the "red" Prince Souphanouvong and eight other Pathet Lao leaders were put under house arrest in Vientiane for interfering with the integration.³⁷ In July 59, the situation in Laos exploded: Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops attacked Royal Lao Government positions in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, and while Air America pilots flew US military advisers and intelligence experts throughout Laos so that they could get a first-hand impression of the situation,³⁸ the Lao government at Vientiane charged Souphanouvong and 15 other Pathet Lao leaders with treason and put all of them into jail. This was the beginning of a new civil war.³⁹ Just in time, that is also in July 59, US military advisers under civilian cover started to arrive in Laos according to the Heintges Plan of February 59, tasked with the reorganization of the Royal Laotian Army,⁴⁰ and a US Special Forces Group codenamed *Hotfoot* also arrived in Laos that month. Soon, twelve Mobile Training Teams took up duties as special-forces advisers at Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, and Pakse.⁴¹ The CIA began operations in 1959 with guerrillas from the Hmong tribes in Laos as part of a regional intelligence program. CIA personnel were sent to Laos to supervise the Green Beret teams teaching Hmong guerrillas on the Plain of Jars.⁴² In November 59, an Air America C-46 flew Team Korchek, the first *Hotfoot* Team in Military Region II, to Phongsavan to start training at Khang Khay. In mid-January 1960, a second and final contingent arrived in Laos, *Hotfoot II*.⁴³ All these activities required additional air transportation, and since July 59, Air America was involved in the civil war by supporting the pro-western forces. In August 59, for example, an Air America C-46 and C-47, accompanied by a contingent of US and Nationalist Chinese pilots, were employed to help the Royal Lao Air Force⁴⁴ to drop paratroopers into Moung Peun during the Sam Neua crisis.⁴⁵

³⁶ Present were: Admiral Felix B. Stump, George A. Doole, Jr., Arthur B. Richardson, William A. Read, Robert G. Goelet, James B. Ames, and Brackley Shaw; absent were Samuel S. Walker and Hugh L. Grundy (Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors of CAT Incorporated of 17 February 1959, in: UTD/CIA/B3F1). The Certificate of Amendment of Certificate of Incorporation of CAT Incorporated, dated 26 March 1959 and bearing the signatures of Hugh L. Grundy and Clyde S. Carter, can be found at: UTD/CIA/B2F1.

³⁷ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp. 204/5; Castle, *At war*, p.17.

³⁸ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, p. 73.

³⁹ Castle, *At war*, p.17.

⁴⁰ For the end of 1959, the US Departments of Defense and State approved a total of 514 advisers for Laos, that is 175 PEO personnel, 190 contract personnel (mostly Filipino technicians of ECCOIL, the "Eastern Construction Company in Laos"), plus 149 temporary-duty Special Forces personnel. Of these 514 authorized, 428 were on hand in late 1959, that is 21 times more than the year before (Castle, *At war*, p. 18).

⁴¹ Twelve eight-man modified "A" teams and a control detachment from the 7th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, arrived in Laos between 24 and 31 July 59. They wore civilian clothing and carried civilian identifications to mask their presence in Laos. After six months, they were replaced by other Green Berets, and these six-month tours hampered efforts to build foreign language proficiency and deeper professional relationships between the Special Forces soldiers and their trainees (Castle, *At war*, pp.18/9; Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp.102/3).

⁴² Leary, *CIA Air Operations*, pp.54-56.

⁴³ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.24/5.

⁴⁴ At that time, the Laotian military had only 6 C-47s, 2 L-20 Beavers, and 6 L-19 Bird Dogs, all delivered by the PEO (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.23).



Air America C-47 B-829 somewhere in Laos in 1959, taken by John Lee
(former photo no. 1-WL1-28-26-PB400, now preserved at UTD/Leary/B77F2)

But the Communists, that is the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese, their military allies, did not only attack Royal Lao Government positions in northern Laos, they also started to make air drops in southern Laos: On 1 May 59, the 919th Air Transport Regiment of the North Vietnamese Air Force (VPAF) had been formed at Gia Lam east of Hanoi. In the summer of 1959, the 4 Li-2s, 1 Il-14 and 1 An-2 belonging to the VPAF at that time were based at Dong



The wreck of what is believed to be a North Vietnamese Li-2 in the western PDJ, taken in
1964/5 by Joe Hazen
(with kind permission from Joe Hazen)

Hoi in southern North Vietnam, and in September 59, these aircraft dropped 60 tons of supplies to units building the “Truong Son” (Ho Chi Minh Trail) thru Laos and Cambodia.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.22.

⁴⁶ Toperczer, *Air war over North Vietnam*, pp.5/6; construction of the Trail began on 19 May 1959, “the 69th birthday of its namesake” (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.115).

In December 59, Prime Minister Sananikone, who had begun negotiations with the Pathet Lao, was overthrown by the rightist General Phoumi Nosavan, who was backed by the CIA. In Thailand, “beginning in early 1960, PARU’s Pathfinder Company had been dispatched to the Lao border. There they established three posts, the first opposite Vientiane, another across from Paksane, and a third at Mukdahan, opposite Savannakhet. From these, PARU was given free access across the border – thanks to an agreeable General Phoumi – in order to collect demographic data on Lao minority tribes, many of whom extended into Thai territory.”⁴⁷ As to the situation in Laos, in order to prepare the elections to be held in April 60, the US Embassy had planned another civic-action assistance program, and this time, not only Air America was involved, but also the 1045th OETG (Operational Evaluation & Training Group), that is the CIA-linked USAF unit headed at that time by Major Aderholt: He arranged for USAF C-130s from Japan to deliver 2 trucks and 2 bulldozers to Vientiane and then to drop them to Phong Saly in late April 60. Air America ferried village chiefs from Phong Saly Province to the polling centers in Luang Prabang.⁴⁸ Elections on 24 April 1960 resulted in a crushing victory for the rightist CDIN. Shortly before the formation of the new government, on 23 May 60, Souphanouvong escaped from Vientiane, joined the Pathet Lao forces that still controlled Houa Phan and Phong Saly, and began a series of guerrilla operations to further reduce the government’s area of control.⁴⁹

On 9 August 1960, a paratrooper captain called Kong Le made a *coup d’état* to reinstall a neutral government and recalled Prince Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister;⁵⁰ the prince accepted and formed a new cabinet on 16 August 60. General Phoumi, who had flown to Luang Prabang for a conference with the King on 8 August, did not accept the change, retreated to his personal power base at Savannakhet, and on 10 September 60, he announced the formation of a “Revolutionary Committee” headed by Prince Boun Oum. As the United States refused to overturn a Thai blockade of Vientiane set up upon Phoumi’s request, on 4 October 60, Souvanna announced his intention to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and invited the Pathet Lao to participate in the new government. On 7 October, the United States halted all military aid to the Vientiane government. After Souvanna had begun negotiations with the Soviet Ambassador on 13 October 60, John N. Irwin, Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Admiral Riley from CINCPAC, met Phoumi on 17 October 60 and told him that the United States had lost confidence in Souvanna Phouma and would support Phoumi all the way.⁵¹ In late October 60, Souvanna announced that he would be very happy to receive Soviet assistance.⁵² In addition to that, in November 60, Souvanna agreed to accept aid also from Peking and Hanoi.⁵³

The Communists considered the Kong Le *coup* to be a chance: The Russians began to support Kong Le with weapons and other equipment, boasting that it was the USSR’s highest-priority supply operation since World War II.⁵⁴ In late November 60, supported by US advisers, Thai technicians and Air America, Phoumi had begun a march up National Route 13 towards Vientiane. Between 4 and 13 December 60, 10 Soviet-piloted IL-14s airlifted non-military supplies from Hanoi to Vientiane airport, flying 5-10 sorties a day. On 9 December 60, Souvanna fled to Phnom Penh. On 10 December 60, Quinim Pholsena and several Pathet

⁴⁷ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.59.

⁴⁸ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.26.

⁴⁹ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.204/5; Castle, *At war*, pp.19-20.

⁵⁰ The same day, i.e. on 9 August 60, the PEO and the Pentagon chose the Hmong for a delivery of 2,000 light weapons (carbines) to protect their villages from Pathet Lao and Neutralist pressure after the Kong Le *coup*. The 2,000 carbines were dropped to the Hmong in October 60 (Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.27 and 33).

⁵¹ Dommen, “How Laos became involved in the Cold War”, pp. 37-43.

⁵² Castle, *At war*, pp.20-22; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.31-46.

⁵³ Castle, *At war*, p.23.

⁵⁴ Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.108. The Soviets made at least 34 flights to Vientiane between 3 and 14 December 60, delivering fuel and military equipment (Castle, *At war*, p.23).

Lao officials flew to Hanoi, announcing that they would formalize a pact between the Pathet Lao and Kong Le's troops in exchange for a Soviet airlift of arms and supplies.⁵⁵ On 11 December, the Soviets landed 4 howitzers at Wattay airport, Vientiane. On 12 December 60, the King's Royal Ordinance 282 transferred governmental power to General Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee.⁵⁶ On 13 December, Phoumi attacked Vientiane, and after 3 days of heavy fighting, Kong Le's troops withdrew from the city. On their way north, Kong Le's forces were supplied by Soviet IL-14s,⁵⁷ until they captured the town of Vang Vieng. On 31 December, several Soviet IL-14s landed at Vang Vieng, picked up Kong Le's troops and parachuted them onto the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. During the last 2 weeks of December 60, the Soviet airlift had flown more than 180 sorties into Laos in support of the Pathet Lao and Kong Le forces. The combined Pathet-Lao-Kong Le forces drove the Royal Lao Government troops off the Plain, and by 3 January 61, every strategic road junction on the Plain was under pro-Communist control. The Soviets adjusted their airlift to the Plain. On 31 December 60, 4 Air America C-46s were to start an airlift to Khang Khay to bring in weapons and ammunition, but the approaching column of Kong Le's men ended this tentative even before it had really begun, leaving the task of evacuating the remaining PEO officials, *Hotfoot* advisers and some other people in Air America Helios and C-47s. On 1 January 61, Kong Le reached Khang Khay, which he made his headquarters, and lots of Soviet IL-14s arrived from Hanoi, bringing in a dozen 105mm howitzers and eight 85mm field guns. Xieng Khouangville and Ban Ban were taken a little bit later. The Plain of Jars stream was in the strategic possession of Kong Le's forces. By 16 January 61, the air bridge to the Plain of Jars and to Sam Neua involved nine IL-14s and nine Li-2s that also made airdrops at locations as Ta Vieng, Ban Ban, and Vang Vieng.⁵⁸ This was the time, when, supported by Air America aircraft, Lieutenant Colonel Vang Pao, a Hmong Royal Lao Army officer native to Xieng Khouang, relocated some 200 Hmong villages from the Plain of Jars to seven pre-selected sites in the mountains located around the Plain. The Communist presence in the area was so strong that on 28 December 60, even the Air Attaché's USAF VC-47 was shot down over the Plain during a recon mission. And the pro-communist build-up continued: When, on 20 February 61, Souvanna Phouma flew to the Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay on the Plain for negotiations, there were not only rebel Lao soldiers at Khang Khay, but also Czech and North Vietnamese "information offices", an "economic and cultural delegation" from Beijing, a North Vietnamese tent hospital, a full Soviet embassy, and a dozen Russian aircraft maintenance personnel, and the whole area was protected by Russian 37mm AAA.⁵⁹

North Vietnam also began a massive intervention in Laos: So, during the second half of 1960, North Vietnamese "volunteers" were dispatched to Laos to assist the Pathet Lao insurgency. In October 1960, 20 Li-2s, 14 Il-14s and 10 Mi-4s were delivered from the Soviet Union to the North Vietnamese AF (VPAF), so that an aerial bridge could be built up, starting in the Soviet Union, passing thru North Vietnam and ending in Laos. The air bridge was performed by 3 units, 2 being based at Cat Bi (Li-2s and Mil-4s) and one at Chu (Li-2s), both airfields being located east of Hanoi. The 919th ATR delivered weapons, food and military supplies to Laos and brought back wounded troops. On 11 December 1960, a new route was

⁵⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp. 38/9.

⁵⁶ "The US Mission in Vientiane had finally delivered a National Assembly quorum to Luang Prabang, where, on the 12th, it passed a no-confidence motion in Souvanna's government and endorsed Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee" (Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.22/3, quotation p.22).

⁵⁷ "In the week after Vientiane fell to Phoumi's battalion, intelligence reports described continuing Soviet airdrops to Kong Le forces still moving north along Route 13. An Air America twin Beechcraft [...] searched the skies over Kong Le's columns, and on 21 December found a twin-engine Soviet supply craft approaching a neutralist drop zone. Photos showing the tail number and the 'CCCP' initials of the Soviet union soon appeared in newspapers around the world" (Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.26, note 26).

⁵⁸ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp. 43-47 + 50.

⁵⁹ Castle, *At war*, pp. 24, 28, 39, 40, and 151, note 74; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 42.

opened to “Xam Nua” (= Sam Neua / L-04) by VPAF Li-2s using mixed North Vietnamese and Russian crews. In the meantime, IL-14s and AN-2s dropped supplies in the regions of “Ban Hong” (= Ban Hong Sa / Site 62), “Muang Vanviang” (= Vang Vieng / L-16), “Muang Phoun” (= Moung Phun / Site 37) and “Sala Phou Khun” (= Sala Phou Koun / Site 260). In December 1960, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces attacked the Laotian districts of Sam Neua, Phong Saly, Xieng Khouang, and the Plain of Jars. The plain of Chanh Dong Chum, part of the Plain of Jars, was conquered by the Communists on 1 January 61. After that, North Vietnamese Li-2s and An-2s landed in the plains delivering weapons to the troops and food supplies to the civilian population. The airfields of Sam Neua (L-04), Vang Vieng (L-16), Nam Bac (Site 203), Chanh Dong Chum and “Muang Xay” (= Moung Sai / L-27) were rebuilt by North Vietnamese Air Force repair units.⁶⁰

Supporting the pro-Western forces: supplies for General Phoumi delivered under USOM contracts

At that time, the United States had already taken counter-measures: In August 60, shortly after the Kong Le *coup*, the US Embassy had established a Deputy Chief PEO at Savannakhet, and in early October, after Souvanna had began negotiations with the Pathet Lao, the Embassy ordered the southern PEO to arrange for training and equipping Phoumi's forces and to produce a campaign plan to retake the capital. So the CIA ordered Air America to deliver supplies to Phoumi's forces in southern Laos.⁶¹ This was possible thru the contracts Air America already had with USOM/Laos,⁶² the most important of which were probably contracts nos. 57-08 and 57-060.

In the early times, Air America's contract no. 57-08 with USOM included flying services to be operated by C-47s and C-46s, mostly out of Vientiane. Before the Kong Le *coup* had developed into a civil war, Air America flew for both sides: Upon request of Kong Le, on 18 September 60, Fred Walker flew 6 paratroopers of 2 BP from Vientiane to Sam Neua town, but as the local commander was loyal to Phoumi, the rebel paratroopers were not allowed to disembark, so that Walker immediately returned to Vientiane.⁶³ Later, Air America's aircraft assigned to contract no. 57-08 only supported the pro-Western troops of General Phoumi. On 9 December 60, for example, Air America aircraft unloaded elements of 1 BP (the 1st Parachute Battalion) at Luang Prabang and parachuted them throughout the afternoon into fields outside Chinaimo.⁶⁴ On 31 December 60, 4 Air America C-46s were to start an airlift to Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars that had been arranged by Kim Brabson of the PEO: The first C-46 brought in mortars from Luang Prabang, the second one brought ammunition, aviation gas and explosives, and the other 2 C-46s contained a disassembled 105mm howitzer each. After the first gun had been offloaded, a Helio came in and brought news of an approaching convoy, presumably enemies; immediately, the Lao troops began disappearing so that there were no longer enough men to offload the second howitzer, and the C-46 was sent back to Vientiane with the howitzer still on board.⁶⁵ On 29 May 61, Air America C-47 B-815 first supplied a station coded “Jersey”, and then shuttled between Vientiane and Luang Prabang for the rest of the day, while C-47 B-817 apparently made drops all day long, returning to Vientiane in the late morning for a second run. The same day, C-46s B-146 and B-154 shuttled rice to various drop zones. All of these flights were operated under the

⁶⁰ Toperczer, *Air war over North Vietnam*, pp.6/7.

⁶¹ Castle, *At war*, pp.22/3.

⁶² A Memorandum dated 27 July 62 (in: UTD/Fink/B2F16) lists up contracts nos. 57-08 (flying services), 58-046 (flight personnel service), 60-009 (flying services), and ICA-39-257 (flying services), concluded with the US International Cooperation Agency.

⁶³ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 36.

⁶⁴ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp. 38/9.

⁶⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 43.

provisions of contract no. 57-08.⁶⁶ On 18 December 61, from his C-46 B-910, Ed Eckholdt dropped rice and chutes to troops sitting near Paksane, and on 15 and 16 January 62 he flew C-46 B-150 carrying troops on the Bangkok-Koke Kathiem-Pakse-Bangkok run⁶⁷ – probably RLAf pilots who had been trained at Royal Thai Air Force Base Koke Kathiem near Lopburi in T-6 gunnery and bombing techniques and then returned to Pakse.⁶⁸ Between 21 and 24 November 61, “Doc” Johnson made similar flights from Koke Kathiem / Lopburi (S-15) to Vientiane and Pakse (V-11), possibly also carrying RLAf pilots or PARU advisers and their equipment.⁶⁹ Later Supplemental Agreements to that contract added aircraft services to be operated by other Air America aircraft types like the Helio Courier, the Bell 47G helicopter, Dornier Do-28s, Fairchild C-123s, DHC-4 Caribous, and even DC-4s and DC-6s if requested,⁷⁰ extended the number of bases from Vientiane to “points in Laos and Thailand [...] as directed by the Contracting Officer”, and postponed its expiration date to 30 June 1962.⁷¹ The reason for this extension covered by Supplemental Agreement no.4 dated 24 May 61 probably was that beginning on 29 April 61 with Thakhek-based *Bataillon d’Infanterie 7* of GM 14, under Project *Ekarad*, the Royal Thai Army began accepting entire Royal Lao Army battalions for military training in Thailand, especially at Lopburi, for one-month refresher courses. In May 61, that program was expanded to also include basic training for officer candidates and recruits, specialized artillery training, and basic pilot training for the RLAf.⁷² Among the pilots, contract no. 57-08 was notorious for its dangerous missions: “I do remember when I flew the C-46 out of Vientiane that the company wrote the contract customer’s number on the flight log sheets we were issued for each flight. I can remember the 57-08 contract as it was the one you always got shot at while flying and you could always tell the planes from the number of patches all over them”, Jim Pearson recalls.⁷³ Indeed 7 out of 26 accidents that happened to all Air America aircraft between 1 January 1960 and 31 July 1962 affected aircraft that were assigned to contract no. 57-08, and 4 out of those 7 accidents had been caused by ground fire, resulting in no less than 3 aircraft crashes.⁷⁴ The other 3 accidents involving aircraft assigned to contract 57-08 resulted from engine failure⁷⁵ or

⁶⁶ “Vientiane Daily Flight Operations Log” plus the “Aircraft utilization” document of 29 May 61, both in: UTD/Lewis/B2F6.

⁶⁷ Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13.

⁶⁸ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.44.

⁶⁹ Page from “Doc” Johnson’s log book, kindly sent to the author by “Doc” Johnson’s son James on 10 August 2013. The flights were Bangkok-Lopburi-Pakse-Lopburi-Bangkok on 21 Nov.61 in C-46 B-150, the same route on 22 Nov.61 in C-46 B-914, adding the leg Bangkok-Vientiane at the end, and Vientiane-Lopburi-Vientiane on 24 November 61, again in Air America C-46 B-914.

⁷⁰ The original contract no. 57-08 between Air America and the International Cooperation Agency (ICA), represented by the US Operations Mission to Laos (USOM/Laos), was concluded on 13 July 57. Supplemental Agreement no.4, dated 24 May 61 (in: UTD/Lewis/B2F5), included one or more C-47s, one or more C-46s, two or more Helio Couriers, a Bell 47G Helicopter, as well as DC-4s and DC-6s on request, while Supplemental Agreement no.6 to contract no. 57-08 (draft dated 3 March 62, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16) added five C-123s, one Caribou, as well as an unspecified number of Do-28s as requested.

⁷¹ As to the bases, Supplemental Agreement no.4 of 24 May 61 still notes (p. 1): “The aircraft shall be based at Vientiane, Laos, and, except for necessary maintenance, shall be available for flight operations from Vientiane for transporting passengers and cargo at such time and to such points as directed by the Contracting Officer” (ib: UTD/Lewis/B2F5). The text speaking of “points in Laos and Thailand” is taken from Supplemental Agreement no.6 (draft of 3 March 62, p.2, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16), the expiration date of 30 June 62 is noted in S.A. no.4, p.8.

⁷² Castle, *At war*, pp.36/7; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.67.

⁷³ E-mail dated 4 December 2004, kindly sent to the author by Jim Pearson.

⁷⁴ Helio B-835 on 3 November 60; C-46 B-916 on 4 February 62; Helio B-837 on 28 February 62 and on 22 July 62 (List “Operational casualties in SEA, 1 Jan. 1960 – 1 Dec. 1962”, in: UTD/CIA/B29F1).

⁷⁵ Helio B-833 at Phong Saly on 2 March 60 (List “Operational casualties in SEA, 1 Jan. 1960 – 1 Dec. 1962”, in: UTD/CIA/B29F1).

Hmong tribesmen walking into the idling propeller.⁷⁶ Most of the remaining 19 accidents of that period resulted from technical failures that very often struck the UH-34Ds assigned to another contract.

The reason why flights for contract no. 57-08 were so dangerous probably was that the aircraft assigned to that contract also supplied friendly positions in battle zones. The Air America aircraft assigned to that contract were not only C-47s that could land the supplies at airfields close to the battle zone or drop them, but also STOL aircraft like the Helio Courier and the Dornier Do-28⁷⁷ that got quite close to the fighting, because only those aircraft could fly into remote landing sites, ferrying people and supplies into isolated mountain outposts.⁷⁸ Since February 61, the 107 US *Hotfoot* advisers working in Laos, by then called *Monkhood*, were permitted to accompany Royal Lao military units on combat operations,⁷⁹ and this also meant more dangerous missions for Air America aircraft. When necessary, the USAF unit for unconventional warfare based at Takhli (T-05), Thailand, under the command of Major Harry C. “Heinie” Aderholt who had encouraged the use of the Helio Courier in Laos, also loaned 1 or 2 of their own Helios to Air America. Aderholt, who, from Takhli, worked as a link between the US military and the CIA’s program in Laos, also obtained some new STOL aircraft for Air America: On 16 March 62, 5 C-123Bs bailed from the USAF were transferred to Air America.⁸⁰ Several Air America pilots – among them Ed Eckholdt, Al White, Fred Walker, Don Campbell and John Lee – had had a week of familiarization training at Clark AFB, Philippines, in late January 62, and then flew the 5 aircraft over to Takhli in February,⁸¹ where – pending FAA certification – they received provisional serials⁸² that they used at least until September 62.⁸³ During that period, they were apparently assigned to contract no. 57-08 and made a lot of air drops to troops in the north – on 3 May 62, for example, Ed Eckholdt made drops in the Nam Tha area⁸⁴ from C-123B “540” – and in the south – on 25 May 62 he used C-123B “550” for drops to positions on the Plateau des Bolovens⁸⁵ –, hauling supplies either from Vientiane or from Takhli.⁸⁶

While the C-123Bs were based at Takhli, they were used to drop rice, arms, fuel drums, and even heavy equipment, and they also made some “black flights”. Professor William M. Leary summarizes as follows the interview that former Air America pilot John E. Lee gave him on 27 May 1987: “After three weeks of training [at Takhli], Lee flew his first mission on February 23 [1962]: Takhli to Vientiane, pick up rice, fly two airdrops, then back to Takhli.

⁷⁶ Helios B-833 on 30 Sept. 61 and B-847 on 6 June 62 (List “Operational casualties in SEA, 1 Jan. 1960 – 1 Dec. 1962”, in: UTD/CIA/B29F1).

⁷⁷ The Do-28 commenced flying under contract in Laos on 19 January 62 (Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p.371, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3).

⁷⁸ Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp.109+116-20.

⁷⁹ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 50.

⁸⁰ AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, Microfilm reel no. ACA-65.

⁸¹ At Clark AFB, Ed Eckholdt flew USAF C-123Bs “64365”, “64367”, “64369”, and “64387” between 19 and 25 January 62. He and Al White ferried C-123B “54555” (that is 55-4555) from Clark to Takhli on 2 February 62 (Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13). The other pilots are mentioned in: John E. Lee, interview conducted by William M. Leary at Watkinsville, GA on 27 May 1987; Prof. Leary’s notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B46F10.

⁸² C-123Bs 55-4573 became “510”, 55-4572 became “520”, 55-4545 became “530”, 55-4576 became “540”, and 55-4555 became “550” (Aircraft list of June 62, corrected to September 63, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1).

⁸³ Ed Eckholdt flew C-123B “540” as late as 8 Sept. 62 (Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13).

⁸⁴ For the military situation at Nam Tha (**MR 1**) in 1961/2 see Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.67-74. The town had been supplied by Air America – on 3 May 62, for example, Ed Eckholdt made drops in the Nam Tha area from C-123B “540” (Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13) –, but was lost to the Communists on 6 May 62 (Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.124). The fiasco of Nam Tha made MAAG chief Brigadier General Boyle comment the FAL’s combat effectiveness in northern Laos as “nil” and the Nationalist Chinese of BS 111 refuse to fight any longer for “a kingdom as militarily inept as Laos” (Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.73).

⁸⁵ For the military situation in Southern Laos in 1961/2 see Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.85-93.

⁸⁶ Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13.

At this time, overnight stays at Vientiane were not permitted. This set the pattern for the next few months. – Lee mainly dropped rice. The C-123 carried 12,000 pounds of rice (double-bagged) on eight pallets. The C-123 had double tracks. If the DZ was tight or under fire, the load could be dropped in one pass: ‘It was quite a thrill when that load went out of the airplane.’ Lee found that 600 feet was the best altitude for rice drops, balancing roll vs. impact. Kickers would remove all tie-downs when approaching the DZ. The load would be held by a single 15,000-pound-test strap. The pilot had to be sure to hold the pressure firm on the strap as he counted down. Dropping rice was like throwing darts. You had to make an eyeball estimate. At the proper moment, you would yell ‘Go’ and ring the bell; the copilot would add power as Lee hauled back on the yoke. The airplane would pitch up momentarily; the kicker would cut the strap with a sharp knife; and the load would be flown out. The process took about eight seconds. This procedure was different from that used by the USAF, which tended to dribble the load out all over the countryside; Air America’s procedure kept [the] load in tight DZ. – Dropping loads by parachute (barrels of fuel for helicopters and arms) required a different technique. Lee usually would drop one barrel to test wind/drift. Also, a roll of toilet paper tossed out the window provided good information on wind/drift. After making the necessary corrections for wind, Lee would drop the rest of the load. [...] The C-123 was ‘Aderholt’s pet’, and he loved to show off its capability. Lee recalls approaching Vientiane one day, when Aderholt came up on the radio and asked him to do a maximum performance landing on overrun of the old runway. When Lee complained about getting the airplane dirty, Aderholt told him not to worry: he would wash it. Lee stopped the 123 in a cloud of dust in 8-9000 feet, to the delight of Aderholt, who had a group of VIPs from Washington with him.

Lee recalls one mission to get a bulldozer to Pop Buell at Sam Thong. An attempt was made to drop it, due to the short strip of LS-20. Don Campbell flew the mission. Normally, it would take 1,500 feet for the chute to deploy properly on a heavy drop, but the weather was bad, with a ceiling of about 800 feet. Under pressure from Aderholt, Campbell dropped; but the parachutes did not deploy and the bulldozer bored a hole in the ground. Aderholt then wanted to land a bulldozer. The strip was 1,200 feet long but the elevation was 4,000 feet, a marginal situation for the 123. Fred Walker was selected to make the landing, but after his training was completed, he was called to Taipei. He turned the job over to Lee. Lee loaded the bulldozer, then took the airplane up to 5,000 feet and simulated a landing at 4,000 feet, flying the airplane on the edge of a stall (on stick shaker). He found that he could fly at about 105 knots. He then landed back at Vientiane and tested the reverse and brakes. He and copilot Andy Anderson proceeded to Sam Thong. There was considerable excitement on the ground as word was passed that ‘Big Bird is coming in!’ The runway was not quite level. Lee added power and missed the end of the runway; however, he managed to stop just short of the end (which dropped off sharply). – Lee flew three special ‘black’ flights, dropping agents (Vietnamese) into the Dien Bien Phu area on April 16, 1962; December 13, 1962; and March 31, 1963. He reported to Takhli two or three days before the mission and was briefed by CIA case officers. The crew was isolated, with no outside contact. They studied the routing, as the plane was sanitized. They flew the mission at low level (800 feet) on moonlit nights, navigating by dead reckoning. There was no change in engine power during drops less location be betrayed. There was no ground drop signal. The agents radioed an ‘OK’ message following the drop. There were no SAR or E&E procedures: ‘You were on your own.’ Lee received special pay (cash) for the missions, but the money did not balance out the time lost from regular flights, as it took five or six days for one of these missions (including debriefing). Campbell, Eckholdt, and Sutphin also flew black flights.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ John E. Lee, interview conducted by William M. Leary at Watkinsville, GA on 27 May 1987; Prof. Leary’s notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B46F10.

But Major Aderholt did not only provide Air America with USAF C-123Bs in 1962: At the same time, he also successfully requested a C-7 Caribou to be brought in from South Vietnam to Thailand for testing by Air America.⁸⁸ So in the spring of 1962, Caribou “333” (msn 4, ex US Army 57-3080) was leased for evaluation in Laos and test flown by Air America’s Chief Pilot Fred Walker. On his initial flight into Pa Doung (Site 5), with Aderholt in the right seat, they landed short and skidded to the end of the runway. So the Agency advised the Army that the Caribou should be equipped with reversible props. On 12 May 62, Fred Walker landed “333” for the first time at a newly constructed airstrip, which was to become famous: Site 30, he noted in his log book, but later it would become famous as Lima Site 20A, that is Long Tieng.⁸⁹ In July 62, Air America’s own 2 Caribous (B-851 and B-853) arrived in South East Asia for service in Laos.⁹⁰ Finally, in 1961/2, the aircraft assigned to contract no. 57-08 for service within Laos were supplemented by 2 USAF C-47s (“147” and “994”) that were leased under contract no. AF33(600)-40818 from the Air Force Logistic Command, Wright Patterson Air Force Base, and then used in Laos under the provisions of contract no. ICA-39-257, also with USOM/Laos.⁹¹

The other important USOM contract Air America had for operations in Laos at that time, was contract no. 57-060. The aircraft assigned to that contract – mostly C-46s plus an occasional C-47 – were based at Bangkok, but operated into Laos. When CAT pilot John E. Lee was assigned to Bangkok in February 1957 as vacation relief for Bill Shaver and Dale Williamson, CAT had a one-plane (C-47 B-815) operation in Thailand that was assigned to two contracts, one with PEO (believed to have been no. 57-060 with USOM Laos) and one with SEA Supply for the Border Police. “PEO flying was routine, with twice a week flights to Vientiane, carrying supplies and personnel. [...] The pattern of flying changed in March 1958. Lee took a routine commissary flight to Vientiane on March 14. He was met, as usual, by Jack Hansell (later, Chuck Percy would meet aircraft). Hansell said that Ambassador Smith wanted to see him. Smith wanted Lee to fly airdrop missions. Lee flew the drop of rice and salt the next day in [C-46] B-136. Lee’s logbook records nineteen drops between March 15 and 29. Missions continued for most of April. [...] Airdrops continued in 1958 and 1959. With more help needed to fulfil requirements, C-46s and crews were sent into Vientiane on TDY.⁹² Drops were mainly rice from Vientiane. A few pilots (not Lee) flew arms drops from Takhli. Lee believes that Forte was the first to fly the arms drops. By 1960 operations had grown to the point that Fred Walker was assigned as chief pilot at Vientiane (February 1960). [...] There was a major operation in November 1960. Lee’s logbook shows numerous flights between Bangkok and PDJ. Dexheimer, newly hired, crashed on the PDJ on November 26. The company had been reluctant to hire new pilots, as they did not know how long the increased requirements would last. As a result, the veteran pilots did a lot of flying. Lee often flew 200 hours in a month.”⁹³

Air America’s C-46s assigned to USOM contract no. 57-060 were the aircraft that – as has been noted quite often⁹⁴ – since the fall of 1960⁹⁵ moved thousands of tons of arms and

⁸⁸ Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp.109+116-20.

⁸⁹ Aircraft list of June 62, corrected to Sept. 63 in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1; Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.119; Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, p.118.

⁹⁰ B-851 was ferried by Don Schwabel, B-853 by Ed Eckholdt (Ed Eckholdt, interview conducted by William M. Leary on 24 September 1987; the notes of Prof. Leary are preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F13).

⁹¹ Memorandum “Contract Administration”, dated 27 July 62, by Jerry Fink, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16.

⁹² In September 59, 1 C-46 was assigned to Contract no. 57-060, but 3 additional C-46s were called for (Letter dated 8 September 59, President Grundy to Vice Chairman Doole, re C-46 fleet – plans for disposition, online at: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1818029/195908.pdf .

⁹³ John E. Lee, interview conducted by William M. Leary at Watkinsville, GA on 27 May 1987; the notes of Prof. Leary are preserved at UTD/Leary/B46F10.

⁹⁴ Prados, *President’s secret wars*, p. 269; Castle, *At war*, p. 23; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp. 36-39.

supplies from Bangkok and from the secret base at Takhli (T-05) in Thailand to General Phoumi Nosavan at Savannakhet and then at Vientiane. By September 60, Air America had 16 aircraft positioned at Bangkok.⁹⁶ By the end of 1960, Air America had no less than 7 C-46s, 2 C-47s, 2 C-45s, and 1 Helio Courier stationed at Bangkok or Vientiane for service in Laos.⁹⁷ Since January 61 Air America aircraft also delivered supplies to a drop zone near Vang Pao's headquarters at Pa Doung in Laos, where a PARU team gave initial training to the Hmong.⁹⁸ Since several years, the Hmong had worked with the CIA and the Green Berets, and Major Vang Pao, who, in January 61, was the deputy commander of the Royal Lao forces in Xieng Khouang district, was known to be very influential in the loose federation of H On 10 January 61, case officer Stuart Methven established a contact with Bill Lair who had successfully run the CIA's PARU program in Thailand for many years. The men met at Ta Viang southwest of the Plain, and Vang Pao convinced Lair that he and his Hmong were the troops that could drive the Communists off the Plain of Jars, which was the homeland of the Hmong. So, on 14 January 61, Air America planes dropped rice and ammunition to the Hmong militia at Ban Khang Kho south of the Plain of Jars.⁹⁹ This was not yet the beginning of the new CIA program that was to create an army of irregular Hmong troops, for this new concept had first to be approved by CIA Headquarters. After the "ok" from Langley, on 24 January 61, 3 Air America C-46s, with Bill Lair sitting in the lead plane, crossed the Mekong with weapons and equipment and dropped them on cargo parachutes to Vang Pao's headquarters at Pa Doung (LS-05). The idea was so much accepted by the US Government that, on 8 February 61, Washington even gave permission to arm up to 5,000 Hmong guerrillas, followed on 30 June 61 by President Kennedy's approval to arm 10,500 Hmong.¹⁰⁰

The Hmong paramilitary operations in northern Laos¹⁰¹ were called Project *Momentum* by the CIA, and under *Momentum*, "the PEO was to channel Department of Defense funding through the CIA to arm the first 2,000 Hmong on an experimental basis. They would be organized into 100-man ADC companies" and "were to be in the forefront of pro-RLG operations in Xieng Khouang Province."¹⁰² As to the supplies flown in by Air America, they could be arms and ammunition or rice bags and elephant-skin containers filled with water, and Air America aircraft also carried royalist paratroops to jump zones near Vientiane in operations leading to the flight of Kong Le's forces northward.¹⁰³ Flying out of Takhli in the early sixties is well described by Air America pilot William A. ("Al") White in his interviews given to William M. Leary: "White joined Air America in April 1961. He flew as copilot on C-46s. He recalls his first introduction to Takhli (then known as 'Romeo') shortly after arriving in Laos. He flew from Bangkok to Takhli with Truman Barnes. There were no approach charts or radio, just a long runway. When they taxied in, he was amazed to see 10-12 B-26 Blackbirds sitting on the ramp, bristling with guns. There were ex-USAF pilots who had taken 'discharges of convenience' to fly the B-26s. [...] Air America was in a large two-story barracks. The flight crews had four rooms on the second floor at the end of the hall. There were three double bunks in each room. The rooms were air conditioned and very

⁹⁵ On 10 October 60, Air America planes began flying supplies (mostly parachutes at the beginning) to Pakse and Savannakhet (Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 36).

⁹⁶ Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p. 353, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3

⁹⁷ Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p. 311, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

⁹⁸ Leary, *CIA air operations in Laos*, p. 58; Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp. 109 and 116; Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.60; Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.62.

⁹⁹ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.29-33.

¹⁰⁰ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.41-45 plus p.91.

¹⁰¹ Between spring and September 61, there was also a southern guerrilla program on the Bolovens Plateau. Funded by the CIA under the name Project *Pincushion*, US Special Forces *White Star* teams trained Lao Theung units at Houei Kong and at Phou Kate, but with little success (Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.85-87).

¹⁰² Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.61.

¹⁰³ Bowers, *The USAF in South-East Asia*, p. 441.

comfortable. Ground personnel occupied the first floor of the building. Flight operations were conducted out of a hangar. The Air America operations room had maps, radios, and (later) photo interpretation equipment where pilots could review film. There were certain parts of the hangar off limits to Air America personnel where U-2s were kept. White quickly settled into a routine of flying two trips a day (morning and afternoon) into Laos, airdropping. He flew 170-180 hours the first month, mainly with Barnes and Forte. [...] Coming back in the evening, they radioed in their dinner request when about 30 minutes out. They would land about 1900, have a couple of cold beers, eat an excellent meal, see a movie, then go to bed. They had to get up at 0530 the next morning.”¹⁰⁴

Among the pilots who flew under USOM contract no. 57-060 was also CAT’s specialist for covert missions, Capt. “Doc” Johnson, who was in Laos on temporary duty at least from late September 61 to 17 October 61, flying for Air America. Several times, he flew his C-46 – mostly B-914 – from Bangkok to Takhli or to Vientiane or from Takhli to Vientiane, sometimes making air drops after he had landed at Vientiane; flights out of Bangkok and Takhli probably carried arms and ammunition. Sometimes he also made air drops flying out of Vientiane – on 2 October 61 in C-47 “147”, on 14 October in C-46 B-910, and on 15 October in C-47 B-815 –, probably hauling rice bags. But there were also some more secret flights whose nature can only be guessed: On 28 September 61, “Doc” Johnson made a 5.8 hour night flight from Bangkok to Takhli using C-46 B-914 – that is 5 hours more than a regular flight between the two points would have taken. On 10 October 61, “Doc” Johnson made a 6.3 hour flight from Takhli back to Takhli, including 5.8 hours of night flying – in both cases possibly dropping agents or commando raiders behind enemy lines. On 17 October 61, he ferried Air America C-46 B-916 from Vientiane to Tainan via Tourane (= Danang).¹⁰⁵

This operation was only possible because the US Air Force and the CIA cooperated closely, and the man in charge of organizing those support flights into Laos was once more Major Aderholt, commander of Detachment 2, 1045th Operational Evaluation & Training Group, by then stationed at Takhli. Aderholt was no stranger to both the Air Force and the CIA: When he was asked to take over the CIA’s clandestine airlift of Tibetan partisans in late 1959, the USAF unit that had been responsible for that operation (former Detachment 1 of the 322nd Troop Carrier Squadron Medium (Special) of Kadena, Okinawa, re-designated Detachment 2, 313th Air Division in 1957)¹⁰⁶ became Detachment 2, 1045th Operational Evaluation & Training Group at Kadena, directly reporting to CIA headquarters. But the CIA did not only want him to straighten out the Tibetan project, which always staged thru Takhli (T-05) in Thailand, but also to expand the detachment’s operations in Thailand, to include air support for burgeoning CIA activities in neighboring Laos.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the civil war in Laos determined the CIA to raise the level of their paramilitary activities, and soon Major Aderholt’s Detachment 2 at Takhli became “the vanguard of special air warfare in Southeast Asia.”¹⁰⁸ Takhli had been constructed with US funds to serve as one of several SAC recovery bases in case of a general war, but apart from the USAF unit working with the Tibetan airlift, only some Royal Thai Air Force T-6s were based at Takhli at that time. When Major Aderholt took over Detachment 2 in January 1960, he was shocked by what he found at the forward staging and recovery base at Takhli: “We slept in the hangar and we did our maintenance in the hangar. [...] The food [...] was the most god-awful mess I’d ever seen.”¹⁰⁹ There were no bath facilities at Takhli, and Aderholt had to buy fifty bicycles and a Volkswagen van, to have

¹⁰⁴ William A. “Al” White, interview with William M. Leary, 7-16 February 1988, written version, preserved at UTD/Leary I B14F6.

¹⁰⁵ Pages from Doc Johnson’s log book kindly sent to the author on 14 September 2012 by James Johnson.

¹⁰⁶ Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA’s secret war in Tibet*, p.271, note 17.

¹⁰⁷ Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.83.

¹⁰⁸ Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.99.

¹⁰⁹ Brigadier General Aderholt, quoted by Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.89.

at least some transportation for the Detachment. This situation changed, however, in the early sixties, when more US warplanes came into Thailand, but “Major Aderholt and his troops kept their secluded part of the base humming with under-cover activity. When operating out of Takhli, they wore civilian clothing, carried civilian identification, and did not address each other by name or rank.” And while the CIA facilities were nicknamed “The Ranch”, the town of Takhli was off-limits. On the other hand, the troops working at Takhli normally rotated back to Okinawa on a monthly schedule so that they could spend time with their families.¹¹⁰

Although it was the CIA who secretly assisted Phoumi’s forces and armed the Hmong tribesmen under Vang Pao,¹¹¹ this was not possible without massive assistance from the USAF: Lots of USAF C-124s and C-118s hauled in tons of palletized supplies of arms and rice to Takhli for distribution to the friendly forces in Laos. In May 1962, even C-130As belonging to the 21st TCS, Naha, ferried supplies into Laos.¹¹² The distribution to the forces in Laos was made by Air America aircraft: A steady stream of C-46s assigned to contract 57-060 took them across the Mekong River and airdropped them to Phoumi’s army. And when the Hmong irregulars of Major Vang Pao were included into the CIA’s support program in January 61, Major Aderholt’s Detachment 2 also started to organize the delivery of arms and supplies to the Hmong. Indeed, one early January evening, Major Aderholt received a message from CIA headquarters that directed him to airdrop one thousand weapons to Vang Pao’s Hmong guerrillas the next morning at their mountain headquarters at Pa Doung (LS-05). As the Agency had stored crates of rifles, grenades, and crew-served weapons at Takhli, while waiting for the approval of arms drops to Vang Pao, the Air America C-46s could be loaded overnight; in the early morning, the C-46s took off and headed for the drop zone at Pa Doung, where they dropped their cargo without incident. So flying arms and supplies into the mountain strongholds became routine for Air America pilots working out of Takhli: Air America C-46s airdropped the bulk of arms and supplies to Vang Pao’s forces.¹¹³ And Aderholt’s detachment continued to work with Air America in re-supplying the Hmong until he left Thailand in August 62.

Flying for USOM contract no. 57-060 continued the same way in 1961. On 29 May 61, for example, 4 C-46s (B-136, B-858, B-156, and B-910), all of them assigned to contract no. 57-060, came from Bangkok and delivered supplies to Luang Prabang directly (B-136 and B-858) or via Vientiane (B-156 and B-910). The same day, C-47 B-827 shuttled between Vientiane and Paksane. All of these aircraft were assigned to contract no. 57-060.¹¹⁴ According to the log book of Tom Jenny,¹¹⁵ the same C-46s also shuttled between Bangkok, “Korat” (standing for Takhli),¹¹⁶ Vientiane, and an unnamed drop zone at least between 21 March 61 and 29 April 61.¹¹⁷ By late May 61, General Phoumi had not only retaken Vientiane

¹¹⁰ Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp.89+103+8+104.

¹¹¹ Trest, *Air Commando One*, p. 108.

¹¹² For the C-124s and C-118s see Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.109. For the C-130As, the official history of the 21st TCS notes for the period between January and June 1962: “Our finest work, as a newly integrated unit, began in May with the airlift to Laos. Although a 7 day week around the clock operation was in progress for nearly a month, we had a very successful operation” (Microfilm no. K0716, preserved at the AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL).

¹¹³ Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp.109+116-20.

¹¹⁴ Vientiane Daily Flight Operations Log of 29 May 61 plus the “Aircraft utilization” document of that day, both in: UTD/Lewis/B2F6.

¹¹⁵ On 22 October 2004, Tom Jenny kindly sent photocopies of those pages of his log book to the author.

¹¹⁶ For 1 April 61, Tom Jenny later corrected his entry “Korat” to “Takhli”, but all of those flights in fact passed thru the “Ranch” at Takhli, when “Korat” was noted in the log book (Interview with Tom Jenny, dated 1 June 2006).

¹¹⁷ In his log book, Tom Jenny notes the following Air America C-46s for the Bangkok-“Korat”-Vientiane-Bangkok run, sometimes limited to the “Korat”-Vientiane-“Korat” segments: B-154 on 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, and 29 March 61, then Bangkok-Saigon-“Korat” on 29/30 March, “Korat” to “Korat” (apparently via a DZ) on 31 March, and “Korat”-Vientiane-Udon-“Korat”/Takhli on 1 April 61; it was again used on 7, 8, 11, 12, 13,

since a couple of months, but he had also created several new regiments and based 2 of them (GM10 and GM11) south of Luang Prabang, headquarters of Military Region I, while a new battalion (BV 51) had been created at Paksane.¹¹⁸ So it can be assumed that the Air America aircraft mentioned above that on 29 May 61 flew to Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Paksane under the provisions of USOM contract 57-060 transported military supplies. Two C-46s were destroyed while operating under the provisions of contract no. 57-060: B-130 made an emergency landing in the Plain of Jars, Laos, caused by elevator control loss, and crashed on 26 November 60,¹¹⁹ and B-136 was destroyed while dropping ammunition¹²⁰ at Pha Khao (LS-14) near Vientiane on 13 August 61, when it struck a mountain while dropping supplies.¹²¹ Contract no. 57-060 with USOM/Laos expired on 9 April 62, and as the old, ostensibly civilian Program Evaluation Office (PEO) hidden within USOM had been replaced by the uniformed Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Laos in April 1961,¹²² the new contract was openly concluded with the United States Air Force: Contract no. AF62(531)-1683 effective 10 April 62 “provides for the provision by the Company of C-46, C-45, C-47 and DC-4 flying services in Laos for MAAG. [...] The Department of Defense provides appropriate indemnity. This is the first time that such contracting has been arranged with the U.S. Government”.¹²³

There was still another contract that had clearly military implications: Contract no. ICA-39-007 of 14 January 60, covering helicopter flights, maintenance, and training within Laos, was openly concluded between Air America and “the Program Evaluation Office of the United States Operations Mission in Laos (hereinafter referred to as ‘PEO/USOM/LAOS’).”¹²⁴ The purpose of this contract was “providing helicopter flights, maintenance and training program within the country of Laos. [...] The Contractor shall also provide helicopter flight and maintenance training to such students as are presented by PEO/USOM/Laos. Such training shall be given at times when the aircraft are not performing operations missions hereunder or undergoing emergency maintenance or repair necessary to support such operations”. For that purpose, 4 American pilots, 1 American Operations Manager, 1 Chief Mechanic, 12 Mechanics plus 5 other support people were included in the contract.¹²⁵ Already in the fall of 1959, three Air America pilots – Dale Williamson, Art Wilson, and Gordon V. Smith – went to the Kawasaki factory outside Kobe in Japan for helicopter training on the Bell 47, manufactured by Kawasaki under license from Bell. In September 1959, CAT bought Kawasaki-Bell 47 B-803 and brought it to Tainan;¹²⁶ here, Dale Williamson, who had 60 hours in the Bell 47, that is more than Wilson and Smith, was assigned to instruct a fourth Air America pilot, Herbie Liu. Shortly thereafter, it was decided to give the pilots instruction in

15, and 16 April 61, sometimes apparently directly operating from “Korat” to the Drop zone and back to “Korat”; other C-46s used on those flights by Tom Jenny were B-138 on 28 March and 10 April 61, B-136 on 28 and 29 April 61, and B-156 on 9 April 61 (taken from the photocopies of his log book kindly sent to the author by Tom Jenny on 22 October 2004).

¹¹⁸ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.51/2.

¹¹⁹ Lists “Company operated aircraft lost or destroyed” (in: UTD/CIA/B1F10), “Operational casualties in SEA” (in: UTD/CIA/B29F1), “Aircraft accidents 1960” (in: UTD/CIA/B49F2), and “Aircraft destroyed or lost” (in: UTD/CIA/B49F2).

¹²⁰ Ed Eckholdt, interview made by William M. Leary on 24 September 1987; the notes of Prof. Leary are preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F13.

¹²¹ Lists “Company operated aircraft lost or destroyed” (in: UTD/CIA/B1F10), “Operational casualties in SEA” (in: UTD/CIA/B29F1), “Aircraft accidents 1961” (in: UTD/CIA/B49F2), “Aircraft destroyed or lost” (in: UTD/CIA/B49F2).

¹²² Castle, *At war*, p. 32.

¹²³ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 13 March 62, p. 5 (in: UTD/CIA/B7F1).

¹²⁴ Contract no. ICA-39-007 of 14 January 60 in: UTD/Lewis/B2F5.

¹²⁵ Contract no. ICA-39-007 of 14 January 60 in: UTD/Lewis/B2F5.

¹²⁶ Among the accessoires of Bell 47 B-803 were inflatable floats and long range tanks (Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p.344, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3).

the model they would be flying in South East Asia. So the four pilots were sent to Johnson AFB, Japan, where they flew the Sikorsky H-19B for 15-20 hours. In the meantime, arrangements had been made to acquire four H-19As from the USAF at Clark AFB. So the four pilots went to Clark for training with the aircraft at the higher elevations they would be operating at in Laos. But as the aircraft were only slightly loaded, that training was not considered to be very realistic. In late 1959 and early 1960, the four pilots went to Vientiane.¹²⁷



CAT Bell 47 B-803 at Taipei in August 1960, taken by Dale Williamson (former photo no. 1-WL1-28-4-PB42, now preserved at UTD/Leary/B75F17)

In March /April 60, the four H-19As were flown to Seno in USAF C-124s. At Seno, they were assembled under the direction of Abe Rivero, who had been assigned to the helicopter project since the beginning.¹²⁸ On 16 March 60, 2 Sikorsky H-19As (H-1 and H-9) were handed over to Air America at Seno, followed by 2 more (H-3 and H-8) on 7 April 60. The aircraft were officially bailed under contract no. AF33(600)-40818 from the Air Force Logistic Command, Wright Patterson Air Force Base,¹²⁹ and used in Laos under the provisions of contract no. ICA-39-007, also with USOM/Laos. In April, that is in the hottest month of the year, Dale Williamson, now acting as project chief pilot, ferried the first H-19 to Vientiane. With a full fuel load and about 300 pounds of spare parts, Williamson was unable to lift off and had to make a running take-off. He found that the helicopter stalled at 800 feet. By the time he reached Vientiane, he had burned off enough fuel to reach 3,000 feet. The H-19s were not very effective; they could not hover at sea level with full tanks, and they were even more severely limited at altitude. Williamson tried to keep three helicopters in service, using one for spare parts. Gordon Smith flew only a couple of trips and then left the program, Liu was mainly used for ferry flights, and Williamson and Wilson did most of the flying. They stayed mainly in lower areas, flying out of Pakse and Savannakhet. The main type of missions operated by Air America's H-19s under that contract seems to have been to fly

¹²⁷ Dale D. Williamson, telephone interview made by William M. Leary on 25 September 1985; Professor Leary's notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5; Williamson took his first training ride on 18 September 59 (Dale D. Williamson, interview made by William M. Leary at Bellevue, WA, on 13 July 1987; Professor Leary's notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5).

¹²⁸ Dale D. Williamson, interview made by William M. Leary at Bellevue, WA, on 13 July 1987; Professor Leary's notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.

¹²⁹ List "Government furnished – Government leased aircraft" of 19 June 1962, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1; Memorandum "Contract Administration", dated 27 July 62, by Jerry Fink, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16.

around military advisers and CIA officers to meetings in outlying areas and especially to establish a Hmong irregular army, but also, during elections, to distribute leaflets that the CIA man on board would toss out of the helicopter. Williamson also flew medical supplies to Dr. Tom Dooley, but the customer discouraged this.¹³⁰

On 26 May 1960, while working out of Savannakhet, Dale Williamson had Air America's first helicopter accident. He had been fueled to maximum for a leaflet drop, when the mission was changed to an emergency medevac. A Lao soldier, stationed in a small outpost some 40 miles northeast of Seno, near the border with Vietnam, had hacked his leg with a machete and gangrene had set in. The area was not good, politically. Williamson took off with a Lao captain and a medic. He reached the area, picked up the soldier and his family (needed to look after him), and took off. He circled to 1,000 to gain altitude, when the engine quit. When the



Air America Sikorsky H-19A "H-3" at the crash site at Na Nhom, Laos on 26 May 60
(UTD/Kirkpatrick/B30)

H-19 reached the ground, the tail rudder and other parts were heavily damaged on impact with the ground, but there were no injuries. All occupants walked one mile back to the outpost, where Williamson spent an uneasy night, having learned that a price had been offered for him. The next morning, he was picked up by Art Wilson.¹³¹

At that point, it became evident that Air America's helicopter job could only be done with better equipment and properly trained pilots. So Williamson recommended to his superiors that experienced military pilots be brought in, and the CIA had reached the same conclusion. Air America then turned to the Marines on Okinawa for replacement pilots, and immediately discharges were arranged for Red Weinberg, Chuck Bade, and Tom Moher (hired 6 June 60), who were later joined by Clarence Abadie (hired as project manager on 28 July 60).¹³² Clarence Abadie recalls: "The H-19s were operating from Vientiane at that time and we were living in a house provided by AID in their compound located several kilometers out of Vientiane to the north. Of the 4 H-19s, we flew 2 at a time with the other 2 in maintenance. One helicopter usually operated south (Pakse, Savannakhet, Thakhek, Paksane) and the other one operated around Vientiane and north (Vang Vieng, etc.). We alternated pilots as schedule

¹³⁰ Dale D. Williamson, interview made by William M. Leary at Bellevue, WA, on 13 July 1987; Professor Leary's notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5; Leary, *CIA Operations in Laos*, p. 55.

¹³¹ Dale D. Williamson, interview made by William M. Leary at Bellevue, WA, on 13 July 1987; Professor Leary's notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.

¹³² Dale D. Williamson, telephone interview made by William M. Leary on 25 September 1985; Professor Leary's notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5; and Dale D. Williamson, interview made by William M. Leary at Bellevue, WA, on 13 July 1987; Professor Leary's notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.

would allow. Although some areas were ‘hot’, there was no Project Pay (Hazard Pay) at that time – co-pilot pay was \$600 and Captain pay was \$1,200 a month – we were not paid for hours flown or worked and while we were out in the field we flew from sun up to sun down and occasionally returned home after dark.”¹³³

“When Captain Kong Le took over the Lao government in Vientiane, we were moved to Bangkok and operated into southern Laos from the airport in Bangkok. We flew to Pakse at the beginning of the week and returned to Bangkok for maintenance and crew change at the end of that week. Operating days were 12 to 14 hours with flight times from 8 to 12 hours. We supported the Special Forces (Jim Ipsen and his team and others) as they helped the loyal Lao troops push back to Vientiane from Savannakhet, Thakhek, Paksane, etc. We also operated to Saravane, the Plateau and Attopeu from the base of Pakse. Our Filipino flight mechanics and ground crews were outstanding and worked longer hours. They got the helicopters ready to go in the morning, flew with us all day, loaded and unloaded cargo/wounded/bodies, pumped fuel with a hand pump and checked & greased the helicopters at the end of the day’s flying. The Chinese radio operators who manned the ground stations (HF & VHF) kept track of us with our infrequent contacts – the HF radios in the H-19s were poor at best.”¹³⁴

“It was in the south, around Pakse, Attopeu and Saravane (L-44), that we worked the H-19 to good advantage and often flew payroll from Pakse and Savannakhet (L-39) to the troops as far east as the Vietnam border and south to Khong Island (L-07). On one of those flights I landed a Paymaster at an outpost due east of Thakhet (L-40) on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was just before that area was completely overrun.”¹³⁵ “I flew Gen Phoumi from Paksane to the ferry landing in Laos, which is opposite Nong Khai in Thailand when he returned to Vientiane – he drove from that point to Vientiane in a Lao army jeep for the effect it would have on his troops and the Lao people in Vientiane. After dropping him off, I flew back to Paksane but about half way back (over Thailand), the H-19 engine began running rough and I could not climb to get out a radio call. I made a call in the blind on VHF and Ron Sutphin answered – he was over Savannakhet in a Helio Courier and a high altitude test flight. Since it was almost dark, he stayed up and in contact with me until I reached the river at Paksane. The C-46s, C-47s, and Helios relayed our positions most of the time, since we were usually too low for VHF reports to the ground stations at long distances and we were too close for HF. Working with Gen. Phoumi’s troops on their drive into Vientiane, I did not take a shower for 3 days – we slept in temporary quarters at the Paksane airfield – it was too cold to take a dip in the river at night. When ‘the good guys’ secured Vientiane once again and Capt. Kong Le moved out to the north, we returned to Vientiane with our operations.”¹³⁶ But before that, during the assault on Vientiane, Phoumi had suffered heavy casualties, and Air America pilot Thomas Moher, with his H-19, had picked up 40-50 KIA and WIA per day.¹³⁷

After the Kong Le *coup*, the main purpose of Air America’s helicopters assigned to contract no. ICA-39-007 was to support Phoumi’s troops who officially became the troops of the Royal Lao Government on 4 January 61, as that day, the King formally recognized Prince Boun Oum as Prime Minister and General Phoumi as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense.¹³⁸ Indeed, already in November 60, Air America Sikorsky H-19s also supported the pro-Western troops of General Phoumi Nosavan against Kong Le.¹³⁹ On 20 December 1960, 4

¹³³ Clarence J. Abadie, Letter sent to Prof. William Leary on 10 June 90, in: UTD/Leary/B43F6.

¹³⁴ Clarence J. Abadie, Letter sent to Prof. William Leary on 10 June 90, in: UTD/Leary/B43F6.

¹³⁵ Clarence J. Abadie, “Air America & the H-19A”, in: *Air America Log*, March 1998 (online).

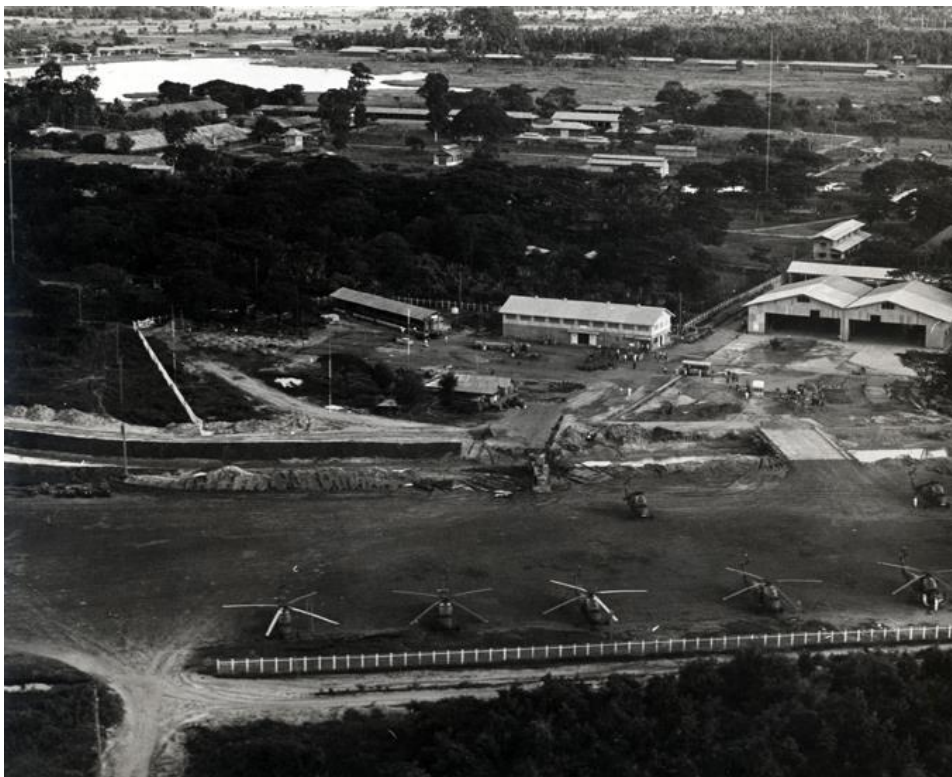
¹³⁶ Clarence J. Abadie, Letter sent to Prof. William Leary on 10 June 90, in: UTD/Leary/B43F6.

¹³⁷ Thomas A. Moher, Interview conducted by Prf. Bill Leary, tape, transcript in: UTD/Leary/B84B4 and B5.

¹³⁸ Castle, *At war*, p.27.

¹³⁹ For example, on 25 November 60, an Air America H-19 flew a PARU captain from his position on the Mekong back to Thakhek (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 37).

former US Marines UH-34Ds (H-A, H-B, H-C, and H-D) were received at Bangkok¹⁴⁰, also leased from the USAF under contract no. AF33(600)-40818¹⁴¹ and also used in Laos under the provisions of contract no. ICA-39-007; they arrived at Wattay in January 61.¹⁴² Their main task was to assist re-supplying the FAR as a reaction to the Soviet airlift that had started on 16 December supporting Kong Le's troops near Vang Vieng.¹⁴³ When the military and political situation escalated, that is after the Plain of Jars had fallen into communist hands in January 61 because of massive communist airlifts, the US Government took several counter-measures: On 9 March 61, President Kennedy ordered an Okinawa-based US contingency force (Task Force 116) to alert status and the 7th Fleet to stand by in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Siam. The same day, Kennedy also authorized the transfer of 16 USMC UH-34Ds to Air America. So on 22 March 61, 300 Marines from TF116 arrived at Udorn to organize a helicopter repair and maintenance base; on 28 March, the UH-34Ds were flown from a US Navy ship to Bangkok; and on 29 March 61, USMC and Air America pilots ferried the UH-34Ds from Bangkok to Air America's new helicopter base at RThAFB Udorn.¹⁴⁴ All of them



Air America's Udorn base in the early sixties
(UTD/Leary/B77F2; former photo no. 1WL1-27-14-PB215)

were bailed under USAF contract no. AF33(600)-40818,¹⁴⁵ and all of them were also used in Laos under the provisions of contract no. ICA-39-007. So these Air America UH-34Ds of the

¹⁴⁰ Aircraft list of June 62, corrected to Sept. 1963, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1.

¹⁴¹ List "Government furnished – Government leased aircraft" of 19 June 1962, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1; Memorandum "Contract Administration", dated 27 July 62, by Jerry Fink, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16.

¹⁴² Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 47. It was probably these helicopters that transported BIs (*Bataillons d'Infanterie*) 4 and 26 from Vientiane to Luang Prabang in January 61 (ib., p.49).

¹⁴³ Castle, *At war*, p.25; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 42.

¹⁴⁴ *Air America Log*, vol. VI, no. 5, 1972, p. 4. Castle, *At war*, p.29.

¹⁴⁵ List "Government furnished – Government leased aircraft" of 19 June 1962, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1; Memorandum "Contract Administration", dated 27 July 62, by Jerry Fink, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16. This USAF contract also explains why these US Marines helicopters were officially transferred to the USAF and received

first generation¹⁴⁶ were a reaction against the Soviet and North Vietnamese support given to the Pathet Lao/Neutralist forces, and of course they should help to prevent an eventual communist take-over of Laos. Their main task was to support pro-Western troops, and so they flew several types of missions: They would transport all sorts of military supplies (food, ammunition, fuel) to gun positions and other outposts, fly medical evacuation missions from the villages or from battle areas, transport indigenous, especially Hmong troops from one point to another during the battle, or evacuate villages and outposts under fire. Some of these UH-34Ds like "H-U" ("55-5258") and "H-M" ("55-5250") were also temporarily stationed at Luang Prabang ("LP") for local resupply flights. This type of missions explains why so many

DATE	AIRCRAFT FLOWN				LOCAL OR CROSS COUNTRY		SOLO		INSTRUMENT	DAILY TOTAL TIME	REMARKS OR INSPECTOR'S SIGNATURE, CERTIFICATION NUMBER AND RATING
	MAKE OF AIRCRAFT	CERTIFICATE NUMBER	MAKE OF ENGINE AND H.P.	CLASS RATING	FROM	TO	DAY	NIGHT			
11	S-58 (Hus)	55-5252	CURTIS WRIGHT 620		UDORN - THAKK - SAKK - UDORN		3	00		114 50	
12	"	"	"		THAKK - SAHNUAKHET		1	00		115 50	
14	"	55-5258	"		UDORN - LUANG PRABANG		5	00		120 50	
15	"	"	"		LUANG PRA. - LUANG PRABANG		6	50		127 40	MADGE LCL RUNS FORM LP (Kucham ck.) Resupply
16	"	"	"		LP - NAM THA - LP		5	05		132 45	LCL RECON AT NAM THA FOR Capt SHANCOCK'S
17	"	"	"		LP - KUCHAM - LP		5	55		139 40	LCL AREA Resupply hops
18	"	"	"		LP - NAM THA - HOUY SOI - LP - LUANG		5	50		144 30	Test Capt Shannon's ability to new village to organize, re-activity
20	"	55-5241	"		UDORN - VTE - PHONG - VTE - UDORN		3	50		148 20	Returned from VTE in HM
24	"	55-5252	"		UDORN - VTE - PHONG - VTE - UDORN		3	40		152 00	Supplies to PHONG & THOAPS
26	"	55-5241	"		UDORN - VTE		4	55		152 35	
27	"	"	"		VTE - VTE (NAM) UDORN		4	15		156 50	Resupply BANKEUN & THOAPS to set in PHONG C (W.K.)
PAGE TOTAL											
AMT. FORWARD											
TOTAL TO DATE											
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE FOREGOING ENTRIES ARE TRUE AND CORRECT.											
										SIGNED Fred W. Sass	

DATE	AIRCRAFT FLOWN				LOCAL OR CROSS COUNTRY		SOLO		INSTRUMENT	DAILY TOTAL TIME	REMARKS OR INSPECTOR'S SIGNATURE, CERTIFICATION NUMBER AND RATING
	MAKE OF AIRCRAFT	CERTIFICATE NUMBER	MAKE OF ENGINE AND H.P.	CLASS RATING	FROM	TO	DAY	NIGHT			
29	S-58 (Hus)	55-5258	CURTIS WRIGHT 620		UDORN - VTE - PHONG - VTE - UDORN		2	40		159 30	Took repairs to PHONG - GUNN' GET IN W.X.
30	"	55-5253	"		UDORN - PHONG - UDORN		2	30		162 00	WENT TO GET HIG (WARRER) INVERTED TO PICK UP HA.
JUNE 1	"	60-6913	"		UDORN - SAVUK - SAVUK		4	40		166 40	Took CH LITTLE TO BAN PHONG + BAN SANG
JUNE 1	"	60-6913	"		SAVUK - SAVUK - UDORN		2	45		169 25	Took CH LITTLE TO PHONG HENG.
5	"	55-5257	"		UDORN - VTE - UDORN		2	55		172 20	Took wounded from Capt Cavilloni Phung Heng.
15	"	55-5252	"		UDORN - UDORN		5	55		173 15	TEST Hop H-O
15	"	60-6914	"		UDORN - UDORN		4	5		174 00	" " H-W
16	"	60-6914	"		UDORN - VTE - LUANG PRABANG		3	50		177 50	STOPPED AT SAHNUAKHET TO SEARCH FOR AMERICANS. NO LUCK
17	"	"	"		LP - LP		2	10		179 50	COULDN'T MAKE PARTIAL, WEATHER
17	"	55-5250	"		LP - LP		3	50		183 40	CP WITH GOSCH
18	"	"	"		LP - LP		3	15		186 55	KILLED HW AT IPSERVILLE - THANK GOD IM STILL ALIVE!
PAGE TOTAL											
AMT. FORWARD											
TOTAL TO DATE											
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE FOREGOING ENTRIES ARE TRUE AND CORRECT.											
										SIGNED Fred W. Sass	

UH-34D flights: Extracts from the log book of Fred W. Sass for May and early June 1961 (in: UTD/Leary/B48F3)

of those UH-34Ds were hit by ground fire: H-M on 18 November 61, H-12 on 24 January 62, H-M on 22 March 62, and H-R on 28 April 62.¹⁴⁷ On 15 May 61, UH-34D H-B made an emergency landing in enemy territory, and all people on board – pilot E. Shore, flight mechanic J. P. McMorrow, and NBC reporter Grant Wolfkill – were imprisoned for 15 months.¹⁴⁸

Originally, the big fleet of Air America UH-34Ds was intended to have an even more aggressive task – they were to be used as part of the aborted Operation *Mill Pond*. This was not only the well-known plan to bomb the Plain of Jars by B-26s, but a planned invasion of

USAF serials. These UASF serials did not appear on the outside of the helicopters, but apparently in the cockpit. So some early pilots like Fred Sass quoted them in their log books as the identity of the aircraft they had flown.

¹⁴⁶ Air America's UH-34s of the first generation used tail numbers composed of "H-" plus another letter, those of the second generation used tail numbers composed of "H-" plus a number.

¹⁴⁷ List "Operational casualties in SEA, 1 Jan. 1960 – 1 Dec. 1962", in: UTD/CIA/B29F1.

¹⁴⁸ List "Operational casualties in SEA, 1 Jan. 1960 – 1 Dec. 1962", in: UTD/CIA/B29F1; Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.94/5.

that plain. Interestingly, the build-up of Air America's helicopter operations at Udorn by US Marines was also called Operation *Mill Pond*,¹⁴⁹ a name that is mostly known only for the aborted B-26 attack out of Takhli that was to hit the Plain of Jars on 17 April 61.¹⁵⁰ Apart from 4 UH-34Ds delivered to Air America already in December 1960, the bulk of the UH-34s had been very abruptly ordered to Laos in March 61. The story was that they were to replace a squadron of US Marine helicopters,¹⁵¹ but in reality, Udorn airfield was only built by US Marine forces who did not arrive from Okinawa before 22 March 61.¹⁵² Apparently, the beginning of Air America's new helicopter operations out of Udorn was conceived as a part of the same decision made by President Kennedy in March 61 to substantially increase US support to the Royal Lao Government against the Communists. In the case of the helicopters, this *new* operation was "disguised" as a continuation, i.e. as a simple change of the operator from the US Marines to Air America, in order to comply with the neutrality of Laos. Thomas Ahern calls Operation *Mill Pond* "the contingency plan for a US invasion of the Plain of Jars" and, to prove it, quotes a document of June 61 from the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. This document says that the "helicopter portion of *Mill Pond* operations is falling apart at the seams"¹⁵³ – apparently referring to the many Air America UH-34Ds that had already been lost by that time.¹⁵⁴

The origin of CEECO, 1959-1962: CEECO in the Republic of China

Although the US military was the first non-civilian organization to help the Royal Lao Government against the Communist forces that had invaded the country, it did not take much time until the Central Intelligence Agency joined the battle for Laos. In doing that, the CIA was no newcomer to fight communism in South East Asia: Since the early fifties the Agency had sent spy planes and agents into Red China from bases in Taiwan and Japan, and also since the early fifties, the CIA had trained a counter-insurgency police troop in Thailand against Communist infiltration. And while CAT had flown many covert missions out of Taiwan and Japan, quite a number of CIA-owned B-26 bombers had been stored at the Air Asia facility at

¹⁴⁹ Col. George R. Hofmann, Jr., *Operation Millpond. U.S. Marines in Thailand, 1961*, Quantico, VA (USMC History Division) 2009, p. 8 (see http://www.marines.mil/Portals/59/Publications/Operation%20Millpond%20US%20Marines%20in%20Thailand%20PCN%2010600001800_1.pdf).

¹⁵⁰ See my file: *Air America in Laos III – in combat* within this *History of Air America*.

¹⁵¹ USAF GS-13 James E. Spencer, former Contract Administrator for USAF-Air America contracts, recalls the beginning of Air America operations out of Udorn from the military point of view: "In early 1961, there was a combat Marine squadron operating and maintaining UH-34 aircraft out of Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. Apparently, because of the political situation, a decision was made in Washington to remove the Marines from Udorn, and to take-over the operation with a civilian contractor. In February 1961, a joint State/DOD message was received by the procuring activity in Tachikawa, Japan directing that the Marine operations at Udorn be taken over by contracting with Air America, Inc. As there were no detailed requirements contained in the State/DOD message, another Contracting Officer, Mr. John F. Pakenham, and I were sent to Vientiane to discuss the details of the requirement with Gen. Boyle. Gen. Boyle's instructions to us were: 'I want aircraft to fly where I want them, when I want them and without any interference.' After the visit to Gen. Boyle, a meeting was arranged with the commander of the Marine squadron, and the details of what would be required of the contractor were determined" (James E. Spencer, End of tour report, 19 September 1974, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F5). All this sounds as the if beginning of Air America helicopter operations out of Udorn was only a change of the operator, replacing the Marines by Air America, and that was probably what people should believe.

¹⁵² In reality, the Marine squadron at Udorn was not a combat Marine squadron, but Marine Air Base Squadron 16 (MABS-16) that had received its order to move from its home at Futema, Okinawa to Udorn only on 19 March 61, with airlift to begin on 22 March 61 (Hofmann, *Operation Millpond. U.S. Marines in Thailand, 1961*, pp. V, 7, and 8).

¹⁵³ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.94.

¹⁵⁴ Air America UH-34D losses by June 61 were: H-D on 22 January 61; H-Q on 5 April 61; H-I on 19 April 61; H-K on 15 May 61; H-G on 30 May 61; and H-W on 18 June 61. For details see the file: *SIKORSKY UH-34s (1st series)* within my *The Aircraft of Air America*.

Tainan over the years, especially aircraft inherited in the fifties from the Agency's Western Enterprises Inc. of Taiwan or in 1958 from Operation *Haik* against Indonesia.¹⁵⁵ So in 1959, Air Asia Co Ltd, which already had a large maintenance facility at Tainan, signed contract no. 59-069 with CEECO or the "Consolidated Electric Equipment Company"¹⁵⁶ covering "Flight Personnel Service".¹⁵⁷ Officially, the identity of CEECO has never been disclosed, but it is evident that the organization was another CIA proprietary.¹⁵⁸ Evidently, CEECO was a CIA front company that officially owned the CIA's B-26s based at Tainan, as this name appeared in some Air America documents,¹⁵⁹ and in the beginning, Air Asia's contract with CEECO probably only included maintenance and some flight training. For, when the CIA built up Project *Mill Pond* in March 61, some of the Project's Air America pilots like Ed Eckholdt and Al White already had B-26 experience. At that time, CEECO also included USAF-owned aircraft like the metal color B-26s,¹⁶⁰ as most of the *Mill Pond* B-26s were USAF aircraft.¹⁶¹ Indeed, in his log book, Ed Eckholdt refers to the Takhli-based B-26s as to CEECO aircraft.¹⁶² The purpose of those B-26s may only be guessed: to be ready for a strike mission, when required somewhere in South East Asia, perhaps especially for strikes against the Pathet Lao, as President Eisenhower considered Laos to be the main problem. Some time after the CEECO B-26s that had participated in the abortive Project *Mill Pond* had returned to Tainan in August 61, i.e. since late 1961, the Republic of China Air Force range at Hsin-Chu near Tainan became available for gunnery practice. So probably still covered by the "Flight Personnel Service" provided under the provisions of contract 59-069, some Air America pilots flew a number of the CEECO B-26s on training missions for bombing, napalm and low-level strafing practice near Tainan from about November 61 to 1964, one of the instructors being Ed Eckholdt. But although official Air America documents refer to those B-26 as "CEECO" aircraft, this name seems not to have been used among the pilots. Joe Hazen, one of those B-26 pilots says: "I don't recall any special names given to the B-26. Probably less said was better. The flying was done to 'test' the armament of the aircraft. We flew to a Chinese Air Force base [...], and had the guns armed and the bombs, which were 100# WSF (water/sand filled) loaded. We then fired the guns and dropped (skip bomb) the bombs at a range on the base, land, de-arm, and go back to Tainan."¹⁶³ According to Morrie Kenstler, there was a total of 7 aircraft, excluding a Chinese aircraft with dual controls.¹⁶⁴ The identity of this TB-26B has always been given as "B-888", but there are no records of this aircraft in the archives of the CAA of the Republic of China.¹⁶⁵ However it is believed to have already

¹⁵⁵ For Western Enterprises and Operation *Haik* see the files *CAT*, *Air Asia*, *Air America – the Company on Taiwan III: Work for the US Government and Working in Remote Countries: CAT in New Zealand, Thailand-Burma, French Indochina, Guatemala, and Indonesia* of this database.

¹⁵⁶ See the "Summary of revenue contracts" in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F4.

¹⁵⁷ Memorandum "Contract Administration" of 27 July 62, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16 .

¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, when the remaining CEECO B-26s were to be ferried to the Congo by SAT pilots in August 64, it was the USAF's Logistical Support Group (LSG) who was forthcoming as the owner of those aircraft, and the delivery contract was an Air Force contract concluded between SAT and the LSG (see Memorandum no. DFO-64-444 of 17 August 1964, at: <http://www.air-america.net/images/SAT/sat-b26a.jpg>). Apparently, the LSG was another cover used for CIA activities.

¹⁵⁹ See the Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd of 25 September 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.

¹⁶⁰ E-mail dated 18 December 2004, kindly sent to the author by Jim Pearson.

¹⁶¹ Hagedorn / Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, pp.132-36.

¹⁶² Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13; see the entry that notes his first flight in a B-26 for 18 November 61 in his list "Types flown – date".

¹⁶³ E-mail dated 5 July 2004, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.

¹⁶⁴ E-mail dated 29 June 2004 kindly sent to the author by Morrie Kenstler.

¹⁶⁵ E-mail dated 26 November 2004, kindly sent to the author by Billy K. C. Chang, Director General, CAA, Republic of China.

been used by Western International on Taiwan since 1956,¹⁶⁶ and it was then used by a number of Air America pilots between at least November 61 and February 64.¹⁶⁷ Evidently this aircraft was primarily destined for training, while all the other B-26s served as a stand-by force for any future CIA operation anywhere in the world, and as can be seen in the B-26 file of this database, indeed some of them were delivered to conflict zones in Africa. All of these B-26s were painted black and were referred to by their crews as “Blackbirds”. One of them, “8765”, crashed near Tainan on 18 February 1962 during a training flight, killing James A. Rasmussen, when he flew into a mountain.¹⁶⁸ Only the last three digits of the serials were painted on the fin, but they were deliberately arbitrary to make these aircraft non-attributable.

CEECO operations in Thailand 1960-62:

It was probably in the summer of 1960 that this contract with CEECO (no. 59-069) was extended to also cover CIA operations in Laos and Thailand, that is at least “maintenance services in Thailand”.¹⁶⁹ When the Russians began to support Kong Le, General Phoumi withdraw from Vientiane to Savannakhet in the South, where, with Prince Boun Oum and backed by the Americans, he formed an army and tried to install a counter-government led by Prince Boun Oum. US military aid now only went to Phoumi Nosavan at Savannakhet and was sharply increased. Special Forces personnel conducted intensive training of his troops, while Air America C-46s flew in supplies from Takhli and Bangkok. In August 1960, James W. “Bill” Lair, the CIA specialist responsible for developing the CIA’s PARU (Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit) program in Thailand, took an Air America Helio Courier, piloted by Ron Sutphin, from Vientiane to Savannakhet to deliver the money (Lao kip) to Phoumi’s 5 battalions; on that occasion, Lair also convinced Phoumi to have his troops assisted by PARU teams.¹⁷⁰ The PARU was a highly effective parachute-trained police unit formed by the

¹⁶⁶ Hagedorn / Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, p.174.

¹⁶⁷ TB-26B “888” was flown by Joe Hazen on 17 and 18 November 61 as well as on 22, 24, and 28 February 64 (e-mail dated 7 June 2004, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen); on 17 November 61, Ed Eckholdt was checked out by Bill Beale in this solid nose, 8 gun aircraft on a one hour flight from Tainan to Tainan; on 26 February 64, Ed Eckholdt and Bob Abrahms were checked out again at Tainan in a 2.00 hours flight, Ed Eckholdt making one landing, and Bob Abrahms 2 landings; on 27 February 64, Ed Eckholdt made two 2.00 hour flights in B-888 from Tainan to Tainan: in the first flight, Ed checked out Chuck Cameron and Russ Krieg, and in the second one Morrie Kenstler (info extracted by Ed Eckholdt from his log book and sent on 11 March 1992 to Leif Hellström, who kindly e-mailed it to the author on 11 July 2004). Already on 22 February 64, Joe Hazen had been requalified in “888” by Truman Barnes (e-mail dated 29 June 08, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen). The same aircraft was flown by Tom Jenny out of Tainan in training programs on 22 and 23 February 64 (log book of Tom Jenny, who kindly sent photocopies of those pages to the author on 22 October 2004), and it was also flown by Morrie Kenstler (e-mail dated 29 June 2004 kindly sent to the author by Morrie Kenstler).

¹⁶⁸ See list “Operational casualties in SEA”, in: UTD/CIA/B29F1; list “Aircraft destroyed or lost”, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2.

¹⁶⁹ The definition of this contract in the Dixon Speas audit dated 12 July 73, p. D-5 (in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F4) gives “flying and maintenance services in Thailand”. However, the Inspector General’s Survey of Civil Air Transport dated 1 May 62, Tab A, p.15, (online readable at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1818029/196201.pdf) lists CEECO under “Services under contract to CIA” covering “Personnel, Taiwan, Takhli, Maintenance”, while flying in Laos (Helio, C-46, C-47, and Do-28) was done under USOM contract no. 57-08.

¹⁷⁰ Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, pp .95/6, at: <http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/>. According to Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 35, the Air America Helio arrived during the second week of September 60 and delivered US. Dollars; in late September 60, the Thai military formed a covert military advisory group to support Laos, later to be known as “Kaw Taw”, with headquarters at Bangkok and a forward detachment at Savannakhet. In November and December 1960 PARU communications and medical technicians played an important role in Phoumi’s capture of Vientiane (Castle, *At war*, p.38).

CIA¹⁷¹ to assist remote police outposts attacked by Communist guerrillas in Thailand, and over the years, Bill Lair had succeeded in transforming this counter-insurgency elite group into a mobile force of highly skilled communications, intelligence, and weapons experts who could train others.¹⁷² And so, Phoumi also obtained support from his friend, Thai Prime Minister Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who sent some of those PARU elite teams to train Phoumi's troops and to serve as intelligence teams, with Helio B-835 assigned to Savannakhet.¹⁷³ Indeed, on 20 November 60, 2 Air America C-47s flew in from Hua Hin, Thailand, home of the PARU, bringing to Savannakhet five 5-man PARU teams, each consisting of a commander, deputy, medic, and 2 communication specialists.¹⁷⁴



Air America Helio “847” surrounded by Lao troops in 1962/3
(UTD/Rich/B1F1)

When Bill Lair flew to General Phoumi in August 60, he had never seen a Helio Courier before, as he assures in his “Oral history.”¹⁷⁵ So at that time, CEECO – who would later have three of them – did not yet exist as an operating entity in Thailand and Laos. In the early sixties, there were only two other customers in Laos and Thailand that used Air America Helios: In September 1959, the Helio was introduced with USOM operations in Laos under the provisions of contract no. 57-08¹⁷⁶ (and these were probably the same Helios¹⁷⁷ that sometimes also made liaison flights for Detachment 2 within Thailand and to Vientiane),¹⁷⁸

¹⁷¹ PARU training was established at Lopburi in 1951 and relocated to Hua Hin in 1953. Supplies for the program were delivered by Air America to the CIA's Bangkok cover organization called “Sea Supply”. At the end of the program the men had even learnt to parachute into insurgent-contested areas (Castle, *At war*, pp.37/8).

¹⁷² Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp. 78/9.

¹⁷³ Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p. 356, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

¹⁷⁴ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 37: “Teams A and B were to run the gauntlet to Vientiane at the head of Phoumi's columns, Team C would block the columns' eastern flanks at Khamkeut, while Teams D and E would bring up the rear.”

¹⁷⁵ Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, p.95, at: <http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/>.

¹⁷⁶ In September 59, Air America's first Helio Courier, B-833, was chartered to USOM for trials in Laos (Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd of 10 Sept. 59, in: UTD/CIA/B6F4).

¹⁷⁷ The original contract no. 57-08 between Air America and the International Cooperation Agency (ICA), represented by the US Operations Mission to Laos (USOM/Laos), was signed on 13 July 57. But already on 3 November 60, Air America's Helio B-833 made a forced landing at Ban Khan Dia, Thailand, when it was assigned to USOM contract 57-08 (Aircraft accidents 1960, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2). Supplemental Agreement no.4 dated 24 May 61 (in: UTD/Lewis/B2F5) included one or more C-47s, one or more C-46s, two or more Helio Couriers, a Bell 47G Helicopter, as well as DC-4s and DC-6s on request, while Supplemental Agreement no.6 to contract no. 57-08 (draft dated 3 March 62, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16) added five C-123s, one Caribou, as well as an unspecified number of Do-28s as requested.

¹⁷⁸ Fax dated 29 May 2000, kindly sent to the author by Brigadier General Aderholt.

and in 1962, Air America based some of their Helios at Bangkok for operations under the provisions of contract no. 58-056 in support of the Thai National Police.¹⁷⁹ As to CEECO, in his “Oral history” interview, former CIA officer Bill Lair states that when Major Vang Pao was included into the CIA’s list of receivers in January 1961, “we had three Helio Couriers that we could count on at all time. They were ours. Then we could get a C-47 or C-46 to drop stuff like that.”¹⁸⁰ This was exactly the number and types of aircraft assigned to the CEECO contract in 1964.¹⁸¹

The type of flights made for CEECO is well remembered by former Air America pilot John E. Lee: “Early in 1961, Thai PARUs went into Laos to lead and train Meos under Vang Pao. The Thais asked for their regular supply pilots to fly logistical support missions. Lee flew drops to Long Tieng and to ridges north of the PDJ. He worked directly under Bill Lair. [...] PARU losses were high. Lee had the sad task of flying into Udorn after dark and taking the bodies of the KIAs to Hua Hin, landing before sunrise. ‘These were the saddest trips I had.’ And there were quite a few of them.”¹⁸² Also in early 1961, a special contingent of CIA case officers – including John E. “Jack” Shirley, Lloyd “Pat” Landry, and Anthony A. “Tony Poe” Poshepny – was sent to Laos to strengthen Royal Lao government control in the north. So Air America Helio Couriers and helicopters flew those CIA men and their PARU interpreters¹⁸³ from mountaintop village to mountaintop village where they succeeded in convincing the Hmong that the United States would give them the means to defend themselves against the Vietnamese. In doing so, they were strongly supported by Vang Pao, who had already been added to the CIA’s list of receivers and who visited many widespread Hmong villages northeast of the Plain of Jars by Air America aircraft, arranging for air delivery of food and arms; and within a few months, several thousand men had received CIA training and weapons. Already in late 1960, Vang Pao had established his military headquarters at Pa Doung (Site 5), located about six miles south of the Plain, where he was driven out in early June 1961, after Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had started to attack Pa Doung with 75mm artillery fire in early May, that is only a few days after signing the cease-fire agreement of 1 May 61. But a few days later, Vang Pao reassembled his forces southwest of Pa Doung at the village of Pha Khao (Site 14) and continued guerrilla operations from his new headquarters.¹⁸⁴ About a year later, Pha Khao had become insecure so that, beginning in May 62, more and more military and paramilitary teams settled at Long Tieng, known at that time as Site 98 or Site 30, where Pop Buell had started to relocate the refugees from Pha Khao. On 15 August 62, Vang Pao took an Air America Helio into Long Tieng for a personal inspection, and as he and his advisers liked the site, Long Tieng became his permanent military headquarters in the summer of 1962.¹⁸⁵ The Hmong volunteers were always accompanied by their families so that Vang Pao’s command posts were like garrison communities. But as the Hmong were migratory farmers who needed new farm land every couple of years, relocation wasn’t such a problem for them, for security of their dependents was the main motivation of

¹⁷⁹ See Supplemental Agreement no.2 to contract 58-056, draft dated 30 March 62, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16.

¹⁸⁰ Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, p.90, at: <http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/>. As Lair states that he had never seen a Helio Courier before August 1960 (p.95), CEECO-Thailand did not yet exist at that time.

¹⁸¹ AAM Aircraft availability of 1 April 64 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B8F4) lists Helios B-839, B-845, and B-861 plus C-46 B-920, plus C-123 N5006X as assigned to the CEECO contract, while AAM Aircraft availability of 3 Feb. 1964 (kindly faxed to the author by Ward S. Reimer on 17 February 2004) lists the same aircraft minus B-861 which had been positioned at Saigon for 90 days on 21 January 64.

¹⁸² John E. Lee, interview conducted by William M. Leary at Watkinsville, GA on 27 May 1987; Prof. Leary’s notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B46F10.

¹⁸³ Since March 61, 8 PARU teams operated in Laos (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.52).

¹⁸⁴ Castle, *At war*, pp.38-42; among the pilots was Fred Walker (ib., p.155, note 72).

¹⁸⁵ Castle, *At war*, p.43; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.90/1.

the Hmong fighters.¹⁸⁶

In 1961, only B-837 and B-835 among the Air America Helios seem to have been used exclusively by the CIA: On 26 April, Ron Sutphin and William Andresevic flew Bill Lair to Pa Doung in B-837, and on 28 April, they made reconnaissance flights in the same Helio. Between 16 and 26 May 61, in his Helio B-837, Andresevic worked for PARU's commanding officer, Lt.Col. Pranet Ritileuchai,¹⁸⁷ out of Paksane and elsewhere, made the first landing at Vang Pao's new headquarters at Pha Khao on 18 May, carried CIA officers Tom Fosmire on 21, 22, and 23 May, and Jack Shirley on 24 May, made several reconnaissance flights out of Pha Khao, evacuated people from Phou Vieng (Site 6) on 22 May, and made a lot of drops to Vang Pao's troops at Pa Doung and Pha Khao, but also to *Hotfoot* Commander Lt.Col. Little¹⁸⁸ on 18 May 61.¹⁸⁹ When in June 1961, B-835 was at Bangkok for maintenance, Andresevic flew Major Aderholt's Helio "555" on missions for the CIA. They included drops at Hmong positions like Pa Doung on 5 June 61, bringing to Vientiane fresh PARU advisers from their camp at Nong Khai, Thailand¹⁹⁰ on 4, 5, 6, and 7 June, or making reconnaissance flights out of Vang Pao's new headquarters at Pha Khao on 7 June 61.¹⁹¹ After B-835 had returned from Bangkok, Andresevic used his old Helio for the same type of missions, i.e. for drops to Hmong forces for example on 27, 28, and 30 June or 16, 17, 23 or 25 July; for bringing PARU advisers from Nong Khai for example on 27, 28, and 29 June, and on 5, 6, 14, 17, 20 or 21 July; for flying CIA men Tony Poe, Jack Shirley, Bill Lair, Tom Fosmire, and Bill Young as well as Vang Pao during the same period – on 3 July 61, Andresevic brought Bill Lair and Bill Young from Vientiane to Bangkok in B-835 –; for reconnaissance missions over the Plain of Jars on 2, 5, 23, 25 or 28 July 61. In August 61, Andresevic flew Helio B-835 for the same type of missions, while between 5 September and 24 October 61, he flew the same type of missions mostly in Air America's new Helio "326" that became B-839 on 25 October 61, but on some days also he also used B-837. In November and December 61, the 2 Helios used for this type of work, including shuttles of PARU advisers from one location in Laos to another as on 18 December 61, were B-843 and, especially since 14 November 61, B-845.¹⁹² While the CIA's Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) program – apparently already covered by the CEECO contract since early 1961 – could count on the aircraft assigned to the CEECO contract at all time, other Air America aircraft could be used by the CIA in the early sixties only upon request at the Embassy.¹⁹³ This may explain why, occasionally, Vientiane-based Helios operating under contract no. 57-08 for USOM/Laos also flew into Thailand, as for example B-833 that made a forced landing at Ban Khan Dia, Thailand, due to unfriendly action on 3 November 60.¹⁹⁴ In this way it becomes evident that the CEECO contract was extended about August 1960 to also cover the PARU training program that was to be

¹⁸⁶ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.81-89.

¹⁸⁷ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.39.

¹⁸⁸ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.76.

¹⁸⁹ Log book of William Andresevic, at: UTD/Leary/B43F9.

¹⁹⁰ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.59.

¹⁹¹ Log book of William Andresevic, at: UTD/Leary/B43F9.

¹⁹² Log book of William Andresevic, at: UTD/Leary/B43F9.

¹⁹³ In his interview with Steve Maxner of December 2001, Bill Lair states: "Every night, because we didn't have very many aircraft, we were operating still very small, so every night we would have a meeting planning on what we were going to do the next day. I think we had three Helio Couriers that we could count on all the time. They were ours. Then we could get a C-47 or C-46 to drop stuff like that, but then we'd plan exactly what we were going to do." (written version, p.90). A little bit later, Bill Lair states: "I immediately went to the Embassy and they had four H-34 helicopters that had just flown in and landed in Vientiane. [...] So I went to the Embassy and said, 'Could I use one of those choppers to go and find VP? I know where he is', and they said, 'Okay'" (written version, p.97, at: <http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/>). Those helicopters had been bailed according to a USAF contract (no. AF33(600)-40818) in late 1960 (Aircraft list dated 19 June 62, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1) and were assigned to a USOM contract (39-007), so the CIA could use them only with permission from the Embassy.

¹⁹⁴ Aircraft accidents 1960, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2.

introduced in Laos.

In 1960, the CIA also recruited elements of the Nationalist Chinese soldiers based in northern Thailand to patrol the China border area. All this was supervised by the CIA and the PEO (Program Evaluation Office). Faced with this American-sponsored build-up of a force that was to overthrow his government, Souvanna Phouma, on 29 September 60, announced his intention of establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and with the Pathet Lao. When Souvanna Phouma entered into negotiations with the Pathet Lao to form a new coalition government on 4 October 60, all US economic aid to the government was suspended on 7 October, but Vientiane received fuel, food, and military equipment from the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁵ Major Vang Pao, who at that time was garrisoned at Xieng Khouang, strongly disapproved that arrangement, but was advised not to take action but to wait. But as Vang Pao's men had not been paid since the August *coup*, he needed money to feed them. So when Lao General Amkha Soukhavong, the area commander who supported Kong Le, flew to Vientiane in October 60, Vang Pao organized some 200 Hmong civilians and brought them to the airport. When General Amkha disembarked from his plane upon return, the mostly unarmed Hmong surrounded him on the airfield, and Vang Pao sent a radio message to General Phoumi, telling him that he might have General Amkha in exchange for the back pay of Vang Pao's soldiers. General Phoumi liked the idea and immediately sent the salary to Vang Pao. General Amkha was flown to Savannakhet and put under house arrest, and Vang Pao was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Word of this weaponless and bold *coup* reached Bill Lair,¹⁹⁶ and this may have created the idea to install counter-insurgency units in Laos – the Special Guerrilla Units (SGU).

On 12 December 60, General Phoumi Nosavan arrived at Vientiane, and after three days of fighting in Vientiane, Kong Le withdrew to the Plain of Jars and finally established his headquarters at Khang Khay, next door to the Pathet Lao. A bit later, on 28 December 60,¹⁹⁷ encouraged by General Nosavan, Bill Lair and Major Harry C. (“Heinie”) Aderholt met Major Vang Pao, the Hmong military leader who commanded the Royal Lao Army's 10th Infantry Battalion on the Plain of Jars and had built a Hmong stay behind force on the southeastern edge of the plain, at Pa Doung (LS-05). Impressed by Vang Pao's energy and his will to fight the Communists, Lair proposed to his superiors to build up a secret CIA financed and PARU trained army of Hmong tribesmen in Laos, as Vang Pao had requested.¹⁹⁸

Fearing that a loss of Laos might have negative consequences – the famous “domino-theory” –, especially after the Communists' successes at the end of the year, US President Eisenhower agreed to arm and train Hmong tribesmen in a CIA program in January 1961. With authorization to arm and train 1,000 Hmong warriors, Lair again visited Vang Pao and arranged for an arms drop at Pa Doung, a mountaintop base south of the Plain of Jars. In January 61, Air America delivered weapons to the first 300 trainees.¹⁹⁹ The program nearly had a disastrous end, when, on 22 January 61, Air America UH-34D H-D, carrying Lair and the PARU training team, crashed and settled upright into the tall trees after failing a ridge line at the Hmong camp near the south rim of the Plain of Jars; fortunately, there were only minor injuries.²⁰⁰ Air America provided the helicopters (H-19As and UH-34Ds) and Helio Couriers

¹⁹⁵ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.205/6; Castle, *At war*, pp.20-22.

¹⁹⁶ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp. 80/1.

¹⁹⁷ Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p.357, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

¹⁹⁸ Leary, *CIA Air operations*, pp.57/58.

¹⁹⁹ Leary, *CIA Air operations*, p. 58. Three Air America aircraft were used (Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, p.98, at: <http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/>).

²⁰⁰ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp.86/7; Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.35/6; after bringing Vang Pao to a site just over the south rim of the PDJ, UH-34D H-D, piloted by Clarence Abadie, got into a downdraft over the trees on take off and settled upright into the tall trees on 22 January 61; the aircraft was operating under contract 39-007, when it had to make this emergency landing in insecure area because of control loss during heavy high altitude landing; the pilot, Capt. C. J. Abadie, was not injured; the aircraft was abandoned on

for the recruitment of the CIA's secret army. These aircraft flew CIA men and Hmong officers from mountain village to mountain village to recruit soldiers in exchange for guns, rice or money. The PARU team organized a three-day training program for the Hmong, involving use of their weapons and basic ambush techniques; some Hmong were also sent to a PARU camp in southern Thailand to be trained as radio operators.²⁰¹ In early 1961, then, about four hundred additional PARU advisers with a handful of CIA case officers – including Lloyd “Pat” Landry, John E. “Jack” Shirley, and Anthony “Tony Poe” Poshepny – were sent to Laos to help build up and train an irregular guerrilla army, which was approved by US President Kennedy to be increased to 11,000 men in August 61.²⁰² And, also in early 1961, a rotational unit of USAF F-100s from Cannon AFB, New Mexico, was based at Takhli to show force.²⁰³

But from the very beginning, it became quite clear that air transportation done by STOL planes capable of reaching the Hmong people living on isolated mountain terrain was indispensable for successful operations. This was all the more the case, as the Royal Lao Army commanded by General Phoumi Nosavan, although still supported by the United States, was exposed as weak and poorly disciplined, when Government forces lost the critical junction of Routes 7 and 13 at Sala Phou Khoun on 9 March 1961 and retreated south towards Vientiane and north towards Luang Prabang, while Kong Le and the Pathet Lao threatened these two cities. Faced with the options either to enter Laos in force or to attempt a negotiated compromise, US President Kennedy declared on 24 March 61 that his goal was a neutral and independent Laos.²⁰⁴ To secure the neutrality of the country, US military forces in the area were placed on alert, and at the same time, Kennedy authorized USMC UH-34Ds to be transferred to Air America, to be flown by USMC, US Army and US Navy pilots. So, as has already been noted above, on 29 March 1961 16 USMC UH-34Ds were flown from Bangkok to Air America's new base at Udorn in northeastern Thailand to support the Hmong forces.²⁰⁵ And until the very end of Air America's presence in Laos, i.e. until 30 June 1974, Udorn remained the base of Air America's helicopter operations, from where pilots would work in up-country Laos for about 6 days each time.²⁰⁶

There was still another measure to save Laos' neutrality that President Kennedy had approved on 9 March 61: the use of B-26 strikes. Although such a strike, that is Project *Mill Pond*, had been called off on 17 April 61,²⁰⁷ the 4 C-130As of the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron that were also based at Takhli and were to be used for close air support of an invasion of the Plain of Jars during *Mill Pond*, remained and got another job: When North Vietnamese units pushed southwards during the second week of April 61, four Air America crews, who had been given special USAF training in early April, took these 4 C-130As²⁰⁸ to transport two volunteer Royal Thai Army 105mm howitzer batteries – eight tubes with gunners – to Seno

customer's advice (C. Abadie, interview of 10 June 90 with W. Leary, in: UTD/Leary/B43F6 for 1960; Operational casualties, in: UTD/CIA/B29F1; List “Company operated aircraft lost or destroyed”, in: UTD/CIA/B1F10; List “Operational casualties in SEA”, in: UTD/CIA/B29F1; Aircraft destroyed or lost, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2).

²⁰¹ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.207-9; Leary, *CIA Air Operations*, pp.56-58; Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.268.

²⁰² Castle, *At war*, pp.38-43.

²⁰³ Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.110.

²⁰⁴ Kirk, *Wider war*, p.207.

²⁰⁵ Castle, *At war*, pp.29/30 plus 43.

²⁰⁶ Robbins, *Air America*, p.179.

²⁰⁷ For *Mill Pond*, see the file “Air America in Laos III – in combat”.

²⁰⁸ On 26 August 1960, C-130As 56-490, 56-493, and 56-497 of 21st TCS, Naha, joined by C-130A 56-491 of 21st TCS on 7 April 61 – were transferred to a special detachment within the 21st TCS that is marked “SF” in the official USAF Assignment Records, preserved at the AFHRA at Maxwell AFB. According to Bowers (*The USAF in South-East Asia. Tactical Airlift*, p. 441), four C-130As “moved to Takhli for CIA scheduling” in early April 61 “for operation by civilian crews under contract with the CIA”, that is by Air America crews.

(L-46), Laos, to help repel the Pathet Lao advance. The Thai then set up a firebase east of Thakhek and dispersed the Communist troops with howitzer fire. Beginning on 26 April 61, USAF C-130s and C-124s also flew military supplies into Wattay airport, Vientiane, for several weeks.²⁰⁹

The creation of the Military Assistance Advisory Group and the *Madrider* contract

By March 1961, the hostilities in Laos had reached a new level: As a consequence of the Kong Le *coup* of August 60, all important road junctions of the Plain of Jars were in Communist hands since early 1961. In February 61, the French, who had continued to train units of the Royal Lao Army after 1954, withdrew, so that the PEO requested 9 additional Special Forces Field Training Teams and 121 additional technicians. However, more than once Royal Lao troops responded in panic by throwing away their guns and fleeing to safety, when they were ordered to attack communist troops so that the Pentagon was convinced that the Royal Lao Army was incapable of defending the kingdom – and that after receiving some \$350 million in US assistance and being assisted by US advisers. As – especially after the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs invasion of 17 April 61 – President Kennedy wanted to show force and as after the withdrawal of the French from training the Royal Lao Army it was no longer necessary to officially assume some sort of auxiliary role, on 19 April 1961, Kennedy authorized the PEO to openly operate as a uniformed Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG). At the same time, the various US Army Special Forces training teams, which up to then had been known by code-names or by the names of the team leader, were officially re-designated as “White Star Mobile Training Teams”.²¹⁰

The 150 men of these 12 teams had many different duties: For the Royal Lao Army they were engaged in individual weapon instruction, unit training, artillery training and assistance in communications and logistics, but they also helped teaching the irregular forces how to carry out guerrilla operations.²¹¹ Such a variety of tasks required good air transportation from one military or paramilitary center to the other. Air America did the job, and initially, *White Star*, CIA, and PARU advisers were flown throughout Laos in Helio Couriers assigned to contracts no. 57-08 (with USOM/Laos) or no. 59-069 (with CEECO) or in Sikorsky H-19s and H-34s assigned to USOM/Laos contract no. ICA-39-007. After the US Army had officially documented their presence in Laos by transforming the ostensibly civilian PEO into a uniformed MAAG on 1 April 61, it was no longer necessary to hide military requirements behind contracts with USOM/Laos. Apart from this, a cease-fire came into being in May 61, but was violated several times by the Communists.²¹² Such a cease-fire had originally been proposed by the British and accepted by US President Kennedy on 23 March 61. On 1 May 61, it was officially offered by Kong Le and the Pathet Lao, to go into effect on 3 May, but was broken by them already 10 days later, when on 13 May 61, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops attacked and overran Muong Ngat, located just 6 miles from the North Vietnamese border.²¹³

Muong Ngat was not the only case of Communist aggression: Already at the end of April 1961, Royal Lao Army units had been driven out of Tchepone and Moung Phine in **MR 3**.²¹⁴ But the pro-western side reacted energetically: On 19 May 61, Brigadier General Andrew J. Boyle, US Army, chief of the US MAAG in Laos, asked the Air Material Force Pacific Area (AMFPA), USAF’s Far East procurement agency, to undertake secret contract negotiations

²⁰⁹ Bowers, *The USAF in South-East Asia. Tactical Airlift*, p. 441; Hagedorn / Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, p. 134; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 53.

²¹⁰ Castle, *At war*, pp.30-2; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.53.

²¹¹ Castle, *At war*, p.32.

²¹² Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.88; Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p. 372, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

²¹³ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.54 and 77/8.

²¹⁴ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.104; **MR 3** stands for “Military Region 3” with headquarters at Savannakhet.

with Air America for a contract that would allow MAAG to use a certain number of Air America helicopters where and when they were needed in support of the Royal Lao Government and without interference. Although these contract requirements were unusual, the Department of the Air Force agreed, stating that the contract was necessary for services “in the interest of National Defense, which because of military considerations, should not be publicly disclosed and for which Air America, Inc., is the only known source.”²¹⁵ The result was contract no. AF62(531)-1674, effective 1 July 61, the famous *Madriver* contract.²¹⁶



Sikorsky UH-34D H-U taken in September 1961
(UTD/Leary/B75F5; former photo no. 1WL1-27-8-PC92)

According to this contract, “the Contractor [= Air America] shall during the period set forth in Part II hereof [= thru 30 June 1962], provide, establish, manage, operate, and maintain a complete flying and maintenance service, inclusive of all facilities, supplies, materials, equipment, and support services not furnished by the United States Government, including required maintenance and referred to as the contract services, to permit utilization by the United States Government of a quantity of six (6) to twenty (20) each helicopter aircraft dependent upon the Contractor’s capability to perform as such may be affected by the result of hostile acts or other unforeseen circumstances beyond the control of the Contractor during performance hereunder. The aircraft are to be operated in the Work Zone as set forth in orders issued pursuant to paragraph ‘f’ herein below and at points in the Work Zone designated by the Chief, MAAG. The contract services shall be rendered at airports or other locations in a specified area made effectively available by the United States Government and designated in writing to the Contractor by the Chief, MAAG.”²¹⁷ So Air America had to provide flying personnel, non-flying personnel, flying services, parts and materials, “flight and maintenance training to such students as are presented by Chief, MAAG”, as well as “medical services, equipment, and materials, as needed, for Contractor personnel”. The “Work Zone” and even the US Government agency for which services are to be provided would be designated by

²¹⁵ Castle, *At war*, pp.43/4. My quotation copies the text given by Castle on p.44 who quotes it from the USAF contracting document of 30 June 61.

²¹⁶ Originally, *Madriver* was only the code name of Air America’s helicopter project. But as those helicopters were all based at Udorn, a small river that meandered thru Air America’s Udorn base was nicknamed “Madriver” (Mike Kandt, “Madriver madness”, in: *Air America Log*, vol. VI, no.5, 1972, p.8).

²¹⁷ Contract no. AF 62(531)-1674, part I, p.1, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F12.

Chief, MAAG.²¹⁸ That means that the UH-34Ds assigned to contract no. AF62(531)-1674 could not only be used by the US military for their aid to the Royal Laotian armed forces, but also by USAID or by the CIA. So even flights performed under this Air Force contract could include humanitarian work. Later, this *Madrider* contract was extended thru 30 June 1963, and the value was increased from \$ 2,500,889.25 to \$ 7,387,500.00.²¹⁹



Air America UH-34D H-G in Laos in 1961
(UTD/Landry/B1F4)

Other counter-measures taken by the pro-western side included the creation of new irregular forces in southern Laos: On 29 June 61, President Kennedy authorized the building up a force of ethnic Lao irregulars who were to work out of Savannakhet in **MR 3**. In February 62, the decision was expanded to include operations out of Thakhek, and on 5 March 62, the CIA was authorized to arm 12 companies of 100 Kha, i.e. Lao Theung tribesmen on the Bolovens Plateau in **MR 4** and to have them trained by “White Star” US Special Forces.²²⁰ On 1 October 61, Vang Pao set up a new headquarters at Vientiane that included offices for the CIA and for the Special Forces.²²¹ All this required additional fixed-wing transportation, not only helicopters. So, in October 61, not only some details regarding indemnification were added to the *Madrider* contract, but at that time, the US military already proposed a similar contract for fixed-wing aircraft, to be called AF 62(531)-1683.²²² But instead, “three (3) to ten (10) each liaison aircraft” were added to the *Madrider* contract by a Supplemental Agreement of 28 January 62 that was modified on 12 April 62 to contain 7 US Government furnished L-20 Beavers.²²³

The Beavers of contract no. AF62(531)-1674

So for only a couple of months in 1962, Air America operated 7 DHC-2 Beavers on loan from the US Army. The Beavers arrived at Bangkok in crates on 15 February 62,²²⁴ were

²¹⁸ “Consistent with the provisions of paragraph a, hereinabove wherein the Chief, MAAG, is authorized to designate in writing to the Contractor the services to be performed, the Contracting Officer will issue orders to the Contractor designating the ‘Work Zone’ at which the services provided for herein will be performed, to be hereinafter referred to as the ‘Work Zone’. Such orders will further specify the US Government agency for whom the Contractor will render the service and which US Government agency will be responsible for technical surveillance and operational control” (Contract no. AF 62(531)-1674, § I, f, pp.2-3, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F12).

²¹⁹ Contract no. AF 62(531)-1674, § IV, 2, p.3, plus introductory note by former USAF Contracting Officer, Colonel Martin L. Kaufman, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F12.

²²⁰ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.105, 117, and 129.

²²¹ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.114.

²²² Negotiation Memorandum dated 13 October 1961, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F12.

²²³ Modification no.1 of 12 April 62 to Supplemental Agreement of 28 January 62, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F12.

²²⁴ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 23 January 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.

assembled by Thai Airways according to contract no. BKK 62-001,²²⁵ and were then officially handed over to Air America at Bangkok on 1 March 62.²²⁶ Training flights at Bangkok started immediately, and on 11 March 62, a group of 5 Beavers – L-201, L-202, L-204, L-205, and L-207 – was ferried to Udorn, with Captain Adams in L-201 as formation leader.²²⁷ At the same time, Air America published a list of 18 airfields in Laos that were approved for Beaver operation.²²⁸ Beaver flying in March 62 were mostly training flights out of Udorn (S-08).²²⁹

<p style="text-align: center;">PROPOSED OPERATIONS ORDER FOR L-20 FERRY FLIGHT BKK-UDN</p> <p>Date : Sunday 11th March 1962</p> <p>Purpose : To ferry 5 L-20A Aircraft Bangkok to Udorn with L-20 PILOTS and other personnel associated with L-20 Projects.</p> <p>After flight crews and passengers are finalized remaining disposable load will be made up of L-20A spare parts.</p> <p>Operations to arrange cargo loads and all items to be weighed and marked.</p> <p><u>AIRCRAFT AND CREWS</u></p> <p>HL-201 A/C FAIRBANKS, ADAMS + Cargo = Gross TOW 5100 LBS. HL-202 " GAINS, FORNEY + Cargo " " " " HL-204 " (VARNEY) LAMBSON + Cargo " " " " HL-205 " SEVERSON, LEWIS + Cargo " " " " HL-207 " FERRY, McDONOUGH + Cargo " " " "</p> <p><u>FUEL & OIL</u></p> <p>Full Belly tanks only. 95 USG. FUEL Gal.</p> <p><u>CALL SIGN & LEADER</u></p> <p>Flight Plan will cover 5 L-20As. Capt. Adams will be formation leader.</p> <p>Leader will do all radio work including, taxi instruction, take-off etc.</p> <p>Leader will handle all position reports enroute and any other data applicable to the flight.</p> <p>Call signs 1) " Beaver Leader " 2) " Beaver 2 " 3) " Beaver 3 " 4) " Beaver 4 " 5) " Beaver 5 "</p> <p><u>RADIO</u></p> <p>Leader will call all freq. changes. All of Aircraft will check in with leader after freq change.</p> <p>123.1 will be company enroute freq out of Control zone and areas.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">INTERIM APPROVED L-20 LANDING FIELDS</p> <p>1. The following list of airfields and landing strips are approved for L-20 operation Only those listed will be used until pilots gains experience in the area. Additions to this list will be made as experience and landing field information are gathered. Airfield information is contained in "Airfield Status" and on the various aeronautical charts.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">WEST LAOS</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>1. Ken Thao</td><td>QV5663</td><td>V-06</td></tr> <tr><td>2. Pak Lay</td><td>QA5715</td><td>V-09</td></tr> <tr><td>3. Samaboury</td><td>Q8732</td><td>V-23</td></tr> <tr><td>4. Ban Houei Sai</td><td>PC4942</td><td>V-25</td></tr> <tr><td>5. Luang Prabang</td><td>TH302</td><td>V-54</td></tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">NORTH LAOS</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>1. Muong Sing</td><td>QD2443</td><td>V-42</td></tr> <tr><td>2. Nam Tha</td><td>QD5219</td><td>V-100</td></tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">CENTRAL LAOS</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>1. Vientiane</td><td>DA388</td><td>V-08</td></tr> <tr><td>2. Pakse</td><td>UF9934</td><td>V-35</td></tr> <tr><td>3. Xieng Dot</td><td>TG6045</td><td>Site-26 Good one</td></tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">EAST LAOS</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>1. Thakek</td><td>VE8024</td><td>V-40</td></tr> <tr><td>2. Ban Done</td><td>VF2270</td><td>Site-28</td></tr> <tr><td>3. Savannakhet</td><td>VD7432</td><td>V-39</td></tr> <tr><td>4. Seno</td><td>WDC543</td><td>V-45</td></tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">SOUTH LAOS</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>1. Pakse</td><td>WB8373</td><td>V-11</td></tr> <tr><td>2. Saravane</td><td>XB5237</td><td>V-14</td></tr> <tr><td>3. Attopou</td><td>XB9737</td><td>V-10</td></tr> <tr><td>4. Dong Bang</td><td>XB4395</td><td></td></tr> </table>	1. Ken Thao	QV5663	V-06	2. Pak Lay	QA5715	V-09	3. Samaboury	Q8732	V-23	4. Ban Houei Sai	PC4942	V-25	5. Luang Prabang	TH302	V-54	1. Muong Sing	QD2443	V-42	2. Nam Tha	QD5219	V-100	1. Vientiane	DA388	V-08	2. Pakse	UF9934	V-35	3. Xieng Dot	TG6045	Site-26 Good one	1. Thakek	VE8024	V-40	2. Ban Done	VF2270	Site-28	3. Savannakhet	VD7432	V-39	4. Seno	WDC543	V-45	1. Pakse	WB8373	V-11	2. Saravane	XB5237	V-14	3. Attopou	XB9737	V-10	4. Dong Bang	XB4395	
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Beaver ferry order for 11 March 62 List of approved Beaver landing strips
(both documents in: UTD/Leary/B48F4)

In April 62, the places where Beaver pilot Paul Severson remained overnight were Udorn, Vientiane, Pakse, and Savannakhet. On 10 April 62, all Beaver pilots were asked to terminate the day's flying not later than sunset.²³⁰ In August 62, Beaver pilot James MacFarlane remained overnight at Udorn, Pakse, and Luang Prabang.²³¹ Those Beavers flew under the provisions of contract no. AF62(531)-1674 with the USAF, that is of the *Madriver* contract, and 10 Air America pilots were assigned to the Beaver operation.²³² Officially, they were used in Southern Laos to fly around officers of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) between March and October 62.²³³ The military advisers who used the Beavers were the US Army *White Star* Special Forces who were based in multiple locations in Laos.²³⁴ Those advisory teams had already been introduced to Laos in 1959, when they were technically under the ostensibly civil "Program Evaluation Office" (PEO), but given

²²⁵ Memorandum dated 9 February 62, in: UTD/Fink/B2F16.

²²⁶ Aircraft list of June 62, corrected to Sept. 1963, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1.

²²⁷ Proposed operations order for L-20 ferry flight BKK-UDN, in: UTD/Leary/B48F4.

²²⁸ Approved L-20 landing fields, in: UTD/Leary/B48F4.

²²⁹ Log book of Paul Severson for March 62, in: UTD/Leary/B48F4.

²³⁰ Memo no. RCP-SEA-62-010 dated 10 April 62, in: URS/Walker/B25F7.

²³¹ Extracts from the log books of Paul Severson (in: UTD/Leary/B48F4) and James MacFarlane (in: UTD/Leary/B31F10).

²³² Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 23 January 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.

²³³ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 27 March 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.

²³⁴ E-mail dated 3 July 2005, kindly sent to the author by Major James MacFarlane.

considerable autonomy under their overall commander Col. Arthur "Bull" Simons.²³⁵ In April 61, PEO was authorized to operate openly as a uniformed MAAG, and at the same time, the various Special Forces teams who had previously been known by code-names like "Foretell" or "Monkhood" were designated "White Star Mobile Training Teams". *White Star* advisers, about 150 men divided into 12 different teams, were engaged in training the Laotian military as well as the irregular forces in individual weapon instruction and in guerrilla or anti-guerrilla operations, but also in unit training or supervising artillery training, construction projects or logistics.²³⁶ But those US Army *White Star* advisers had to be assisted by PARU teams, because the *White Star* advisers could not talk to the locals.²³⁷

The image shows two pages of logbooks from Air America, Inc. The left page is for Paul Severson, dated March and April 1960. The right page is for James MacFarlane, dated August 1960. Both pages contain columns for Date, Flight Route, A/C Type, A/C No., FLT Hrs, and Other Crew Members. The logbooks are filled with handwritten entries and signatures.

Extracts from the log books of Paul Severson (in: UTD/Leary/B48F4) and James MacFarlane (in: UTD/Leary/B31F10)

"The mission of the Beavers was specifically to support SF in Laos. The planes were based in Udorn. They would fly a variety of supplies to teams to include medical supplies, food, soft drinks, water and beer. [...] At Pakse we had tin roofing we dropped to SF teams on Plateau des Bolovens for the locals. It was fun to watch the visual from the sky in Beavers because all the huts in the villages up there suddenly had tin roofs. Yes, we would move SF teams mostly to Udorn for R&R, to BKK or other places. We would also bring replacement SF troops into Laos from Udorn. For the SF we would drop rice to pro western Laotian and Meo troops. The Beavers were not used for operations other than for SF that I ever saw. They did not operate from Long Chien and I don't know of one that ever went in there. Where were the SF bases? Each base probably had a team of 10 to 15 SF and they had maybe 8 locations in Laos but I cannot remember them all. Pakse was one and Sayaboury another. There was another in the first major town east of VTE on the Mekong but I can't recall the name. It had a 4000 foot dirt strip. I think they were also at Luang Prabang and Savannakhet but I'm not sure. Don't recall if I ever took them ammo but most likely yes. Did a medevac on one of them once from Pakse. We could not land on the Plateau des Bolovens so we used to drop to SF up there. It was a gorgeous plateau at about 4000 feet. The Chief pilots of Beaver program that I knew of were Bob Ferguson, ex US Army attache pilot, US Embassy pilot Saigon and John

²³⁵ Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.21.

²³⁶ Castle, *At war*, p.32.

²³⁷ Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, pp.147/8, at: <http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/>

Simons.²³⁸ Bill Palmer was one of the mechanics who were assigned to service the Beavers working out of Luang Prabang.²³⁹



Air America's 6 Beavers lined up at Udorn, probably in 1962
(UTD/Fink/ photo no. 1-JF25-16-PB1)

Sometimes, those Beaver missions were quite dangerous. On 2 July 1962, Air America pilot C. P. "Rusty" Phillips was assigned to resupply a team located 65 miles north of Thakhek, between highways 18 and 13. Radio contact had been difficult due to the mountainous terrain. He was to drop two boxes of supplies, together with instructions for the team to head west out of the karst so that they could be picked up near the Mekong. But when he reached the drop zone, he realized that the *White Star* team had been cut off by the Pathet Lao and trapped inside a small valley. As the first box was very heavy, Phillips had to enter the valley even twice to make his drop, and each time he had to escape small arms ground fire upon entering and exiting the "keyhole" and then make a tight turn at the end of the valley. As the aircraft went into a sharp bank, the kicker – a Lao soldier – struggled to the front of the Beaver and fell into the empty co-pilot's seat. Moments later, the aircraft started to stall: The kicker inadvertently had hit the flap handle and retracted the flaps. Phillips quickly dropped 30 degrees of flap, managed to clear the karst "by inches", climbed out and returned to Thakhek.²⁴⁰ In October 62, the Beaver operations were completely withdrawn.²⁴¹ For some time, the decision of what to do with the aircraft was postponed, but when it became evident that the Helio Courier could do the same job, the aircraft were returned to the US Army.

²³⁸ E-mail dated 5 July 2005, kindly sent to the author by Major James MacFarlane.

²³⁹ E-mail dated 6 July 2005, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.

²⁴⁰ "The Beaver program – 1962", in: UTD/Leary/B48F4, believed to be an interview William Leary made with Rusty Phillips.

²⁴¹ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 30 October 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.

A new contract with the US Air Force: AF 62(531)-1683

Although, in that way, the Beavers remained under the old *Madriver* contract, US MAAG / Laos did get their own Air America contract covering more fixed-wing aircraft. When the old contract no. 57-060 with USOM/Laos that had hidden military aid as work for the ostensibly civilian Program Evaluation Office (PEO) expired on 9 April 62, the uniformed Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Laos, that had been formed in April 1961,²⁴² arranged for a new contract concluded between Air America and the United States Air Force: Contract no. AF62(531)-1683 effective 10 April 62 “provides for the provision by the Company of C-46, C-45, C-47 and DC-4 flying services in Laos for MAAG. [...] The Department of Defense



Beech C-45G N7950C in Laos, probably in the early 60ies
(UTD/Landry/B1F4)

provides appropriate indemnity. This is the first time that such contracting has been arranged with the U.S. Government.”²⁴³ The basic contract, which ran thru 30 June 1962, but was later extended thru 30 June 1963, covered 1 C-46 to be based at “Base Point A” (that is probably at Takhli or Udorn), plus 1 C-47 and 1 C-45 to be based at “Base Point B” (believed to stand for Vientiane), but “when requested by the Chief, MAAG, and subject to availability of Contractor aircraft”, Air America should also “furnish additional flying services consisting of C-46, C-47, or DC-4 type aircraft”. However, “when it is desired to change such ‘Base Point’ the base point may be changed by mutual agreement between the Contractor and the Chief, MAAG, expressed in writing.”²⁴⁴ As was the case for aircraft assigned to the *Madriver* contract, aircraft assigned to contract AF62(531)-1683 could be used not only by the US military, but also by the CIA or USAID: “The Contracting Officer will issue orders specifying the following:

- 1) The United States Government agency for which the services are to be performed.
- 2) The United States Government agency responsible for technical surveillance and operational control.
- 3) The United States Government agency designated to make payment, if any, under this contract.”²⁴⁵

²⁴² Castle, *At war*, p. 32.

²⁴³ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 13 March 62, p. 5 (in: UTD/CIA/B7F1).

²⁴⁴ Contract no. AF 62(531)-1683, § I a, item 4, p.2, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F11.

²⁴⁵ Contract no. AF 62(531)-1683, § I i, p.5, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F11.

As the contract also covered flying in hazardous areas, transporting “explosives, or flammable, or volatile cargo as required or authorized by the Chief, MAAG” as well as “air-drop missions”,²⁴⁶ it is evident that the aircraft assigned to this contract were to be used for transporting and dropping military supplies and probably also fuel drums. As the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules for 27 and 28 November 1962 have survived,²⁴⁷ we can see that on 27 November, 3 C-46s (“854”, “138”, and “914”) and 2 C-47s (“815” and “817”), and on 28

OFF PRESS 1230L				SCHEDULE FOR 27TH NOV. 1962				PREPARED BY <i>cmwong</i> FOR ATCO							
A/C NO.	FUEL	FPA NO.	ROUTE	PILOT	AGN	TIME	TIME	A/C NO.	FUEL	FPA NO.	ROUTE	PILOT	AGN	TIME	TIME
854	700	1683	VTE/BAK/VTE	COLN FLE	POREBY TH SOO	0700L	0700L	854	800	1683	VTE/DE/VTE/SVTE/VTE/SVTE/VTE	WIKERT YU	COLN FLE KANGKOL CHAY	0700L	0700L
843	FULL	342	VTE/ACOM/SAH TONG/ACOM/VTE	TOMASKY		0730L	0730L	500	F/C/14-15	342	VTE/PAKSE/VTE	DEKOWI		0700L	0700L
855	FULL	342	VTE/SAH TONG/VTE	KEMSTER		0730L	0730L	843	FULL	342	VTE/SAH TONG/VTE	DEARBONI		0730L	0730L
865	FULL	342	VTE/SAH TONG/VTE	LAUFER		0730L	0730L	859	FULL	342	VTE/SAH TONG/VTE	KEMSTER		0730L	0730L
138	800	1683	VTE/DE/VTE/VIENG KHOUANG/VTE VTE/DE SHUTTLE RTH VTE	COLAN VEGON DGOOLIA* TH WANG*	CHANG* SOUVITA* HANS* TANGKAR*	0730L	0730L	150	800	1683	VTE/PAKSE/VTE/PAKSE/VTE	PEARSON DALETT		0730L	0730L
914	800	1683	VTE/DE/VTE/VIENG KHOUANG/VTE VTE/DE SHUTTLE RTH VTE	HEATY FANGLIN T/FO BANGKOL*	MONKHOL* SUD* THOMATON* SUPINNO*	0730L	0730L	154	800	1683	VTE/DE SHUTTLE RTH VTE	PEARSON LO CHAO IBREK* TH WANG	SUWING TANBAK SUSAK HANG	0800L	0800L
918	800	342	VTE/DE 3 SHUTTLES RTH VTE	PEARSON LO CHAO T/FO HERULICK ST GEORG	SAN ANG SMERN COLLICK PANGRA	0730L	0730L	003X		342	VTE/DE SHUTTLE RTH VTE	PEARSON LO CHAO IBREK* TH WANG	SUWING TANBAK SUSAK HANG	0800L	0800L
732	B66		VTE/DE SHUTTLE RTH VTE			0830L	0830L	918	800	342	VTE/DE/VTE/VIENG KHOUANG/VTE VTE/DE/VTE	BASSON YEDON DGOOLIA* ST GEORG*	PEARSON PANGRA* THOMATON* SUWING*	0830L	0830L
003X	342		VTE/DE SHUTTLE RTH VTE	ALAN WILSON SINDER	HERALD VIMAT BOONETTI	0830L	0830L	914		342	VTE/DE/VTE/VIENG KHOUANG/VTE VTE/DE/VTE	ALAN WILSON GULLATT	SUWING SUSAK CHANG	0830L	0830L
815	500	1683	VTE/PAKSE/VTE	EG ADAMS RIDGES		0900L	0900L	914	700	1683	VTE/DE/BAK FOR #1 SVC (RTH BAK/UDN/VTE 28 NOV.)	GRILL WALKER		0900L	0900L
817	500	1683	DELE RUN SOUTH	FREDERICK HEIMAR		0900L	0900L	007K		342	LOCAL TRAINING	WALKER CAMPBELL		0900L	0900L
994	500	342	DELE RUN NORTH	FRANK GILLIES R/FO - COLN		0900L	0900L	220		800	VTE/PAKSE/VTE			1015L	1015L
512			VTE/BAK												
148	700	342	VTE/UDN/BAK FOR #1 SVC (RTH BAK/UDN/VTE 28 NOV)	TRAIL CH CHU	AGN CAMERON CARROLL R/FO CH YU YJ LEE OT CHU YO HOA	0900L	0900L								
004X		342	VTE/VIENG KHOUANG/VTE VTE/DE SHUTTLE RTH VTE	REILLY BANGKOL HERITAGE	HIGHEN* SABER*	1145L	1145L								
DISCOUNT AIRCRAFT															
B10L	(DC-4)		TU/HKO/VTE/HEH/TIN	TIN CREW CO-CAPT. SUFFREN (VTE/HEH/TIN)	ETA VTE TID VTE	1215L	1215L								
S/B CREW: 0-47 - WELCH NELSON ROBERT PARKER 0-46 - YEDON WATTHI BANHUA BANGKOT APD - SAMAN CHANBANGK PLADT															

Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 27 and 28 November 1962 (in: UTD/Walker/B31F8)

November 4 C-46s (“854”, “150”, “154”, and “914”) were assigned to operations for contract no. AF62(531)-1683. While on both days, one C-46 went to Bangkok for Company business or maintenance, the other aircraft flew to Paksane, Pakse, Savannakhet, Xieng Khouang or unnamed Drop Zones, probably delivering military supplies. On 30 June 63, contract no. AF62(531)-1683 was completed and the remaining 2 aircraft – C-47 B-827 and C-45 N7951C – were released.²⁴⁸

Dropping agents who had to work in Communist territory

On the clandestine side, in the early sixties Air America aircraft were sometimes also used for dropping agents who had to work in North Vietnam or in Laotian territory held by the Communists. This happened, when VIAT, the South Vietnamese outfit that would normally do that job, was unable to do it. So in September 61, an Air America C-46 picked up at Takhli 2 South Vietnamese commando teams belonging to *Project Typhoon* and dropped them to a drop zone south of Tchepone.²⁴⁹ Former Air America kicker Miles L. Johnson recalls: “There were some very hush-hush C-46 missions out of Takhli into North Vietnam. Pete [Peterson],

²⁴⁶ Contract no. AF 62(531)-1683, § VII a, 7-8, pp.15/6, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F11.

²⁴⁷ In: UTD/Walker/B31F8.

²⁴⁸ AAM Aircraft Availability for 1 July 63, in: UTD/Walker/B25F8.

²⁴⁹ Conboy / Morrison, *Early covert action on to the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, p.4.

Fred Barnosky and I were PDO's [Parachute Dispatch Officers] with Bill Welk and Doc Johnson, pilots, that was in the fall of 1961."²⁵⁰ In March 1962, Air America aircraft were used to help infiltrate South Vietnamese agents into North Vietnam, since the Chinese crews who were to fly the VIAT C-54 out of Saigon on air drop missions into North Vietnam were not yet ready: On 12 March 62, two Air America UH-34Ds, led by an Air America Helio Courier piloted by Ron Sutphin and accompanied by a third UH-34D that would serve as rescue bird, ferried team "Atlas" to a mountain clearing in Laos close to the North Vietnamese border, from where the agent team penetrated into North Vietnam. Reportedly, on 16 April 62, an Air America C-46 piloted by Ron Sutphin and M. D. "Doc" Johnson departed Takhli and dropped agent team "Remus" onto a rugged drop zone 15 kilometers northwest of Dien Bien Phu, from where the team crossed the border into North Vietnam without being detected.²⁵¹ From "Doc" Johnson's log book, however, it makes more sense to assume that this was the mysterious 4 hour flight in Air America C-46 B-914 that he noted to have made on 26 April 62 from Vientiane (V-8) to Vientiane (V-08).²⁵²

16	R/I	TPE-TG-TMN	C-46	1.4	2000	B-908	
17	CHTR	TAINAN VIENTIANE	"	7.6	"	B-910	25
20	"	V-08-V-11-AID-V-11-AID-V-11-V-44-V-11-V-08	"	6.9	"	B-914	4
23	"	V-08-V-54-AID-V-54-V-54-V-08-S-08-V-08	C-47	5.7	1250	B-815	10
24	"	V-08-S-08-S-08-S-08-V-08	C-46	4.0	2000	B-146	
25	"	V-08-V-54-V-08-V-54-V-08-V-54-V-08	"	3.9	"	B-146	20
26	"	V-08-V-08	"	4.0	"	B-914	12
26	TRAINING	V-08 V-08	C-47	0.5	1250	B-815	
27	CHTR	V-08-V-11-AID-V-11-AID-V-11-V-44-V-11-V-08	C-47	7.2	"	B-815	
27	TRAINING	V-08 V-08	C-46	0.6	2000	B-154	
28	TRAINING	V-08 V-08	C-47	1.2	1250	B-815	5
IF YOU WISH TO CERTIFY EACH PAGE USE THIS SPACE							
CERTIFIED CORRECT <u>Doc Johnson</u>				TOTALS FOR THIS PAGE ONLY			
ATTESTED BY _____				TOTALS FORWARD FROM PRECEDING PAGE			
				GRAND TOTALS FORWARD TO NEXT PAGE			
				92.4			
				16,441.4			
				16,533.8			

"Doc" Johnson's log book, extract of 16-28 April 1962, showing the mysterious 4 hour flight that Johnson noted to have made on 26 April from Vientiane to Vientiane (Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

Another spy program involved Hmong living in North Vietnam's Son La Province. On 21 June 62, a team of South Vietnamese recruiters, code-named "Zeus", was escorted from Xieng Khouang north to the border, from where they crossed into North Vietnam; three Hmong from Vang Pao's own clan were selected and went to Saigon. The idea was to create a resistance movement within North Vietnam, which was to be called the *Sacred Sword Patriot's League* (SSPL), but this movement never really came into life.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ Letter dated 17 January 1992, sent by Miles L. Johnson to Prof. William Leary, in: UTD/Leary/B69F11.

²⁵¹ Conboy / Morrison, *Spies and commandos*, pp.46/7.

²⁵² Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013.

²⁵³ Conboy / Morrison, *Spies and commandos*, pp.75-80.

III) Air America in Laos: military and paramilitary aid 1962-68:

On 23 July 62, the foreign ministers of 14 nations signed the Declaration and Protocol on the Neutrality of Laos, and this included a 7 October 1962 deadline for the departure from Laos of all foreign regular and irregular troops. So US MAAG Laos had to withdraw about 1,200 US and third country personnel – about 100 Thai “volunteers”, 424 Filipino contract technicians of the Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL), and the rest were members of the US armed forces. The Thai specialists departed Laos on 22 August,²⁵⁴ followed by the ECCOIL people in mid-September. The first US personnel left the country in mid-September, and on 6 October 1962, Major General Reuben H. Tucker, III, Chief, MAAG Laos, and the remaining 127 MAAG personnel formally departed the Kingdom of Laos.²⁵⁵ The North Vietnamese, however, did not comply with the Accords: Only about 40 out of some 7,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos, went thru the formalities of leaving the country, while the remaining North Vietnamese forces together with about 19,500 fighting men of the Pathet Lao expanded their area, pushing the Hmong away from their settlements, or absorbing those who did not flee, as well as attacking the neutralist forces. The Soviets also continued to



Prince Souphanouvong arriving at Vientiane in 1962 aboard Aeroflot IL-14 CCCP-52043
(with kind permission from Joe Hazen)

back the Communist side, at least until 2 December 62,²⁵⁶ and when Prince Souphanouvong, the “Red Prince”, came to Vientiane in 1962 for negotiations, he arrived in an Aeroflot IL-14. The Geneva Accords were like a *de facto* division of Laos into 2 halves: Hanoi seemed to have received the northern mountains and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, while the Royal Lao Government seemed to have received the Mekong Valley and the contiguous highlands.²⁵⁷ So Air America was allowed to secretly resupply the Hmong irregulars with small amounts of food and ammunition. But Communist aggression was not stopped by the Accords: As the Geneva Accords were being signed in late July 62, the North Vietnamese army attacked the joint command post of the Thakhek unit (**MR 3**), and on 18 August 62, the North Vietnamese attacked the Hmong base at Phou Koup in Sam Neua Province (**MR 2**).²⁵⁸ Even the neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma understood that without US assistance, the Communists

²⁵⁴ Already between 5 and 12 August 62, Ed Eckholdt shuttled between Hua Hin in southern Thailand and Sam Thong in Laos via Vientiane, Udorn or Takhli in Air America’s new Caribou B-853, probably bringing home PARU advisers and their equipment (Log book of Ed Eckholdt, in: UTD/Leary/B44F13). Hua Hin had been the home of the PARU units since 1955, when they were still called the “Royal Guards” (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.58/9). On 19 August 62, Eckholdt flew Caribou B-851 from Bangkok to Hua Hin and then to Nong Khai in Thailand (another PARU camp) and back to Vientiane.

²⁵⁵ Castle, *At war*, pp.46-50.

²⁵⁶ On 2 December 62, the Soviets officially ended their Lao airlift, turning over 9 Li-2s to the Lao coalition government, while the IL-14s used in the airlift were turned over to North Vietnam (Caste, *At war*, p.56).

²⁵⁷ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.133/4.

²⁵⁸ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.137/8.

would take over the Kingdom of Laos. As Article 6 of the Geneva Accords prohibited the introduction of all sorts of armaments into Laos, except in small quantities necessary for the defense of the country, already on 10 September 62 Souvanna Phouma sent a letter to US Ambassador Unger, requesting repair parts and supplies for US-furnished equipment, including training ammunition, oils and lubricants. In his reply dated 12 October 62, Ambassador Unger acknowledged that a new military assistance program had been created in the meantime, partly thru a new office set up within USAID Laos.²⁵⁹

So, in order to counterbalance the continued North Vietnamese presence in Laos without infringing themselves the Geneva Accords, the United States moved military advisers and CIA personnel just across the border into Thailand.²⁶⁰ The CIA and the Thai “Kaw Taw” first moved to the small Thai town of Nong Khai (T-22), located southeast of Vientiane on the banks of the Mekong River, which served as a CIA base for some time in 1962,²⁶¹ until the CIA’s 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment was established at the Royal Thai Air Force base at Udorn in late 1962. There, the Thai “Kaw Taw” was officially redesignated “Headquarters 333”.²⁶² From now on, CIA people were flown in daily by Air America planes. The US Embassy declared that Air America flights were humanitarian, while CIA men took USAID posts as cover. Some of the PARU teams also remained in or close to Laos: Team F remained at Phone Kheng, assigned to Siho’s special troops. Three PARU teams remained in Military Region I (**MR 1**) along the Thai-Lao frontier: Team I at Chiang Khong (inside Thailand); Team J plus CIA-man Arthur Elmore at Ban Bo Yuak, in Thailand’s Nan province bordering Sayaboury; and Team L at Phu Mieng Mane, 11 kilometers inside Sayaboury Province. Two PARU teams remained in **MR 2**, i.e. Team V at Hong Non handling Sam Neua Province and Team Z, responsible for Xieng Khouang Province, at Long Tieng, which was also home of CIA men Tony Poe and Vint Lawrence.²⁶³ The reason for this concentration at Long Tieng was that after the 1962 Geneva Accords, Long Tieng continued to be Vang Pao’s home base where, in December 62, he gathered all 500 of the SGU trained at Hua Hin earlier that summer and molded them into a new 1 SGU Battalion garrisoned at Long Tieng and intended to be his mobile reserve force.²⁶⁴ Another northern Thailand airfield that served as a base for military or covert aid to Laos was Nakhon Phanom (T-55), located some 120 miles east of Udorn on the banks of the Mekong River, which, especially since 1966, was the place from where the Air Commandos operated night interdiction missions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.²⁶⁵ But Nakhon Phanom was not a special base for Air America operations.

While the CEECO contract covering the CIA’s SGU program continued to exist until the mid-sixties, when it was replaced by contract no. AID-439-713, the old USOM contracts were replaced by a new contract with USAID, that is by contract no. AID-439-342 effective 7 October 1962.²⁶⁶ Like some of the contracts of the pre-1962 period, this new contract with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also allowed to transport military and paramilitary supplies to the Royal Lao armed forces and to the CIA’s SGU program, and these flights are described below as *Peppergrinder*-operations and AB-1 missions. As to the two pre-Geneva contracts with the United States Air Force, that is AF 62(531)-1674 Helicopters and L-20s and AF 62(531)-1683 Fixed Wing / Laos, the Executive

²⁵⁹ Castle, *At war*, pp.51/2.

²⁶⁰ Leary, *CIA Air Operations in Laos*, p. 60.

²⁶¹ Castle, *At war*, p.161, note 60; Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.97.

²⁶² Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp. 118-20; Castle, *At war*, pp. 60-61, Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.99.

²⁶³ Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.97/8 + 102, note 16.

²⁶⁴ Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.98.

²⁶⁵ Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp.182-212.

²⁶⁶ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd of 30 October 1962, pp. 1-2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.

Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd stated on 9 October 62 that they “remain essentially unchanged, except for the fact that APRFE [= USAF, Air Procurement Region, Far East] has designated Director USAID to replace Chief MAAG as the supervising agent.”²⁶⁷ But probably the US military felt somehow uneasy about depending from the Director of a civil organization, and so this arrangement was soon changed again, as Modification no. 12 to the *Madrider* contract no. AF 62(531)-1674, dated 11 December 1962 states that effective 8 December 62 “the above-numbered contract is modified to reflect the following administrative changes by changing any reference in this contract which reads ‘Director, USAID’ to read ‘Deputy Chief, JUSMAG, Thailand’”.²⁶⁸ Probably the same happened to contract AF 62(531)-1683, but both contracts were not extended beyond 30 June 63. The follow-on contracts to AF 62(531)-1674 were all concluded between Air America and Deputy Chief, JUSMAG, Thailand,²⁶⁹ and even under the combined contracts of the early seventies *Madrider* flying continued to exist till the end of Air America’s work in Laos.

Military aid to Laos

The two supply channels

This new purchaser of Air America services in Laos mentioned in the last modification to the *Madrider* contract, that is ‘Deputy Chief, JUSMAG, Thailand’, was one end of one of the two new supply channels that allowed the US to transport arms and ammunition into neutral Laos even after the new Geneva Accords. While rice drops into Laos were hauled out of Vientiane, mostly aboard Air America’s C-46s and C-47s,²⁷⁰ military supplies (called “hard rice” by the pilots) could not be openly delivered by Air America planes because of the official neutrality of the country. For the 1962 Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos prohibited “the introduction of foreign regular and irregular troops, foreign paramilitary formations and foreign military personnel into Laos” as well as the “introduction into Laos of armaments, munitions and war material generally, except such quantities of conventional armaments as the Royal Government of Laos may consider necessary for the national defense of Laos.”²⁷¹ Indeed, there were two clandestine logistical systems to channel military and paramilitary aid into Laos, one run by the US Department of Defense and the other one run by the CIA. A Memorandum dated 17 January 64 and sent by the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Scott, to the Special Group,²⁷² makes an interesting distinction between overt military support kept secret and covert support to paramilitary forces: “Military assistance is being provided overtly to the regular non-communist forces, at the request and approval of Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma. These regular forces include the conservative *Forces Armées du Royaume* (FAR) under General Phoumi and the neutralist forces loyal to Prince Souvanna Phouma under General Kong Le. This overt assistance is in accordance with Article 6 of the Protocol of the Geneva Agreements, although we attempt to avoid publicizing it. Covert support is given to paramilitary guerrilla and intelligence collecting groups that consist primarily of tribal members. General Phoumi is, in general, familiar with our assistance to these groups but not

²⁶⁷ Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd of 30 October 1962, pp. 1-2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1.

²⁶⁸ Modification no. 12 to contract AF 62(531)-1674, dated 11 December 1962, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F12.

²⁶⁹ On 1 July 63, the original *Madrider* contract no. AF 62(531)-1674 was replaced by contract no. AF 62(531)-1758 (AAM Aircraft Availability for 1 July 63, note 5, in: UTD/Walker/B25F8). Between 1 July 63 and 30 June 65, the follow-on contract was no. AF 62(531)-1758 (in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F10), followed by contract no. AF 62(531)-1841 between 1 July 65 and 30 June 67 (in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F9). Between 1 July 67 and 30 June 70, this contract was no. F62531-67-C-0028, which was followed by a more comprehensive contract on 1 July 70, that is by F04606-71-C-0002 (Price negotiation memorandum dated 20 October 71, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F8).

²⁷⁰ E-mail dated 2 July 01 kindly sent to the author by former Air America pilot Frank Bonansinga.

²⁷¹ Quoted from Castle, *At war*, p. xiv.

²⁷² In: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d1>, tab.1.

in detail. Although Prince Souvanna is generally aware of our activities in this area, he is less so than Phoumi.” Indeed, the letter of 10 September 62 sent by Souvanna Phouma to Ambassador Unger was also the base for sending supplies to Kong Le, who was under Communist pressure, aboard Air America planes contracted by the US Government. In November 62, open conflict erupted between Kong Le and the Pathet Lao on the Plain of Jars, and the Soviets halted their airlift to the Neutralists.²⁷³ So the US Embassy at Vientiane directed some non-military supplies to be sent to the Neutralists. But some of the Neutralist leaders favored the Pathet Lao, and the downing of Air America C-123B N5004X, which was shot down upon landing at Xieng Khouang (L-22) on 27 November 62, while carrying 12,800 pounds of rice under the provisions of contract no. USAID-439-342,²⁷⁴ was ascribed to a unit belonging to those pro-Communist Neutralists.²⁷⁵ Nevertheless, as William Leary pointed out,²⁷⁶ at the beginning, Air America arms drops were approved by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Averill Harriman only very reluctantly. And even in early 1964, the flying in Laos was still very low: Already on 12 November 63, Air America noted that “there has been a small but steady decrease in Southeast Asia flying activities over the past three months. The Company’s personnel and equipment position is improving and the Company continues to have excess capacity.”²⁷⁷ On 14 January 64, Air America notes that “USAID flying in Laos is down somewhat” and that “MAAG reportedly wants to reduce the number of flight personnel assigned to Udorn.”²⁷⁸ And in February 64, the message is even more alarming: “Contract flying in Southeast Asia remains unchanged with flying in Laos continuing its steady decline. Since the middle of 1963 flying in Laos has declined about 30 %.”²⁷⁹ But the Company continued its assistance to Laos.

As to the organization of US military aid to Laos, the US Department of Defense supported the Lao regulars, that are the Royal Lao Army and the Royal Lao Air Force, thru a Thailand-based organization called “DEPCHIEF”, which operated out of Bangkok and worked hand in hand with a Laos-based organization called the *Requirements Office*. Already in August 1962, US President Kennedy had approved plans for a new covert US military assistance program to Laos. When the US MAAG group withdrew from Laos on 6 October 62, the following day US Major General Tucker established and took command of Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Assistance Advisory Group, Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI), normally abbreviated as DEPCHIEF, which was to become a new covert military assistance program for Laos.²⁸⁰ Although officially a Military Assistance Program to Thailand for counter-subversion, its real function was to provide military assistance to Laos in Thailand and to ship it onwards to Laos.²⁸¹ But as DEPCHIEF personnel were not allowed to work in Laos, the program needed people working in Laos to coordinate the military assistance received from Thailand. These people belonged to the *Requirements Office* (USAID/RO), the small new

²⁷³ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.141/2.

²⁷⁴ See the statements about this accident in: UTD/Hickler/B24F1.

²⁷⁵ As Mike LaDue points out, “the shoot-down was ironically ordered by none other than Kong Le’s second-in-command, Colonel Deuan Sunnalath, with whom Kong Le had had a recent falling out” (Mike LaDue, *April Fools Day - Kong Le style*, in: <http://www.air-america.org/Articles/LaDue3.htm>).

²⁷⁶ Leary, *CIA Air Operations*, p.60.

²⁷⁷ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc, of 12 November 1963, p.2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F2.

²⁷⁸ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc, of 14 January 1964, p.1, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3.

²⁷⁹ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc, of 11 February 1964, p.1, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3.

²⁸⁰ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp. 234-36; Castle, *At war*, pp. 50+53; Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.102, note 1.

²⁸¹ In his letter dated 12 September 62 sent to President Kennedy’s military aide Major General C.V. Clifton, General Robert J. Wood (US Dept. of Defense) defines DEPCHIEF’s purpose as to “carry out, within Thailand, certain necessary military assistance functions for Laos” (quoted from Castle, *At war*, p. xii).

office within USAID Laos mentioned by Ambassador Unger in his letter of 12 October 62, which was an integral element of DEPCHIEF – about thirty retired US military officers and some third-country technicians –, but was ostensibly under the control of the USAID program.²⁸² DEPCHIEF wrote the programs, established training arrangements, coordinated the delivery of military equipment, and provided technical assistance, while the *Requirements Office* worked with the Ambassador, the Attaches and the Royal Lao Government and forces in determining support requirements. To a very limited extent, USAID/RO personnel also worked as advisers in field units.²⁸³ It was especially the training of the lowland Lao army that was left to DEPCHIEF and the *Requirements Office*.²⁸⁴

This USAID umbrella for US military aid given to the Royal Laotian Armed Forces was not just a cover, but also reflected the financing: “Between 1962 and 1969 A.I.D. bore the full cost of foodstuffs for regular military and paramilitary forces and for paramilitary dependents in Laos, and half the airlift cost of these foodstuffs. Beginning in FY 1969 the Department of Defense assumed the funding of food and delivery costs for the above forces and dependents in the northern Military Regions (I and II) which involved air delivery. Beginning in FY 1971 DOD assumed funding of the remainder of the above types of costs previously borne by A.I.D. In addition, DOD assumed funding of the personnel costs of the USAID *Requirements Office* which was responsible for assisting the Lao Armed Forces to receive, warehouse, allocate and distribute all Military Assistance Service Funded (MASF) equipment and supplies for Laos. Pursuant to the terms of the Laos peace agreements, the *Requirements Office* was abolished following the establishment of the PGNU and the reduced volume of military assistance in FY 1975 was provided through the Defense Attaché Office under a Military Assistance Program.”²⁸⁵ Generally speaking, USAID shared its costs, especially those for air transportation, with other U.S. agencies: “The need for air transport resulted from difficult terrain, the absence of railroads, and a limited network of roads that were often impassable during the rainy season and frequently insecure. [...] Funding of the A.I.D. contracts required for this project [= the Air Technical Support Project] were shared by other U.S. agencies utilizing the air and support services available. As required, A.I.D. utilized services available under contracts or through other U.S. agencies on a reimbursable basis.”²⁸⁶ Evidently, these “other U.S. agencies” were the CIA and the US military.

While Air America flights carrying arms and ammunition for DEPCHIEF’s military assistance program to Laos were called *Peppergrinder*-missions, as will be seen below, all other flights operated for USAID/RO had RO- flight numbers – some of them seem to have been liaison flights, while others evidently supported pro-Western troops in Laos.²⁸⁷ But when some misuse of material supplied to Laos was discovered, in 1966, some 120 active-duty US Air Force and US Army personnel – mostly radio communicators, intelligence, and operations specialists – were allowed to enter Laos under “Project 404” (sometimes referred to as “Palace Dog”), a covert augmentation of DEPCHIEF and the US military attachés in Laos: While administratively assigned to DEPCHIEF in Thailand, they indeed worked at RLAF bases and Royal Lao Army Military Regions Headquarters, to advise, to assist in targeting, and to effect coordination of air support requirements. Only part of these men really acted as

²⁸² Castle, *At war in the shadow of Vietnam*, pp.85+53/4.

²⁸³ Castle, *At war*, p.85; Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.102, note 1.

²⁸⁴ Castle, *At war*, p.131.

²⁸⁵ Ramsay et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 324.

²⁸⁶ Ramsay et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 327.

²⁸⁷ On 24 May 66, Helio Courier “843” flew from Vientiane to Udorn, Sayaboury (L-23), and Hong Sa (LS-62) for “RO-2566” and “RO-2569” – probably liaison flights, while the same day, C-123 “617” flew for “RO-2567” to Moun Soui (L-60) – probably a supply run to Kong Le’s headquarters (see Vientiane daily flight schedule for 24 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B7F7A). Kong Le definitely left Laos in October 66 (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.158).

trainers for the Lao, while a good number of them helped to coordinate the Lao Air Operations Centers (AOCs) and RLAF and USAF aircraft.²⁸⁸ “This augmentation of attaché offices had come at the expense of the other two Advisory groups. For its part, the RO found part of its end-use analytical function repeated – if not subsumed – by the Project 404 regional detachments. Similarly, the DEPCHIEF, based in distant Bangkok, was increasingly sidelined as a major player. Even administrative bookkeeping for Project 404, which technically fell under DEPCHIEF’s preview, had come to be handled by the attachés.”²⁸⁹

On the other hand, the CIA, thru its 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment created at Udon in late 1962 and later mostly called “AB-1”²⁹⁰ by Air America people, was responsible for supporting all paramilitary forces in Laos, and this included not only Vang Pao’s Hmong forces at Long Tieng, but also certain elements of the FAR as well as other irregulars and other tribal forces working for the CIA. The Memorandum of 17 January 64 written by the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, states that “certain organizations of the FAR can be considered to have a paramilitary character. These are the *Auto Défense de Choc* (ADC) units and the *Directorate of National Coordination* (DNC). [...] The FAR ADC units, which are not part of the Meo ADC force, have a total strength of about 9,000 and are essentially home guard or militia-type military units concerned with local village or urban defense. On occasion, however, they have been used as regular forces. The ADCs are considered to be part of the FAR and come under its organizational command. Thus, General Phoumi controls these units, as he does the regular FAR troops. Phoumi provides some support to the ADCs from US military assistance, but the amount is probably minimal. The neutralists have also begun recently to develop some ADC elements that will presumably be controlled and maintained by the regular neutralist forces under Kong Le. The Directorate of National Coordination is an organization of the FAR charged primarily with security and police responsibilities. [...] In addition to acting as the police force in Vientiane and other areas, the DNC is engaged in intelligence, customs and border control activities on behalf of the FAR. DNC units are stationed in the few cities and large towns and penetrate slightly into the countryside in scattered gendarmerie posts of four or five men. The DNC numbers some 7,800 men under Col. Siho, of which 3,600 are engaged in police and 4,200 in military-type activities. [...] As part of the FAR and because of Siho’s relationship with him, General Phoumi controls the DNC.”²⁹¹

As to the tribal military forces supported by the CIA, the Hmong forces had been expanded to approximately 19,000 guerrillas by January 64, engaged in village defense and guerrilla activities against the Pathet Lao. Since about mid-1963, those Hmong forces were trained in Thailand – at first only at the PARU center at Hua Hin, where they were taught guerrilla warfare tactics and the use of modern weapons and radios, and then also at Phitsanulok in northwestern Thailand. After returning to Laos, the Hmong saw action against communist-held Hmong villages throughout northeastern Laos. Once these villages were taken, they were fortified, defended by Hmong soldiers and supplied by newly built STOL sites. Later, a similar training program was also organized at Long Tieng.²⁹² But the Hmong were not the only tribal forces supported by the CIA by early 1964, for the Agency had also developed “paramilitary and intelligence assets among the Yaos in northwest Laos (currently 1700; 2500 authorized) and the Kha tribesmen in south Laos (currently 400; 1,000 authorized) and Lao in

²⁸⁸ Castle, *At war*, pp.85/6; Moody, *The great adventures, Prelude*, p.5; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.159.

²⁸⁹ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.366.

²⁹⁰ According to Jim Rhyne, the CIA’s office at Udon “initially was in a shack on stilts next to the Air America office (also on stilts). The Air America office was Administration Building # 2 and Customer office was Administration Building # 1” (Jim Rhyne, Interview conducted at Clayton, NC on 13 October 90 by Prof. Bill Leary, p. 2, in: UTD/Leary/B47F9), hence the name “AB-1”, which lasted also after transfer to the new building.

²⁹¹ In: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d1>, tab.1.

²⁹² Castle, *At war*, pp.57/8 and 160.

central Laos (currently 1,200; 2,000 authorized). The latter assets (Lao in central Laos) operate under FAR cover.”²⁹³ Later, the Lao Theung or the Hmong worked as road watchers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.²⁹⁴ And the 4802nd JLD was also responsible for cooperation with the Royal Thai military. A Thai military unit called “Headquarters 333” and the 4802nd JLD at Udorn, comprising together about 80 Thais and Americans, acted as a joint US-Thai command for covert military and intelligence-collection activities in Laos, and one of their tasks was to organize the use of PARU personnel in Laos, who also worked as road watchers, and to assist in the recruitment and training of Thai soldiers destined for duty in Laos.²⁹⁵ Indeed, Royal Thai government cooperation was integral to the covert US aid for Laos – not only by providing land for US-built and US-operated military facilities, but also by sending PARU units since 1960, Thai Air Force T-28s since 1964, and between 1970 and 1974 even battalions of Thai volunteers (project *Unity*).²⁹⁶

But from 1962 to 1975, the real commander in chief of the entire war in Laos was neither a military commander nor a CIA man, but the US Ambassador to Laos – a situation that made Admiral John S. McCain, Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), observe that “Laos is a SECSTATE [Department of State] theater of war.”²⁹⁷ After the Bay of Pigs failure, President Kennedy had determined to make the Department of State the central point, below the President, in the conduct of foreign affairs. On 29 May 61, Kennedy sent a letter to each US Ambassador working abroad stating that they were in charge of all operations of the US Diplomatic Mission, also including “representatives of all other United States agencies”, that is also including all CIA operations. In that letter, only the US military forces operating in the field were excluded, provided that “such forces are under the command of a United States area military commander.” But officially, Laos was neutral and there was no US military in Laos, and so there was no such “area military commander” either.²⁹⁸ Consequently, by this letter of President Kennedy dated 29 May 61, the US Ambassador to Laos became the controlling authority for all aspects of the war in Laos; he was the man who was really in charge of the entire war in Laos.

Although much of the military supplies destined for the Royal Lao Army and Royal Lao Air Force was delivered by merchant ships to Thai ports and then trucked up to the border and transported across the Mekong River,²⁹⁹ all military supplies that were flown into Laos – that is probably most of the military supplies that were not destined for the Vientiane area –, were hauled out of Udorn or Takhli by Air America aircraft. But Air America tried to hide the real identities of their customers to their personnel, and so official Company papers used code-names. As was noted by Joe Hennessy in his short history of Air America,³⁰⁰ there were two customers at Udorn, AB-1 and “AB-2”, which were located at different parts of the airport. The number of aircraft assigned to these customers as well as other details make clear, however, that “AB-2” – probably an unofficial name – was the DEPCHIEF-program, and Air America flights operated for this program appeared on the Company’s Flight Operations Circulars as flights as directed by “PPG” or *Peppergrinder*, while supplies destined for Vang Pao’s irregulars were hauled on flights operated for CEECO and later on flights “as directed by AB-1”, that is by the CIA’s headquarters for Laotian operations at Udorn. But in reality,

²⁹³ Memorandum of 17 January 64, written by the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, in: US Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, vol. XXVIII, Laos, in: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d1>, tab.1.

²⁹⁴ Castle, *At war*, pp.58, 82, 85, and 107.

²⁹⁵ Castle, *At war*, pp.3, 60/1, and 82.

²⁹⁶ Castle, *At war*, pp.2/3; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.444.

²⁹⁷ Quoted from Castle, *At war*, p.2.

²⁹⁸ Quoted from Castle, *At war*, pp.54/5.

²⁹⁹ Castle, *At war*, p.85.

³⁰⁰ Joe Hennessy, *Air America*, in: *Air America Log*, vol. XVII, no.3, July-Sept. 2000, pp.11-14, *ibid.*, p.13.

this distinction had probably more importance for book-keeping,³⁰¹ that is in order to know who was to pay for the flight, and for determining the origin of the supplies, that is the US Military Assistance Program on the one hand and the CIA's supply stocks at Okinawa³⁰² on the other hand. For while flights for the *Requirements Office* could also carry supplies to the Royal Lao Air Force at Luang Prabang,³⁰³ and while AB-1 missions also supplied the Hmong, PARU and Theung road watchers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, General Vang Pao was at the end of both supply channels: As leader of Laos' Military Region II,³⁰⁴ he commanded troops of the Royal Lao Army, while as leader of the Hmong irregular forces, he also received supplies from CIA sources.³⁰⁵

Peppergrinder-operations 1962-1968:

As the military assistance program to Laos run by DEPCHIEF was created in October 62,³⁰⁶ it is believed that *Peppergrinder*-operations were started at about the same time. *Peppergrinder* was the code-name of a 380-acre munitions storage facility located at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. At *Peppergrinder*, there was a detachment of DEPCHIEF, the covert military assistance program to Laos, reporting directly to CINCPAC. It had been created in October 62, was headquartered in Bangkok, where DEPCHIEF also operated a large warehouse (code-name "Redcap") at Don Muang airport, and had other detachments at the Air America facility at Udorn Air Base and at the Thai port of Sattahip.³⁰⁷ Indeed, throughout 1963 and into 1964, the DEPCHIEF continued to resupply the rightist and neutralist armies processing military aid shipments thru Bangkok and then ferrying them north to the Thai-Lao border where they were picked up by trucks or by Air America aircraft.³⁰⁸ In the early days, all types of aircraft assigned to contract AID-439-342 made flights for the *Requirements Office*. Joe Hazen recalls that he flew ammunition and even parts of a captured Russian tank in his Caribou "392", when it was assigned to contract AID-439-

³⁰¹ Although Air America had separate contracts with USAID, the CIA, and the Department of Defense (Castle, *At war*, p.84), that is AID-439-342 with USAID, CEECO contract 59-069 and later AID-439-713 with the CIA, and AF62(531)-1674 and its follow-on contracts with the USAF, most pilots would fly a variety of missions, both military and civilian related, over the course of the day, and sometimes they would even have several customers on the very same flight. This complex system was managed by the "Air Support Branch" within USAID/RO that in close cooperation with the air carriers and the "customers" would publish the Daily Flight Schedules at Vientiane and Udorn (Castle, *At war*, p.84).

³⁰² At Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, was the CIA's main logistics base in East Asia, code-named ZRBLUSH and containing, among other supplies, arms and ammunition (see Leary, *Secret mission to Tibet*, p.69).

³⁰³ This happened, for example, in February 1967, after a Pathet Lao attack had destroyed or heavily damaged the whole local fleet of 9 Royal Lao Air Force T-28s based at Luang Prabang, the flight-line equipment, and the Air Operations Center (AOC) at Luang Prabang. The damaged T-28s were air-lifted to Udorn and repaired by Air America, and, as Don Moody, who at that time worked at the AOC of Luang Prabang, reports, "the Requirements Office (RO) sent us munitions and replacement parts to replace almost everything lost in the attack" (Don Moody, *The great adventures of Bob and Don*, Episode 2, pp.5/6).

³⁰⁴ General Phoumi promoted Lieutenant Colonel Vang Pao to Brigadier General in December 63, and in January 64, King Vathana named him a "Commander of the Order of the Million Elephants. [...] Now, the king's embrace and Vang Pao's promotion added Laotian endorsement and sponsorship to what had begun as an essentially unilateral American creation" (Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.177/8). The command of Military Region II passed to General Vang Pao on 28 February 65 (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.125).

³⁰⁵ In 1964, General Vang Pao, commander of Military Region II (which included the provinces of Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang, that is areas of intense fighting), had approximately 15,000 fighters under his command: "As a general in the Lao Army, he commanded regular Lao troops, Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs), and hill tribe irregulars, including Kmhmu, armed and trained under the auspices of the CIA" (Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, p.137). In 1971, his forces comprised 19 battalions of hill tribe irregulars (5,100 men), 10 battalions of Thai irregulars (3,100 men), and 4 battalions of Royal Lao Army infantry (645 men) (Castle, *At war*, p.107).

³⁰⁶ Castle, *At war*, p.53.

³⁰⁷ Castle, *At war*, p.53.

³⁰⁸ Castle, *At war*, p.62.

342.³⁰⁹ “On 6 July 1964, in Caribou 392, I flew from Vientiane to LS-20A with a load of whatever, then to Muong Soui (it had no site number at that time) on the west side of the PDJ, loaded up, went to Udorn to refuel and then on to Bangkok with the Muong Soui cargo. The cargo loaded at Muong Soui was part of a Russian tank that had been captured which had a drive mechanism that used water jet propulsion when in the water rather than a propeller and which the USA wanted very much to study. Personnel (assume CIA) were sent to Muong Soui several days prior to cut up this tank into transportable pieces with acetylene torches, to be taken to Bangkok, eventually loaded on a US Air Force transport and flown to Detroit to the Tank Arsenal, which I believe was operated by the Chrysler Corporation, to be reconstructed and tested. The tank was fairly large and several Caribous were involved in the operation. I flew just the one trip. On 7 July I flew 392 from Bangkok to Udorn, picked up a load of whatever (I think ammunition), flew it to Muong Soui, off loaded and then went to Vientiane. There was no sign of tank remains at Muong Soui, so I assume the last of it went out the previous day or even the same day prior to my arrival.”³¹⁰ Later, *Peppergrinder*-flights mostly used C-123s that were based at Vientiane, assigned to the “regular” USAID-contract AID-439-342 and normally used for hauling fuel drums or heavy equipment into Laos. When necessary, the cargo was then distributed to various locations by Air America’s helicopters and STOL aircraft. Sometimes, Air America’s C-123s also transported big guns like the 105mm, like N5005X that, in November 65, brought one to Thakhek West, as can be seen in the photos below. The transportation of military cargo under the provisions of a USAID contract was possible, because USAID/RO served as a link between DEPCHIEF and the regular USAID. Ostensibly under the control of the USAID program and designated the *Requirements Office* (USAID/RO), the unit was established to act as the in-country component of a highly classified, Thailand-based, joint US military assistance organization.³¹¹ Pilots would fly their C-123s to Udorn, get a short and rather general briefing at the Flight Information Center, depart to *Peppergrinder* where they would be told their actual destination, load up the arms and ammunition, fly them to the destination designated by *Peppergrinder* and return to their base at Vientiane. As was noted in a Memorandum by P.R.



³⁰⁹ Caribou “392” was used out of Vientiane under the provisions of USAID contract AID-439-342 at least between 27 May 64 and 1 Oct. 64 (Availability list, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8; Aircraft status as of 7 July 64, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1).

³¹⁰ E-mail dated 4 February 2006, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.

³¹¹ Castle, *At war*, p.53.



Three moments of the same scene, taken by Dr. Jonathan Pote: A 105mm gun is pulled out of Air America C-123B N5005X that has brought it to Thakhek West in November 1965. (with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

O'Brien dated 18 January 72:³¹² "Destinations are designated at PPG. The impact of this reversed situation – briefing prior to destination assignment – is somewhat academic since there are ordinarily some 5 airfield possibilities and 4 Drop Zone possibilities and the crews are well aware of all of these areas. The SOM (Senior Operations Manager) UTH (Mr. Palmer) assures me that unusual destinations are called in from PPG the night before so that an FIC briefing can be conducted." Already in July-September 1964, *Peppergrinder*-operations played an important roll in supporting Thai-piloted RLA F T-28s that attacked Pathet Lao positions west of the Plain of Jars near the junction of Routes 7 and 13 in Operation *Triangle*. Operation *Triangle* lasted for about 10 weeks, and during this time, 3 Air America C-123s brought in arms for the T-28s from *Peppergrinder* at Udorn.³¹³ In 1966, between one or four C-123s per day were used on *Peppergrinder*-flights, and in this case, the

³¹² In: UTD/CIA/B29F2.

³¹³ Castle, *At war*, pp.73/4; Leary, *Outline - Air America in Laos*, 1964, pp.24/5.

actual flight schedules would only indicate: “UDN/ as directed by PPG /VTE”.³¹⁴ As according to former CIA Director William Colby, “the lowland-bound Royal Lao Army, despite American military aid, was not going to go outside the narrow limits of the Mekong plain to engage the Communists”³¹⁵, it becomes evident that the arms and ammunition flown into Laos on *Peppergrinder*-missions were taken at DEPCHIEF’s depot, but delivered mostly to support the RLAf as well as the USAF aircraft flying in RLAf colors within the Military Assistance Program, and only to a smaller extent to the Royal Lao Army units serving outside the Mekong Valley, for example to those serving under General Vang Pao.

CEECO operations in Laos and northern Thailand from August 1962 to 1965:

CIA-sponsored military aid to Laos was first concentrated at Takhli (T-05) in Thailand, where a special CIA compound existed within the Air Base, which was open only to those Air America pilots who had special government clearances.³¹⁶ In the late fifties and early sixties, the secret missions flown by USAF C-130As piloted by Air America crews to support the Tibetan guerrillas had started at Takhli. In January 60, Major Aderholt had taken over Detachment 2, 1045th Operational Evaluation and Training Group, directly reporting to CIA headquarters, and by then, Takhli also became the starting point for arms and supplies drops organized by Major Aderholt and flown by Air America aircraft to General Phoumi as well as (since January 61) to Major Vang Pao. During 1961, the B-26s of the abortive Project *Mill Pond* and the RB-26Cs of Project *Black Watch* had also been based at Takhli. And, as has been shown above, the CIA used its front company CEECO or “Consolidated Electric Equipment Company” not only for the operation and maintenance of the *Mill Pond* and *Black Watch* B-26s, but also for the arms and supply drops to Vang Pao that were flown out of Takhli as well as for liaison flights within Thailand and to Laos.

It could have been expected that this situation would have changed with the Geneva Accords of 23 July 62, which ordered all foreign troops and paramilitary personnel had to leave within 75 days and stay out of Laos. But as the Pathet Lao did not allow ICC inspectors to visit and control their territories, and as very soon, it became clear that the North Vietnamese did not leave Laos, as they should have done according to the Geneva Accords, Air America and the CEECO-program stayed on as well. And indeed, even for 1973, the Dixon Speas audit dated 12 July 73 still mentions contract 59-069 between Air Asia and the “Consolidated Electric Equipment Company”, valid for an open period, and providing for “flying and maintenance services in Thailand” at a worth of “\$2,000 per month”.³¹⁷ But while Flight Operations Circulars of 1973 do not indicate any Air America aircraft assigned to contract 59-069, earlier Operations Circulars do so: From July to September 63, C-123B N5006X, C-46 B-138 and Helios B-839, B-845, and B-861 were assigned to contract 59-069, being the only Air America fixed-wing aircraft operating out of Udorn at that time.³¹⁸ In April 64, C-123B N5006X, C-46F B-920, as well as Helio Couriers B-839, B-845, and B-861 were assigned to contract 59-069, again being the only Air America fixed-wing aircraft operating out of Udorn at that time.³¹⁹ For by then, Udorn (T-08) had become a second base for Air America’s secret missions into Laos: As will be recalled, since late March 61 Udorn in

³¹⁴ For Friday, 20 May 1966, the daily flight schedule of Vientiane mentions only C-123 “613” being “as directed (PPG)” out of Udorn, while on Tuesday, 24 May 66, C-123s N5007X, “671”, “613”, and “374” flew “UDN / AS DIRECTED PPG” before returning to Vientiane or even to Udorn for operating the same type of missions the next day. At the very same time, all of these aircraft were assigned to contract AID-439-342 for operation out of Vientiane (Vientiane daily flight schedules of 20 May 66 [in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B] and 24 May 66 [in: UTD/Hickler/B7F7A]; Aircraft status of 4 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B1F2).

³¹⁵ William E. Colby, *Honorable Men*, New York 1978, p.194, quoted in: Castle, *At war*, p.57.

³¹⁶ Robbins, *Air America*, pp.125/6.

³¹⁷ In: UTD/Kaufman/B1F4, p. D-5.

³¹⁸ Air America Aircraft Availability for 1 July 63, 15 July 63, and 21 September 63, in: UTD/Walker/B25F8.

³¹⁹ Air America Aircraft Availability for 1 April 64, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B8F4.

Thailand was the center of Air America's helicopter operations for Laos, and since late 1962 Udorn slowly became Air America's "extraordinary Thailand headquarters".³²⁰ For after the Geneva Accords had banned all United States troops and paramilitary forces from Laos, the CIA moved its paramilitary operations to Nong Khai (T-22), Thailand, on the Mekong River between Vientiane and Udorn,³²¹ but in late 1962, the CIA established its 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment at Udorn,³²² which became the CIA's command center for military operations in Laos and was located adjacent to the Air America parking ramp at the Company's Udorn facility.³²³ Only in 1967, the CIA Detachment at Udorn changed office, when the large AB-1 complex on the other side of the taxiway was built.³²⁴

But this new CIA station at Udorn did not mean the end of Takhli. Over the years, most of these "hard rice" missions were no longer considered to be strictly clandestine, and many of them were flown out of Udorn. But there was also a small number of such flights that were top-secret operations, and they were known as "black" projects. "Black" or top-secret projects were mostly run out of Takhli air base (T-05) in Thailand. Pilots were taken out of their normal program for eight to ten days and then flown back to Vientiane. At Takhli, there was a special compound guarded by civilians of the CIA. These "black" missions could include night drops to spy teams inside North Vietnam, inside China, or to road watcher teams along the Ho Chi Minh Trail:³²⁵ "There were a lot of things that went on at Takhli. Supply missions into parts of Burma and India; all our U-2 and SR-71 flights were out of Takhli".³²⁶

Unfortunately, the CEECO-contract is not available, but the Memorandum of 17 January 64 written by the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, is quite explicit, although it does not mention Air America: "In support of the above forces CIA has employed covert air support designed to fulfill resupply requirements, as well as meet FAR and neutralist paramilitary and military requirements. This air support, conducted by an ostensibly private and commercial company, has been able to continue operations in Laos under USAID contractual arrangements and through the flexibility of CIA's cover and funding mechanisms. During this development, employment and support of the above covert tribal paramilitary program in Laos, CIA has provided World War II weapons and associated ammunition; salary and subsistence and miscellaneous support items. The budget for the Laos tribal program for FY 1963 was \$ 11,625,000 and for 1964 \$ 14,008,000."³²⁷ In addition to this statement made by the CIA for the US Government, a comparison between the aircraft assigned to the CEECO-contract in the Air America Aircraft Status reports and the routes flown by them in early 1964 according to the log books of some pilots makes clear, which type of flights the aircraft flying under the CEECO contract were engaged in: Air America's bigger aircraft assigned to the CEECO contract were still used for air drops over Laos. Both C-46F B-920, acquired in the summer of 1963, and C-123B N5006X had accidents in Laos in 1964, while operating under the CEECO-contract: On 21 April 64, a pallet struck the empennage of B-920 during an air drop over Laos, and on 12 September 64, Air America employee Howland D. Baker fell out of N5006X with load on during an air drop at Ban Na (LS-15), Laos, near Long Tieng (LS-20A), and was killed.³²⁸

³²⁰ Castle, *At war*, pp.29-30.

³²¹ Castle, *At war*, p.161, note 60.

³²² Castle, *At war*, pp.60/1.

³²³ Leary, *CIA Air Operations*, p.61.

³²⁴ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p.175; see also the map of the Air America facility at Udorn, dated 15 October 68, in: UTD/Hickler/B6F3.

³²⁵ Robbins, *Air America*, pp.125-29.

³²⁶ Jim Parrish, quoted by Robbins, *Air America*, p.129.

³²⁷ Memorandum of 17 January 64, written by the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, in: US Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, vol. XXVIII, Laos, in: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d1>, tab.1.

³²⁸ Aircraft accidents 1964, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2, and Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3.

As to Air America's Helio Couriers, it is interesting to note that several of those assigned to the CEECO-contract in the Operations Circular of 1 April 64, which, at that time, were the only Air America fixed-wing aircraft operating out of Udorn, already operated out of Udorn in the autumn of 1962: As can be seen by the entries in the log book of Allen W. Rich, at that time, at least Helio Couriers B-845, B-859, and B-861 were used out of Udorn during the second half of 1962. It is even more interesting to note that, at least since August 62, Udorn-based Air America Helios very often stopped at Nong Khai (T-22) on their way into Laos: B-859 flew Udorn-Nong Khai on 19 August 62, then flew for some time in Laos with various crews, and returned from Long Tieng to Nong Khai on 12 September 62. On 20 September 62, B-859 was again on its way to Nong Khai, when it crashed in Laos. Helio B-845, which had operated out of Long Tieng for some time, returned to Udorn via Nong Khai on 17 September 62. And Helio B-861, which had also operated out of Long Tieng for some time, is known to have flown Vang Pao to places like Phu Pha Thi. Air America-pilot Joe Hazen recalls a very particular flight. "On the 27th of September 1962, I flew Tony Poe into LS-85 (Phu Pha Thi) in Helio Courier B-861. After he conducted his business, we got back on board; I started up and prepared for takeoff. For those not having been there, LS-85 was located on a karst several miles to the NW of Sam Neua (L-04), which was unfriendly territory. The strip was higher in the middle than both ends, which prevented one from seeing the other end of the runway. At the crest of the runway, (600'x50', elevation 4500'), on the left side, stood a Hmong soldier. As I was checking the mags, he extended an arm, with his thumb pointing skyward. As I released the brakes, his other arm went up and his other thumb pointed skyward. When I got to the crest of the runway and could see the other end, I immediately knew two thumbs up meant TWO HORSES ON THE RUNWAY. I proceeded straight ahead, pulled back on the yoke, got airborne and hit one horse with the right side landing gear. *The horse was a tough Mao mountain pony about the size of a Welch pony with the stockiness of a Shetland (this is an editor's note to give the reader an idea of the size of the horses in the story).* It went over the end of the runway to its' death. The other one ran off. [...] The next time I flew into and out of LS-85 was on 4 October in Helio Courier B-847. If there were any horses about, they were kept away from the runway."³²⁹ On 19 and 21 December 62, Helio B-861 departed Udorn to Nong Khai in Thailand, before continuing to the Laotian town of Xieng Khouang in the Plain of Jars. But Helio B-861 also operated liaison flights into Southern Thailand: Udorn (T-08) - Takhli (T-05) - Bangkok-Don Muang (T-09) between 21 and 23 September 62.³³⁰ Sometimes, Air America aircraft that were not primarily assigned to contract no. 59-069 also flew the same type of missions. Joe Hazen recalls: "I spent the night at Udorn on 18 November [62], flying [Do-28 N42]24G all that day and the next day, 19 November went to S-22 (Nong Khai), picked up a Customer (forgot name) and a load of several types of explosives."³³¹ He then brought the ammunition to Chiang Kong (T-516), the place of CIA man Bill Young.³³²

The importance of the CIA station at Nong Khai (T-22), Thailand, also home of PARU "Team E"³³³, is underlined by the fact that sometimes, pilots had to fly even large detours to pass thru that station: On 22 February 63, Allen Rich took his Helio B-845 from Udorn north to Nong Khai, and there he made a sharp turn to the west, going up to Chiang Rai and Chiang Kong in northwestern Thailand; and on 13 March 63, he even made a 180 degree turn, taking Helio B-861 from Udorn first north to Nong Khai and then from there south to Bangkok. And

³²⁹ Joseph W. Hazen, "Two Thumbs Up", at: <http://www.air-america.org/Articles/Hazen.shtml> .

³³⁰ Log book by A. Rich, in: UTD/Rich/B1.

³³¹ E-mail dated 30 January 2015 kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.

³³² E-mail dated 31 January 2015 kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.

³³³ On 13 October 62, Allen Rich took Helio B-861 from Udorn to "Team E" and passed his night at Nong Khai ("RON S-22") according to his log book; from there, he made several air drops, always returning to Nong Khai, until he went down to Bangkok on 15 October 62 (Rich log book, in: UTD/Rich/B1).

this type of liaison flights linking with each other the CIA center at Udorn with the CIA stations at Nong Khai, Takhli, Bangkok and Long Tieng and evidently operating under the CEECO-contract no. 59-069, was also carried out by Air America's Helio Couriers B-845 and B-861 during the year of 1963. In 1964, Helios B-839 and B-845 had several accidents in Thailand.³³⁴ But it should not be forgotten that there was at least one more activity carried out by Air America aircraft assigned to the CEECO-contract, and that was flight instruction: At least in May and June 63 as well as in May 64, Helios B-845 and B-861, but also Helio B-839, all assigned to the CEECO-contract in April 64, carried out a number of instruction flights out of Udorn.³³⁵



Air America Helio "839" with troops in 1964
(UTD/Leary/B75F5, formerly photo no. 1WL1-27-8-PC93)

Between the summer of 1964 and the early months of 1966, this situation did not change very much, except that the number of aircraft assigned to the CEECO-contract was increased over the years: While in July 64, C-123B N5006X, one C-46 (this time B-138), as well as Helios B-839 and "531" (msn 531) were once more assigned to contract 59-069 with CEECO, being again the only Air America fixed-wing aircraft based at Udorn, the number of Air America aircraft operating under the CEECO contract out of Udorn had been considerably increased in November 65: By then, there were not only C-123B N5006X plus the 2 Helio Couriers, but even five of them (once more B-839 and the former "531" in the meantime reregistered as XW-PCD, plus Helios XW-PBY, XW-PBZ, and XW-PCA), to which had been added Caribou B-851 and Turbo Porters N9444 and N285L.³³⁶ During 1965 and early 1966, the smaller Air America aircraft flying under the CEECO-contract operated in Laos or made liaison flights in Thailand, as is testified by various log books and accident reports.³³⁷ At the same time, the big aircraft assigned to the CEECO-contract were also used in Laos or in Thailand,³³⁸ but while some flights linked the CIA center at Udorn (T-08) with the

³³⁴ Log book of A. Rich, in: UTD/Rich/B1; "Aircraft accidents 1964", in: UTD/CIA/B49F2.

³³⁵ Log book of A. Rich, in: UTD/Rich/B1.

³³⁶ Aircraft status of 7 July 64 and 1 November 65, both in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1.

³³⁷ Helio XW-PCD, for example, crash-landed at Sam Thong (LS-20), Laos, on 29 October 64; after being repaired, it crashed again at site T-612 in Thailand on 10 February 65; after being repaired, XW-PCD crashed again in the Chiang Kong (T-516), Thailand, area on 2 April 65 (Log book of Allen Rich, in: UTD/Rich/B1, plus the lists "Aircraft accidents" of 1964 and 1965, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2). Helios XW-PBY and XW-PCA were operated in Laos in April 66 (Log book of L. H. Maxwell, in: UTD/Maxwell/B1F6).

³³⁸ In mid-December 1965, Caribou "851" was operated in Laos; and on 20 November 65, C-123B N5006X had

CIA station at Long Tieng (LS-98), others were direct links between the secret CIA compound at Takhli (T-05), which was responsible for the “black flights”, and the CIA station at Long Tieng (LS-98), as is testified by the log book of Donald Wharton.³³⁹

To sum up, until early 1966, Air America’s bigger aircraft assigned to the CEECO-contract still flew arms and supply drops into Laos on missions that often originated at the CIA’s secret compound at Takhli (T-05) and were mostly headed for the CIA headquarters at Long Tieng, while the Helios were used for liaison flights within Thailand, that sometimes went up to the Burmese border in northwestern Thailand, as well as for flight instruction from Udon. At the same time, Air America aircraft operating for CEECO out of Takhli were also flown on “black missions” that could be destined for North Vietnam, China or elsewhere in South East Asia, and which will be dealt with later. For example, William Andresevic “flew a number of ‘black’ flights. He went into North Vietnam several times, mainly hauling people into secret strips in connection with an intelligence operation involving French planters. He also flew a few missions into China”, and all that during his time with Air America, i.e. between 1961 and 1964.³⁴⁰ Although no confirmation from CIA sources is available, all this makes quite clear that, between 1960 and early 1966, contract no.59-069 with the “Consolidated Electric Equipment Company” was the CIA’s pipeline into Laos.

A moment of hesitation: Seaboard World Services (SWS):

As has been noted above, Air America’s flying in Laos went down since mid-1963, so that the Company had to say in February 1964: “Contract flying in Southeast Asia remains unchanged with flying in Laos continuing its steady decline. Since the middle of 1963 flying in Laos has declined about 30 %.”³⁴¹ In late April 64, Air America’s Executive Committee “reviewed and discussed the phasing out of operations in Laos and flying activities in general throughout Southeast Asia.”³⁴² And by 11 May 64, Air America had even found a buyer: “It was reported that Seaboard World Services, Inc., which is to take over Air America’s USAID operation in Laos, moved some personnel into Vientiane on May, 8, 1964.”³⁴³ At least 2 Air America Helio Couriers were painted in the colors of the new operator, showing a blue stripe going up to the tail and “SWS” titles.³⁴⁴

There was also a political side of the question: Pathet Lao propaganda did not cease to accuse Air America of being “a paramilitary organization”.³⁴⁵ The first idea had been to convert the Air America operation into a combined operation flown together with the Royal Lao Air Force,³⁴⁶ but at the end, the Company’s continued presence became more and more

an accident at Petchaburi (T-33), Thailand, while on the CEECO contract (Log book of L. H. Maxwell, in: UTD/Maxwell/B1F6, and list “Aircraft accidents” of 1965, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2).

³³⁹ The log book of Donald Wharton (in: UTD/Wharton/B1F2) notes the following entries for C-123B N5006X assigned to the CEECO-contract: 11-12 Feb 66: N5006X operated T-08-LS-98-LOCAL-LS-98-T-08; 13 Feb.66: N5006X operated T-08-T-05-LS-98-T-05 and T-08-T-05-T-08; 14 Feb 66: N5006X operated T-08-T-11 (Chiang Mai) -T-05-LS-98-T-05-LS-98-T-08.

³⁴⁰ Interview with William Andresevic conducted by Prof. William Leary at Beaverton, OR on 19 June 87, written summary, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2.

³⁴¹ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc, of 11 February 1964, p.1, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3.

³⁴² Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc, of 28 April 1964, p.2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3.

³⁴³ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc, of 11 May 1964, p.2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3.

³⁴⁴ Interview given to the author by Les Strouse at Bangkok on 28 February 2014.

³⁴⁵ See: Memorandum dated 29 May 63, from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy, in: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis, Document no. 473, at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v24/d473>.

³⁴⁶ See: Paper Prepared by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff, in: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963

embarrassing to Souvanna Phouma's Government. Already in November 63, the Laotian Prime Minister and US Ambassador Unger agreed that Air America should withdraw from Laos and should be replaced by a similar, but smaller operation.³⁴⁷ Initially, resistance came from George Doole, Air America's CEO, and from the Board of Directors, but in March 64,



Col. Tong standing in front of what seems to be a Seaboard World Services Helio
(photo taken by an unknown photographer, kindly supplied by Joe Hazen)

Doole approached Seaboard World Airlines to lend their name to the formation of a new airline to be financed by the CIA. The new company was to be called Seaboard World Services and to lease aircraft from Air America that were to be maintained by Air Asia. However, the military successes of the Communist Pathet Lao in January and May 64 urged the US Ambassador to openly use Air America C-123s and Caribous for carrying war supplies and even to use Air America pilots to fly RLAFF T-28s. When it became evident in the summer of 1964 that the machinery for neutralizing Laos, established at Geneva in 1962, had broken down, Souvanna Phouma remodeled his government to exclude the Pathet Lao.³⁴⁸ However, Ambassador Unger still insisted that Seaboard World Services (SWS) had to take over Air America operations in Laos. But in May 64, "it was reported that Seaboard World Services has encountered delays in organizing its Laotian operation due to the political uncertainties which have developed there,"³⁴⁹ and the same problems were reported on 23 June 64.³⁵⁰ The designated SWS president, John Davidson, had been killed in the crash of CAT C-46 B-908 on 20 June 64, and the acting president was chronically ill and unable to

Volume XXIV, Laos Crisis, Document no. 440, at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v24/d440> .

³⁴⁷ Leary, Manuscript, p.418, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

³⁴⁸ Leary, Manuscript, pp.418-26, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

³⁴⁹ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc., of 26 May 1964, p.2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3.

³⁵⁰ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc., of 23 June 1964, p.2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3.

function. When the CIA saw that SWS would not be able to perform many of the tasks performed by Air America before, they decided not to replace Air America. At the same time, Air America could report “that flying in Southeast Asia in general and Laos in particular has been heavy during the past two months.”³⁵¹ When Ambassador Unger finally informed Souvanna Phouma that Air America’s operations in Laos were not to be taken over by Seaboard World Services, the Prime Minister simply replied that for him, it was no longer necessary to insist on a change, and so, the plan was abandoned.³⁵²

The -713 customer

On the April 66 “Aircraft status” list, all Air America aircraft formerly assigned to contract 59-069 had been transferred to contract AID-439-713 with USAID-Laos³⁵³ – together with C-47B B-879, 3 more Turbo Porters (N152L, N12235, and N192X), and 2 more Helios (B-875 and B-877), all operating out of Udorn.³⁵⁴ And these aircraft seem to have continued flying the same type of missions as under the old CEECO contract: For example, C-123B N5006X – reserialled as “576” in mid-1966, probably to avoid confusion with the call-sign of Air America’s new Bell 204B N1306X – continued to link the CIA base at Takhli (T-05) with the CIA station at Long Tieng (by now known as LS-30).³⁵⁵ This makes clear that the -713 customer was the old “Consolidated Electric Equipment Company” or CEECO, that is the CIA, which by then was able to hide behind a USAID contract and a new customer designation: AB-1. What clearly indicates that the customer of this contract was the CIA, is the introductory formula: It was not a contract between USAID and Air America, but between “the Government of the United States of America [...], acting through the Agency for International Development [...] and Air America, Inc”. Some aircraft – 1 C-123, 1 Caribou, some PC-6 Porters, and some Helio Couriers – were to be assigned to the contract, while some more aircraft had to be provided “upon call by the Contracting Officer”.³⁵⁶



Astazou-powered PC-6A N12235 at Luang Prabang in June 66, taken Dr. J. Pote
(with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

³⁵¹ Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air Asia Company Limited and Air America Inc, of 23 June 1964, p.2, in: UTD/CIA/B7F3

³⁵² Leary, Manuscript, pp.426-29, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

³⁵³ Contract AID-439-713 was dated 21 October 65 (see the original contract AID-439-713 at: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 27).

³⁵⁴ Aircraft status of 8 April 66, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1.

³⁵⁵ One example: According to the log book of Donald Wharton (in: UTD/Wharton/B1F2), C-123B “576” flew T-05 (Takhli) - LS-30 (Long Tieng) - T-05 - LS-30 - T-08 (Udorn) on 22 September 66.

³⁵⁶ Contract no. AID-439-713 of 21 October 65, p.1, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 27.

THIS CONTRACT, Number A.I.D.-439-713, entered into this 21st day of October, 1965, by and between the Government of the United States of America, hereinafter called the "Government", acting through the Agency for International Development, hereinafter called "A.I.D.", represented by the United States A.I.D. Mission to Laos, hereinafter called "USAID", and Air America, Inc. hereinafter called "Contractor", a corporation organized and existing under the laws of the State of Delaware, U.S.A., with its principal offices located at 815 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006, District of Columbia, U.S.A.;

WITNESSETH:

WHEREAS, USAID is desirous of obtaining aircraft flying services, additional flight crew personnel services and aircraft maintenance and supply support including skilled technical personnel services from the Contractor and the Contractor is willing to provide all such services under the terms and conditions hereof;

PART I. AIRCRAFT FLYING SERVICES

Article 1. The Contractor shall, as hereinafter proscribed in this PART I, and pursuant to the applicable provisions of this contract, furnish at such times and at such "Base Points", as designated pursuant to Article 9 of PART V of this contract, the services of not less than the number and types of aircraft, at rates and for the minimum hours, proscribed as contract assigned aircraft in Appendix "A", attached hereto and hereby made a part hereof, and subject to the availability thereof, and upon call by the Contracting Officer pursuant to the provisions of this contract, the Contractor shall provide additional aircraft services with the aircraft types subject to call proscribed in Appendix "A" hereto. Subject to applicable provisions of this contract and at no additional cost to the Government, except as otherwise provided for in this contract, the Contractor shall furnish in connection with the performance of services proscribed in this Article "1" all necessary maintenance and operations personnel, normal air crew, including a Pilot of American nationality, and on C-123, C-46 and DC-4A aircraft only one each Air Freight Specialist, supplies, services, maintenance, repairs and all ground equipment necessary for the operation of said aircraft. USAID shall provide personnel to load, handle and unload cargo. However, where Contractor has station facilities and personnel and USAID is unable to provide or arrange to have provided through its existing contractual arrangements for such services, the Contractor shall assist in the loading, handling and unloading of cargo and in any event the crew will assist whenever necessary. The Contractor shall provide in each aircraft required equipment, except damage, and/or pallets, for securing of cargo aboard aircraft.

Contract no. AID-439-713 dated 21 October 65, p.1
(in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.27)

This original contract has been modified several times: Amendment no.2 of 30 June 67 adjusts the "term of the contract to coincide with the United States Government Fiscal Year" and adds the "services of Volpar Turbo Beech (VTB) type aircraft as call aircraft".³⁵⁷ Amendment no.3 of 31 August 67 adds "the services of an On Mark type aircraft as call aircraft".³⁵⁸ In May 1968, the entire contract got a new form: Amendment no.6 dated 3 May 68 deletes the old 19 page contract document, replacing it by a new 28 page document. This new contract no. AID-439-713 contract was no longer a contract between the United States of America acting thru USAID and Air America, but directly between USAID and Air America, hiding the CIA's presence behind the contract, and although it was signed only on 3 May 68, it was retroactive, i.e. effective 1 July 67. This new contract no. AID-439-713, which is available on microfilm,³⁵⁹ among other points sets forth how the modification of C-123B models to C-123K standard should be handled, when such an aircraft was assigned to

³⁵⁷ Contract no. AID-439-713, Amendment no.2 of 30 June 67, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 27.

³⁵⁸ Contract no. AID-439-713, Amendment no.3 of 31 August 67, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 27.

³⁵⁹ In: UTD/Bisson/B5 microfilm reel no. 30.

Contract no. AID-439-713. More interesting, however, are two other points: Part I, Article 2b, p.2, states that “the Contractor [that is Air America] may hire out or charter the aircraft made available pursuant to Article 1.a. PART I hereof to others, including other United States Government agencies, under such terms and conditions as the Contractor may deem desirable, provided that such hire or charter shall not in any manner interfere with any of the requirements of USAID for the use of the aircraft made available under the terms of this contract. [...] The flying hours flown on any charter or hire shall be credited to USAID for the purposes of determining the applicable line price to be charged USAID” – this is how the CIA came into this contract. The second interesting point refers to the right the pilots had to refuse a mission for safety reason: Part I, Article 4f, p.6, states that “the Pilot-in-Command of the aircraft shall be the deciding authority on flight completion or diversion or any other action deemed necessary in the interest of flight safety, adequacy of clearances and permissions obtained.” This point became particularly important in the early seventies, when some pilots

Contract No. AID-439-713		CONTRACT NO. AID-439-713																															
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to																																	
CONTRACT BETWEEN																																	
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA																																	
and																																	
AIR AMERICA, INC.																																	
<p>Contract AID-439-713 dated 1 September 1965, as amended, is hereby amended as follows:</p> <p>1. By deleting the contract document, as amended, consisting of the Schedule of pages 1 through 19, the General Provisions of pages 1 through 9 and Appendices A through G and substituting therefor the Contract document (Contract No. AID-439-713) consisting of a Cover Page, the Schedule of pages 1 through 28, a Table of Contents of 3 pages, the General Provisions and Appendices A through H attached hereto and made a part hereof.</p>																																	
<p>AIR AMERICA, INC.</p> <p>Original Signed By By <u>J. W. Walker, Jr.</u> Title <u>Vice President Flying Contract Affairs</u> Date <u>MAY 3 1968</u></p>		<p>AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>By <u>Anthony E. Labar</u> Title <u>Contracting Officer</u> Date <u>MAY 22 1968</u></p>																															
<p>AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEGOTIATED PURSUANT TO THE FOREIGN ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1961, AS AMENDED, AND EXECUTIVE ORDER 11223</p> <p>CONTRACT FOR Aircraft Flying Services and Other Services</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>ISSUING OFFICE USAID Vientiane, Laos</td> <td>AMOUNT Refer Part II., Article 4.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CONTRACTOR Air America, Inc. Field Executive Office APO 96239</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ADMINISTRATION BY USAID Vientiane, Laos</td> <td>COGNIZANT TECHNICAL OFFICE USAID VIENTIANE, LAOS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>MAIL VOUCHER (Original and 3 copies) TO PAYING OFFICE</td> <td>ACCOUNTING AND APPROPRIATION DATA PID/1 No. APPROPRIATION No. ALLOTMENT No.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>EFFECTIVE DATE <u>1 July 1967</u></td> <td>ESTIMATED COMPLETION DATE <u>30 June 1968</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td>TYPES OF BUSINESS (CHECK APPROPRIATE BOX(ES))</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> SOLE PROPRIETORSHIP</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> SMALL BUSINESS</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> PARTNERSHIP</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> LABOR SURPLUS AREA</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> JOINT VENTURE</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2"><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CORPORATION INCORPORATED IN STATE OF <u>Delaware</u></td> </tr> </table> <p>THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, HEREINAFTER CALLED THE GOVERNMENT, REPRESENTED BY THE CONTRACTING OFFICER EXECUTING THIS CONTRACT, AND THE CONTRACTOR AGREE THAT THE CONTRACTOR SHALL PERFORM ALL THE SERVICES SET FORTH IN THE ATTACHED SCHEDULE, FOR THE CONSIDERATION STATED THEREIN. THE RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF THE PARTIES OF THIS CONTRACT SHALL BE SUBJECT TO AND GOVERNED BY THE SCHEDULE AND THE GENERAL PROVISIONS. TO THE EXTENT OF ANY INCONSISTENCY BETWEEN THE SCHEDULE OR THE GENERAL PROVISIONS AND ANY SPECIFICATIONS OR OTHER PROVISIONS WHICH ARE MADE A PART OF THIS CONTRACT, BY REFERENCE OR OTHERWISE, THE SCHEDULE AND THE GENERAL PROVISIONS SHALL CONTROL. TO THE EXTENT OF ANY INCONSISTENCY BETWEEN THE SCHEDULE AND THE GENERAL PROVISIONS, THE SCHEDULE SHALL CONTROL.</p> <p>THIS CONTRACT CONSISTS OF THIS COVER PAGE, THE SCHEDULE OF 28 PAGES, INCLUDING THE TABLE OF CONTENTS, AND THE GENERAL PROVISIONS AND APPENDICES A THROUGH H</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>NAME OF CONTRACTOR AIR AMERICA, INC.</td> <td>UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Original Signed By By <u>J. W. Walker, Jr.</u> (SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED INDIVIDUAL)</td> <td>By _____ (SIGNATURE OF CONTRACTING OFFICER)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>TYPED OR PRINTED NAME <u>J. W. Walker, Jr.</u></td> <td>TYPED OR PRINTED NAME <u>Anthony E. Labar</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td>TITLE <u>Vice President Flying Contract Affairs</u></td> <td>TITLE <u>Contracting Officer</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td>DATE <u>MAY 3 1968</u></td> <td>DATE</td> </tr> </table>				ISSUING OFFICE USAID Vientiane, Laos	AMOUNT Refer Part II., Article 4.	CONTRACTOR Air America, Inc. Field Executive Office APO 96239		ADMINISTRATION BY USAID Vientiane, Laos	COGNIZANT TECHNICAL OFFICE USAID VIENTIANE, LAOS	MAIL VOUCHER (Original and 3 copies) TO PAYING OFFICE	ACCOUNTING AND APPROPRIATION DATA PID/1 No. APPROPRIATION No. ALLOTMENT No.	EFFECTIVE DATE <u>1 July 1967</u>	ESTIMATED COMPLETION DATE <u>30 June 1968</u>	TYPES OF BUSINESS (CHECK APPROPRIATE BOX(ES))		<input type="checkbox"/> SOLE PROPRIETORSHIP	<input type="checkbox"/> SMALL BUSINESS	<input type="checkbox"/> PARTNERSHIP	<input type="checkbox"/> LABOR SURPLUS AREA	<input type="checkbox"/> JOINT VENTURE		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CORPORATION INCORPORATED IN STATE OF <u>Delaware</u>		NAME OF CONTRACTOR AIR AMERICA, INC.	UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	Original Signed By By <u>J. W. Walker, Jr.</u> (SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED INDIVIDUAL)	By _____ (SIGNATURE OF CONTRACTING OFFICER)	TYPED OR PRINTED NAME <u>J. W. Walker, Jr.</u>	TYPED OR PRINTED NAME <u>Anthony E. Labar</u>	TITLE <u>Vice President Flying Contract Affairs</u>	TITLE <u>Contracting Officer</u>	DATE <u>MAY 3 1968</u>	DATE
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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)

felt that the CIA did not inform them correctly about the dangers they were likely to encounter on a particular mission, and when apparently some CIA case officers tended to say that they did not want a pilot who had turned down an assignment to fly for them anymore.³⁶⁰

³⁶⁰ Robbins, *Air America*, pp.205/6.

b. Hire or Charter of Aircraft to Others

The Contractor may hire out or charter the aircraft made available pursuant to Article 1.a. PART I. hereof to others, including other United States Government agencies, under such terms and conditions as the Contractor may deem desirable, provided that such hire or charter shall not in any manner interfere with any of the requirements of USAID for the use of the aircraft made available under the terms of this contract. Prior to entering into any commitments for such hire or charter, the Contractor shall, through its local representative, request permission in writing from USAID or its duly authorized representative to make such commitments. USAID shall not unreasonably withhold such permission when requested.

The flying hours flown on any charter or hire shall be credited to USAID for the purposes of determining the applicable line price to be charged USAID in accordance with Appendix "A". Further, the Contractor shall either pay USAID or reimburse USAID in kind for any fuel and oil consumed if such were either furnished or paid for by USAID.

c. Maintenance Flights

The round trip flying hours of Contractor furnished aircraft for scheduled maintenance, major repairs and modifications to Contractor facilities utilized other than base point(s) agreed to pursuant to Article 1. of this PART I., shall not be added to the flying hours flown in performance of services under this contract for the purpose of determining whether USAID has met the minimum guaranteed hours for such aircraft during any calendar quarter, or for the purpose of determining flying hour price to be charged to USAID for such aircraft during any calendar quarter. USAID shall have the right to utilize one half (1/2) of the Available Cabin Load (ACL) on such maintenance ferry flights.

Article 3. Provisions Applicable to Government Furnished Aircraft

a. Conditions Affecting Use of Government Furnished Aircraft

The Contractor's undertakings herein with regard to making the C-123 type aircraft listed in Appendix "B" available upon an initial or continuing basis and the operation thereof

provided that such decisions shall reflect established Contractor and industry standards.

f. Non-Completion or Diversion of Flights

The Contractor shall not be responsible for non-completion or diversion of any flights from original point or destination due to adverse weather conditions, mechanical trouble, or other causes beyond the control of the Contractor except when such non-completion or diversion of such flights is due to gross negligence on the part of the Contractor's Officers and Directors. The Pilot-in-Command of the aircraft shall be the deciding authority on flight completion or diversion or any other action deemed necessary in the interest of flight safety, adequacy of clearances and permissions obtained. The time for such flights shall be chargeable to and shall be paid by USAID under the terms hereof.

g. Cargo Handling

The Contractor shall provide in each aircraft required equipment for securing of cargo aboard aircraft. USAID shall be responsible for providing all personnel required to determine the accurate weight, load, handle, and unload cargo, including the securing of cargo aboard aircraft under the supervision of qualified Contractor personnel; provided, however, where USAID is unable to provide or arrange for such personnel and where the Contractor has such personnel available, the Contractor shall assist in the loading, handling and unloading of cargo.

h. Measurement of Flying Hours

(1) Fixed Wing Aircraft

The flying time shall be calculated as follows: From the moment the aircraft first moves under its own power for the purpose of flight until the moment it comes to rest at the next point of landing ("Block-to-Block" time).

(2) Rotor Wing Aircraft

The flying time shall commence upon engagement of the rotors for the purpose of flight and shall continue until the aircraft returns to the ground and the rotors are disengaged and shall include time at intermediate stops when rotors are engaged and the pilot remains at the controls while loads are being discharged or taken aboard.

New Contract no. AID-439-713, Part I, Article 2b, and Part I, Article 4f
(in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no. 30)

The double nature of that contract – nominally a contract with USAID that evidently also covered CIA activities in Laos – becomes clear from the funding, as former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson points out: “Refugees were actually two groups of people. In the Vientiane area and on south, they were just refugees but in the north of Laos, **MR 1 & 2**, USAID did the primary feeding and care for two groups that comprised refugees. These were civilian displaced persons, plus the SGU [= Special Guerrilla Units] / paramilitary dependents of the SGU fighters. We also did the primary feeding for the SGU themselves, as far as rice is concerned, not special rations. Thus RR had a split budget, about 50% funded directly by USAID and the other 50% funded by DoD, the U.S. Department of Defense through RO, the USAID *Requirements Office* in Vientiane (reckon these funds were actually CIA passed to DoD then to DepChief, which handled the RO funding).”³⁶¹ Apparently, one part of the aircraft assigned to the -713 contract was used to move the Special Guerrilla Units financed by the CIA, like the Bell 205s that USAID could not afford,³⁶² while the other half was used to feed them and their dependents. And those SGUs were not just Hmong, but belonged to a variety of ethnic groups, as MacAlan Thompson points out: “The SGU was composed of many ethnic groups, including ethnic lowland Lao. In the NE, VP’s turf, the SGU was Hmong, Lao Theung, and Lao, for the most part. In central Laos it was mostly Lao. In the south, Lao and some odds and ends of ethnics. In the NW, out of Luang Prabang, it was Lao Theung and some Hmong. Further west to 118A it was mostly Lao Theung and Yao/IuMien, with other smaller ethnics.”³⁶³

³⁶¹ E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

³⁶² E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

³⁶³ E-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

Project flights operated out of Takhli between 1965/6 and 1968:

As has already been noted, a change took place in late 1965 or early 1966. Already between 11 and 29 April 63, a number of Air America crewmembers were sent to Naha, Okinawa, for C-130A training with the USAF's 315th Air Division. After ground school held between 14 and 19 April 63, the crewmembers were sent to the simulator for up to 4 hours a day, and later they received in flight training in one of the C-130As for up to 8 ½ hours a day. In his diary, Clifford A. Costa, who was one of the crewmembers who received C-130A training, notes that the group consisted of Messrs. Sailer, Marsh, Stiles, Judkins, McCollom, Bunner, Cross, Crawford, Condon, Oliver, La Pointe, Williams, Keck, Rockwell, Cartwright, Cameron, Murphy, Sanders, Gionet, and Costa himself. Messrs. Hayes, Doug Smith, and Clough Hicks had been on a previous program, and "Doc" Johnson and Kevin Cochrane were added later. The C-130As that Costa himself flew on training flights between 23 and 28 April 63 were 56-504, 55-038, 56-510, 55-044, and 56-492; on all flights, he was accompanied by USAF crews.³⁶⁴ During the training, the SAT crews wore mufti and were provided with a military-type flight suit and red cap. But nothing came of the training "for over the year", as Costa notes in his interview with William Leary.³⁶⁵ This could mean that at least some of the trainees also flew the 2 C-130Es (64-0506 msn 3990, and 64-0507 msn 3991) that had been transferred from the USAF "to another agency" in December 64 and that were seen again in Laos in May 69,³⁶⁶ but probably on another program.

As to Air America's Project flights into Laos, Costa returned to Naha for retraining in July 1965, and the program got underway shortly thereafter. Al Judkins was chief pilot at first; he was replaced by M.D. ("Doc") Johnson. The last chief pilot (in 1969) was J.D. Dieckman, who had been USAF C-130 squadron commander at Naha and signed on with Air America after retirement. So, from the second half of 1965 to the spring of 1971, Air America used 2 C-130As at a time, bailed from the USAF as "project aircraft" from Takhli (T-05), Thailand, to fly large supplies of ammunition into "forbidden territory under cover of darkness",³⁶⁷ that is to Laos (Long Tieng, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Sam Thong, Saravane, Savannakhet, Pakse). On 17 July 65, a C-130A started the Takhli-Long Tieng service, the CIA's logistic support pipeline. Costa would go to Naha on temporary duty and fly with USAF support personnel to Takhli. There, the operation was run out of Det.3, a secure area on the base. The area was fenced, with guard towers. There was a barracks, mess hall, movie theater that showed films every night, shot gun for skeet shooting, etc. There also was a high-tech com-

Date	Route	Aircraft	Duration	Pilot	Flight No.
6-JULY TRNG	NHA - LCL	C-130	4.0	-	470472
8	" "	"	4.0	ALLISON	470470
9	" "	"	4.5	"	470470
11	" "	"	3.9	"	50047
13	" "	"	6.8	"	70469
15	KDNA - CIARK - RANCH	"	8.4	"	50047
17	RANCH LCL	"	6.3	"	"
18	RANCH LCL - RANCH - BKK	"	6.4	"	"
19	BKK - NAHA	"	6.7	"	"

The beginning of the "CIA pipeline" Takhli-Long Tieng in July 1965
(Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

³⁶⁴ Costa, Diary, pp.1-3, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5.

³⁶⁵ Written summary of an interview with Cliff Costa that William Leary tape-recorded on 5/6 November and 4/5 December 84.

³⁶⁶ Olausson, *Lockheed Hercules production list 1954-1999*, p.50.

³⁶⁷ Robbins, *Air America*, p.126.

munications bunker. The first missions with the C-130A were airdrops of 30-40,000 pounds of cargo for Long Tieng; later, that is since December 65,³⁶⁸ the cargo was landed on a short asphalt strip. There were also missions to LS-118 in support of Tony Poe. The crews usually flew 3 missions a day, using call-sign "Gooneybird 1, 2, 3". They flew every day for about a week – except when weather prevented a flight.³⁶⁹ The extract from "Doc" Johnson's log book given here shows the beginning of this type of missions from the pilot's point of view: After several days of training at Naha, Okinawa with C-130As (5)70469, (5)70470, (5)70472, (5)50045, and (5)50047 all belonging to the 315th AD Headquarters, Naha, Johnson took C-130A "50047" (= 55-047) from Kadena, Okinawa via Clark to Takhli ("Ranch") on 15 July 65 in an 8.4 h flight. On 17 July 65, he began the "CIA pipeline" flying Takhli-Long Tieng-Takhli ("Ranch" local), a 6.3 h flight, and on 18 July, he repeated the same route, but added the leg Takhli-Bangkok at the end (6.4 hours), so that on 19 July, he could return the aircraft from Bangkok to Naha.

For the period between August and October 1965 and in January 1966, "Doc" Johnson's log book reveals several other C-130 flights. In all cases, Johnson ended his scheduled airline service at Taipei a couple of days prior to the C-130 flights. Apparently, he was then flown (as a passenger or "dead head") down to Takhli. The log book does not show such flights as a "dead head", but the "local" C-130 flights out of the unnamed base point (believed to have been Takhli) were sometimes as short as 1.3 hours, so cannot include a long flight from Taiwan or Okinawa down to Thailand. After the end of the C-130 flights, "Doc" Johnson was again flown as a passenger to Taiwan, where he picked up his next scheduled airline flight a couple of days later. Officially, he made these C-130 flights for "O.A.C" or "OA/C". Although the meaning of this abbreviation is unknown, there is no doubt that these were more flights from Takhli to Long Tieng and back for the "CIA pipeline". Unfortunately, no C-130 aircraft serial is given for these flights, but it is believed that the aircraft used were taken from the C-130As that had been used for training.

12	"	TPE-HKG-TPE	"	4.2	"	"	10
17	O.A.C	LOCAL LOCAL	130	7.1	Allison	-	
18	"	" "	"	7.5	"	-	
19	"	" "	"	1.3	"	-	
20	"	" "	"	2.6	"	-	
27	SCHED	TPE-HKG-TPE	DC-6B	4.3	P47	B-1006	14

The "CIA pipeline" Takhli-Long Tieng-Takhli in August 1965

(Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

1-SEPT	"	TPE-HKG-TPE	"	4.2	"	"	
7	OAC	LOCAL LOCAL	130	7.2	Allison	-	
8	"	" "	"	7.8	"	-	
15	SCHED	TPE-HUL-TPE	DC-6B	6.0	P47	B-1006	20

The "CIA pipeline" Takhli-Long Tieng-Takhli of 7 and 8 September 1965

(Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

³⁶⁸ Leary, Manuscript, ch. VI, p. 515, in: UTD/Leary/B19F4.

³⁶⁹ Written summary of an interview with Cliff Costa that William Leary tape recorded on 5/6 November and 4/5 December 84.

17	"	TPE - HKG - TPE	"	4.2	"	"	10
21	OAC	LOCAL LOCAL	130	8.2	ALLISON	-	
22	"	"	"	8.3	"	"	
23	"	"	"	2.8	"	"	
27	SCHED	TPE - HKG - TPE	DC-6B	4.9	P-7	B-1006	30

The "CIA pipeline" Takhli-Long Tieng-Takhli of 21-23 September 1965
(Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

30	"	TPE - HKG - TPE	"	4.4	"	"	20
1- 30	"	TPE - HKG - TPE	130	5.5	ALLISON	-	
6	OAC	LOCAL LOCAL	130	5.5	"	"	
7	OAC	LOCAL LOCAL	DC-6B	6.0	P-7	B-1006	10
13	SCHED	TPE - MUL - TPE	"	8.11	"	"	20

The "CIA pipeline" Takhli-Long Tieng-Takhli of 6-7 October 1965
(Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

6-JAN	CHARTER	TPE - TYO - TPE	"	10.7	"	"	40
9	O/A	KDNA - CLARK - LCL - CLARK	130	6.8	ALLISON	-	
10	O/A	CLARK - TKLI - LCL - TKLI	130	8.2	"	"	
14	CHARTER	TPE - HKG - TPE	DC-6B	4.8	P-7	B-1006	20

The "CIA pipeline" Takhli-Long Tieng-Takhli of 9-10 January 1966
(Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

23	TRAINING	TPE - LCL - TPE	DC-4	1.4	"	"	B-1014
29	O/A	TKLI - T9 - LCL - T9	130	5.7	ALLISON	-	
3-FEB	CHARTER	TPE - SGN - TPE	DC-6B	11.3	P-7	B-1006	

The "CIA pipeline" Takhli-Long Tieng with continuation to Bangkok of 29 January 1966
(Page from "Doc" Johnson's log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

Since 1967, at least one of the 2 C-130s at Takhli flew into Laos every day. By about 1968, the C-130A had become "the workhorse cargo and troop carrier. A US Air Force standards team that inspected the program commented [...] on the mountain airstrips the Air America pilots had to contend with: No one such site in South Vietnam was as bad as the best of those in Laos. But the team awarded the Air America pilots – and the overall operation – very high marks for both efficiency and safety."³⁷⁰ Since 69, C-130A missions from Udorn to Luang Prabang were added. These aircraft are believed to have come from E-Flight, 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, which became Detachment 2, 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo), organized at Kadena, Okinawa, on 1 January 1962 for special operations, which in turn became Detachment 1 of the 6315th Operations Group on 20 September 1964 and Detachment 1, 374th Troop Carrier Wing, Kadena, Okinawa, on 8 August 1966. On this date, the 21st TCS was reassigned to the 374th TCW.³⁷¹ This large-scale importation of weapons by C-130s –

³⁷⁰ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.98, note 9.

³⁷¹ Official history of the 374th TCW contained in microfilm no. N0497 preserved at Maxwell AFB, pp.5, 6, 10, and 11; also at site <http://afhra.maxwell.af.mil/rso/squadrons/flights/pages/sqs/0021as.htm> of the AFHRA. The 5 C-130As based at Kadena, Okinawa, and mentioned in a letter dated 17 January 66 by the commander of the

ammunition, grenades, bombs, and weapons, sometimes even howitzers – was mostly destined to the secret army of Vang Pao. Former Air America pilot Paul Taylor recalls: “The E-flight personnel came with the aircraft to Takhli. They set up the 130, cleaned off, that is Air Force and the full serial number. [...] We did haul a lot of ammo, T-28 tip tanks, and a lot of supplies, most always to LS-20A, Vang Pao’s Hq. We landed there, turned around on the ramp. By that time the load was untied. We then set brakes full throttle, released the brakes. The load went out and we swung onto the runway. The kickers closed the ramp. While we



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

were on the take-off run we could dump a full load and log one minute of ground time. As a note, on one trip I pulled out of the traffic pattern for a Blackbird having an emergency. He was coming from somewhere north, probably China. By the time we parked, the Blackbird had been put away out of sight.”³⁷² At Takhli, the C-130As were handled by CIA and by Air Force people, as Paul Taylor recalls: “The personnel loading were likely Agency civilians. They just didn’t advertise their connection, but they stayed at Takhli at the ‘Mickey Mouse compound’ what we called the CIA compound. I would see them also when we went to Takhli with the C-123. Another agent filed our flight plans. We were always on classified flights – radio silence with code to recall us in case there was time reporter or something like that. We flew the 130 for one-two weeks at least 10 hours per day, usually to LS-20A, on occasion to Tony Poe’s 118A. [...] They came in from Okinawa as USAF. Next morning, a clean aircraft was sitting there. We flew it for many days, then we finished. The next morning, a USAF aircraft would be sitting on the ramp. When we flew, AF mechanics serviced the aircraft, also kept up the maintenance. When AA finished our mission, the AF crew then flew it back to Okinawa. We could catch a ride with them, and they would drop us off at Udorn on their way to OKI. As far as I could tell, there were a least six 130s in E-flight. We would get any one that was in commission and had enough time available. I [...] think we flew all at one time or another.”³⁷³ From time to time, some Air America C-46s were also used on missions out of Takhli, as well as Air America C-123s, including N5006X in February 66, “576” in September 66, or “617” in January 67.³⁷⁴

6315th Operations Group (1966 *History of the 315th Air Division*, pp.34/35, in: microfilm no.23820, preserved at the AFHRA) were not E-Flight aircraft, but belonged to *Operation High Gear* and were on continuous ground alert at Kadena Air Base for the airlift of nuclear weapons in the event of a general war (ib., p.64).

³⁷² E-mail dated 14 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Paul Taylor.

³⁷³ E-mail dated 19 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Paul Taylor.

³⁷⁴ Robbins, *Air America*, pp.126-33; Bowers, *The USAF in South-East Asia*, pp.448-50; log book of Donald D. Wharton, in: UTD/Wharton/B1F2.

AB-1 missions

Another type of missions, where the customer gave Air America pilots their destinations were those marked “as directed [by] AB-1” on the flight schedules. As has been shown above, AB-1 was the designator for CIA air and ground operations in Laos.³⁷⁵ The aircraft involved were Vientiane-based C-123s operating under USAID-contract AID-439-342, which would first fly from Vientiane to Udorn, then pick up their cargo at the “Q-warehouse” located within the AB-1 area at Udorn Air Base and then deliver it “as directed”. The “Q-warehouse” was also the place where the C-123s picked up dead heads for upcountry Laos.³⁷⁶ As Frank Bonansinga pointed out, “all the ‘as directed flights’ or AD on the schedules [....] could have



C-123B N5007X taken at Luang Prabang in June 1966 by Dr. J. Pote
(with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

been taking passengers and cargo and dropping them off, then picking up pax and cargo to other places. These flights could have the same schedule going on a “courier type plan” or could be as directed by the user at the outlying up country base.”³⁷⁷ This type of missions is known to have been flown by C-123B N5007X on 20 May 66 and by C-123B N5005X on 24 May 66.³⁷⁸ In later years, AB-1 was a huge compound at Udorn, adjacent to the Air America ramp and taxiway and close to the CASI ramp, with its own Air Operations, several warehouses, including the Q-warehouse, and several large antenna poles.³⁷⁹ Udorn flight schedules for 1969 indicated that the C-123s involved would pick up their load at the Q-warehouse, fly to Luang Prabang (L-54), Long Tieng (LS-20A), or Nam Lieu (LS-118) and then continue as directed.³⁸⁰ As the C-123 assigned to contract AID-439-713 and permanently based at Udorn at that time, that is Air America’s “293”, always picked up its cargo at AB-1’s Q-warehouse,³⁸¹ it becomes clear that Vientiane-based C-123s working out of Udorn “as

³⁷⁵ Fax dated 7 August 2000, kindly sent to the author by Brigadier General Aderholt.

³⁷⁶ E-mails dated 20 December 2004 sent by Dick Elder and Duane Keele to Jim Pearson who kindly forwarded them to the author.

³⁷⁷ E-mail dated 28 June 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

³⁷⁸ Vientiane daily flight schedules of 20 May 66 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B), and of 24 May 66 (in: UTD/Hickler/B7F7A).

³⁷⁹ Map of the Air America facility, in: UTD/Hickler/B6F3. Bill Lair, head of AB-1, recalled: “I had a small notebook that I carried in my pants pocket and it had everything in it. That changed in 1967 when architects from Washington came to Udorn. They came to build me a new office. [...] They designed a big air-conditioned building that must have cost a million dollars” (quoted in: Leary, Notebooks for 1968, p. 22, online readable at: <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/aam68.pdf>).

³⁸⁰ Udorn flight schedules of June 1969, that is of 11 (in: UTD/Hickler/B6F3), 20 (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), 21 (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), 23 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F1), 24 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F1), 26 (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), 27 (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), and 28 June 69, (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14).

³⁸¹ Udorn flight schedules of June 1969, that is of 11 (in: UTD/Hickler/B6F3), 20 (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), 21

directed [by] AB-1” were additional aircraft temporarily assigned to the AB-1 customer to support General Vang Pao’s irregulars or other CIA-supported programs or even covert missions.³⁸² And as sometimes, Air America’s C-123s carried “C/L seats”, that is centerline seats when flown on missions for AB-1 out of Udorn,³⁸³ these flights may also have transported troops or PARU units, as AB-1 or the CIA was also responsible for the US-Thai support-program for Laos.³⁸⁴

***Madriver* Flying: re-supplying military camps**

Flying UH-34Ds under the provisions of the *Madriver* contract³⁸⁵ did not necessarily mean combat missions, it could also mean to transport ammunition, rice, and soldiers to and from garrisons to and from small outposts. Occasionally “we get a Lao soldier to show us the way to the destination. This mainly happens when there is a new site and there has not been time to set up a signal.”³⁸⁶ But when those garrisons or out posts just “kept” their position and when there was no fighting, *Madriver* flights were not dangerous, but just a normal part of the military aid routine work done by Air America. On his very first day in Laos, on 16 January 65, Air America’s new helicopter pilot Charles Davis flew as a co-pilot from Udorn to Vientiane and after breakfast on to Long Tieng (LS-20A), from where he and his pilot “Scratch” Kanach hauled ammunition and rice bags to Tha Thom (LS-11). “We spend the rest of the day flying up and down this valley. [...] During the day we repeatedly land at Paksane airport, load up with various cargoes or soldiers, and head up the valley to drop our loads at different landing sites and pads. Sometimes we bring back soldiers and take them to other spots along the valley.[...] At one landing at Tha Thom, a local commander climbs up Kanach’s side of the helicopter and after a quick conversation, Kanach announces that his



Air America UH-34D H-23 offloading troops in the mid-sixties
(UTD/Hickler/B32)

(in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), 23 (in:UTD/Hickler/B8F1), 24 (in:UTD/Hickler/B8F1), 26 (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), 27 (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14), and 28 June 69, (in: UTD/Hickler/B3F14).

³⁸² Joe Hennessy notes that “on occasions it would be necessary to give AB-1 preference and allocate them additional C-123s” (Hennessy, *Air America*, p.13).

³⁸³ For example, on 1 September 72, C-123K “545” had to taxi to the Q-warehouse at Udorn at 0700L, pick up seats, fly to Vang Vieng (L-16) at 0800L, then to Long Tieng (LS-20A), and return to Udorn (T-08) ASAP, that is “as soon as possible” (Udorn daily flight schedule for 1 September 72 in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

³⁸⁴ Castle, *At war*, pp.60/1, and 82.

³⁸⁵ Between 1 July 63 and 30 June 65, this was contract no. AF 62(531)-1758 (in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F10), and between 1 July 65 and 30 June 67, it was contract no. AF 62(531)-1841 (in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F9).

³⁸⁶ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, p.82.

soldier needs to guide him for several short trips to a new area where a small garrison is posted. [...] Around four in the afternoon, we finish our last trip around the Tha Thom area and head to Paksane for fuel. After refueling we fly down the Mekong River toward a river town named Thakhek, which is labeled L-40 on my map. We have about half-a-dozen officers of the Lao army on board who are heading for Thakhek.”³⁸⁷ This type of work was typical for Air America’s UH-34Ds, and so the following day Davis flew similar missions: “We haul rice, boxes of ammo, different kinds of food such as meat, and relocate soldiers to various places. It amounts to a lot of repeat work, the same as we did the day before. [...] We finish the day and head back to Udorn, which is less than an hour away.”³⁸⁸ Re-supplying military outposts with ammunition and food and transporting soldiers of the Royal Laotian Army was routine for Air America’s UH-34Ds flying under the provisions of the *Madrivier*-contract.³⁸⁹ Some outposts were particularly dangerous, however: In the spring of 1965, one team had been installed in “a karst formation southeast of Route 12 at the North Vietnamese border,” that is “on a tiny mesa that overlooked the road as it emerged from a gap in the Annamite chain called the Mu Gia Pass. Too small for a drop zone, its resupply depended on an Air America helicopter flying at night.”³⁹⁰ Air America’s UH-34Ds mostly flew at the will of local “customers”, that is representatives of various USAID programs and especially CIA men whose job was to “coordinate activities between the air crews and the Laotian military,”³⁹¹ but also to advise military units and to direct and train paramilitary units.³⁹² As CIA case officer James Parker (“Mule”) noted: “Occasionally, I called in an Air America helicopter for a recon (reconnaissance) high over my advancing GM [= *Groupement Mobile* or unit] out to the edge of the PDJ [= Plain of Jars].”³⁹³ Sometimes, General Vang Pao would climb onto the co-pilot’s seat and fly himself an Air America UH-34D, as happened to Charles Davis, when he transported a load of soldiers from Na Khang (LS-36) to Long Tieng on 4 July 65.³⁹⁴

But the UH-34Ds assigned to the *Madrivier* contract could also be used for purely humanitarian tasks like flying a load of rice for Pop Buell’s Refugee resettlement and resupply program, transporting wounded soldiers to the Sam Thong hospital or flying around people who would care about sick village people like Father Bouchard did.³⁹⁵ When an outpost had been overrun by enemy forces, the survivors would have retreated, trying to hide somewhere in the bush. Those stragglers had to be picked up by helicopter and taken to a secure area. Sometimes they would wait close to clear areas where an Air America UH-34D could land. But when the terrain was too rugged or covered by thick jungle, the UH-34D would lower a hoist and pick up the men. At the end of the cable would be a harness that the survivor would place his waist or sit in. The harness would be large enough to allow three or

³⁸⁷ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, pp.27/8.

³⁸⁸ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, pp.30/1.

³⁸⁹ On 17 February 65, the UH-34D of Charles Davis carried the same type of load all day long: At Long Tieng the flight mechanic “has the chopper refueled and loaded with several bags of rice and a few boxes of ammunition, euphemistically called ‘hard rice’ by the chopper crews. The remaining load consists of half-a-dozen soldiers who have been waiting nearby. We wait for the troops to board the cabin and then take off for what turns out to be another average day upcountry. Our first stop is LS-58, where we unload everything, including the troops. We reload with eight soldiers and their gear, plus ammo and a supply of rice. We take the load to a chopper pad about three miles to the north. There we unload our cargo and troops, pick up other troops, and then return to LS-58. We fly similar missions for almost two hours, going to different pads in the area. [...] After refueling I start up again making a lot of in-and-out runs from LS-58. [...] On the last trip of the day we take a load of soldiers back to Long Tieng. [...] I will stay here tonight and am told that I will probably work the same area tomorrow as I did today” (Davis, *Across the Mekong*, pp.52-54).

³⁹⁰ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.221.

³⁹¹ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, p.52.

³⁹² For a more detailed picture see the book by James E. Parker, *Covert ops*, passim.

³⁹³ Parker, *Covert ops*, p. 4.

³⁹⁴ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, pp. 92/3.

³⁹⁵ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, pp.119-24.

four small Asians to fit into it, but that could be a very tricky maneuver, especially when the helicopter was too heavy for hovering more than 5 minutes. And when the helicopter became unstable, it risked to touch the trees and get damaged.³⁹⁶

The UH-34Ds assigned to the *Madrider* contract were also used to carry to the next bigger airstrip small aircraft like the Helio Courier that had crashed; from there they were flown back



The wreck of Air America PC-6C N153L carried by a UH-34D, possibly taken in Dec. 66 (UTD/Miller/B4F13)

to Vientiane or Udorn via a C-123 or a Caribou. In the early days ill-fated aircraft were dismantled on site by mechanics, then the parts were airlifted via a sling by UH-34Ds to the next dirt strip, where they were loaded onto the bigger aircraft.³⁹⁷ Later, Air America's UH-34Ds were equipped to carry the wings of a Helio or even of a Pilatus Porter on one side of the helicopter and the fuselage on the other side, as can be seen above.

Re-supplying the TACAN sites since 1966

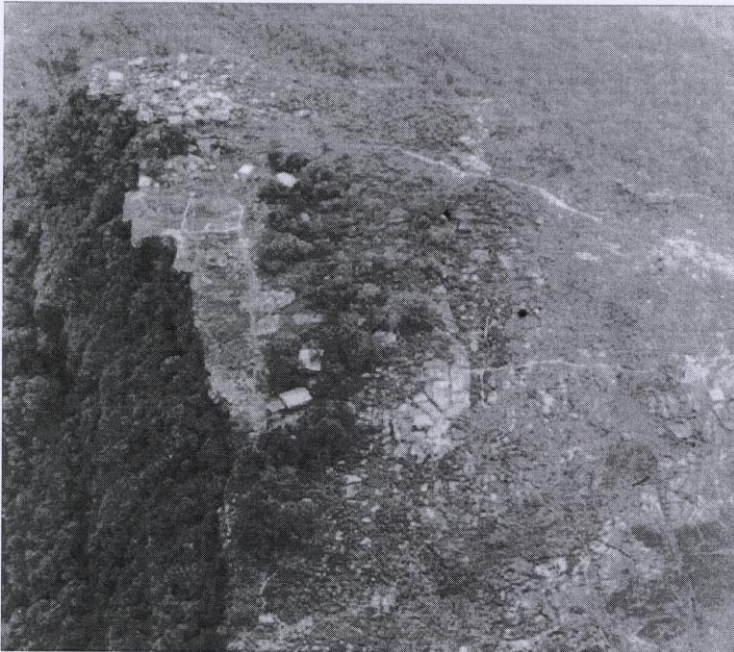
There was still another type of cooperation between Air America and the United States Air Force. Among the sites that were regularly re-supplied by Air America aircraft on a contract basis since 1966 – mostly by UH-34Ds working under the *Madrider* contract (AF62(531)-1841) –, were the TACAN sites built in Laos by the USAF. TACAN (“Tactical Air Navigation”) sites were places, where portable tactical air navigation aids had been installed that gave orientation to USAF aircraft crossing Laos on their way to North Vietnam. “Using the TACAN system, the aircraft transmitted an interrogator pulse to a ground station, and received back range and bearing information. [...] Among their basic components were a beacon transponder, and an all-band antenna capable of furnishing information to 100 aircraft at a time. [...] The system's line-of-sight range was 200 nautical miles”.³⁹⁸ There were TACAN sites at Phou Kate near Saravane (L-44) since April 1966, on Skyline Ridge near Long Tieng (LS-20A) since May 66, at Phu Pha Thi (LS-85) since September 66, and at Muang Phalane (LS-61) since March 67. All TACAN stations were placed and initially operated by technicians from USAF's 1st MOB and by private contract technicians hired by

³⁹⁶ Charles Davis describes similar experiences when he and George Carroll picked up stragglers near Moung Hiem (LS-48) on 21 March 1966 (*Across the Mekong*, pp.124-28).

³⁹⁷ See the report by Tom Hoppe in Davis, *Across the Mekong*, p.179.

³⁹⁸ Castle, *One day too long*, p.25.

USAF, but in October 1967, personnel from “Heavy Green”, the ground-directed radar bombing system installed at Phu Pha Thi (LS-85) took over operation.³⁹⁹ On 6 December 67, communist forces threatened Saravane (L-44) in preparation of the Tet Offensive and the encirclement of Khe Sanh, causing the evacuation of L-44 and its TACAN, and on 25 December 67, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao units attacked Muang Phalane (LS-61),



Coming in for Landing at Phou Kate on Air America H-34



Air America H-34 Landing at LS44 Phou Kate



LS-61 TACAN near Muong Phalan (probably the only photo in existence)

(all photos with kind permission from Richard Hicks)

³⁹⁹ E-mail dated 30 April 2010 kindly sent by former Heavy Green technician Richard Hicks to Paul Oelkrug, who forwarded it to the author.

trying to silence another one of these important navigational aids⁴⁰⁰ and also attacking the local Air America radio station at LS-61, where four Thais were killed and a Filipino radioman, Juan Solita, was taken prisoner.⁴⁰¹ After landing there CIA man Mick McGrath on 25 December 67, Air America UH-34D H-56 was hit by ground fire upon departure from Muang Phalane (LS-61), but made an emergency landing some 10 kilometers west of LS-61 and was recovered.⁴⁰² While operations at Phou Kate were just interrupted for some time, the TACAN at Muang Phalane was destroyed by rockets on 25 December 67, but a new TACAN was installed at Phou Mano, located near the Mekong River about 4 miles south of Mukdahan, Thailand, and became operational on 8 January 68.⁴⁰³ But when the TSQ-81 ground-based radar system installed on top of Mount Phu Pha Thi was overrun by North Vietnamese sappers on 10 March 68, the TACAN site was also taken. The following day, what remained of the installation was deliberately destroyed by USAF aircraft.⁴⁰⁴ In July 68, a new TACAN was erected at Na Khang (LS-36),⁴⁰⁵ but this was destroyed on 28 February 69, when Na Khang fell.⁴⁰⁶

Supporting the war on the ground

On 9 April 63, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma openly declared the Pathet Lao as being “the aggressor” and accused the North Vietnamese of having left troops in Laos. On 12 April 63, Kong Le “came to the Sam Thong refugee center, where he persuaded Vang Pao to send troops to the Plain of Jars. Hmong irregulars dressed in neutralist uniforms moved onto the western part of the plain, where they secured Kong Le’s headquarters, freeing neutralist troops to face the Pathet Lao farther east.”⁴⁰⁷ Also in April 63, the “Red Prince” and another Pathet Lao minister left Vientiane, and it looked as if the Communists had abandoned even pro forma respect for Souvanna’s coalition government.⁴⁰⁸ “To bring the Prime Minister into consistently active opposition to the Communists had been an American goal ever since the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements. The US Mission now sought to engage him in supporting the anticommunist forces in the northeast by offering the government a gift of several C-46 cargo planes. Souvanna accepted these, for they gave him the capability to support Kong Le’s units, the only forces personally loyal to him.”⁴⁰⁹ He then began allowing airport authorities to clear other C-46s, merely leased to the Lao but also carrying Laotian markings, to pick up ordnance at the border town of Paksane for delivery to Long Tieng. One of them even picked up ammunition and flew it direct to Kong Le’s headquarters on the Plain of Jars.”⁴¹⁰ This “gift of several C-46 cargo planes” to the government and not to the air force of Laos probably explains, why the 2 former Air America C-46s that were sold to USAID-Laos on 8 March 63, B-914 and B-918, and that had initially received Royal Lao Air Force serials “621” and “630”, received a new type of civil registrations in late March 63, where the “E” in XW-EAA and XW-EAB probably stood for “État” or “State”, denoting that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma as head of the government was to use these aircraft and not the

⁴⁰⁰ Castle, *One day too long*, pp.26/7+p.264, note 12.

⁴⁰¹ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.178.

⁴⁰² Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.178; XOXO of 25 December 67, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F8; Accident report, in: UTD/Hickler/B24F3.

⁴⁰³ Castle, *One day too long*, pp.72-74.

⁴⁰⁴ Castle, *One day too long*, pp.117-21 plus 138.

⁴⁰⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.197.

⁴⁰⁶ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.209.

⁴⁰⁷ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.151/2.

⁴⁰⁸ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.154.

⁴⁰⁹ In 1963, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma still wanted to ban Air America out of Laos. Prince Boun Oum was also hostile to Air America, “which he clearly viewed as an instrument of possible unilateral American purposes in Laos” (Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.167).

⁴¹⁰ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.155.

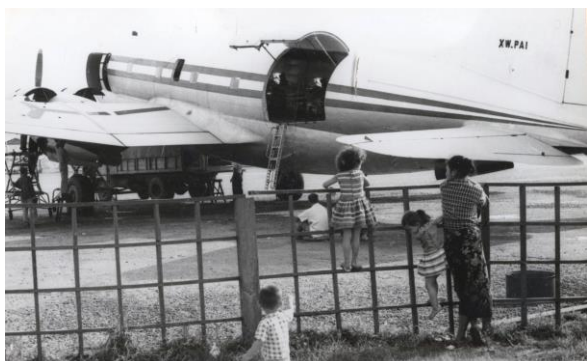
Royal Lao Air Force.⁴¹¹ As to the other XW-registered C-46s existing at that time, Air America and Bird & Sons did not have any in 1963. So it may refer to the C-46s of Véha-Akat Airlines, like XW-PAI seen here as taken by Dave Hickler at Vientiane in 1963/64. But it may also explain why – as it seems – all US-registered C-46s of Bird & Sons, which was an American company, had the Erawan painted on the side of the fuselage, probably denoting that this aircraft flew for the Government of Laos.



RLAF C-46s “621” and “630”
(UTD/Hickler/B54, photo nos. 1-DH54-6-PB82 and 1-DH54-6-PB70)



Lao Government-owned C-46 XW-EAB
(UTD/Hickler/B54, photo nos. 1-DH54-6-PB82 and 1-DH54-6-PB70)



Véha-Akat C-46 XW-PAI
(photo by Dave Hickler [no. 1-DH54-8-PB28] and courtesy of Dr. Jonathan Pote)



Bird & Sons C-46 N4871V carrying the Erawan
(photo by Dave Hickler [no. 1-DH54-8-PB28] and courtesy of Dr. Jonathan Pote)

Anyway, since April **1963**, heavy fighting broke out in the Plain of Jars in **MR 2** between Kong Le’s Neutralists, supported by the rightist Phoumi Nosavan, and the Pathet Lao, supported by the leftist group within the Neutralists and by North Vietnamese troops. At least since then, Souvanna Phouma was aligning himself closely with the Western-supported right wing, so that 6 Bird & Sons aircraft⁴¹² now supported Kong Le’s Neutralists, while Air America supplied the troops of the rightist Phoumi Nosavan, the Royal Lao troops obedient to the government of Souvanna Phouma, and – as “black missions”⁴¹³ – the Hmong irregulars at Long Tieng.⁴¹⁴ During the second half 1963, the most efficient Hmong action in MR 2 was the cratering of Route 7 east of Ban Ban; that way, some 1,000 Hmong irregulars blocked Communist military traffic on 6 August 1963.⁴¹⁵ As the fighting on the Plain of Jars

⁴¹¹ For details see the file *RLAF C-46s* in my *The Aircraft of Air America*.

⁴¹² Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.167/68.

⁴¹³ It was especially the US Department of State that saw problems in US pilots transporting war material in Laos, and imposed draconic restrictions on all Air America flights (Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.170/1).

⁴¹⁴ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.168.

⁴¹⁵ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.174.

continued, clashes between Pathet Lao and Royal army forces occurred in the southern provinces of Attopeu and Saravane in **MR 4**, necessitating other Air America supply missions to be flown to the south, where the United States were building up a military complex on the Bolovens Plateau.⁴¹⁶ In mid-1963, the US Mission joined “the Vientiane government in a program of defended villages (‘clusters’) similar to the so-called strategic hamlets in South Vietnam. The Laotian version was called Mu Ban Samaki, for which CIA was to support the ‘covert or semi-covert’ aspects, including weapons, radios, and militia pay, while USOM designed and funded the economic and social programs. The country team [= US Embassy] wanted a massive effort to secure the entire valley, but Washington mandated a more cautious approach.” A scaled-back version was launched in the fall of 1963, with six pilot projects scattered from Sayaboury to Attopeu.⁴¹⁷ A similar, multiethnic project of defended villages was implemented in 1963 and 64 along the Thai border west of Luang Prabang (L-54) in **MR 1**. “With project headquarters at Xieng Lom, located south of the Mekong where the river bends east toward Luang Prabang, the village defense program became, at least nominally, a part of the *Armée Clandestine*” – a name that had been given to the tribal guerrilla force created by the French in the 1950s, whose remnants still existed in that area in isolated pockets after the fall of Nam Tha and Nam Bac in 1962.⁴¹⁸

In June 63, the CIA was authorized to beef up its paramilitary program to 23,000 men, and there were still some 1,000 irregulars at Thakhek (**MR 3**) in 1964, who were mainly used for information gathering about Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese army movements in the eastern panhandle. On the Bolovens Plateau in **MR 4**, only some 300 Kha irregulars were left under arms in 1964, and at that time, the Communist had already recaptured the entire Na Khay Plateau in the upper panhandle.⁴¹⁹ But still, in Washington’s eyes, “the imperative to preserve at least a shell of the Geneva Agreements [...] continued to restrict the range of measures that might restore the anticommunist position in Laos and limit North Vietnamese use of the Panhandle routes to South Vietnam.”⁴²⁰

The “Secret War”

In mid-1964, the political and military situation in Laos escalated: When talks between Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, held at Khang Khay in April 64, failed,⁴²¹ the Pathet Lao began new attacks against Kong Le and his Neutralist forces on 16 May 1964, and within a week, Kong Le was driven first to Ban Na and then to the western edge of the Plain, where he established the Neutralist headquarters at Moung Soui.⁴²² At Vientiane, tensions between the neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the rightist General Phoumi Nosavan also escalated, and in the *coup* of 19 April 64, people working for Phoumi put Souvanna Phouma and other Neutralists under arrest. However, this *coup* only produced chaos in Vientiane that, viewed by the Communists as weakness, seemed to invite them to attack and occupy further Hmong territory.⁴²³ It was in this situation that, in May 1964, Souvanna Phouma accepted to openly attack the Communists: “The enemy encroachments that began in early 1964 and accelerated during the political chaos of April and May, did achieve one decisive political effect. Souvanna Phouma, no longer hoping for restraint from the Pathet Lao and Hanoi, essentially abandoned the idea that neutrality could be achieved or preserved by

⁴¹⁶ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.208-10.

⁴¹⁷ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.196. In 1966, CIA support to the village defense program ended (Ahern, p.267).

⁴¹⁸ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.203.

⁴¹⁹ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.161-67 plus 183.

⁴²⁰ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.183.

⁴²¹ Castle, *At war*, pp.63/4. On 3 June 64, Souphanouvong declared that the Pathet Lao no longer recognized Souvanna as prime minister (ib., p. 65).

⁴²² Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.210-14.

⁴²³ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.187-90.

accommodation. He did not, of course, formally repudiate the coalition, something that would have invited Hanoi into the Mekong Valley. But his newly combative stance prompted Ambassador Unger to make the unprecedented suggestion in mid-May that T-28 fighter-bombers flown by American pilots be deployed against the advancing enemy. Souvanna did not hesitate, and a week later, Air America pilots were bombing and strafing enemy positions both east and west of the Plain of Jars. From this point on, Air America helicopters resumed flying troops and ordnance as they had done before October 1962.⁴²⁴ Shortly afterwards, Washington also loosened restrictions on support to the friendly military, and Operation *Triangle* in July 64 is a good example of the new cooperation between Royal Lao Army troops, Air America C-123Bs, Caribous and UH-34Ds, USAF F-100s and F-105s, US-piloted T-28s from *Water Pump*, RLAFF Thai-piloted T-28s, and an RLAFF Aero Commander with an Air Commando Forward Air Controller inside.⁴²⁵ So this was an operation that involved only regular Royal Lao troops, while as late as 1965, the Embassy kept Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma in the dark about CIA paramilitary programs in Laos, “fearing that his chronic urge to accommodate his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, would lead him to reveal their details to the Pathet Lao.”⁴²⁶

By now, the “Secret War” in Laos had really begun. As to the northern and central parts of Laos, supported by Air America planes, Royal Lao forces launched a monsoon counter-offensive in July 64 that undid many earlier Pathet Lao gains. The government not only opened Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, but also set up new positions in Phong Saly (**MR 1**) and Sam Neua (**MR 2**) provinces, long regarded as Pathet Lao terrain. Most important among the towns abandoned by the Pathet Lao on Route 13 were Vang Vieng (L-16), 50 miles north of Vientiane, and Sala Phou Koun (LS-260), another 50 miles north at the junction of Routes 7 and 13, recaptured by Kong Le in August 64. North Vietnam immediately increased their troops in the northern part of Laos that were estimated to number over 30,000 men later in 1964.⁴²⁷ This was the beginning of a pattern of fighting which, since 1964, was to repeat itself over the years: Communist, i.e. Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces advanced regularly during the winter dry season, which lasted from October to May, as they were moving on foot and later using wheeled vehicles to move heavy weapons and could easily drive back the Royal Lao troops when it was possible to walk thru the jungles. During the monsoon rains of summer, they always retreated, because when the jungles were 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. So, during the dry winter season, Air America planes had to support the Royal Lao troops and tribal SGUs during their retreat to the west, while during the rainy summer season, which lasted from June to September, Air America planes not only delivered supplies to the same troops, but transported them back to more eastern parts of Laos.⁴²⁸

But in a more general way, **1965** marked the beginning of major military activities in Laos. When in 1965, the North Vietnamese troops operating in Laos were increased to about 40,000, they not only tried to protect the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system, but they also attacked Laotian government forces in the south. Supported by Air America, Royal Lao Government troops were able to repel these assaults: On 9 March 1965, Communists attacked a reserve officers’ school at Dong Hene, 30 miles east of Savannakhet (L-39) in **MR 3**, but were stopped by Royal Lao troops and Royal Lao AF T-28s.⁴²⁹ In August 65, the

⁴²⁴ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.191.

⁴²⁵ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.192; for details about Operation *Triangle*, see my file *Air America in Laos III – in combat*.

⁴²⁶ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.205.

⁴²⁷ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.210-14; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.108-10.

⁴²⁸ Moody, *The great adventures*, Prelude, p.7; Castle, *At war*, p.80.

⁴²⁹ Kirk, *Wider war*, p.215.

launch base east of Saravane was overrun by Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops, and Royal Lao troops and Kha irregulars immediately tried to recapture the lost territory. During these fights, Air America lost UH-34D H-32 on 12 October 65, when it crashed on take-off from a pad at coordinates XC 675465 near Saravane (L-44) in **MR 4** and hit the ground at 90 mph, killing the pilot, Capt. Richard H. Liebert, the co-pilot, Franklin D. Smith, and 2 USAID passengers, including Mike Deuel. The helicopter had dropped off a payroll at a site east of Se Kong and apparently had engine problems during take-off.⁴³⁰ Then, in November 65, at the beginning of the next dry season, Lao soldiers repelled several mixed North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao battalions 2 miles outside of Thakhek (L-40) in **MR 3**. Still more encouraging was the success of General Vang Pao in the northeast, where, once again supported by Air America planes, he recovered small outposts in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces (**MR 2**) for the Royal Lao government in the 1965 monsoon counteroffensive. More important than the loss of Hong Non (LS-86) west of Sam Neua town was the new role of Na Khang (LS-36) in northwestern Xieng Khouang province, which became the staging base for the Helios and Porters that flew food and ammunition to forward units and outposts in Sam Neua province. In mid-July 65, Ambassador Sullivan authorized USAF H-3 *Jolly Green Giant* helicopters to take Long Tieng and Na Khang as daytime stations, from where they could shorten by an hour their response time to distress calls. “Na Khang became something of a transportation hub. [...] Locally based air activity required fuel, and along with rice and ammunition, aviation gasoline became one of Na Khang’s three main imports.” In the evening, however, all Americans had to leave Na Khang.⁴³¹

In **1966**, these military successes of the pro-western forces in Laos could be repeated: In spite of intensive road construction work carried out by Chinese workers in the north-eastern regions of Laos since 1962, Royal Lao troops, supported by Air America planes, drove into the Nam Bac valley in **MR 1**, some 20 miles east of Moung Sai in August 1966, during the monsoon season. For a year and a half, the Lao forces loosely held the valley, thru which ran an old trail leading east to Sam Neua.⁴³² In **MR 2**, Na Khang (LS-36) had to be abandoned on 17 February, but was recaptured in May 66. The battle for Na Khang in February was the first time that Ambassador Sullivan authorized the use of napalm, which later became routine. From 18 February to 15 March 66, Vang Pao had to stay in a hospital at Korat in Thailand. So, in his hospital rooms, a series of tape-recorded mission orders were made that were flown to the major sites in the mountains of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. Of course he made plans to recapture Na Khang, and as long as that had not been achieved, Moung Son (L-59) in northwestern **MR 2** served as an interim base of operations. On 6 March 66, Air America Helio “877” lifted off the Moung Hiem airstrip (LS-48A) north of Na Khang with several American passengers and PARU Captain Deja Adulrat, bound for the new staging area. However, a stabilizer cable broke on take-off, so that the aircraft stalled into the ground at Chong Ha (LS-48), about 2 miles from Moung Hiem, killing the pilot, Wayne W. Ensminger. Captain Deja who had escaped from the crashed aircraft, returned to it to save the pilot, when “877” exploded and killed him.⁴³³ Among the military successes of 1966, some truck convoys from North Vietnam that were destroyed by USAF aircraft – US Navy A-6s, USAF F-105s and A-26s – should also be mentioned, mainly on the Trail, but also along

⁴³⁰ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.142; Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.225-27; Leary notebook of 1965 at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/aam65.pdf> for 12 October 65.

⁴³¹ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.233-41, quotation p.238.

⁴³² Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.214-18.

⁴³³ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.153; Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.239-48; Memorial; Leary notebook of 1966 at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/aam66.pdf> for 6 March 66; Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd and Air America Inc. of 23 March 66, in: UTD/CIA/B8F1.

Route 7 in **MR 2**. At the beginning, Forward Air Guides walking on the ground guided the air strikes, but the rate of “truck kills” was improved, when road watch teams on the ground began to communicate with Forward Air Controllers sitting in small airplanes. For this reduced to a matter of minutes the time between a sighting and the arrival of air force attack planes.⁴³⁴



A USAF A-26A flown in Laos, taken in the mid-sixties
(Ed Eckholdt collection, photo kindly submitted by Mike LaDue)

In **1967**, however, there was a stronger resistance on the Communists’ side in **MR 1** and **MR 2**. As the Nam Bac valley could have been used as a base to extend Lao rule into terrain controlled by the Pathet Lao (Sam Neua) and the Chinese (Phong Saly, Moung Sai), the Communists reinforced positions surrounding the valley in July and August 1967. So Air America planes supported the Royal Lao troops sitting there to defend the valley. Some of the rockets delivered to northern Laos by Air America also came from the USAF stocks at Nakhon Phanom, as the USAF’s 56th ACW was ordered to use them on their A-26s and T-28s, although they were needless. So Colonel Aderholt had them send up to Vang Pao’s guerrillas, who launched them off the ground.⁴³⁵

At about the same time, down in **MR 4**, the Communists sent reinforcements east of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the vicinity of the towns of Saravane (L-44) and Attopeu (LS-10), north and south of the Bolovens Plateau.⁴³⁶ Already in late 1966, the CIA had begun to build up a guerrilla force in Military Region IV, first with Chinese Nung from Cholon in Saigon, who were trained at Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165) in the south, an isolated base 23 kilometers southeast of Houei Kong, and at PS-22, a road watch training camp 11 kilometers northeast of LS-165. After training, USAF *Pony Express* helicopters and Air America UH-34Ds flew them to the corridor east of Saravane down to Attopeu, where they seeded roads with anti-vehicle and anti-personnel mines. Then, heliborne raids were flown against North Vietnamese training sites in southern Laos. But as the Nungs were deemed a poor investment by their CIA advisers, they were replaced by Lao Theung road-and river-watcher teams in 1967. In the fall of that year, a 4,000-foot runway was built at Phou Luang Noi (PS-38), 15 kilometers south of LS-165, which was to serve as a new door to the expanding paramilitary activities on the Bolovens. At the same time, another outpost in the neighborhood, Kong My (PS-7), home of a Lao Army militia detachment completely reliant on aerial resupply, was ringed with minefields. In this area, CIA advisers organized local guerrilla forces that were to watch and harass the Sihanouk Trail, i.e. the Communist supply line that ran from the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which it reached in Attopeu province in

⁴³⁴ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.250-57.

⁴³⁵ Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp.198/9.

⁴³⁶ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.223-25.

southern Laos. Sometimes, the USAF *Pony Express* CH-3E and Air America UH-34D and Bell 205 helicopters were attacked when they tried to extract the guerrillas the following morning, as it happened south of PS-22 on 29 December 67.⁴³⁷ Air America UH-34D pilot Larry Taylor recalls one such mission near the Cambodian border in 1967/68: Air America had carried about a company sized unit from New Ban Bouac (LS-116) to the Sihanouk Trail; they were scheduled to be picked up seven days later. Taylor was in the lead H-34, flying co-pilot for Billy Pearson, and there were several UH-34Ds, USAF CH-3s from Nahkon Phanom, and A-1s for cover. Just about 100 feet before the landing zone, Taylor's helicopter received continuous automatic fire from all sides and had to fly to the nearest friendly base at LS-10 for checking the damage.⁴³⁸

Further north, in **MR 3**, most of the paramilitary efforts at Savannakhet (L-39) were focused on the Hark road-watcher program, but there was also a small guerrilla program organized at the CIA compound at Naseng in the outskirts of Savannakhet. From March to May 66, 40 Royal Lao Army officers were sent to Pitt's Camp in Thailand (T-603) for leadership instruction, and after their return, they were posted to a new guerrilla camp at Nong Saphong, 25 kilometers north of Savannakhet. They then commanded newly formed 60-man formations called *Compagnies Volontaires* (CV), whose task was to clear and then to hold liberated pockets of territory. On 5 January 67, the best 10 men of these guerrillas boarded several Air America UH-34Ds that flew them to the vicinity of the famous Ban Naden prison camp. After 48 hours of walk, on 7 January 67, Team Cobra broke into the Communist prison camp, freeing 80-plus prisoners, including former Air America kicker Pisidhi Indradat, and led those who wanted to join them westward to a prearranged exfiltration site held by friendly partisans, located east of Thakhek. There, 2 Air America UH-34Ds flown by Jerry McEntee and Sam Jordan picked up Pisidhi Indradat and some others and flew them to Savannakhet.⁴³⁹ These activities meant that Air America planes also had to support the Royal Lao defenders in the south. Both movements later proved to be the opening of the Lao phase of the Communists' winter-spring Tet offensive, although the aims were different from the Tet offensive in South Vietnam, as in Laos, its main purpose was to defend the trail system and divert and disperse Lao forces in the north.⁴⁴⁰

In **1968**, the whole pace of the secret war in Laos changed. On 10 November 67, Vang Pao began airlifting guerrillas to an area east of the Nam Bac Valley in **MR 1** with the intention to march west. Impatient with the progress of the Pathet Lao, North Vietnam introduced new troops and opened its campaign in Laos with an attack on government positions in the Nam Bac valley in December 67, whose Royal Lao Army defenders were supplied by Air America C-123Ks. During the first week of January 68, the airfield had to be closed, and now, supplies were dropped. But supported by artillery in the mountains, within a few days, the Communists dispersed some 2,000 government soldiers, most of whom fled or surrendered. On 13 January 68, the Royal Lao defenders started evading to the south: Nam Bac was abandoned. The battle of Nam Bac (LS-203) was the most important in northern Laos that year, but North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces also obtained some minor victories.⁴⁴¹ – Further south, in **MR 3**, another traditional Royal Lao Government outpost was taken by Communist forces in January 68: Ban Houei Sane (LS-189), located just 5 kilometers from the South Vietnamese border and near one of the busiest portions of the Trail. Ever since 1961, the garrison had depended on Air America airdrops with occasional landings, but when, in 1966, new Communist guns had made supply flights from Savannakhet too dangerous, MACV-SOG

⁴³⁷ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.170-75.

⁴³⁸ Larry s. Taylor, Interview, conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at Atlanta, GA on 28 November 84, in: UTD/Leary/B49F2.

⁴³⁹ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.175-77.

⁴⁴⁰ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.223-25.

⁴⁴¹ Kirk, *Wider war*, pp.224-26; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.183-85.

aircraft from South Vietnam had taken over the airdrops. On 23 January 68, North Vietnamese PT-76 tanks attacked the little outpost, and within hours, the garrison and its dependents fled into South Vietnam.⁴⁴²

But the most spectacular sign of the new pace of the secret war could be seen in the north: On 12 January 68, two AN-2s of the North Vietnamese AF (919th Air Transport Regiment) attacked the US TACAN installation and the US TSQ-81 ground-directed radar bombing system installed on Phu Pha Thi (LS-85) in **MR 2** to guide bombing missions over North Vietnam.⁴⁴³ The AN-2s attacked with 120mm mortar rounds converted to “bombs”, 57mm rockets and machine guns; the TACAN site sustained only little damage and remained in operation, but two soldiers and two female civilians were killed and two soldiers wounded. An Air America UH-1D, XW-PFH, crewed by Captain Theodore H. Moore and Flight Mechanic Glenn Woods, happened to be in the vicinity, delivering food and ammunition to various Hmong villages and defensive positions located around LS-85. When Captain Moore saw the AN-2s, he chased them in his Bell 205, while flight engineer Woods began firing an AK-47 rifle at the fleeing biplanes. One of the AN-2s, apparently hit by groundfire and by Woods’ gunfire, dropped and then crashed into a mountain ridge and exploded, followed, only a few minutes later, by the second AN-2, which hit the side of a mountain some three miles further north of the first crash, apparently also hit by Woods’ AK-47 fire. As this aircraft did not explode, a Hmong-PARU team landed there in the afternoon, picked up the dead aviators and exposed them in bodybags at Long Tieng before handing them over to the DRV Embassy at Vientiane. The AN-2 was sling-loaded by a USAF HH-53B and later put on public display at Vientiane. As a political consequence, Captain Moore was immediately fired by Air America for “causing an international incident”, but later rehired by the Company upon request of the CIA.⁴⁴⁴ But this was only the beginning, as the military situation in Laos changed completely at the time of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam.

Spy teams to northern Laos and inside China or North Vietnam

On 7 July 64, Washington approved a CIA program in North Vietnamese “tribal areas” that “included setting up base camps and roadwatch positions, and establishing ‘safe areas for further activities if and when directed’”.⁴⁴⁵ At that time, “for two months, Hmong patrols were already observing Route 7 inside North Vietnam and scouting out base camps and sites for ‘carefully conceived harassment’ of traffic on the road.”⁴⁴⁶ In April 65, Ambassador Sullivan approved expanding the irregular forces “up to and across DRV [i.e. North Vietnam] border,” which – as Vientiane’s CIA Station understood him – meant the area north of Sam Neua Province and south of Dien Bien Phu. However, this authorization did not include arming those people in North Vietnam or conducting harassment operations, but only intelligence gathering and propaganda.⁴⁴⁷

In the spring of 1965, Air America bought 2 “Skyhook” installations for Caribous – special equipment that could be used to retrieve agents and that was also used by the top-secret Studies and Operations Group in Vietnam: So, retrieving agents from enemy territory was another type of missions flown by Air America Caribou B-851, as their other Caribous were

⁴⁴² Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.187-88.

⁴⁴³ About LS-85, see the video tape at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UC3mqwVuLgU>.

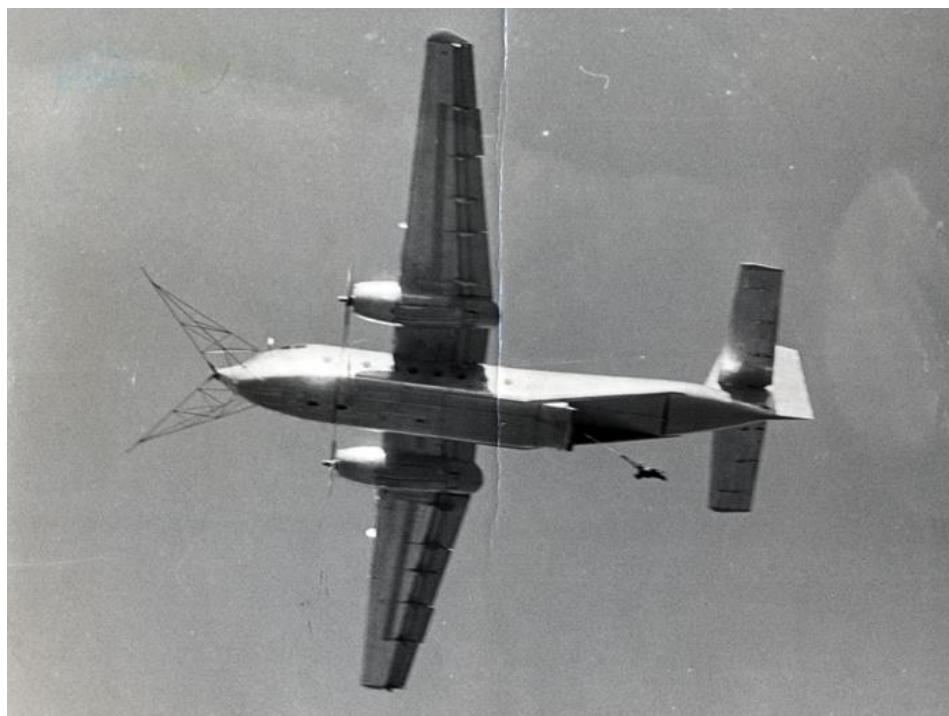
⁴⁴⁴ Castle, *At war in the shadow of Vietnam*, pp.94/5; Castle, *One day too long*, pp.76-78; this version is based on interviews given to Castle by Captain Moore; a different version, based on William Colby’s book, is given by Robbins (*Ravens*, p.42), who speaks of 3 An-2s participating in the attack. According to Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.189/90, 4 AN-2s had left Duc Thang airfield towards Laos, but 2 of them entered a border orbit so that only 2 attacked the site; a photo of one of the converted An-2 taken prior to the mission can be seen at Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.227.

⁴⁴⁵ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.212.

⁴⁴⁶ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.212.

⁴⁴⁷ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.215.

based at Bangkok or Saigon at that time.⁴⁴⁸ The training base for retrieving agents was Pitt's Camp, Thailand (T-603), and among the CIA case officers involved were Shep Johnson and of course his boss Bill Lair. Among the Air America pilots who flew Caribou "851" during those pick up flights was Jim Rhyne.⁴⁴⁹ Especially in the Trail area in southern Laos, villagers living close to the Trail had been either driven off or reported to the Pathet Lao, so that an overland in- and exfiltration of spy and road watcher teams was no longer possible. These teams could be infiltrated by helicopter or by parachute drop. They covered "their targets for six to eight weeks before being exfiltrated by helicopter or by the so-called sky hook recovery technique."⁴⁵⁰ It seems, however, that the Fulton Skyhook system was not used very often.



Caribou "851" with the "Fulton Skyhook" system attached, picking up an agent
(UTD/Leary/B77F2, formerly photo no. 1WL1-28-11-PB170)

At the same time, other clandestine activities of Air America included night drops of spy teams in northern Laos or even inside China or North Vietnam. These spy teams or "infiles" could be dropped in by Air America UH-34Ds or landed in by Helio Couriers, but even more hazardous could it be to pick them up again: Spy teams to be flown out or "exfiles" were often wearing Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese uniforms, and the people waiting at the meeting point, even with the right signal, could be real Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese soldiers waiting for the Air America aircraft to arrive and to open fire onto it, when the cover had been blown up or when the return had been delayed for some reason. One of the select group of Air America pilots who were often called upon to fly extremely dangerous missions into North Vietnam and to infiltrate or exfiltrate CIA-controlled spy teams was Captain Ted Moore, the man who attacked two North Vietnamese AN-2s near LS-85 on 11 January 68.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ The purchase of the Fulton Skyhook equipment was approved in May 65 (Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd and Air America Inc. of 25 May 65, in: UTD/CIA/B7F4); see also Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.59; and Status of aircraft reports of 1 November 65 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1), 8 April 66 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1), and 5 May 66 (in: UTD/Hickler/B1F2).

⁴⁴⁹ Shep Johnson photos exhibited at the Air America Reunion at Washington in June 2006.

⁴⁵⁰ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.252.

⁴⁵¹ Castle, *One day too long*, p.76.

In late 1966, the CIA changed its strategy in Laos; up to then, paramilitary operations outside **MR 2** had focused mainly on intelligence gathering. By 1967, in Military Region I, Nam Yu (LS-118A) and Luang Prabang (L-54) had become centers of major paramilitary activities that did not only include intelligence-gathering, but also harassment operations hitting Communist and forcing them to stop using certain routes as regular supply channels. This explains the sapper attacks against Luang Prabang airfield in February and July 67, when a total of 15 RLAFF T-28s⁴⁵² and 2 Air America UH-34Ds were destroyed.⁴⁵³ But the buildup of paramilitary forces at Nam Yu and Luang Prabang also resulted in a successful surprise attack against Communist-held Nam Tha in late December 67, when Air America UH-34Ds lifted CIA-backed guerrilla troops to several positions around Nam Tha and later flew them back to Nam Yu, allowing thousands of refugees to flee from Nam Tha to villages under Government control.⁴⁵⁴

Cross-border intelligence operations into China were initially conducted out of Burma, but in 1966 and 1967, Tony Poe, the leading CIA man at Nam Yu, organized several wiper tap missions to the Meng Mang area in China: Air America UH-34Ds flew the guerrillas from Nam Yu to a point inside Laos close to the Chinese border, from where the teams walked into China and attached the wire taps.⁴⁵⁵ The CIA preferred to call these missions SAR missions and sometimes asked for cover by T-28s. Don Moody, commander of the Air Operations Center (AOC) at Luang Prabang at that time, recalls such a mission that took place in late February or early March 67: "It all started with a SAR request from Lima Site 118A through our local CAS⁴⁵⁶ guys. They were asking the RLAFF to provide T-28 cover support for the infil of one of their Intel teams into northern Laos, somewhere near the China border. I don't know why, but CAS called their team infil missions SARs. Typically a SAR had two Air America H-34s (one empty for backup), and if the threat called for it, a flight of two to four T-28s to escort the choppers and fly cover for the infil. [...] Most SAR missions are uneventful and for this mission I was assured it would be a milk run. We joined up with the H-34s just north of Nam Yu and proceeded to the point up north where the team would be dropped off. The flight up to this point was uneventful. The area that was picked for the drop off seemed all right, but something about it didn't look right to the H-34 pilot, and at the last minute, he took a wave off. This was a smart move on his part, as the bad guys seemed to know we were coming and were ready for us. There had been no way for us to check the security of the LZ ahead of time, and the bad guys had pre-positioned several 12,7mm heavy machine guns around the area that were set up to present a withering cross-fire. In less than five minutes they shot down two T-28s and killed Lt Pheuak the flight leader, who was one of my replacement pilots. Lt. Pheuak was shot down on his first pass to clear out the area around the LZ where the ground fire was coming from. My aircraft was hit trying to cover the retreating H-34s. [...] As luck would have it, I was alive and had the aircraft safely on the ground, but in a rice paddy somewhere in northern Laos. The real stroke of luck came in having the empty H-34 in position to make a quick pick-up. Thank you Air America."⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵² On 2 February 67, 6 RLAFF T-28s were destroyed at Luang Prabang airfield: 50-287, 50-306, 50-308, 50-309, 50-317, and 0-91526; several more were damaged. On 16 July 67, 9 RLAFF T-28s were destroyed at Luang Prabang airfield: 49-1500, 50-220, 50-254, 50-274, 50-288, 50-297, 50-298, 51-3518, and 51-7774 (for details see the RLAFF T-28s file within my *The Aircraft of Air America*).

⁴⁵³ Air America's UH-34Ds H-F and H-31 were both destroyed at Luang Prabang airfield in the sapper attack of 2 February 67 (for details see the UH-34D files within my *The Aircraft of Air America*).

⁴⁵⁴ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.163-66.

⁴⁵⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.166/7.

⁴⁵⁶ CAS stands for "Controlled American Sources" and was the term used by US military personnel in South East Asia for overseas CIA offices and case officers (Castle, *At war*, p.140, note 2).

⁴⁵⁷ Moody, *The great adventures*, Episode 2, p. 7 (<http://ravenfac.com/ravens/Adventures/Episode0002.htm>).

Relieving road watcher teams

Among the special missions flown by Air America's UH-34Ds at night was the relief of road watcher teams working close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴⁵⁸ "The purposes of these teams is to watch for movements of enemy troops and supplies and, if needed, to coordinate bombing strikes."⁴⁵⁹ The concept of road watcher teams had already been tested in mid-1961 in **MR 2**, when heliborne Hmong teams landed along Routes 7 and 4 to count troops and trucks. Equipped with a camera, the Hmong identified vehicles by plastic-coated picture cards, wrote down their findings and were extracted by helicopter. In February 62, case officer Mike Deuel began a road watcher program along Route 8 in the upper panhandle, molding road watchers from inexperienced Lao villagers, overseen by a fresh PARU detachment, Team W, who radioed information to Thakhek. But then the Communists got wind of this activity and in late June 62, they moved towards the PARU post: "With Deuel hovering overhead in an RLA Alouette II, an Air America H-34 landed on the mountain for a successful emergency exfiltration".⁴⁶⁰ After the Geneva Accords, i.e. by June 63, 2 CIA case officers and a new PARU Team W began training road watcher teams in a remote training site dubbed "Siberia" and located 15 kilometers east of Thakhek, but each day, they had to be shuttled from and back to Nakhon Phanom.⁴⁶¹ Further south, near the Bolovens village of Houei Sai, CIA man Deuel set up new groups of Lao Theung road watchers in the summer of 1963 (Project *Hardnose*), who were trained at Houei Sai by PARU Team T and some of them even at Pitt's Camp in Thailand.⁴⁶² By May 64, the program was increased to 20 radio-equipped Lao Theung teams concentrated in the vicinity of Saravane and extending south to the Cambodian border.⁴⁶³ On 7 July 64, Washington approved a CIA program in North Vietnamese "tribal areas" that "included setting up base camps and roadwatch positions, and establishing 'safe areas for further activities if and when directed'".⁴⁶⁴ At that time, "for two months, Hmong patrols were already observing Route 7 inside North Vietnam and scouting out base camps and sites for 'carefully conceived harassment' of traffic on the road."⁴⁶⁵ As one of the consequences, in December 1964, US combat aircraft began bombing infiltration routes in the Laotian Panhandle. There was even the idea to use South Vietnamese tribesmen against the Trail in Laos, i.e. people who were to be supported from Saigon by MACV. However, Ambassador Sullivan had to slow down Washington's new enthusiasm for this type of cross-border operations, as it could be viewed as a violation of Laotian sovereignty, and Sullivan feared to lose Souvanna's support.⁴⁶⁶ Instead, Vientiane, which continued to be in charge over southern Laos, preferred the Kha irregulars of the Bolovens Plateau in **MR 4** as its main tool. So, the road watchers continued to be Laotian tribesmen and continued to be supported by Air America helicopters.⁴⁶⁷ In late 1964 or early 1965, Air America's Jim Rhyne had discovered on a Helio reconnaissance mission that there was a lot of road construction activity – bulldozers and trucks – on the Trail south of Mu Gia Pass. "Shortly afterwards, Rhyne and another of Lair's assistants went back with a case of road nails. Using buckets, they dumped the nails in the road, often flying at 5-6 feet over the ground. Landing back at

⁴⁵⁸ Since February 66, Nakhon Phanom-based and since July 66, Udorn-based USAF CH-3 and still later CH-53 "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters belonging to the 20th Special Operations Squadron also inserted such road watcher teams; these infiltration and exfiltration missions were called "Pony Express" (Castle, *At war*, pp.82+92; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.144).

⁴⁵⁹ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, p.31.

⁴⁶⁰ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.117/8 (quotation from p.118).

⁴⁶¹ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.119.

⁴⁶² Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.119.

⁴⁶³ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.120.

⁴⁶⁴ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.212.

⁴⁶⁵ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.212.

⁴⁶⁶ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.213/4.

⁴⁶⁷ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, pp.221-25

Savannakhet, Rhyne confirmed General Ma that he was likely to find some stranded trucks in the area. He sent in T-28s the same day and did find targets. However, he lost a T-28 to anti-aircraft fire and was not pleased.”⁴⁶⁸

On 22 January 1965, Charles Davis participated in such a mission. “We are taking a team of less than a dozen soldiers into a landing zone and bringing out a similar group.”⁴⁶⁹ Early that day, an Air America Helio had scouted the route, with the pilot of the lead helicopter on the co-pilot’s seat, and as they had discovered an anti-aircraft gun on the scheduled helicopter route, that route was changed to include a detour around that gun before reaching the landing zone. “It is now four o’clock in the afternoon. [...] We fly from Udorn to [...] Nakhom Phanom, Thailand. [...] We refuel our helicopters and get a bite to eat. Around twilight we start up our helicopters and take a quick fifteen minute flight across the Mekong, landing on the runway at Thakhek. There we taxi to a clear area, shut down again, and are given a briefing by an American in civilian clothes. He shows us on our maps the location of our destination. The mission is to be a four-ship operation with two pilots in each chopper. [...] By now the twilight is almost completely displaced by darkness, so we load up and head east with our ‘cargo’ of eleven troops with all their gear. [...] We climb up to eighty-five hundred feet as indicated on our barometric altimeter. We remain mostly silent for the next hour. [...] The silence is broken when Zeitler announces on the radio that he sees the landing area. I scan the ground in the distance, and faintly see what might be lights. A few minutes later, faint lights become a group of smudge pots in a heart-shaped circle. Zeitler says they are leaving altitude to go in for a landing. Soon thereafter, they land and drop off their load, reload with



A four-ship mission waiting at Thakhek West in 1966, taken by Dr. Jonathan Pote
(with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

outgoing troops, and are back in the air. We and the other two ships do the same thing, one at a time. In a matter of no more than twenty minutes, we are back in the air, heading to the northwest [...] to Thakhek.”⁴⁷⁰ Then they continue to Nakhom Phanom for a late snack before returning to Udorn. If there were no unexpected problems like an engine failure or enemy contact, most road watcher relief missions probably were like that. Indeed, on a mission on Thanksgiving Day, 1966, Charles Davis flew the lead helicopter in a group of 4 Air America UH-34Ds that picked up troops and their gear at Thakhek, flew them to somewhere close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, picked up other troops after landing, returned to Thakhek, off-loaded the troops, and then headed their separate ways – a mission that Davis had already flown several times before with nothing special about it, except for the fact that this time the

⁴⁶⁸ Bill Leary, Telephone interview with Jim Rhyne of 14 September 1991, notes, in: UTD/ Leary/B47F9.

⁴⁶⁹ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, p.31.

⁴⁷⁰ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, pp.32-34.

helicopters were crossed by 4 jet aircraft that came straight at the helicopters, without causing any accident, however.⁴⁷¹

“As early as May 1966, two teams were being prepared for helicopter infiltration, one north and one south of the communist transportation hub at Tchepone; they were to install electronic sensors signaling the passage of motor vehicles. Battery-powered, the devices were to furnish continuous coverage for as long as two months. Heliborne infiltration continued until the end of the war [...], but it never replaced the practice in which natives of the target area infiltrated overland and recruited local villagers as informants. In mid-July, the station concluded that, despite the obstacles posed by enemy security measures, these teams remained the most productive. This was true even in the area around the key chokepoint called the Mu Gia Pass, where several hundred residents of the area had taken refuge at the closest roadwatch command point, about 10 miles away.”⁴⁷²

Supporting road watch, action, and spy teams

Another type of “black” mission was the nightly support of road watcher spy teams. The Ho Chi Minh Trail had become a vast military supply corridor with ten thousands of kilometers of meandering trails heading south. The main roads even had truck parks where drivers could sleep during daytime, while the transportation took place during the night; often drivers took a truck for only a short distance, which they knew so well that they could drive without lights. From the air, the whole trail system was invisible because of triple-canopy foliage, and unfordable rivers were crossed by portable bridges hidden out of sight during daytime. The whole trail system was protected by more than 2,000 gun positions, from .51 caliber machine guns to 100mm radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns effective up to 30,000 feet. In order to survey all these logistic activities of North Vietnam invisible from the air, the CIA used the Nungs, a national minority of Chinese hill people. As the Nungs were mostly illiterate, the CIA developed a special radio transmitter (*Hark I*) with pictures of a tank, a truck and so on, so that these teams only had to push the appropriate button as often as a tank or a truck passed their position.⁴⁷³ These signals were collected at a base camp or relayed to an observation plane – e.g. to one of the Air America Volpars operating out of Savannakhet – to be used by attack aircraft for immediate bombing on the trail. These Nung spy teams had to be supplied by Air America planes – without navigational aids, without radio contact, just looking for a prearranged signal of ten to fifteen flashlights.⁴⁷⁴ As the C-123B had very little single-engine capability, these night drop missions were initially undertaken by an Air America Caribou.⁴⁷⁵ Air America kicker Miles G. Lechtman “spent a lot of time on night drops with the Caribous, flying out of Savannakhet, resupplying teams along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and into China. These missions increased as time passed. There were two kickers on night drops. They often used B-851, carrying c. 7,500 pounds of cargo. There was a single track. They usually did three drops at night. At first, he would spend 3-4 nights a month on this project, but toward the end it became two weeks at a time. Gene Hughey (‘the Colonel’) was the pilot on many of these flights, with MacAlister as copilot. [...] In late 1966, [Victor

⁴⁷¹ Davis, *Across the Mekong*, pp.192/3.

⁴⁷² Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.255.

⁴⁷³ The device was officially called the *Hark-I* and was introduced in early 1967 (Conboy/Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.145). Such an “elephant counter” can be seen at <https://www.cia.gov/about-cia/cia-museum/experience-the-collection/index.html#!/artifact/153> .

⁴⁷⁴ Robbins, *Air America*, pp.130-32; e-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga . These teams “were supposed to be where they said they were with a DZ light signal, usually an X or L laid out at a specific time and place, usually a small jungle clearing” (E-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga).

⁴⁷⁵ Jim Rhyne, Interview conducted at Clayton, NC on 13 October 90 by Prof. Bill Leary, p. 5, in: UTD/Leary/B47F9. The Air America Caribou that had made the night-drops to the road watchers was B-851, which was based at Udorn with CEECO contract 59-069 and then with contract AID-439-713 since at least 1965.

B.] David was involved in night drops with the Caribou over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. [...] He would fly heading, time, and distance, then let down and look for the drop signal. The signal was often different from the one that he had been briefed on. You had to use your best judgement about making the drop. If the drop was not made, the Customer was unhappy. One Customer [...] once told David that teams would sometimes claim that the package was not received, but the articles would show up several days later in the village markets.”⁴⁷⁶ Mostly, these *Hark*-teams consisted of 3 road watchers who had established a rear base high in the mountains or in a cave, where they were resupplied and relieved, and then had to walk long distances to arrive at their hidden observation points.⁴⁷⁷ In 1967, road watch/action teams usually consisted of 12 men. They observed traffic and called in air strikes. Action teams ambushed and destroyed trucks, planted anti-tank mines, etc. they were normally inserted by helicopters that were covered by T-28s/A-1s, but sometimes they entered the area on foot.⁴⁷⁸

In May 67, a specially modified B-26 entered service with Air America in Laos for use in bad weather night drops: OnMark B-26 N46598.⁴⁷⁹ The aircraft was fast and had self-sealing tanks. It carried a navigator under a curtain with a repeater radar scope (Robert B. McKean / John O. Kessock) who passed up messages to the cockpit, where there also was a scope – the radar was similar to that used on F-4s.⁴⁸⁰ The aircraft was delivered by Intermountain Aviation of Marana, AZ, whose personnel also gave a short ground school on the aircraft and its electronic equipment to the Air America crews who were to fly it. Called the “Blue Goose” or the “Blivit” by the crews who flew them, this aircraft looked like an OnMark Marksman, having wing tip tanks, windscreen and wheels taken from a DC-6 or a DC-7. In the interior, however, there were rollers or tracks for cargo dropping, a very sophisticated electronic equipment including terrain following radar, and a cargo drop ramp. The aircraft arrived at Udorn in May 67, and its arrival is well documented by photos. It remained based at Udorn, where it was also maintained.⁴⁸¹ After some practice day drops at the Thai Border Police camp outside Udorn, followed by some training flights in Laos, the OnMark was used for nightly low-level supply drops (food and ammunition) over Laos since about May 67, especially over the Ho Chi Minh Trail between the Mu Gia Pass and Tchepone, and was destined to supply road watcher teams, composed mostly of Thais in the early days, but later of Lao people, who had previously been supplied by Air America Caribous.⁴⁸² The similarity of the OnMark and its sound to the USAF B-26Ks used by Operation *Steel Tiger* had the advantage not to attract undue attention to the position of the road watcher teams, but at times, it could have attracted more ground fire than normal transport aircraft, although this did not deter the air crews from dropping nor the watch teams from setting up the DZ signals. As there was no radio contact between the crew and the people on the ground, and as the crews were given only approximate drop coordinates, the aircraft needed light signals from the ground. These were often seen too late to make the drop, and then, the OnMark was too fast. “The poor visibility was because the nose of the B-26 precluded the pilot from seeing the DZ unless a slight skid and or turn was made to keep the lights in sight”, former Air America pilot

⁴⁷⁶ William Leary, Notebook for 1966, pp. 29-30, online readable at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/aam66.pdf> .

⁴⁷⁷ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.147.

⁴⁷⁸ William Leary, Notebook for 1967, p. 7, online readable at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/aam67.pdf> .

⁴⁷⁹ Msn 27694 ex N900V; previously USAF 44-34415. See Hagedorn / Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, pp.171-73.

⁴⁸⁰ William Leary, Notebook for 1967, p. 8, online readable at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/aam67.pdf> .

⁴⁸¹ E-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁴⁸² While at Udorn, the OnMark was always kept on the Air America side of the ramp at Udorn. But when it was to be loaded, it was taxied or towed to the warehouse in the AB-1 area (E-mail dated 2 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga). Evidently, supporting the road watchers, belonged to the programs directed by AB-1.

Frank Bonansinga remembers. “This and the 140 knots drop speed gave little time at very low level to hit the small jungle clearings at night. Probably with the same results, if we dropped in the day time.”⁴⁸³ High drop speed and poor visibility meant that often the aircraft had to pull up and go to the next drop zone or to fly back to the supply base, if no lights were seen, for it could not come around over the drop area for several times, as this would have drawn attention to the aircraft and to the people on the ground.⁴⁸⁴ So, the OnMark quickly proved to be unsuitable for the task. This may explain, why a second B-26, which had been converted in a similar way (N800V msn 28977; previously USAF 44-35698)⁴⁸⁵ and was also painted dark blue with white stripes,⁴⁸⁶ did never enter the night-drop program in Laos.⁴⁸⁷ Instead, this second OnMark was delivered to an Air Force unit based at Norton AFB, CA, in June 68.⁴⁸⁸ Two more US civil identities are known, that is N58071 and N67623,⁴⁸⁹ but then its traces



Air America OnMark B-26 N46598 over Laos on 29 July 67, with Frank Bonansinga at the controls (photo kindly submitted by Frank Bonansinga)

disappear. As to the night drop missions over Laos, former Air America pilot Frank Bonansinga remembers⁴⁹⁰ that the last of these night drop missions from Udorn aboard N46598 was flown in the night of 7 October 1967. The aircraft was still used on other missions⁴⁹¹ until mid-April 68, when it was flown to Takhli RThAFB (T-05).⁴⁹² Among these other mission flown by the OnMark were some special flights to Nam Lieu (LS-118A), Tony Poe’s headquarters, when Larry Taylor saw it rigged for airdrops, and once even heading

⁴⁸³ E-mail dated 20 July 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁴⁸⁴ E-mail dated 14 November 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁴⁸⁵ See Hagedorn / Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, pp.171-73.

⁴⁸⁶ Detail given by Jim Keck, who flew the aircraft with Intermountain Aviation.

⁴⁸⁷ E-mail dated 17 April 2001, kindly sent to the author by former Air America pilot Frank Bonansinga.

⁴⁸⁸ E-mail dated 12 April 2005, kindly sent to the author by former Intermountain employee Don Gearke.

⁴⁸⁹ In 1972/3, when John Davis acquired a microfilm of the FAA cards, those FAA cards indicated B-26B N58071 with msn 28977, which had then been deleted (e-mail dated 9 April 2005, kindly sent to the author by John Davis); the same cards also noted “now [N]67623” (e-mail dated 9 April 2005, kindly sent to the author by John Davis).

⁴⁹⁰ Bonansinga, “The Blue Goose and the Steel Tiger”, in: *Air America Log* of March 98 (internet-version).

⁴⁹¹ Former Air America pilot Frank Bonansinga recalls that “the plane flew on a couple of plane maintenance flights, perhaps a couple of transportation flights to L-39 or L-01 and then a flight or two just to fly, but no more night drops” (E-mail dated 16 July 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga).

⁴⁹² E-mail dated 26 June 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga; a last photo of the “Blue Goose”, taken in April 68 when flying over the Mekong, can be seen at: http://www.air-america.org/Images/Bonansinga_Frank/016.jpg.

north, possibly to China.⁴⁹³ Shortly afterwards in April 1968, N46598 started to burn during take-off from the runway at Takhli and was destroyed on the ground by subsequent fire, when it was to be ferried back to the United States, as Don Gearke noted.⁴⁹⁴

Nevertheless, supporting the road watcher teams continued to be one of Air America's tasks, and in 1968, it was a Udorn-based C-47 to do the job. When this aircraft was transferred to Bangkok in 1969, the task was again taken over by Caribou B-851 and also by C-123Ks.⁴⁹⁵ The normal procedure would be that the road watcher teams sent up relayed messages from some type of hand held device that sent a radio signal to an orbiting Air America Volpar, which would send these messages to the CIA people at Udorn, who, in turn, would alert Colonel Aderholt's 56th Air Commando Wing at Nakhon Phanom for night interdiction missions. But sometimes, Aderholt's men flying reconnaissance missions over the Trail were the first to discover enemy trucks, as it happened during the night of 21 October 67, when the pilot of one of Aderholt's T-28s spotted the season's first large-scale truck movement.⁴⁹⁶ Other reconnaissance missions over the Trail were flown by Air America crews: It was Air America pilot Jim Rhyne who, "flying a dangerous treetop level flight south from Route 12, had, in October [1965], provided the first photographs of motorable roads and the foliage-covered trellises used to conceal them. And it was clear that traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail had metastasized since mid-1964. Motor traffic could now reach the South Vietnamese border southwest of Da Nang, 100 miles farther south than before the latest surge of construction. Previously used to infiltrate specialists, advisers, and modest amounts of equipment, the Trail network had by this time transported three regiments of Hanoi's 325th Division, the 250th Independent Regiment, and possibly a fifth regiment as well."⁴⁹⁷

More intelligence work: The Aerial photography project of USAID contract 439-713⁴⁹⁸

Air America's Aerial photography project of USAID contract 439-713 started in late 1966 under the direction of James H. Rhyne, Air America's Chief Pilot Fixed Wing Special Projects department, from its base at Udorn (T-08) and lasted to the spring of 1974. Previously, some photo work had been done by Continental Air Services⁴⁹⁹ who, still in June 1968, had some Beech Barons based at Udorn.⁵⁰⁰ The customer of the Aerial photography project was the CIA, which had the intelligence gathering responsibility covering Laos and its borders during the war in Vietnam. Air America's Aerial photography project was to provide the most time critical photography for the CIA's Imagery Analysis interpreters or Photo interpreters (P.I.s) who worked with the "Barrel Roll" area of Northern Laos and the "Steel Tiger" area of Central and Southern Laos. These P.I.s were responsible for two daily US

⁴⁹³ Larry s. Taylor, Interview, conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at Atlanta, GA on 28 November 84, in: UTD/Leary/B49F2.

⁴⁹⁴ Gearke, "A-26 On Mark operational note", in: *Air America Log*, October 98 (internet version).

⁴⁹⁵ E-mail dated 16 July 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga; according to the Status of aircraft report of 1 May 68 (in: UTD/Herd/B2), C-47 B-879 was based at Udorn at that time and assigned to contract AID-439-713; in June 69, this aircraft was already based at Bangkok (Flight Operations Circular of 15 June 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B). The C-123K based at Udorn in May 68 was "576", and in June 69, it was "293", but in July 71, no C-123Ks or Caribous were based at Udorn. See: Status of aircraft report of 1 May 68 (in: UTD/Herd/B2), and Flight Operations Circulars of 15 June 69 and 1 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B).

⁴⁹⁶ Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.208.

⁴⁹⁷ Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p. 222.

⁴⁹⁸ This chapter is mainly based on Frank Bonansinga's personal memoir of the Aerial photography project, in: UTD/Bonansinga/Sm.Coll.1.

⁴⁹⁹ E-mail dated 20 July 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁵⁰⁰ Continental Air Services' Beech 95-A55 Barons N4681 (msn TC-309), N522C (msn TC-415), and N1313Z (msn TC-125) were all based at Udorn in June 68 (Memorandum "Competitive aircraft" dated 18 June 68 in: UTD/Herd/B2). Frank Bonansinga presumes that CASI's photo Baron always came in from Vientiane, parked at AB-1, where the pilot got a briefing and where he returned for a debriefing; then the plane returned to Vientiane (E-mail dated 11 November 2001, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga).

Military strike mission briefings given to the 602nd Special Operations Squadron Forward Air Controllers (FACs); the 602nd SOS used A-1 aircraft from their bases at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom. The daily photography gathered by the Air America photo aircraft in the “Steel Tiger” area was utilized by the FACs sending in strikes of Royal Lao Air Force T-28s based at Savannakhet (L-39)⁵⁰¹ and Pakse (L-11); these missions supported the Royal Lao army and special operations of the “Steel Tiger” area. Forward Air Controllers in the “Barrel Roll” area of northern Laos controlled about 40 to 60 jet aircraft per day on targets developed from the photos obtained by Air America’s Volpar N9542Z. These targets were selected in support of Vang Pao’s combat operations to capture and restore the historical “homeland” back to the Hmong people, which included the Plain of Jars, Xieng Khouang Ville, Ban Ban, Sam Neua and other areas in northern Laos.

These enemy-held areas and many other areas throughout Laos were defended by numerous anti-aircraft artillery batteries using 37, 57, and 100-millimeter guns, which often changed location daily. In order to increase the chances of all air crews operating in these areas to avoid ground fire, the photos made by Volpar N9542Z on a daily basis provided the up to the minute intelligence information that was needed for survival and very much relied upon by crews operating in Laos. Apart from this military situation, the maps available in South East Asia were often 10 to 15 years old. Bans or villages and roads were not accurately indicated or were missing entirely. Topographical features such as mountains, their elevations, streams and boundaries could not be relied on, but the Air America crews who lived in the country for several years knew it by their own experience and could be expected to bring back the most useful photos. Air America’s first Udorn-based Volpar, N9542Z, arrived at Udorn on 15 August 66.⁵⁰² After the camera installation and some modifications of the aircraft, Captains Jim Rhyne and Berl King flew the first photo mission. But the majority of the photo missions during Air America’s photography program were flown by Captains Frank Bonansinga and Berl King. Apart from making photographs, during its 6 or 7-hour missions going up to Sam Neua or down to Attopeu in high altitude, Air America’s photo bird N9542Z also relayed the “operation’s normal” report every Air America plane had to make every half hour. And then, sometimes, N9542Z also flew medevac, passenger, cargo or VIP flights. But normally, the Udorn daily flight schedule would indicate “T-08/AS DIRECTED/T-08” for Volpar N9542Z with normal departure at “0830L” hours. The P.I.s of the CIA prepared the flight charts showing roads, rivers, caves, pipelines and whatever target areas prior to the day’s mission. Normally, the targets were located in enemy territory, so sometimes a fighter cover was set up flying high over the scene to protect the photo bird, whereas the photo Volpar normally flew at 10,000 or 11,000 feet. Targets in northwestern Laos could be Nam Tha, Muong Sing or along Route 19 by Phong Saly to the border of North Vietnam; targets in the “Barrel Roll” area of northeastern Laos frequently were caves in the Sam Neua area and then down Route 6 to Ban Ban to targets on the Plain of Jars. Other targets were in the Mu Gia pass and Tchepone area, where pipelines and caves were photographed, as in these caves enemy supplies and prisoners were kept. Other targets were in the south, like roads into Saravane or the road from Attopeu over to South Vietnam. Sometimes, enemy truck convoys driving down an open road in the day were spotted from the photo bird. Orientation in the aircraft was done via charts and via the TACANs. On the floors in the cabin, the cameras were mounted replacing several of the passenger seats. The mainstay camera was the old WW II type K-38 Fairchild; usually two of them were loaded, one with a

⁵⁰¹ Sometimes, at Savannakhet (L-39) as at some airports in South Vietnam, the fact that military and non-military aircraft worked out of the same airport could mean some danger. Former Air America pilot Frank Bonansinga remembers: “I once had a Lao T-28 almost hit me on a takeoff in the daylight on a Thanksgiving Day some years later. I will never forget that! Our wing tips missed by a foot as he was taking off without clearance opposite to me” (E-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga).

⁵⁰² See the list “Status of aircraft” dated 1 May 1968, in: UTD/Herd/B2.

6 inch focal point and the other perhaps 18 inch. Later, a newer Zeiss RC-8 camera was installed supplementing the K-38s: All photos were in black and white and were 9x9 or 9x18 inch format.

“McNamara Fence” and HARP

It has been maintained that Air America also serviced what was to become known as the “McNamara Fence”.⁵⁰³ This was an air-supported barrier south of the Demilitarized Zone in South Vietnam and extending into Laos, which was to use minefields and electronic sensors. On 15 November 67, the US Navy deployed 12 OP-2E Neptunes to Nakhon Phanom in Thailand, to take part in *Mud River*, a program to seed the Ho Chi Minh Trail with sensors capable of detecting enemy vehicles. But the signals of these sensors were relayed to helicopters and strike aircraft by a squadron of USAF EC-121R Constellations based at Korat.⁵⁰⁴ The Neptunes, belonging to the VO-67 Squadron of the US Navy assigned to Nakhon Phanom, had to fly over the Trail at 500 feet in daylight; VO-67 was rapidly withdrawn in June 68, after losing 25 percent of its aircraft over the Trail.⁵⁰⁵ On 11 January 68, one month after VO-67 began dropping sensors, one of the squadron’s Neptunes (“131436”) went down; all nine aboard were killed; on 17 February 68, it happened again (involving “131486”), and nine more airmen perished, and another ten days later, a third Neptune (“131484”) was shot down.⁵⁰⁶ On 31 May 68, project *Igloo White* was born, an ambitious effort to plant mines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail – mines equipped with sensors which could detect the presence of men and machines moving south. These sensors were dropped by F-4s, F-105s and A-1Es. US Navy Neptunes also dropped Air Delivered Seismic Intruder Devices, which transmitted signals from traffic vibrations, and these signals were again relayed by the EC-121Rs, now operating from Nakhon Phanom, and the EC-121R served in this role until the end of the war.⁵⁰⁷ For three reasons, however, the project proved to be a failure: Most supplies came down the Trail not on trucks but by foot – so the sensors destined to count trucks could not work; those sensors that were destined to count troops could not distinguish a cow from a human being – so there were many false alarms, and after a certain number of false alarms, the attention paid to the signals slackened. Finally, part of the electronic equipment was even stolen by the enemy.⁵⁰⁸ Ambassador Sullivan is reported to have complained that the system had poor results, “except to create a lot of three-legged monkeys in Southern Laos.”⁵⁰⁹ And it is now known that, in spite of all these electronic measures, the North Vietnamese military succeeded in restoring the bases at Sam Neua (L-04), Chanh Dong Chum and Tchepone (L-38) to full operational status between April and October 1968.⁵¹⁰

This purely military high-tech program had nothing to do with Air America, however.⁵¹¹ The Air America Volpars operating out of Savannakhet at night quoted by Robbins as part of

⁵⁰³ Robbins, *Air America*, p.134.

⁵⁰⁴ Dorr/Bishop, *Vietnam air war debrief*, p.106. These EC-121Rs belonging to the 553rd RW were later replaced by QU-22s (Hobson, *Vietnam air losses*, pp.132/33).

⁵⁰⁵ Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.209. A photo of “131423”, one of these modified OP-2E Neptunes can be seen in Hobson, *Vietnam air losses*, p.132.

⁵⁰⁶ Sauer, *Ghost squadron no longer*, in: SignOnSanDiego.com, dated 9 November 2001 (http://www.uniontrib.com/news/military/20011109-9999_1n9ghost.hrml); Hobson, *Vietnam air losses*, pp.132-38.

⁵⁰⁷ Dorr/Bishop, *Vietnam air war debrief*, p.131.

⁵⁰⁸ Robbins, *Air America*, p.134.

⁵⁰⁹ Ambassador Sullivan, quoted by Trest, *Air Commando One*, p.189.

⁵¹⁰ Toperczer, *Air war over North Vietnam*, p.26.

⁵¹¹ As Frank Bonansinga points out: “We (AA’s HARP Volpar project) had nothing to do with that. We, the HARP AA Volpars, were relaying radio messages along the Ho Chi Minh Trail” (E-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga).

the “McNamara Fence”⁵¹² worked for the HARP or *High Altitude Relay Project*, also called *Aerial Survey Project* in Air America papers.⁵¹³ And, as former Air America pilot Frank Bonansinga states, “no other aircraft but the Volpars were relay aircraft for HARP”.⁵¹⁴ In March 1967, four Beech Volpars were assigned to Udorn, to operate under the provisions of contract USAID-439-713, with a fifth following on 1 June 67; the sixth Volpar was Air America’s photo bird N9542Z, which had already been assigned to Udorn on 15 August 66.⁵¹⁵ On 15 December 67, the Volpars were assigned from Udorn to Air America’s Vientiane base,⁵¹⁶ still under the provisions of contract USAID-439-713. Actually, however, these aircraft – with the exception of the photo bird – were operated out of Savannakhet (L-39) and Pakse (L-11)⁵¹⁷ and were used at night to circle border areas in high altitude and relay the signals received from the road watcher teams to the main computer. The pilots and planes were at Savannakhet on a temporary basis rotating every week or so, but except for minor maintenance, which was done by Stan Wilson and his small crew at Savannakhet, all maintenance was performed at Udorn, which remained their actual home base.⁵¹⁸ During these missions, the teams stayed between the Mu Gia pass coming out of North Vietnam and to the South towards Tchepone.⁵¹⁹ But Air America also flew the HARP project at two locations in the northern orbit and for a while in the southern orbit south of Tchepone (LS-38) by Saravane (L-44).⁵²⁰ As these missions started in the darkness of the early night and were ended in the very early morning, the Volpars sometimes hit people during landing or take-off: Such an accident is known to have occurred at Savannakhet on 24 December 67 (involving Volpar N9577Z). The long duration of those flights meant that the aircraft often came back with only little fuel left in their tanks, and in the morning, when the right engine quitted due to fuel starvation, as the right main tank was dry, although the quantity indicator had given that there was some fuel left.⁵²¹ But there were also other problems. Former Air America pilot Frank Bonansinga, who flew in the HARP program, recalls: “Once I was asked to fly a HARP Volpar Turbo Beech 18 from Udorn to Savannakhet, as there was no replacement aircraft or fuel available that night. It was to be fully loaded with JP fuel, including the extra large cabin fuel tanks. The landing was going to be a tricky one. It wasn’t the length of the runway or coming in at night that was to be the problem. It was the over gross with the weight and balance problem we would experience, that made this one flight, you don’t forget. A former Marine chopper aviator and excellent AA chopper and VTB pilot, Bobby Nunez, needed a ride to Savannakhet to fly on the HARP 22 March 67, Volpar N9671C even had a landing accident at Savannakhet in the early project. So, Bobby and I departed Udorn that evening, the 11th of May 1967 in Volpar N9671C headed to Savannakhet, the Laotian border town on the Mekong about 130 miles east of Udorn, Thailand. We took off on Udorn’s 10,000-foot strip where the US Air Force C-5s take off, so taking off, even over gross wasn’t a problem.

Though it was a certainty, if an engine failed right after lift off at L-39, we were in deep trouble. So the trip over to L-39 was routine, but I was anxious. When we arrived at Savanna-

⁵¹² Robbins, *Air America*, p.134.

⁵¹³ Status of aircraft as of 1 May 68, in: UTD/Herd/B2.

⁵¹⁴ E-mail dated 20 July 2001 sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁵¹⁵ Volpar N9577Z had arrived at Udorn on 13 March 67, followed by N9671C on 14 March, N7770B on 15 March, N9664C on 27 March, and N3728G on 1 June. N9542Z had been assigned to Udorn on 15 August 66. There was also a seventh Volpar at Vientiane, i.e. N9157Z, but this was assigned to contract USAID 439-342 on 10 November 67 (Roster “Status of aircraft” dated 1 May 68, in: UTD/Herd/B2).

⁵¹⁶ *Air America Log*, vol. II, no.1, January 1968, p.2.

⁵¹⁷ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.146/7; operations out of Pakse began on 30 April 67 (Leary, Manuscript, ch. VI, p. 561, in: UTD/Leary/B19F5).

⁵¹⁸ E-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁵¹⁹ E-mail dated 16 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁵²⁰ E-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁵²¹ See the XOXOs of these accidents: N9577Z in: UTD/Hickler/B25F8; N9671C in: UTD/Hickler/B26F16.



Air America's Project Volpar N9671C over Laos
(with kind permission from Frank Bonansinga)

khet, we slowed down, got the gear and flaps down, as I added 20 knots or more, to the normal approach and landing speed. I lined up, using the runway lights, but was unable to make, what I considered a safe landing. It just didn't 'feel right', so we went around. Flying the VTB with so much extra fuel, being greatly over gross (well over a ton), made driving the plane like trying to balance a pencil on your nose! Well, I exaggerate, just a little. Perhaps it's more like on your finger tip! Whatever, it was very, very sensitive, most touchy, with the center of gravity spread about an inch or two at most. This technically relates to, between a safe and unsafe factor, of control. So, I took my own 'wave off' and we went around, to try it again. The next approach or pass was similar to the first one, but I made a much wider pattern with a longer final. We somehow stuck it on the runway, not far down from the end and ended up in one piece. I believe we touched down at 125 to 135 knots, that night. I must have silently thanked Garrett (Engines), for the reversible props. And whoever made the brakes and the tires, for not blowing. Bobby and I were very tired when we taxied in. It seemed like we had been on one of our 14 hour, 'all night butt buster', HARP flights! Yet this last minute hurry up ferry flight, was a mere 45 minutes! The flight ended well and they had a back up plane at Savannakhet. But it was one flight, very easy to remember."⁵²² – In March 67, the project of relaying signals from the road watcher teams had been inherited from Continental Air Services who had to use two Dornier Do-28s based at Savannakhet (L-39), if continuous relay coverage was required. But then, on 12 March 67, one of CASI's Dorniers crashed into the hangar at Savannakhet (L-39), killing the pilot, Carl Stone. Immediately, i.e. on 15 March 67, the project was transferred to Air America, especially as a Volpar could and did stay up 14 hours, if it was necessary.⁵²³ The project ended on 31 December 68.⁵²⁴ By that time, it had

⁵²² E-mail dated 24 September 01 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

⁵²³ E-mail dated 20 July 2001 kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga; Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p.146. According to Jim Rhyne, "the missions were 13 hours long. The planes carried 14 hours of fuel and 16 hours of oxygen. An airplane was on station all night at an altitude of 20,000+ feet" (Jim Rhyne, Interview conducted at Clayton, NC on 13 October 90 by Prof. Bill Leary, p. 6, in: UTD/Leary/B47F9).

⁵²⁴ Minutes of Meetings of the Executive Committees of Air America Inc and Air Asia Co Ltd of 7 January 69, in: UTD/CIA/B8F3; Leary, Manuscript, ch. VI, p. 562, in: UTD/Leary/B19F5.

become clear that there were far more trucks on the Trail than US airpower could destroy, and then, the AC-130 introduced on the Trail in February 1968 had night-vision devices that enabled them to identify their own targets – *Hark*-equipped road watchers were no longer needed.⁵²⁵

Techniques of hiding an aircraft's identity when used on covert missions:

Most techniques of hiding the identity of an aircraft that was involved in covert operations were related to fake tail numbers. The easiest method just used paint. This was widely used on regular Air America aircraft when they flew covert missions. Ward S. Reimer recalls: “We never paid any attention to numbers while employed very much. Because the Company was always switching numbers on the aircraft. It just took paint and a painter. Sterilizing the aircraft for covert flights took about three hours.”⁵²⁶ A more sophisticated system was used on the USAF C-130As that since the mid-sixties carried weapons into Laos out of Takhli, flown by Air America crews. Those C-130As could be converted into non-attributable aircraft within about two hours: C-130As destined for these special missions were not camouflaged and had screw-on Air Force insignia and Scotch tape markings when they arrived, so that their exterior could be changed quickly.⁵²⁷ Former C-130A co-pilot Paul Taylor recalls: “The aircraft arrived with the full number and big US Air Force painted on the side. Next morning, [...] three numbers were the only markings. When we finished, next morning, the aircraft had all the numbers on the tail and US Air Force in big letters on the side.”⁵²⁸ “The E-Flight personnel came with the aircraft to Takhli. They set up the 130, cleaned off, that is Air Force and the full serial number.”⁵²⁹

As to the serial numbers used on the aircraft, there were several methods to avoid an identification of the aircraft by its tail number. Some aircraft did not bear any tail numbers at all – as was the case for the CIA-owned B-26s destined for the abortive Project *Mill Pond*,⁵³⁰ some aircraft bore fictitious serials that had no relation to their origin – as was the case for the two RB-26Cs used in Project *Black Watch* (“236” and “745”, believed to be msns 28864 ex 44-35585, and 29092 ex 44-35813, but not necessarily in this order). Sometimes, Air America aircraft used on secret missions also doubled the tail numbers of other existing aircraft as cover to make it impossible to follow the one aircraft that was on mission: Robert M. Hifler tells the story of three different Helio Couriers all serialled XW-PEA that were present at Wattay airport, Vientiane, at the very same time⁵³¹ – it can only be presumed that the two spurious XW-PEAs were U-10s bailed from the military for a special mission.

A similar technique had already been used on Air America C-123s that were to deliver weapons and ammunition to the Hmong in 1963: A Vientiane-based C-123 contracted to USAID would depart Vientiane on a rice-drop mission, make a normal flight watch report and then leave Laos without reporting. Upon entering Thai air space, it would send a prearranged code to Udon Air Traffic Control on a special frequency in order to avoid Royal Thai Air Force intercept. In the meantime, another C-123, loaded with military supplies and bearing the same tail number as the first one, would have departed Takhli and crossed into Laos upon hearing the code sent by the first C-123. After dropping the military supplies, the second C-123 would return to Takhli and the first C-123 would reenter Laos, accomplish its rice drop and return to Vientiane.⁵³²

⁵²⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp.148 and 377.

⁵²⁶ E-mail dated 20 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Ward S. Reimer.

⁵²⁷ Robbins, *Air America*, p.126.

⁵²⁸ E-mail dated 9 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Paul Taylor.

⁵²⁹ E-mail dated 14 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Paul Taylor.

⁵³⁰ Hagedorn/Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, pp.132-36.

⁵³¹ Leary, *The aircraft of Air America*, p.17.

⁵³² Leary, Manuscript, ch. V, p. 413, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.

A different method of disguise was used on the C-130s bailed on a long-term basis: While ordinary aircraft bailed from the USAF, like the C-123s used by Air America, just preserved the last three digits of their former USAF serial – e.g. USAF C-123 “57-6293” became “293” with Air America –, the tail numbers used on the C-130s started at the beginning or in the middle of their USAF serial. For example, USAF C-130A “(5)6-0510” became “605” with Air America, and USAF C-130E “63007868” or “37868” became “786” with Air America, making it impossible to identify an individual aircraft from the tail number, although it was not too difficult for USAF and Company personnel to keep track of the aircraft. This was the task of Fletcher Prouty, who as USAF liaison officer with the CIA, had the unenviable job of keeping track of what the Agency was doing with Air Force planes, in order to make it possible for the USAF to prove that they were not involved.⁵³³

The most complicated technique of hiding the identity of an aircraft was based on a mixture of part numbers. It has already been pointed out that the initial C-118A used on the covert flights into Tibet “had many of the part numbers removed or modified so that it might not be traced if captured. There was a small metal frame (about 12 inches square) on the side of the body, near the rear door. We used to put different country’s flags into this frame as needed.”⁵³⁴ But sometimes, even regular Air America aircraft that had been badly damaged in an accident were fixed with parts taken from various military aircraft. Ward S. Reimer recalls: “When we lost a helicopter we had the data plate and I would pull a fuselage from the junk piles in Vung Tau and send it to Tainan. And lo and behold it would come back just like new.”⁵³⁵ “When the need arose numbers were switched. This was done in Tainan. For example Bob Hitchman sling loaded out a military Bell fuselage back to Saigon from Vung Tau for shipment back to Tainan. We had the Bell jigs and fixtures and as the saying went: ‘all we need is the data plate’. True it was. Pilatus from Stans, Switzerland showed up in Tainan and inspected the Porters in work. They found out we were manufacturing pure aluminum control surfaces and they cut us off from any further parts sales. [...] The thing that I remember best about hauling out that Bell from Vung Tau: Some full Colonel (the Commander of the junk pile) come racing down to where we were standing, screaming that we could not be taking anything without orders. He had his arm raised and looked up in the sky and there goes his Bell carcass being sling loaded over his head. It looked like he was going to cry. We left him in the road.”⁵³⁶

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⁵³³ Robbins, *Air America*, pp.126-30.

⁵³⁴ Letter dated 10 July 2001, kindly sent to the author by Jim Keck.

⁵³⁵ E-mail dated 20 January 2006, kindly sent to the author by Ward S. Reimer.

⁵³⁶ E-mail dated 21 January 2006 kindly sent to the author by Ward S. Reimer.