

# Air America in Laos I – humanitarian work

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## Part II

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### A) Humanitarian work in Laos from the Tet Offensive to the Cease-fire Agreements: Air America 1968-1973

#### Air America's operations for USAID/Laos

While in South Vietnam, the Tet Offensive of late January 1968 meant a complete change in the war, it did not affect Laos very much.<sup>1</sup> But if we understand the Tet Offensive as a prelude to an overall more aggressive strategy of North Vietnam, there were indeed some very important changes that affected Laos. First, the war became more conventional, when North Vietnam brought big guns and entire battalions into Laos, resulting in a similar strategy on the pro-western side that, to a certain extent, replaced the old guerrilla strategy. Then, beginning in 1969, the traditional pattern of the war in Laos – during the dry season Communist troops would advance to the west, but during the rainy season they would be pushed back to the east by pro-western troops supported by Air America aircraft – no longer worked, as then, the Communist troops continued their attacks during the rainy season.<sup>2</sup> On the humanitarian side, all this meant an enormous increase in the number of refugees to be fed and also an increased number of refugee resettlements and of downed aircraft whose crews had to be rescued.



Wattay Airport Vientiane 1969



Wattay airport 1969

Vientiane's Wattay Airport, the starting point of Air America's food-drops  
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

#### Flights for USAID's Refugee Relief program: food-drops

As to the rice drops, an article published in a 1969 issue of *Air America Log* describes the situation as follows: "Air-delivering 10-million pounds of rice and related commodities a month – mostly by free-fall airdrop, but some by landed delivery – is no mean accomplishment. Aerial rice deliveries are made seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, weather permitting. Air America does it – and does it consistently – month in, month out; year in, year out." Then the text continues illustrating a photo: "Above, you can see the beginning of the action (except for actually filling the bags with rice). Customer rice has just been trucked into the Air Transport Operations Group (ATOG) warehouse at Air America's Base, Wattay

<sup>1</sup> Bill Lair, interview with Steve Maxner, December 2001, written version, p. 157, at: <http://star.vietnam.ttu.edu/>

<sup>2</sup> Kirk, *Wider war*, p.228.

Airport, Vientiane, Laos. Customer's laborers are hefting the 40 kilo (88 lb.) burlap bags from the truck and are stacking them in neat piles awaiting aerial delivery somewhere in Laos. The rice is triple-bagged to resist the impact of a free fall from a dropping altitude of approximately 800 to 900 feet above terrain. This altitude range was selected because it is high enough to allow the rice bags to lose almost all forward motion (and thus avoid rolling and breaking open upon impact with the ground) and it is also low enough to allow the plane's pilot to make his drops with reasonable accuracy. Although rice represents by far the greatest proportion of the 10-million pounds of commodities that Air America delivers monthly in Laos, other items also delivered include cornmeal and salt."<sup>3</sup> As an example, former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls Houei Thong Kho (LS-184): "at least in 1969, perhaps 20 C-46 drops a month to feed the 12,000 people there, largely refugees, but also some SGU and dependents."<sup>4</sup>



Drops for a small Laotian village, taken by Dan Gamelin  
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

For each month, the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation program of USAID's Rural Development Division made up a schedule of supplies to be delivered to each location. At Sam Thong (LS-20), Long Tieng (LS-20A), and Muong Cha (LS-113), rice, cornmeal, and salt was landed. The list for May 1969, published on 2 May 69 by USAID's J. L. Williamson and kindly sent to the author by former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson, distinguished between food that was landed and food that was dropped. For the food that was landed, it gives the following numbers:

a) 100 kilo bags of rice: 100 bags were landed at Long Tieng every day, making a total of 3,000 bags per month; 100 bags were landed each time at Sam Thong on 2, 10, 15, 20, and 15

<sup>3</sup> (anonymous), "Rice for the mouths of Laos", in: *Air America Log*, vol. III, no.5, 1969, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> E-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.



May 69; 25 bags were landed each time at Muong Cha on 6, 16, and 26 May 69.

b) 40 kilo bags landed: 120 bags of rice were landed each time at Long Tieng on 5, 10, and 15 May 69, together with a total of 250 bags of corn – all that destined for customer “Mr. Bo”; 80 bags of rice were landed each time at Sam Thong on 10 and 25 May 69, together with 250 bags of corn meal each time; in addition to that, 1,200 bags of rice were delivered to Sam Thong in May 69 for air drops made out of Sam Thong.

c) 44 kilo sacks of salt: 500 sacks were landed at Sam Thong on 11 May, and another 500 sacks on 22 May 69.

d) 80 kilo sacks of salt: 100 sacks were landed at Long Tieng on 11 May, and another 100 sacks on 22 May 69.

The drop schedule for May 1969 contained in the list published on 2 May 69 by USAID’s J. L. Williamson, gives no less than 57 Limes Sites and 30 additional drop zones that were regularly supplied that year by dropping 40 kilo bags of rice. The smallest villages – Pha Phai (LS-65), Phu Houei Mouei (LS-67), Tin Bong (LS-90), Muong Aow Neua (LS-227), Phong Tha (LS-229), and Pha Kat (LS-245) – received 60 bags once a month at a date still to be determined. Many villages were supplied only once a month, but received 120 bags of rice, like San Chaw (LS-2), Phu Chia (LS-25), Houei Ki Nin (LS-38), Ban Pak Ha (LS-40), San Louang (LS-41), or Phou Meng Mane (LS-96). The big “customers” were supplied 4 times a month, that is Phu Cum (LS-50) received a total of 480 bags of rice, Pa Doung (LS-5) a total of 1,200 bags of rice, Houei Tong (LS-196) and Thong Miang (LS-266) each a total of 360 bags of rice and 240 bags of corn, Phou Saly (LS-178) and Sam Song Hong (LS-201) each received a total of 480 bags of rice and 240 bags of corn, Bouam Long (LS-32) a total of



2 pallets on the way down at Site 32

(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

1,800 bags of rice and 360 bags of corn, Xieng Dat (LS-26) a total of 2,860 bags of rice. A few locations received drops even 5 times a month, that is Na Luang (LS-66) a total of 600 bags, Phu Dam (LS-256) a total of 960 bags, and Hat Khon (LS-271) even a total of 2,400

bags. And Phou He (L-255) was supplied on 1, 4, 9, 12, 17, 21, and 24 May, that is even 6 times in May 69 with a total 840 bags of rice and 360 bags of corn. As to the drops made to villages, some of them showed some particularities in the drop list for May 69: Most drops were to be made onto the airstrip, but the drops at Muong Om (LS-22) were to be made in part onto the airstrip and in part into the village on 9 and 18 May, the drop for Pou Khong

<u>DROP SCHEDULE</u>						
<u>40 KILO BAGS</u>			<u>DATE</u>	<u>NO. OF BAGS</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	
<u>IS 255</u> Phou He ຜູ້ ສີ	TF9377	T	1 4 9 12 17 21 24	120 120/120 120 120/120 120 120/120 120		840/360*
<u>IS 256 (L.P.)</u> Phu Dam ຜູ້ ດຳ	SH9920	T	3 13 17 23 30	240 120 240 120 240		960
<u>IS 261**</u> Muong You ເມັງ ຍູ	TG7394	H	7	120		
<u>IS 266</u> Thong Miang ທອງ ມິງ	TF8986	P	1 6 20 25	120 120 CM 120/120 120		360/240*
<u>IS 270</u> Phu San Gop ຜູ້ ສານ ກອບ	UFO990	O	1 5 15	120 120 CM 120		240/120*
<u>IS 271</u>	TG8693	L	2 8 14 20 26	480 480 480 480 480		2400
<u>DZ 002</u> Nam Deng ນາມ ດອງ	BG5605	T/Y			RICE HARVEST	
<u>DZ 003</u> Muong Aow Tay ເມັງ ອົງ ທິ	UFO279	V			DBOP FROM SAMTHONG	
<u>DZ 005</u> Pha Kyt ຜາ ກຸດ	TG8674	K		60		60

USAID drop schedule for May 1969 (p.7), kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson

(LS-42) was to be made locally upon call on 12 May, the dates for the 60 bags of rice and the 60 bags of cornmeal to be dropped at Than Sorn Yai (LS-74) were still to be determined; there were 2 drop locations at Muong Moc (LS-46): On 3 and 21 May 69, a total of 240 bags of rice and 120 bags of corn was to be dropped onto the airstrip, and on 6, 16, and 26 May, a total of 360 bags of rice was to be dropped into the school yard; and Chieng Sa Ni (LS-45),

Pha Lang Mou (LS 170), Thong Keum (LS-191), Nan Mo (LS-207), Phon Sai (LS-211), Ban Son (LS-246), and Neo San Luang (LS-252) did not receive any rice drops that month – either because they were “buying rice” or because they had “rice harvest”. As to the drop zones, some of them probably were refugee camps, and many of them probably were military or SGU positions. The number of bags dropped to those drop zones was similar to that dropped to the villages, starting with DZ-005 at coordinates TG8674 and DZ-030 at coordinates UG1300, which were to receive 60 bags each at a date to be determined, and going up to the big “customers”, that is DZ-056 (“Alpha Pad”) at coordinates UH1346, which was supplied 6 times in May 69 with a total of 1,440 bags of rice, and DZ-057 (“Lima Pad”) at coordinates UH1543 and DZ-070 at coordinates TG8587, which each received a total of 2,400 bags of rice that month. Here, too, there were some particularities, as DZ-003 at coordinates UF0279 was supplied from Sam Thong, while DZ-002 and DZ-012 did not receive anything that month because of “rice harvest”. But of course, all of these numbers refer to both Air America and Continental Air Services, as both companies had similar contracts, and the USAID paper quoted here does not indicate what was transported by Air America and what by CASI.<sup>5</sup>

But C-46s were not the only Air America aircraft that were used on rice drop missions. MacAlan Thompson recalls: “We bought and delivered the food stuffs upcountry, to the main bases of L-25, 54, 20, and 20A., via boat, truck, and plane, for redistribution. USAID did the direct deliveries via CASI and AirAm smaller planes, except for 20A, where SKY made the deliveries (not for pots, pans, and blankets, though.”<sup>6</sup> Many Air America Porters had fold-up seats and a door in the floor, which could be opened by the pilot by a handle and thru which the cargo could be dropped.<sup>7</sup> In 1972, this handle was relocated from its former location, between the pilot’s seat and the fuselage, where the pilot had to operate it with his left hand,



Porter drop door handle at its new position

Porter N366F with its drop door open

(both photos in: *Air America Log*, vol. VI, no. 4, 1972, p.3)

to the center of the aircraft below the sandwich tray, where the pilot could grip it with his right hand.<sup>8</sup> These Porters were used out of regional USAID centers like Ban Houei Sai (L-25), Luang Prabang (L-54), or Sam Thong (LS-20) to drop rice and other commodities to

<sup>5</sup> All details taken from the list of food to be landed and dropped in May 1969, published on 2 May 69 by USAID’s J. L. Williamson and kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson on 7 January 2006.

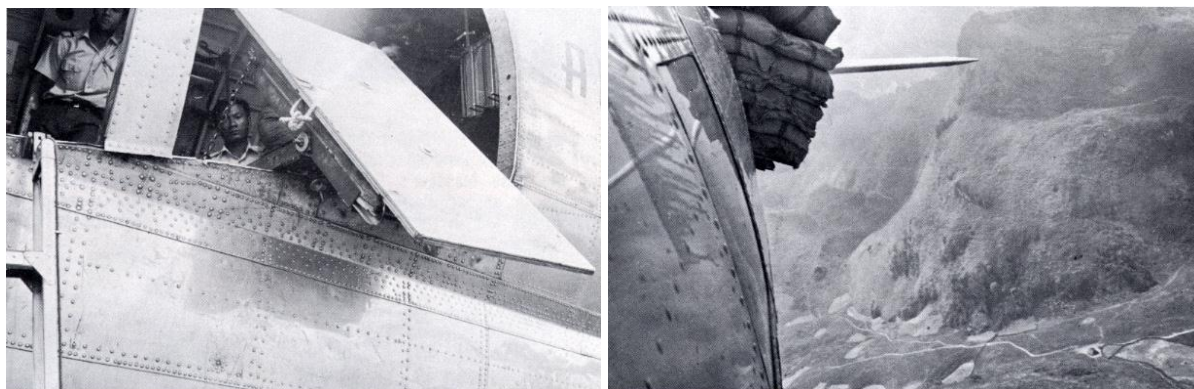
<sup>6</sup> E-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

<sup>7</sup> Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14.

<sup>8</sup> (anonymous), “Porter drop door handle relocated”, in: *Air America Log*, vol. VI, no. 4, 1972, p. 3.



Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs), their dependents, and refugees. MacAlan Thompson recalls: “L-25, Ban Houei Sai, was the main ‘refugee’ site for NW Laos, we did most of the rice drops out of here to the SGU, their dependents, and to refugees, with CASI or Air America Porters, depending just who had the contract at that time. I worked there Sept. ’69-June ’70. L-54, Luang Prabang, same, USAID did the Porter drops of rice and canned meat to the SGU, dependents, and refugees. [...] LS-20, Sam Thong, landed Caribous loads of rice and other goods, food and pots and pans and blankets, etc. for the refugees and dependents. These were redistributed out of 20 by AirAm H-34 and CASI Porters, and occasionally AirAm Helios. Fuel, too.”<sup>9</sup> “As to animal protein for the refugees, SGU dependents, and SGU, we, USAID/PHD, came up with a canned meat supplement. [...] This started along towards late 1968, I think it was, small quantities. Contracted from Singapore but was really Australian mutton. Later the contracts were shifted to Bangkok and ended up being Thai water buffalo, five contracts at the high point, 25,000 cases per month. Delivery of the canned meat was a real problem as USAID didn’t have the budget for lots of H-34 time. In LP, January 1969, Joe Flipse and I came up with some sort of home made parachute of USAID funded PL-480 cloth sheets, local plastic rope, and a few round rocks. With this we could air drop five cases of meat from a Porter with a pretty good ’chute opening rate. Those cans of meat that were broken could be eaten right away, the good cans put on the shelf.”<sup>10</sup>



Air America’s new rice drop technique introduced in 1970  
(*Air America Log*, vol. V, no. 5, p.4)

In 1970, a new rice drop technique was introduced in Laos, used on Air America’s C-46s. “First conceived in 1970 by Jerry Ryder, TM(T) VTE, the new concept was developed into a practical technique by First Officer G. D. (Jerry) MacPherson<sup>11</sup> and has become the standard method of air-dropping rice and other commodities furnished by USAID/L (United States Agency for International Development/Laos). Primary advantages of the new system of rice dropping are:

- Greater safety for the “kickers”,
- Considerable potential monetary saving for the customer;<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> E-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

<sup>10</sup> E-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

<sup>11</sup> MacAlan Thompson adds that “one of the head Filipino guys, Ramon DeMesa, was also involved with Jerry on this project” (e-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).

<sup>12</sup> “More ‘logistics’ saving than \$\$\$\$ , in that I didn’t have to worry about the small pallet contract of local masonite board and having them delivered daily to ATOG. That was sometimes a real hassle, supply of steel bolts, rollers, etc. The tilt track pallet was VERY NICE, only had to provide perhaps one or two hundred a year. A negative of the tilt track system to the people upcountry on the DZ was that they no longer had good hard masonite pallets for local construction use, houses, schools, bunkers, etc. Pop Buell chastised me several times

- Reduces possible damage to aircraft's left stabilizer
- Weight saving;
- Speedier ground loading.

The manner in which these manifold advantages were achieved was to develop a three-foot, tiltable, hinged track system at the drop door of the C-46. The hinged track extends 15 inches out of the aircraft's door and incorporates a pallet stop built into the guide roller channel to retain the pallet in the aircraft instead of dropping it with its rice load, as was done previously. The pallet stop is easily removable should the rice have to be jettisoned any time during the flight. The old track system consisted of four ten-foot sections, one "Y" section, and one curved section, for a total weight of 770 pounds. The new track system is made up of two ten-foot sections, one eight-foot section and one curved section for a total weight of 500 pounds. Saving in ACL (Allowable Cabin Load): 270 pounds. Under the old system, the rice was palletized nine bags per pallet; average C-46 load was 13-14 pallets. With the new system, the rice is palletized 18 bags per pallet; average aircraft load is 7 pallets. Because ground loading crews have to handle only half as many pieces of cargo, ground loading time is significantly decreased. Prior to the development of the new system, the pallet was dropped with its load; this posed a constant threat of the relatively large-area and light-weight pallet being blown into the C-46's left horizontal stabilizer. Moreover, since under the new system the pallets are reusable instead of being expendable, the need for new pallets is greatly reduced, thereby offering the customer saving of up to \$ 200,000.00 yearly. And greater safety for the "kickers" stems from the fact that, instead of physically having to push each pallet (or pair of pallets) out of the plane as they did under the old system – and thus exposing themselves to the remote possibility of falling out of the airplane [...] – now, from inside the plane, they merely lift the inboard edge of a pallet positioned at the drop door and the bags of rice, or other commodities, simply slide off the pallet and tumble to the DZ (Drop Zone) over which the aircraft is flying."<sup>13</sup> In spite of this invention, however, the quantity of rice air-dropped by Air America aircraft in 1970 was below the 10-million pounds a month given for 1969. An article published in the *Air America Log* in early 1971 notes: "Air America has been moving rice in Laos since 1961. In 1970, we moved approximately 46,000,000 pounds of commodities – mostly rice, but also salt, canned beef<sup>14</sup> and other foodstuffs."<sup>15</sup>

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about this, for pushing the tilt track system, I liked it. We also did a semi similar deal for rice dropping from C-123s but I never liked that plane and resisted using it, except for a few test drops" (e-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Ryder, "New rice drop technique in Laos", in: *Air America Log*, vol. V, no. 5, 1971, pp. 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: "Later in Vientiane, probably 1970 or so, I came up with the 'hash' combination for air drop with the C-46. 32 kg rice and eight (I think) cans of meat. Did quite a few test drops there at Wattay airport with a Porter to come to the right combination of rice-canned meat, and the type of can. This latter was a real problem as the 'normal' shaped can, somewhat larger than a beer can, 454 gms / one pound, would usually crack along the side seam when it hit the ground. Working with our Bangkok contracting office, one of the meat packers came up with a flat can, about 5-6 inches diameter and less than 2 inches high. This can worked, very good non-breakage rate when dropped along with the rice" (e-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).

<sup>15</sup> (anonymous), "46-million lb. a year", in: *Air America Log*, vol. V, no.1, 1971, pp. 4-5. Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson who worked in the Refugee Relief program presumes that those tonnage figures either include more than just food or include what was moved by CASI (e-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).



Loading a C-46 on the Air America ramp in Vientiane

(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

At the same time, the situation around Luang Prabang had become problematic. “By 1970, RLG areas in western Luang Prabang, the Nam Houn Valley and Nam Bang Valley were lost. In November 1969 the fall of the last RLG position on the Mekong between Pak Ou and Pak Tha closed that river for shipping between Luang Prabang and Ban Houie Sai. [...] Luang Prabang had to rely upon either Route 13 or the Mekong from Vientiane. Commercial cargo and rice could not be barged in from Thailand. [...] Thus by early 1970 all of northern Luang Prabang Province was gone, as well as the area west to the Nam Tha (River). Luang Prabang itself was nearly encircled. With a record high of 48,000 people on the food support rolls, land was at a premium. Villages on the Mekong which had always been secure, were swiftly overrun.”<sup>16</sup> Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “Normally we’d ship rice and fuel up to LP via the Mekong River, however in the dry season, say March-June, the river would get low and the 100 MT capacity river boats could only carry perhaps 40 MT, and even for that they might have to unload and reload to get over and around some spots of rocks in the river. I don’t think we ever dropped rice to LP, but we did do landed load when stocks were critical and the river traffic hadn’t arrived. I do remember this being the case in later 1973. Normally this would be flown up via C-123 as easier to load and unload. However, if the 123s were not available (this might be the case if troop movements, ammo, etc, was needed) we’d use the C-46s.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1971, large parts of MR II fell to the enemy, creating ten thousands of refugees to be fed. “In March 1971 another 8,000 Lao Thung and Meo from Lima Sites 57 and 180 north of Route 7 headed in the direction of Route 13. In addition 2,000 civilians formerly at the old neutralist center of Muong Souie began moving southwest. When that area fell on February 4, general uncertainty brought about by Vietnamese incursions around Long Tieng put 30-40,000 refugees into a confused flight. North of the PDJ Phu Bia fell on June 28, 1971. In December, during the initial days of Hmong new year, the Vietnamese launched massive attacks against the PDJ. In one day the entire Plain was overrun. The refugee population crowded into the ‘crescent’ from Long Tieng south of the PDJ panicked. An estimated 40,000 people evacuated their villages, many not in direct danger of the Vietnamese thrust. However thousands of refugees had been warned by the Vietnamese that if they were caught again they would be killed. This was especially true of the Thai Dam and Lao Neua, many of whom fled as far as the Vientiane Plain. Some 3,400 fled from the Ban Xon area itself to Vientiane.

North of the Plain of Jars only two enclaves survived, Bouam Long (LS 32) and Phu

<sup>16</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 179.

<sup>17</sup> E-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.



Cum (LS 50). While the courage and tenacity of the Hmong and Lao Thung were equally outstanding at both places Bouam Long has received deservedly more attention. Situated in a small bowl with one open end, Bouam Long is surrounded by hills, each topped by a small, but well dug-in position. For two years Bouam Long was subjected to continuous ground and rocket attacks by the Vietnamese. Scores of civilians, as well as troops, were killed or wounded. In several instances Vietnamese sappers penetrated the airstrip, only to be killed or driven out. The most remarkable thing was that there was never a day when the 4,000 civilians and 500 troops lacked food or supplies. Air America and Continental Airlines crews braved incredible batteries of 12.7 mm anti-aircraft guns to drop 70-80 metric tons of food stuffs per month. Pilots were given extensive briefings in the situation before each flight. On several occasions the A.I.D. refugee relief logistics officer from Vientiane flew north to observe and coordinate rice drops into Bouam Long.”<sup>18</sup>

For Air America, the big change came in July 1971. On 2 June 71, C-46 XW-PFL was shot down near Bouam Long (LS-32), while on a drop mission under the provisions of contract AID-439-342.<sup>19</sup> On 1 July 71, Air America’s Flight Operations Circular notes that 4 out of the 6 C-46s assigned to contract AID-439-342 – N1383N, N9458Z, XW-PEJ, and XW-PGD, that is the bulk of the rice droppers – were to be released from that contract on 15 July 71 and put into storage at Tainan. At that time, 3 of Air America’s C-46s (B-138, B-146, and B-154) were already in inactive storage at Tainan.<sup>20</sup> The following Flight Operations Circular, that of 15 July 71, gives the precise dates (all in July and August 71), when the four rice droppers were to be put into inactive storage and adds that one of the remaining 2 rice droppers assigned to contract AID-439-342, that is C-46 XW-PBW, was modified to become a 69 passenger aircraft.<sup>21</sup> All this makes clear that July 1971 marked the end of Air America’s rice dropping missions in Laos. This was probably not due to the loss of XW-PFL, as in South Vietnam, Air America continued to use some of their C-46s even until 1975. The reason for this probably was that Air America’s long-time competitor Continental Air Services Inc., who had also operated rice drop missions in Laos all the years,<sup>22</sup> this time had a lower bid after they had added more C-46s to their fleet,<sup>23</sup> so that after July 1971, CASI remained the only company to do the job.

### **Refugee airlifts for USAID’s RDD**

The more the situation became desperate in Laos, the more it became necessary to resettle the thousands of refugees that the war in Laos had generated. The more aggressive strategy introduced by North Vietnam in early 1968 also affected the refugee situation in Laos. On 10-11 March 1968, Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), the secret ground-directed radar bombing system installed on top of a steep mountain in northern Laos considered to be inexpugnable, was conquered by the North Vietnamese and given up by the Royal Lao Government.<sup>24</sup> “The following day an A.I.D. refugee operations center at Houie Kha Moun (LS 111) was hit by the Vietnamese. Prior to the attack 4,000 refugees were on the strip awaiting helicopter evacuation under the direction of an American operations officer.<sup>25</sup> Extremely accurate mortar fire hit the small A.I.D. shack destroying the radio and generator. About half of these refugees

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<sup>18</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 182/3.

<sup>19</sup> Accident report in: UTD/Anthony/F4.

<sup>20</sup> Flight Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-71-014 of 1 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B.

<sup>21</sup> Flight Operations Circular no. DFOD-C-71-015 of 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B.

<sup>22</sup> E-mail dated 13 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

<sup>23</sup> Les Strouse in a telephone interview made by MacAlan Thompson, who kindly forwarded that information to the author in his e-mail dated 13 November 2005. Indeed, on 29 June 71, CASI had acquired C-46s XW-PHL (msn 27049), XW-PHM (msn 30252), and XW-PHN (msn 30257) from the Norwegian cargo operator Fred Olsen (Eastwood / Roach, *Piston engine airliner production list*, pp. 177 + 180).

<sup>24</sup> Castle, *One day too long*, pp. 111-37.

<sup>25</sup> This was Ernie Kuhn; see Castle, *One day too long*, p. 112.

were able to walk to RLG-held villages while the remainder were captured. Attempts were made to relocate 15,000 Hmong, Lao Thung, Lao Neua and Tai Dam at Phu Loi near LS 184 but poor security made that plan unfeasible. In March 1968 the U.S. Ambassador approved the evacuation of some 12,000 civilians from Sam Neua to points south of Long Tieng. This first airlift tacitly acknowledged that those people could never return to secure villages in Hua Phan Province. It also implied that the U.S. government would assist in moving refugees from insecure areas to places where they could be safely relocated.”<sup>26</sup>

In December 1968, the next big refugee airlift occurred:<sup>27</sup> “In September 1968 an offensive to retake Phu Pha Thi was launched. After heavy Lao-Hmong casualties, the operation was called off at the end of December. Another 10,000 refugees were air-lifted to Phu Lao. These people remained there until January 1970, when they were all evacuated to the Sam Thong-Long Tieng area. In March 1969 Na Khang (LS 36) the center of support for the Houa Phan area was overrun with heavy RLG casualties including the military commander and the governor. Small enclaves north of Nong Het held out until mid-1970 when they were overrun. A few hundred civilians were evacuated but the refugee program in Houa Phan Province was effectively dead. [...] By the end of 1968 the original conceptual relationship between the paramilitary, their dependents, the refugees and local villagers was nearly finished. Long before official air evacuations had been sanctioned, thousands of civilians had managed to flee north Laos into the Sam Thong-Long Tieng area on returning aircraft.

The military campaign on and around the Plain of Jars in 1969 had far reaching effects on the refugee program and introduced a new phase of evacuation and resettlement activity. In April and May of 1969 RLG forces captured Xieng Khouangville and later, in June-August, the entire Plain of Jars (PDJ) area. Approximately 20-25,000 civilians fled or were initially evacuated to safer areas near the PDJ.<sup>28</sup> Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls: “Walking was the more ‘normal’ means of relocation. I was overhead when 36 was hit the least time March 1969, the civilians and dependents walked out to the south and west for a week or more, no air evac there. Later in 1969 I was working LS-32 when the bad guys were getting real close. Decision was made to evac refugees and dependents, did so via CASI and AirAm Porters and H-34s down to LS-57, where they could rest up, then walk on down to LS-108, Moung Soui, and over to LS-26, Xieng Dat, for ‘resettlement’. Another one, May ’69, when we initially got in to L-03, Xieng Ville. The airfield is some distance from town where the civilians were congregated. I had H-34s and Hueys bringing in troops and ammo to the soccer field, they hauled out civilians to LS-05, Padong. Had CASI and AirAm Porters

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<sup>26</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 177; Air America Captain Julian S. Kanach and his team were commended by Ambassador Sullivan for an emergency airlift of over 8,000 people in Northeastern Laos accomplished between 20 and 25 March 1968; see the document published by the CIA at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266371.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls one from Houei Hin Sa: “One of the larger moves was from the LS-215, Houei Hin Sa, area west of LS-184. This was done before I got up in that area, probably late 1968. Involved AirAm choppers, H-34s & Hueys, and USAF Jollies, several of them” (e-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).

<sup>28</sup> “In June 1969 the neutralist enclave of Muong Soui fell and 5-6,000 civilians were airlifted or walked to Vang Vieng” (Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 209). On 2 July 69, the CIA sent a commendation for this heroic action to Air America (see <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266388.pdf>), saying: “The Military Attaché Vientiane has reported to senior military headquarters throughout the Far East on the evacuation of Muong Soui. His report ends: ‘But no praise can evaluate the aircrews of the unarmed and vulnerable helicopters who time and time again descended into the enemy controlled area at minimum altitude and airspeed... These deeds should not go unnoted to the men of the Air Force helicopter units and their comrades of Air America, Inc.’. Within the bounds of security, I ask that you make known to the Air America personnel concerned my personal admiration and respect for their courage and fortitude. If security precludes my association with this commendation to certain personnel, I ask that you take appropriate action in the name of the Air America Executive Committee.” It was signed by R. E. Cushman, Acting DCI.

coming in to airfield with troops and ammo, but no people to back haul. So I got a couple of vehicles, my Hmong field assistant, Her Tou, drove one of those Russian jeeps, I drove a Russian truck, attached photo, moving folks out to the airfield (we also had groups walking



MacAlan Thompson and his Russian truck at L-03 in May 1969  
(with kind permission from MacAlan Thompson)

out to the airfield) to make effective use of the empty airplanes. Later called in a couple of C-46 rice drops to LS-05 for ‘dinner’.”<sup>29</sup> There was no clear-cut overall policy regarding these refugees by either the RLG or the Mission. “Because General Vang Pao, Commander of MR II, would not allow the civilians to remain on the fringe areas of the PDJ, all refugees were initially air evacuated a short distance away to Tha Tham Bleung (LS 72). This small STOL strip and surrounding tiny valley could not safely absorb all the incoming refugees. [...] Later as the RLG consolidated its hold on the PDJ, new relocation areas were set up on the Plain. [...] Approximately 1,000 non-Lao civilians, primarily Chinese and Vietnamese, with some Indians and Khmer were air evacuated to Vientiane where they were taken in by their respective ethnic, social or political societies.”<sup>30</sup>



Refugees waiting for evacuation at Moung Soui in January 1970  
(*Air America Log*, vol. IV, no.1, 1970, p.1)

<sup>29</sup> E-mail dated 11 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

<sup>30</sup> Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 177/8.



The scene was always similar: When a refugee airlift was imminent, hundreds of people, all accompanied by their children and packed with their most important belongings, rushed to the airstrip, and all of them tried to get onto an airplane at the same time. Some scenes of refugee airlifts can be seen at the end of the documentary *Flying Men, Flying Machines*. These pictures seem to show the evacuation of Phou Sam Soun made by Air America PC-6s in April 1970. So Air America crews had to organize boarding the airplanes in order to avoid that they were overloaded so that they could still take off. Some of the bigger airlifts of this period are well documented by the first three numbers of *Air America Log's* 1970 edition, when Air America aircraft flew three massive evacuation airlifts. In January 1970, three Air America C-123Ks and three Caribous evacuated 5,627 refugees in nine days from recently recaptured Moung Soui in North Central Laos under contract to USAID / Laos. A first series of pictures showing Lao refugees carrying all their worldly possessions gather on the edge of Moung Soui airstrip appeared in *Air America Log*, vol. IV, no.1 (1970), p. 1.

The following issue<sup>31</sup> offered their readers some more pictures of Lao refugees waiting with their backs bending with personal belongings and babies, while more bundles of personal belongings are lying on the ground, and climbing into C-123K "555" and other Air America aircraft. The pictures were accompanied by an article written by Air America's Vientiane Base Manager James A. Cunningham Jr., saying: "At the request of the United States Agency for International Development / Laos, Air America recently undertook a massive airlift of thousands of indigenous refugees in Northern Laos. AAM pressed into service three C-123Ks – which were configured to carry 50 passengers by installing center-line seats – and three Caribou C-7As configured to carry 32 passengers per flight. With these six aircraft operating regularly seven days a week, Air America evacuated 5,627 refugees in nine days, moving them from the recently recaptured and refurbished airstrip at Moung Soui to a USAID/L-furnished relocation site at Ban Xon, some 37 statute miles south of Moung Soui, which itself is 108 statute miles north of Vientiane, the Administrative Capital of Laos. Flights were operated under the direction of USAID/L personnel at Moung Soui and Vientiane. A major problem during the evacuation was the language barrier, even among the Laos themselves. Many of the refugees were Meo tribespeople from the mountains of Northeast Laos; they even had difficulty in communicating with their fellow Meo from the Moung Soui area. Many of the Laos – and all the Americans present – had problems in communicating with the refugees in any language. Refugee reaction to flying ranged from sheer terror to joy; the latter reaction coming from some of the refugees who had already flown in Air America planes, having been evacuated from their homes before as, over the years, the Communist Pathet Lao kept on encroaching into free Laos. For all intents and purposes, the refugees were leaving Moung Soui with all their worldly possessions in their arms and on their backs. They carried cooking utensils, baskets and bags of all shapes and descriptions, and a few lucky ones were airlifted with their pigs, goats and other small animals. One major adjustment problem for many of the refugees coming from far Northeast Laos is that their progressive moves in advance of the Pathet Lao have brought them from high ground to much lower altitudes where temperature ranges, vegetation, insects, diets and even cultures are radically different from those to which they have been accustomed over the years. Each aircraft used in the airlift made three to four refugee flights daily. The planes would fly to Vientiane for refueling as necessary, and also to pick up loads of drummed fuel for the back-haul to Moung Soui."<sup>32</sup>

Later in 1970, *Air America Log's* no.3 was published as a special issue entirely dedicated to Air America's refugee airlifts in Laos, and the introductory article gives a more complete picture, adding that the three airlifts evacuated people "mostly of the various Meo tribes from insecure areas of North Central Laos to more secure villages" and that they took place

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<sup>31</sup> "AAM airlift", in: *Air America Log*, vol. IV, no. 2, 1970, pp. 4-5

<sup>32</sup> J. A. Cunningham, "AAM airlift", in: *Air America Log*, vol. IV, no. 2, 1970, p. 5.

between January and April 1970. “In the first two airlifts, 100 percent of the flight crews involved were Air America’s; in the third airlift, AAM supplied a majority of the airlift with Company STOL-type aircraft. In the first refugee movement, in January, some 5,000 North Lao tribespeople were airlifted from Moung Soui to Ban Xon [...]. In the second airlift – the most massive of the movements – 16,720 refugees were whisked from the Plaines des Jarres to Ban Keun and Vientiane. This airlift was accomplished in six days in February. The third evacuation, which occurred in April, involved moving some 3,500 refugees from Phou Sam Soun to Phu Cum in several days; in some cases Phou Sam Soun was under attack while the airlift was being accomplished. There were no casualties to Air America personnel nor damage to Company aircraft engaged in the operation. Air America was commended by the customer for its Quick Reaction Capacity (QRC) during these evacuations. Types of planes used in the various airlifts were: C-130s bailed to USAID, C-123Ks, C-7As, and PC-6Cs.”<sup>33</sup> This time, the authorities who were responsible for those airlifts were also depicted, that is USAID/Laos (represented here by Mr. Charles Mann, its Director), USAID/Laos’ Rural Development Division (represented here by its Chief, Mr. Phillip Gullion), the Royal Lao Secretary of State for Social Welfare (Mr. H. E. Keo Viphakone), and the Lao Director-General of Social Welfare, Mr. Houmpheng Prathoumvan.<sup>34</sup> Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson thinks that the 2 C-130s were officially bailed to USAID and not to Air America to provide a better cover story: “I might speculate [...] that since the CIA, the Embassy, and USAID realized that a movement of a LARGE number of people off of the PDJ to Vientiane could not be handled quietly, as things were done upcountry on similar but smaller moves, it was decided that USAID would provide the cover story. The people moved were, after all, civilians, and were to be resettled on the Vientiane Plain by the RLG Ministry of Social Welfare, with USAID support.”<sup>35</sup>



An Air America C-130A taken at Vientiane during the refugee airlift in February 1970  
(*Air America Log*, vol. IV, no. 3, 1970, p. 3)

<sup>33</sup> (anonymous), “Air America’s Laos airlift”, in: *Air America Log*, vol. IV, no. 3, 1970, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Photo in: *Air America Log*, vol. IV, no. 3, 1970, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> E-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

Yet, the situation was much more complicated than documented by *Air America Log*, the Company journal intended for a larger public, because during the same period, not only Sam Thong (LS-20) and its USAID facilities there were under attack and had to be evacuated, but also the “secret city” of Long Tieng (LS-20A) with its CIA base and General Vang Pao’s headquarters. So the report “regarding the organized refugee airlift of the last few months”, sent by Vientiane’s Base Manager James A. Cunningham to Washington on 8 June 1970, is much more detailed: “It is difficult, if not impossible, to factually cover the precise figures for movement of personnel and material for which Air America was responsible during the critical period of the evacuation of the Plaine des Jarres in February and the subsequent evacuation of LS20 and LS20A in the middle of March. Both operations required minimum planning and maximum execution because of the time limit imposed by unfriendly forces. Any accurate statistics on the total number of refugees moved by Air America fixed wing assets is only approximate and limited to those flights which were specifically launched to carry only refugees, troops or material. A great many refugees and their belongings were carried on a space available basis by all fixed wing aircraft of the VTE [= Vientiane] fleet operating into and out of the PDJ [= Plaine des Jarres] and Sam Thong/Long Tieng areas.



Air America C-130A “604” on the Plain of Jars in February 70  
(*Air America Log*, vol. IV, no. 3, 1970, p. 7)

In the PDJ evacuation the critical period for which records do exist began 5 February and ended 10 February. Two C130 aircraft in this period flew a total of 65 sorties into and out of LS275 [= Ban Thang] and LS276 [= Lat Sen], the principal marshalling points for refugees as directed by USAID. Ten thousand refugees were carried out in the C130s alone. On each



flight roughly 150 passengers were carried plus their personal effects, which were estimated to amount to approximately 12,000 to 15,000 pounds per trip. In the same period of time the C123K aircraft flew 38 sorties and hauled out 2,350 refugees plus 121,000 pounds of cargo. From 5 February to 10 February, 15 scheduled C7A sorties were flown to the PDJ and carried out 350 passengers and 28,500 pounds of cargo. As noted earlier, any aircraft operating in the PDJ area picked up as many refugees and baggage as could be handled within ACL limits. Neither these passengers nor their baggage are included in any of the above figures.

In the month of March the critical period was between 17 and 20 March and again between 1 and 3 April. It was then that the enemy moved in on LS20 and LS20A, requiring the evacuation of refugees and the importation of troops along with the backhaul of critical USAID and -713 Customer material, much of which was of a highly classified nature. During this period the C130 aircraft flew a total of 16 sorties, five of which were for the insertion of 751 troops to LS20A and the backhaul of 183,000 pounds of cargo. During this same time the C123K aircraft were evacuating LS20, into which they flew a total of 18 sorties to take out 1,855 refugees and 65,000 pounds of cargo. The C7As flew 24 sorties in mid-March into LS20 and carried out 750 passengers and 23,000 pounds of cargo. At the same time, the C123s, operating out of LS20A into LS 272 [= Ban Xon], the new USAID refugee center southwest of LS20A, flew 21 sorties carrying 320 passengers and 75,500 pounds of cargo. The C7As operating in the same area flew 14 sorties with 66 passengers and 16,500 pounds of cargo.

A smaller evacuation took place between 21 and 25 February from L03 [= Xieng Khouang Ville] on the PDJ to LS113 [= Moug Cha], when three C7As were committed for a total of 16 sorties carrying 330 refugee and military personnel and 9,000 pounds of cargo.

In addition to the evacuation of refugees in large aircraft in considerable numbers over a relatively short period of time, Air America Porters have played an important though less spectacular role recently in supporting the refugee relocation effort. For example, in the 30 day period between 4 April and 4 May, the Porters flew 25 sorties and moved 233 refugees from LS63 (Moug Nham) to LS22 (Moug Oum), one of the trickier airstrips in Laos. In the period between 6 April and 24 May, Air America Porters flew 34 sorties carrying 300 refugees from LS50 (Ban Na Tai) to Long Tieng (LS20A). In most cases where refugees are moved by air, it is the old people, infirm and aged, and the very young who are airlifted out in the face of an advancing enemy force.

Air America personnel at all levels in Vientiane were deeply involved in the support of these critical evacuation flights. Supervisory personnel were pressed into service as air controllers on the PDJ and at the points where refugees and their supplies were being offloaded. Medical and fire brigade personnel worked long hours assisting in the movement of the wounded, injured and aged refugee personnel, primarily in the Vientiane area. Flight crews worked tirelessly from dawn to dusk without relief and often without time for meals in order to make maximum use of the aircraft at our disposal. Air America traffic personnel were dispatched to LS20A to assist in expediting the turn-around of aircraft carrying in critical materials and exfiltrating customer cargo and customer personnel. In Vientiane the entire traffic complement turned out to assist the metropolitan police and the Army in the off-loading and relocation of refugees from the aircraft as they arrived. In short, it was a maximum effort for all concerned with highly gratifying results.<sup>36</sup>

The background for these large refugee airlifts was that by January 1970, the military situation had deteriorated on the Plain to the extent that the refugees could not adequately be protected and that on 20 March 1970, Sam Thong, the center of all Refugee Relief activities in MR II, fell to the enemy. "Prior to that work had begun on a fall-back strip near an old Lao

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<sup>36</sup> J. A. Cunningham, Jr., Memo to DCASB, dated 8 June 1970 (BM/VTE-ICRS-70-147), in: UTD/CIA/B29F4. See also the CIA report at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05268856.pdf>.

village, Ban Xon. A large airstrip and support facilities, such as warehouses, offices, and a small hospital were constructed. The A.I.D. support center for what was left of the old program was then conducted out of Ban Xon. The complete disintegration of the original concept of the paramilitary civilian relationship was ended when three important decisions were made. The first was to attack and attempt to hold the Plain of Jars; the second was to relocate the civilian population found there; and the third was to integrate Government's village paramilitary (ADC's) into the more structured Special Guerilla Units (SGU's). The important features of the 1969 PDJ campaign which affected the refugee program were first of all, that a large scale military operation was undertaken to foil future enemy advances southward and to hold territory. This was a clear divergence from the past when the civilians had been an integral part of the overall plan. Secondly, the requirement to relocate such large numbers of civilians was relatively new.<sup>37</sup>

In September 1970, a change took place. Since the beginning, USAID's Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Project had been operated as a branch of the Rural Development Division (RDD) headed by the Assistant Director for Rural Development (AD/RD). The Refugee Project field staffs were responsible directly to the AD/RD and not to the local Area Coordinator (AC). In September 1970, the RDD was split into two assistant directorships – the Assistant Director for Field Operations (AD/FO) and the Assistant Director for Refugee Affairs (AD/RA), and the AD/RA himself was on top of four separate branches:

- “1) Refugee Relief Branch (RRB), which provided emergency relief to refugees as they were initially displaced, carried out requirements for refugee censuses; determined commodity requirements, including medical supplies, coordinated logistics requirements, and monitored refugee supplies.
- 2) Refugee Affairs Administrative Branch (RAA) organized, monitored and served as a central repository of all information relating to refugee affairs, including evaluation of conditions of refugee groups, problems, progress, and potential for phase-out of assistance.
- 3) The Refugee Relocation Branch (RRL) planned, monitored, backstopped, and acted as liaison with other Mission elements to assure implementation of steps designated as second and third priorities.
- 4) The Food for Peace Branch (FFP) programmed and monitored the use of PL-480 commodities.”<sup>38</sup>

Although there were more changes in 1970, the most important point in this reorganization was that prior to 1970 the program was primarily focused on emergency relief and organization of basic infrastructure in remote villages, while the phase beginning with 1970 was directed mainly toward relocation of selected groups of refugees in areas where they might become self-sufficient in foodstuffs; and there were integrated projects providing land, housing, schools etc. This second phase ended in December 1974, when the Lao Government, in conjunction with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, began to canvass the refugees for eventual return to their original villages.<sup>39</sup>

In the southern part of Laos, the situation was a little bit different. Of course, permanent fighting produced thousands of refugees, but they fled walking or were trucked elsewhere. In December 1970, 1,200 from Thateng and Houei Kong fled to Paksong and later to Pakse. In March 1971, continued attacks along Route 9 in the Muong Phalane-Dong Hene area produced 2,243 refugees. Seven thousand civilians were trucked into Pakse from Saravane, and 2,500 refugees fled Muong Phalane in mid-March 1971. In late April 71, 4,000 refugees from Muong Phalane and 2,800 refugees from Dong Hene were displaced. After RLG troops

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<sup>37</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 178/9.

<sup>38</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 173.

<sup>39</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 173.

had recaptured these areas, some of the refugees returned, but when the Vietnamese were again in Saravane, Muong Phalane, Thateng and Paksong by late 1971, the civilian population fled these areas once more, mostly to settle in the Khong Sedone area. When that area was taken by the Vietnamese in May 1972, 7,300 refugees fled from that area and later settled near Pakse. But here like in central Laos, where several thousand refugees fled when the key towns of Nam Thorne and Kengkok fell in late October 1972,<sup>40</sup> people simply fled walking or were evacuated by trucks. And that was also true for parts of MR II.<sup>41</sup>

Refugee relocation of “Phase 2” was begun in the late sixties, and many of the relocation areas were in the south of Laos. Indeed, “refugee relief and resettlement was the largest program in MR IV during the 1971-75 period. [But] refugee population figures reflected only people receiving direct food support from A.I.D. via the RLG Social Welfare (SW) Service. Once a refugee reached self-sufficiency status, even temporarily, he was dropped from the reporting rolls. In early 1973 the relief rolls in MR IV reached their highest level, 52,000. [...] Following the 1974 harvest, there were no refugees receiving food support in MR IV.”<sup>42</sup> Houie Nam Phak, some 25 kilometers south of Pakse was opened in April 1969. Houses and physical infrastructure such as schools, dispensaries and offices as well as a dam for an irrigation system were built, but when the village was attacked in March 71, several thousand dollars of property and equipment were destroyed. Part of that project were also several relocation villages in the Paksane area, but their end came in November 72, when the inhabitants fled to Paksane. Two other relocation areas were opened in early 1970, the smaller one near Seno<sup>43</sup> and the bigger one in the Vientiane Plain. The latter consisted of 27, later 58 villages. Here, heavy duty equipment was used to clear land for rice fields; an extensive system of roads was constructed and wells were drilled in the villages. Several new relocation areas were opened in 1971/2, Thasano in the Savannakhet area for 11,500 refugees, Hin Heup on the Nam Lik River for people who had fled from the Plain of Jars, Long Nam Khan between Xieng Ngeun and Muong Nane for refugees of the Luang Prabang area, and Phu Ba Chiang in the Pakse area. From 1969 to 1975, construction in the South included 4 roads (82 kilometers), 5 wooden bridges, 4 fish ponds, and 6 water storage dams.<sup>44</sup> In most of these cases, Air America and CASI probably helped transporting to the sites construction material and heavy equipment. For several reasons, other projects did not lead to what was to be a permanent relocation of refugees like those at Thakhek, Houie Nam Ngam, and even Ban Xon, and in December 1974, the U.S. Mission at Vientiane classified all those relocation sites as phased out, because at that time, under the umbrella of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, all refugees were invited to return to their homes.<sup>45</sup>

### **Air America flights for USAID’s Public Health Development project**

In the late sixties, a public discussion arose in Laos about family planning, but only in the early seventies, official Lao politics became interested in that field, and with the help of the Maternal Child Health and Family Planning (MCH/FP) programs of USAID’s Public Health Development project, some new MCH centers were built or at least some existing hospitals extended: At Ban Houei Sai, construction was begun in late 1969, and the new MCH center was opened in March 72; at Vientiane, construction of a new section of the Mahosot Hospital was begun in early 71, and the center was dedicated in September 73; and 2 rural clinics at

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<sup>40</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 180/1.

<sup>41</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 182.

<sup>42</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 241.

<sup>43</sup> “In 1969, because of the influx of refugees from the Muong Phine area, the Region obtained its first heavy equipment to assist in the development of the Seno Relocation Project” (Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 229).

<sup>44</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 229.

<sup>45</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 184-92.



Phone Sim and Savannakhet in south central Laos were renovated in 1971, with other clinics to follow.<sup>46</sup> Although it cannot be proved by documents like the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules, it seems to be logical to assume that Air America also participated in this extension of the Laotian hospital and clinic system, that is by carrying planning personnel and then by hauling construction material.

Nevertheless, the overall network of rural hospitals, health stations, and dispensaries built up during the early sixties by USAID's Public Health Development project was slowly reduced in the 1968-73 period, as "the military-political situation in Laos was characterized by a gradual but steady loss of territory controlled by the Royal Lao Government to the Pathet Lao forces. In MR I, village dispensaries in the regions around Nam Tha and Nam Bac were withdrawn and shifted with the refugee movements to areas close to the Mekong River north of Ban Houei Sai and to areas near Luang Prabang. In MR II the loss of the contested area of Sam Neua, the Plain of Jars, and essentially all of the area north-westerly and southeast of it restricted the RLG operational area to a small southwest segment approximately 85 by 40 kilometers. The loss of Sam Thong in 1970 and with it the loss of the main support hospital there necessitated the relocation of the makeshift hospital base at Long Tieng and Ban Xon. A crude temporary hospital of some 200 beds was improvised at Ban Xon from a pre-existing A.I.D. Public Works camp and this served as the base for Mission medical operations in MR II until the termination of the project.<sup>47</sup> In MR III the RLG maintained control of an area along the Mekong which was only about one-third the width of the country in the South. The areas around Thakhek were unstable and tenuous. The hospital at Kengkok (operated by OB [= *Operation Brotherhood*]) and the surrounding network of dispensaries between there and Savannakhet remained in operation except for a brief period when Kengkok was lost. In MR IV the hospitals established at Attopeu, Saravane and Pak Song were all lost. The newest hospital established at Khong Sedone was severely damaged by enemy attacks and operations there were discontinued in 1972. The provincial hospital at Pakse was expanded and Pakse became the base for operations. The shift of refugees from the overrun areas of Attopeu, Pak Song, Saravane and the Bolovens Plateau required the establishment of refugee villages in areas north of Pakse. Dispensaries were established in these relocation areas where operations continued until the cease-fire. In MR V the hospital at Vang Vieng gained increased importance in support of casualties and refugees when Sam Thong fell in 1970 and Long Tieng was under siege. Once the improved hospital was established at Ban Xon, the activity at Vang Vieng returned to normal. During the enemy's drive on the Plain of Jars and into Xieng Khouang Province, many tribal people were evacuated to Vientiane and later located in resettlement villages adjacent to route 13 between Vientiane and Vang Vieng. A smaller group was relocated southeast of Vientiane. This shifting of war refugees required the establishment of new dispensaries to serve these people. Thus at the time of the cease-fire in 1973 the project was directly or indirectly operating seven hospitals, the temporary facility at Ban Xon under the Village Health Activity and six others under the OB contract, located at Ban Houei Sai, Sayaboury, Vang Vieng, Vientiane, Kengkok and Pakse. There was a network

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<sup>46</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 103-20.

<sup>47</sup> Later, the Ban Xon hospital resembled the old Sam Thong facility in completeness: "The A.I.D. Health program in MR II was the largest of any Region in Laos. The center of the program was the 200 bed hospital at Ban Xon. This hospital was originally located in Sam Thong but military action in the area forced its evacuation. The hospital was jointly administered and staffed by Lao civilian and military as well as A.I.D. personnel. It was a complete health center with inpatient and outpatient services. A new surgical wing was added in 1973. Services offered were x-ray, laboratory, maternal / child health, dental and sick call. [...] The hospital at Ban Xon was a temporary wooden structure with the exception of the surgical wing" (Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 216/7).

of about 200 village dispensaries approximately half of which were located in MR II.”<sup>48</sup> All this meant that the number of flights by which Air America and CASI aircraft had to support the activities of USAID’s Public Health Development project became smaller over the years, and although these activities were among those that were to be transferred to the Royal Laotian Government in 1974, this plan did not materialize due to the political evolution in Laos.<sup>49</sup>

### Search and Rescue (SAR) missions 1968-73

This increase in military activities did not only mean that Air America had to transport more troops and more “hard rice” than before, it also meant that more Company aircraft were shot at or even shot down. A list of Air America aircraft that received ground fire in Laos and in South Vietnam between 3 December 1971 and 9 April 72<sup>50</sup> has no less than 18 pages and thus illustrates well the increasing danger that Air America met in Laos. Only 2 out of the 27 incidents reported on page 1 of that document and covering the two weeks between 3 and 17 December 71 happened in South Vietnam, the remaining 25 incidents happened in Laos.

UTD/CIA/B51 F12  
GROUNDFIRE REPORTS - DEC 71-9 APRIL 72

REPORTING LOCATION	DATE	PILOT	AIRCRAFT NUMBER	TYPE	ACTION LOCATION	ACTION REPORTED
UTH	03 DEC 71	Capt. E. D. Rudolfs	XW-PFG	205	L-106	Field recd fi
UTH	05 DEC 71	Capt. L. Andrews	N8535F	204B	QB0481	Near miss
UTH	05 DEC 71	Capt. L. Andrews	N8535F	204B	PB7775	Near miss
UTH	21 NOV 71	Capt. R. B. Densley	N8513F	204B	PB 995832	A/C hit
UTH	07 DEC 71	Capt. E. Munsell	H89	H34	XC4708	A/C hit
UTH	07 DEC 71	Capt. B. Van Etten	H74	H34	WA5586	A/C hit
SGN	08 DEC 71	Capt. D. E. Zube	N1303X	204B	BT 2814	Near miss
SGN	08 DEC 71	Capt. J. E. Stallman	1559	C-47	XS 5575	Near miss
UTH	09 DEC 71	Capt. J. Rausch	H77	H34	XB404815	A/C hit
UTH	09 DEC 71	Capt. J. Heini	N8535F	204B	QB0189	Near miss
UTH	09 DEC 71	Capt. E. Spencer	N1196W	204B	QB038805	Near miss
UTH	09 DEC 71	Capt. E. Spencer	N1196W	204B	PB9779	Near miss
UTH	09 DEC 71	Capt. J. Rausch	H77	H34	XB3377	Near miss
UTH	09 DEC 71	[REDACTED]	H45	H34	XC6712	Near miss
VTE	30 NOV 71	F. T. Reynolds	N392R	PC6C	PB9983	A/C hit
VTE	08 DEC 71	D. Romes	N774M	DHC-6	XB400815	A/C hit
VTE	08 DEC 71	W. F. Buckley	554555	C-123K	XB 383810	A/C hit
VTE	08 DEC 71	D. Romes	N774M	DHC-6	XB400815	A/C hit
VTE	09 DEC 71	B. Foote	61-2389	C7A	LS449	A/C hit
VTE	10 DEC 71	W. H. Leinbach	612401	C7A	XB358808	A/C hit
VTE	10 DEC 71	J. L. Fitch	605430	C7A	PS49	A/C hit
UTH	12 DEC 71	Capt. J. W. Knotts	N8512F	204B	PB855709	Near miss
UTH	12 DEC 71	Capt. J. W. Knotts	N8512F	204B	PB816935	Near miss
VTE	11 DEC 71	H. G. Bogdan	N152L	PC6C	QB 0585	A/C hit
UTH	13 DEC 71	Capt. L. Lashomb	H81	H-34	WA5081	A/C hit
UTH	13 DEC 71	Capt. J. J. McCauley	N8512F	204B	QB0885	A/C hit
UTH	17 DEC 71	Capt. F. F. Frahm	H74	UH-34D	XC 4808	Field recd fire

List “Groundfire Reports - December 71 to 9 April 72”, page 1, in: UTD/CIA/B51F12

<sup>48</sup> Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 162/3. “With the occupation of Khong Sedone by the NVA in 1972, the *Operation Brotherhood* hospital was abandoned, and the OB personnel fled to Pakse where they set up a surgical wing at the provincial hospital” (p. 247).

<sup>49</sup> Ramsey et. al., *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 164-68.

<sup>50</sup> Preserved at UTD/CIA/B51F12.

But not only the number of Air America aircraft that received ground fire in Laos increased dramatically in the early seventies, the aircraft that crashed did as well, as did the number of Air America crews who lost their lives. As a consequence, a radio message (XOXO) was sent to the Chief Pilots on 25 April 1972, to be distributed to all flight crew members. That message starts with a list of all the dangers inherent to flying in Laos at that time, then points out that only the judgment of the individual crewmember can determine if a mission will be successful or a failure: "Your evaluation of the total situation including the condition of the aircraft and its equipment, your personal physical and mental state, and the relative urgency of the mission in addition to the factors cited above culminates in a decision as to whether or not the mission should be attempted under the circumstances."<sup>51</sup> The text then continues that sometimes it may be better to "refuse missions which require such maximum performance except under life and death circumstances", and ends with "great respect to the memories of the [...] crewmembers who have been lost or missing since 1 January 1971".

INFO VP LAOS VP DIR PH SON D72 000 000 000  
SUBJ AIR CRAFT ACCIDENT  
REF XOXO VTE D72 241100Z

CHIEF PILOTS PLEASE DISTRIBUTE COPIES OF THIS MESSAGE TO ALL FLIGHT CREW MEMBERS

IT IS WITH DEEP PERSONAL REGRET THAT I CONFIRM THE TRAGIC LOSS OF ANOTHER AAM PILOT YESTERDAY. THE PAST FEW MONTHS HAVE PRODUCED AN APPALLING TOLL IN LIVES AND SERIOUS INJURIES. IN LIGHT OF THIS EVENTS I ASK THAT EACH FLIGHT CREWMEMBER AND EACH SUPERVISOR REAPPRAISE ALL THE FACTORS WHICH MAKE FLYING IN OUR OPERATION A PARTICULARLY UNFORGIVING PROFESSION. WE ARE CALLED UPON TO PERFORM UNDER POSSIBLY THE MOST DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS IN THE WORLD CONSIDERING THE COMBINATION OF REMOTE, MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN, ABSENCE OF MODERN NAVIGATION/COMMUNICATIONS AND AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL FACILITIES, ACTIVE PRESENCE OF HOSTILE ARMED FORCES, ABSENCE OF ADEQUATE MEANS OF REPORTING AND FORECASTING THE VARIED SEASONAL WEATHER AND WINDS, AND MARGINAL AIRFIELDS AND LANDING ZONES, TO NAME A FEW EXAMPLES. ADDITIONALLY IT MUST BE RECOGNIZED THAT PERFORMANCE OF SUPPORT FUNCTIONS SUCH AS MAINTENANCE, TRAFFIC, FLIGHT WATCH, ETC. MUST BE ACCOMPLISHED UNDER EQUALLY TRYING, ALTHOUGH DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES. THESE ACTIVITIES, OPERATING UNDER PRESSURE HAVE VERY REAL PROBLEM AREAS OF THEIR OWN, FOR WHICH CREW MEMBERS MUST BE ON CONSTANT ALERT. THE KEY ELEMENT WHICH MOST OFTEN DETERMINES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF EACH FLIGHT IS THE JUDGEMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL CREWMEMBER. YOUR EVALUATION OF THE TOTAL SITUATION INCLUDING THE CONDITION OF THE AIRCRAFT AND ITS EQUIPMENT, YOUR PERSONAL PHYSICAL AND MENTAL STATE, AND THE RELATIVE URGENCY OF THE MISSION IN ADDITION TO THE FACTORS CITED ABOVE CULMINATES IN A DECISION AS TO WHETHER OR NOT THE MISSION SHOULD BE ATTEMPTED UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES. THAT RESPONSIBILITY IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE, EVEN THOUGH SUCH DECISIONS MUST BE MADE MANY TIMES EACH DAY AND THOUSANDS OF TIMES IN A LIFETIME OF FLYING. THE PRICE FOR ONLY ONE ERRONEOUS ASSESSMENT OF THESE INGREDIENTS ALL TOO OFTEN IS FATAL. IT IS INCUMBENT ON EACH MEMBER OF THE FLYING DIVISION TO EXERCISE ALERTNESS TO RECOGNIZE WHEN SUPPORT, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND PERSONAL FACTORS HAVE COMBINED TO PRODUCE A RISKY OR HAZARDOUS SITUATION REQUIRING THE MAXIMUM PERFORMANCE BY THE AIRCRAFT OR ITS CREW, TO EXERCISE SUFFICIENT SELF-DISCIPLINE AND MATURITY TO REFUSE MISSIONS WHICH REQUIRE SUCH MAXIMUM PERFORMANCE EXCEPT UNDER LIFE OR DEATH CIRCUMSTANCES. AND, TO UNDERSTAND THAT CONTINUED ACCEPTANCE OF HIGH RISK OPERATIONS, EXCEPT UNDER UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES, CAN ONLY LEAD TO FURTHER ACCIDENTS AND HUMAN TRAGEDY, AND IN THE LONG RUN, FAILURE TO MEET CUSTOMER REQUIREMENTS, THE RECENT ACCIDENTS SHOULD MAKE IT INDELIBLY CLEAR IN YOUR MIND, AS IT HAS MINE, THAT VIOLATION OF THESE CONCEPTS DOES HAVE SUCH RESULTS. WITH GREAT RESPECT TO THE MEMORIES OF THE FOLLOWING CREWMEMBERS WHO HAVE BEEN LOST OR MISSING SINCE 1 JANUARY 1971, I ASK EACH OF YOU TO GIVE THIS MATTER YOUR MOST SERIOUS CONSIDERATION.

DATE	A/C NO.	TYPE	POSITION	CREWNAME	REMARKS
20 JAN 71	H78	UH-34D	F/M	E.M. CRUZ	
17 MAR 71	N393R	PC-6C	PIC	K.A. HOUP	
21 MAR 71	XWPCB	PC-6C	PIC	B.A. FRANKLIN	
29 APR 71	N180K	PC-6C	PIC	H.E. MULLHOLLAND	
2 JUN 71	XWPFL	C-46	PIC	H.W. CLARK	
2 JUN 71	XWPFL	C-46	F/O	T. THUTANON	
27 DEC 71	576293	C123K	PIC	G.L. RITTER	MISSING
27 DEC 71	576293	C123K	F/O	R.F. TOWNLEY	MISSING
27 DEC 71	576293	C123K	AFS	E.J. WEISSENBACK	MISSING
27 DEC 71	576293	C123K	AFD	S. KHAMPHANH	MISSING
4 FEB 72	612393	C-7A	AFS	KHAMMOUTH SOUSADALAY	
8 APR 72	N152L	PC-6C	PIC	L.I. WIEHRDT	
24 APR 72	N391R	PC-6C	PIC	L.K. RANDELL	

AVPFO/DFD TPE D72 250230

Warning sent to all crewmembers – XOXO of 25 April 1972, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2

<sup>51</sup> XOXO of 25 April 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2.



Indeed, some of the most dramatic accidents and also some of the most dramatic search and rescue missions ever flown by Air America occurred in the late sixties and in early seventies.

Not all of them, however, were the result of enemy activities – some of those accidents were also due to bad weather. For example C-123K “555” crashed on 27 August 72 into a large ridge line north of Ban Nammeui, when it encountered poor weather conditions in the Nammeui valley consisting of low ragged clouds and poor visibility.<sup>52</sup> But the enemy could be everywhere: Some aircraft were shot down by ground fire, as was XW-PFF: “On the morning of 17 January 1970, Bell 205, XW-PFF, was scheduled to work for the 713 Customer at LS-20A. The Captain was directed by the Customer to proceed to L-22 and he departed LS-20A at 0745L. The enroute flight to L-22 was uneventful as was the subsequent shuttle flight of thirty five minutes conducted from L-22. The Captain was then directed to proceed to Echo pad, UG 0659, with one passenger (Customer) and 400 pounds of cargo. When approximately one mile southwest of Echo pad small arms fire was heard and the aircraft received several hits which resulted in engine flame-out. A successful autorotation was made into an open area at coordinates UG 0470. Under very adverse conditions, the crew and passenger of XW-PFF were evacuated to L-22 by [Air America UH-34D] H-59. XW-PFF was subsequently destroyed by unfriendly forces. There were no injuries to the crew or the passenger.”<sup>53</sup> Other aircraft were destroyed by landmines hidden on the landing strip, as it happened to Porter N195X on 5 April 72. “Air America, Inc. Pilatus Porter PC-6C, N195X, piloted by Captain (PIC) Mathew P. Daddio, landed at Ting Bong (LS-90), Laos, on 5 April 1972. During the following take off phase, the right landing gear apparently contacted a land mine prior to lift off, detonating it and seriously damaging the aircraft. The aircraft was on a scheduled flight from Ban Xon (LS-272), Laos, to LS-90 and return, operating under the provisions of AID Contract 439-713. There were six passengers aboard at the time of the accident. Minor injuries were suffered by the PIC, while two of the passengers received more serious injuries. The burning aircraft was abandoned by PIC and passengers as it rolled over the side of the landing area into a small creek where it burned. The engine propeller and nacelle were later recovered intact, but substantially damaged.”<sup>54</sup>

A particularly treacherous way to attack an Air America aircraft was an ambush, when enemy forces were hidden close to a landing site, just waiting for an aircraft to come in, as it happened to UH-34D H-71 on 17 February 71: “During the afternoon of 17 February 1971, UH-34D, H71 was scheduled to work out of L-54 (Luang Prabang), Laos. The aircraft was piloted by Captain Robert P. Caron and co-captained by Frederic F. Frahm. Flight mechanic duties were performed by [name blackened]. One passenger, an interpreter, was also aboard the aircraft. Captain Caron was directed by the customer to proceed to a landing zone, grid coordinates TJ 5827. He departed L-54 at 0710Z (1410L) accompanied by UH-34Ds, H73 and H64. His trip to the landing zone was uneventful. After arriving at the landing zone, Captain Caron instructed his crew and the one passenger on board to search the high grass on and around the landing zone for any hidden personnel. He made one circle over the landing zone and noted four personnel, in military uniform, standing in tall grass in the middle of the zone with their hands in the air. This was a pre-arranged signal. Captain Caron, after his final

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<sup>52</sup> Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B61F8.

<sup>53</sup> Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/Hickler/B24F2. The crews of UH-34D H-59 and Porter N358F, which also participated in the rescue mission, were subsequently commended by the CIA: “Hqs wishes to specifically commend pilots L. M. Prulhiere and E. G. Steale, flight mechanic R. A. Ramos and Air America Captain Les Bays for their courageous action resulting in the successful rescue of the downed crew and passenger of an Air America helicopter on 17 January. Despite the fact that the crew of H-59 and the Porter 58-F received heavy ground fire and without regard to their personal safety, they displayed a dedication to duty and a coolness under fire which is most certainly in the highest traditions of any service of the U.S. Government. Please convey Hqs admiration and deep gratitude for their heroic actions.” (see the document at: <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266383.pdf> of the CIA).

<sup>54</sup> Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/Anthony/F4.

turn, brought his aircraft almost to a hover and observed one man dive to the ground. Immediately after, automatic weapons fire erupted from all sides of the aircraft. The aircraft sustained several hits and the engine failed. An emergency engine-out landing was executed with rotor inertia and up collective used to cushion the landing. The aircraft landed intact in an upright position at about 1530. The crew members and passenger exited rapidly and became separated in tall grass. After approximately two hours all personnel were rescued and returned to Udorn, Thailand. The Co-Captain, F. F. Frahm, was wounded in the forehead by metal fragments and the Flight Mechanic [name blackened] received a bullet wound in the upper left chest and a wound on the right knee. The Captain, R. P. Caron, received minor cuts and bruises. Recovery of the aircraft was precluded because of hostile action in the area.”<sup>55</sup> Sometimes, even friendlies fired at Air America aircraft: Most of the time, the short hop between Long Tieng and Sam Thong had been considered to be a safe flight, because the mountains lying between the two points were held by friendly troops. Then, on 19 August 1969, Air America Porter N196X was shot at and subsequently crashed killing all on board: “At approximately 1655L on 19 August 1969, PC-6C, N196X, owned and operated by Air America Inc., and operating under the provisions of AID 439-713 contract, departed Long Tieng (LS-20A) for Sam Thong (LS-20), Laos. The aircraft was piloted by Captain R. S. Davis and there were 12 passengers aboard. Five minutes later, during an enroute climb, the aircraft was observed to perform an erratic maneuver for the nature of the flight involved and crashed into a hillside. All aboard were fatally injured and the aircraft was destroyed by impact and fire. It was determined that the probable cause of this accident was the fatal wounding of the pilot by a bullet fired from a source outside the aircraft resulting in the loss of control.”<sup>56</sup> The Memorial file adds: “reportedly shot down by Meo”.<sup>57</sup>

### **SAR missions flown for Company aircraft**

One of the most dramatic search and rescue missions flown by Air America aircraft in the early seventies was that for C-123K “293”. In the morning of 27 December 1971, C-123K “293” left Udorn for Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69) on a flight for *Peppergrinder*, carrying “12,892 pounds of mixed ordnance including 75mm shells, 81mm rounds, 222 caliber small arms ammunition and white phosphorus smoke rounds”.<sup>58</sup> The “aircraft probably disappeared at about 0900L but UTH [= Udorn] became highly concerned 1100-1200L and VTE [= Vientiane] (the prime control agency) did not instigate notification procedures until 1400L.”<sup>59</sup> The main reason for this several hours delay in starting a Search and Rescue mission seems to have been a false radio report stating that “293” had landed at LS-69 and was now enroute back to Udorn. As the first XOXO (radio message) about that accident states: “Flight watch shows departure from LS69 at 270320Z [that is 10.20 hours local time] for T08.”<sup>60</sup> The reason why “293” disappeared was never determined, but “the aircraft probably strayed from course and, over exceedingly hostile country, was hit by enemy fire and rapidly destroyed.”<sup>61</sup> What happened to the crew of “293”, that is to Pilot in Command George L. Ritter, co-pilot Roy F. Townley and kickers Edward J. Weissenback and Khamphanh Saysongkham,<sup>62</sup> is unknown. According to that XOXO, “SAR initiated 270615Z”, that is at 13.15 hours local time, adding that “AAM aircraft involved were C46 XWPBU [probably XW-PBV, as there was no XW-

<sup>55</sup> Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B60F19.

<sup>56</sup> Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/Dreifus/B1F10.

<sup>57</sup> Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3; Robbins, *Air America*, p. 125, says the same thing.

<sup>58</sup> Accident report of this accident, p. 2, in: UTD/CIA/B15F4.

<sup>59</sup> P. R. O'Brien (Director of Safety), Letter to the President dated 18 January 72 (DSAFE-72-19), in: UTD/CIA/B29F2.

<sup>60</sup> XOXO of 27 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2.

<sup>61</sup> Accident report of this accident, p. 13, in: UTD/CIA/B15F4.

<sup>62</sup> Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3; XOXO dated 25 April 72, in: UTD/Luckett/B1F3.

PBU], VTB's N9542Z, [N]9671C, PC6's N359F, N195X. N9542Z took battle damage approximately 1000Z [that is at 5 pm] at coordinates QC4013. N9671C escorted aircraft to UTH. N9671C returned to SAR approximately 1230Z [that is at 7.30 pm]. 71C ended SAR for M27 [= December 27<sup>th</sup>] at 1633Z [that is at 11.33 pm]. [...] Will continue SAR M28 using C123K 554545, VTB N9157Z, PC6 N365F".<sup>63</sup> But in the evening of 28 December, another XOXO reported "SAR efforts M28 had negative results. Will continue SAR [using Helio] XWPCD"<sup>64</sup>, and similar reports were sent in the evening of 29, 30, and 31 December 71.<sup>65</sup> At the end, the search and rescue mission remained unsuccessful: "With a few breaks due to weather and one false lead from a native claiming to have seen an aircraft,<sup>66</sup> the SAR continued through 5 January 1972. All efforts to find traces of 293 were unsuccessful. Due to the extreme hostility of the area, several AAM, Inc. aircraft received battle damage while on the SAR. Due to the proximity of the hostile Route 46, the SAR was rather constricted in nature. The final effort consisted of dropping leaflets offering rewards for information and/or the aircrew. The SAR, although late in starting, was as thorough as terrain, the weather and the enemy would permit. Further air search was deemed fruitless after 5 January 1972."<sup>67</sup> Yet, in spite of the official end of the Search and Rescue efforts, Air America pilots continued to look for their lost colleagues, as did PIC R. A. Main and co-pilot James H. Rhyne in their Volpar N9671C on 15 January 72, when they dropped leaflets at 13,000 to 14,000 feet near the Chinese Road in Laos in an effort to find Capt. Ritter and his crew missing in C-123K "293". During that flight, Capt. Rhyne was hit by a large caliber round and seriously injured, suffering from multiple wounds, while he was sitting in the back seat throwing out the reward leaflets; the PIC, Capt. R. A. Main, immediately flew him the 150 miles to Udorn. During that flight, MAFS R. J. Herald, who had minor injuries to his face, "applied a tourniquet to Jim's leg, I believe with his belt, which most probably saved his life".<sup>68</sup> Frank Bonansinga escorted them back to Udorn.<sup>69</sup> At Udorn the aircraft made an uneventful high speed landing, and Capt. Rhyne was immediately transported to the local USAF hospital and taken to surgery, but a part of his right leg below the knee had to be amputated; N9671C was later repaired.<sup>70</sup>

Another SAR mission of that period, that was particularly dramatic, was the one that was set up after the loss of C-123K "648" on 6 December 1972. "On 6 December 1972, C123K 54648 was on scheduled mission from Pakse (L-11), Laos to drop miscellaneous cargo to two forward areas in the LS-180 area. After successfully completing the drop at the first site, and while approaching the second drop zone, the aircraft received several rounds of hostile ground fire. Control of the aircraft was subsequently lost and all crewmembers (Capt. N. G. Hansen, F/O W. C. Crothers, AFDs [names blackened])<sup>71</sup> parachuted to safety and were taken to L-11

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<sup>63</sup> XOXO of 27 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2.

<sup>64</sup> XOXO of 28 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2.

<sup>65</sup> "SAR efforts M29 had negative results. Weather precluded full day's search. Will continue SAR M30 utilizing DHC6 N5662, H395 XWPEA" (XOXO of 29 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2). "SAR efforts M30 proved negative. Weather precluded full day's search. Will continue SAR M31 using VTB N9671C" (XOXO of 30 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2). "Weather today was good but no results on SAR. On A01 [= 1 January 72] will set up ground work for more positive approach to SAR on A02, hopefully with better results" (XOXO of 31 December 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2).

<sup>66</sup> The XOXO of 4 January 72 (in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2) reports: "Presently interrogating indigenous witness who claims to have seen a stricken aircraft in vicinity of SAR efforts. Will proceed depending on validity of information."

<sup>67</sup> Accident report of this accident, p. 5, in: UTD/CIA/B15F4. The XOXO of 5 January 72 (in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2) notes: "SAR efforts A05 utilizing H-395 aircraft XWPGC and XWPGM yielded. Negative results."

<sup>68</sup> E-mail by G.C. Odgers dated 22 Oct. 2003.

<sup>69</sup> E-mail dated 20 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Frank Bonansinga.

<sup>70</sup> XOXOs of 15 and 16 Jan. 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; UTD/Leary/B1 for 15 January 72; Accident summary, in: UTD/Hickler/B24F2; additional information kindly supplied by G. C. Odgers in his e-mail dated 22 October 2003 to Dr. E. Carlson who forwarded it to the author.

<sup>71</sup> The kickers were S. Sompop and V. Boonma (XOXO of 6 Dec. 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2).

by various company helicopters. The aircraft crashed and was consumed in the ensuing fire.”<sup>72</sup> Although all crewmembers arrived on the ground with only minor injuries, it took no less than 4 Air America helicopters to bring them back to Pakse. The first helicopter to arrive at the crash site was UH-34D H-52, piloted by Captain R. C. Thierault.<sup>73</sup> H-52 picked up First Officer Crothers and one of the kickers on the ground and used the cable hoist for Captain Hansen. In picking up the Captain, the tail rotor of H-52 contacted nearby trees. So H-52 was flown to Toong Set (LS-449), where a precautionary landing was intended. Due to vibrations, however, possibly caused by the damaged tail rotor, the helicopter was forced to set down prematurely near LS-449 in a mine field. Another UH-34D, H-53, piloted by H. J. Thompson, flew to the site where H-52 had landed and picked up the crew of H-52 and their passengers. “At this time I was three quarters of the way back to L-11 and headed back to pick up the crew and pax of H-52. I landed at the down site with 275 lbs of fuel and made it several miles before I landed at a friendly position with 50 lbs of fuel remaining.”<sup>74</sup> This was some 25 minutes out of the LS-449 area enroute to Pakse (L-11). S-58T XW-PHE returned these personnel to L-11, while in the meantime, UH-34D H-81 had picked up the second kicker and returned him, too, to Pakse.<sup>75</sup>

### **SAR missions flown for the US military and for the Royal Laotian Air Force**

Little is known about SAR missions flown by Air America crews to pick up USAF personnel downed in Laos during that period. The reason seems to be given by Ben Van Etten in his article: “Normally the military took care of their own SAR’s, but Air America made many rescues simply because we were in the area. Some times the Air Force was its own worst enemy because by the time birds were scrambled, briefed, cover provided, and authentication of the downed pilot (as if the enemy would stage a fake crash) were made, he’d probably be captured. On two other occasions I’d picked up a downed crew, moved them to a safe area, and finally the military would make their pick up.”<sup>76</sup> This “separatist” attitude is confirmed by the mission Van Etten describes: On 18 March 72, the USAF airborne controller for search and rescue asked for “any Air America helicopter in the Savannakhet area that might be available to help rescue a downed pilot”. That day, Van Etten flew UH-34D H-70 in the vicinity of the downed OV-10, but when the Air America pilot asked for the precise coordinates of that OV-10, “Sandy One”, a USAF A1E that flew cover refused to pass them, because USAF CH-53s were to do the job. But when the same “Sandy One” was hit by enemy fire and had crashed, Van Etten’s H-70 was allowed to rescue the downed pilot of that A1E – no more word about the downed OV-10.

However, the extracts from ABCCC – Cricket & Hillsboro – that were published by the *Ravens* at <http://www.ravens.org/abccc.htm> list several of those rescue missions:

“In April four USAF aircraft went down in the day Barrel Roll area. Four crewmen were recovered but three are MIA. Falcon 75 went down on 22 April and both men were picked up the next day. Raven 50, with Raven in the back seat, went down on 24 April; both pilots are MIA. In May three aircraft were downed and all five pilots were rescued by Air America. [1970]”

“Air America stated that LS-33 and all surrounding friendly positions were overrun. An unknown number of refugees were captured by the enemy. Rainbow was proceeding south. Apparently he abandoned his outpost last night. Cricket never established radio contact. Watts reported intermittent contact throughout the day. Tiger 01 was hit in the LS-32 area by 12.7mm gun fire and both crewmembers ejected. The crew was picked up by Air America

<sup>72</sup> Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B61F15.

<sup>73</sup> XOXO of H-52 accident of 6 December 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2.

<sup>74</sup> Statement dated 15 December 1972 by Capt. H. J. Thompson, in: UTD/CIA/B61F15.

<sup>75</sup> Accident report of this accident in: UTD/CIA/B61F15.

<sup>76</sup> Van Etten, “Rescue”, pp. 1/2.



helicopters 76 Hotel and 96 Whiskey. Both men were in good condition. Air America 96 Whiskey was hit by small arms fire and one of its crewmembers was hit in the shoulder. Raven 22 was the on-scene SAR commander. A RLAFF T-28 reported that he spotted supplies in the open and 'live' trucks parked next to 'dead' trucks in an attempt at camouflage. He also spotted fresh trails in and out of the area and he requested additional ordinance at first light on the 8th. [7 May 1970]"

"... Weather was excellent on 16 January. Wildcat reported TIC. Raven 51, flying an O-1, had an engine failure due to complete loss of oil at 0145Z. Raven made for an open field and made a successful emergency landing at UF833500. He was picked up at 0230Z by an Air America helicopter. [1971]"

"... Weather in the Barrel Roll was workable for visual flights most of the day on 8 February. Raven 25 was forced to bail out of his aircraft in the middle of a strike mission. He was rescued 24 minutes later by Air America helicopter 96W. [1971]"

"... Two trucks were destroyed on 20 March. The Ravens directed 37 strike sorties in support of ground forces. Raven 27 received battle damage and he was forced to put the aircraft down at LS-72. He was picked up by an Air America helicopter at 0945Z. [1971]"

"... As Moonbeam assumed station Raven 42 was requesting ordinance for two enemy tanks at XB217798. At 1055Z Raven 42 was shot down by a 12.7 mm gun and crash landed at 050/25/82. Raven 44 and four Navy flights provided excellent support. At 1137Z Raven 42 and his back-seater were picked up by Air America helicopter Hotel 88. [11 June 1971]"

"... Raven 52 had engine failure. Raven was picked up at UG545575 by Air America at 0358Z. [29 January 1972]"

"... On 31 January Lulu had a ground assault. Crowbar, Wild Bill and Spotlight had attacks by fire. Raven 11 was downed at TH0302 southeast of L-54. He was recovered by Air America at 1035Z. [1972]"

"... On 24 March Raven 41 declared an emergency at 0958Z. Bulldog gave his general position at WB9778 on the east side of the mountain. Both crewmembers were picked up by H45 (Air America). Raven 41 had engine failure. [24 March 1972]"

"... On 31 March the SAR for Spectre 22 was concluded at 0230Z. All fifteen crewmembers were picked up. The Jolly Greens picked up thirteen and Air America picked up the other two. There were no serious injuries reported. [1972]"<sup>77</sup>

However, the commendations Air America received at that time do speak for themselves. On 28 December 70, the US Dept. of the Air Force thanked Air America pilots Capt. K. E. Wood and W. R. Hutchinson for rescuing the crew of a USAF aircraft call-sign "Laredo 14 which had ejected over Barrel Roll" on 19 December 70.<sup>78</sup> On 27 September 71, the Air Attaché to the US Embassy at Vientiane thanked the crew of Air America UH-34D H-89 (Don Henthorn, R. D. Decosta, and P. V. Lorenzo) for rescuing RLAFF pilot Sourisack Savong shot down on the Plain of Jars on 20 September 71.<sup>79</sup> On 22 January 72, Major General D. R. Searles of the Dept. of the Air Force wrote: "I wish to convey my personal appreciation and commendation to two of your helicopter crews for their exceptional aerial skill in the rescue of the crew members of an RF-4C, Bullwhip 26, on 20 January 1972. The efforts of Messrs. Lee Andrews, Nicki Filippi and Ron Anderson in AA Helicopter XWPFH, and John Fonberg, William Phillips and Bob Noble in AA Helicopter 8513F, were truly outstanding. In spite of a known 37MM high threat area and small arms fire, these crew members disregarded their own personal safety to perform a heroic recovery. The quick response to the distress call and actual recovery in near record time were unquestionably instrumental in saving the lives of the

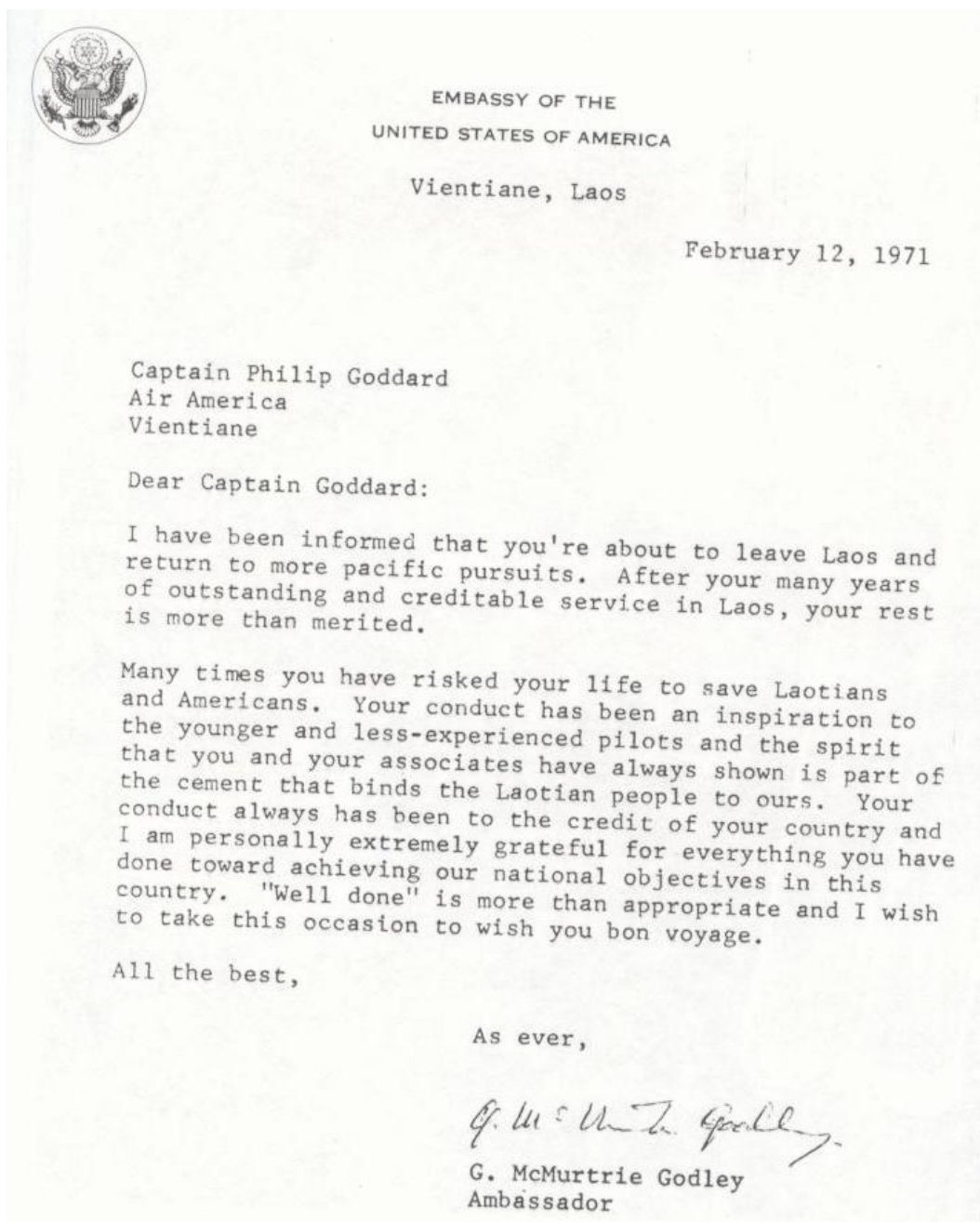
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<sup>77</sup> From the extracts from ABCCC – Cricket & Hillsboro – that were published by the *Ravens* at <http://www.ravens.org/abccc.htm>.

<sup>78</sup> See the commendation at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266384.pdf>.

<sup>79</sup> See the commendation at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266391.pdf>.

USAF RF-4C crew members.”<sup>80</sup> Already on 21 January 72, General Lavelle had thanked Air America by telex,<sup>81</sup> and on 10 February 72, the CIA noted that this was “an example of correspondence relatively frequently received by the Company, and especially these months, for help in Laos.”<sup>82</sup>



Commendation of 12 February 71  
(*Air America Log*, vol. V, no. 3, 1971, p. 2)

Another Commendation refers to the pick-up of the crew of a downed USAF aircraft made on 2 September 1971 by two Air America helicopters. The location is not given, but at that time, Air America's Bell 205s and UH-34s operated only in Laos.

<sup>80</sup> See the commendation at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266397.pdf>.

<sup>81</sup> See the telex at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266402.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> See the document at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266399.pdf>.

FROM: Department of the Air Force  
Headquarters 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (PACAF)  
APO San Francisco 96237

8 September 1971

REPLY TO ATTN OF: CC

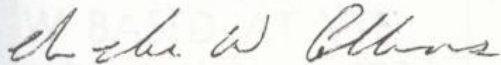
SUBJECT: Rescue of Downed F-4 Aircrew

TO: Base Manager, Air America, Inc.

c/o Air Force Liaison Officer

Box 62, APO San Francisco 96237

1. On 2 September 1971, one of the aircrews of the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) "Panther Pack" received battle damage to their aircraft and crashed in a ball of flames. Fortunately, both crew members were able to eject prior to impact, but they were both injured. Incapacitated and helpless on the ground, in Indochina, they were in imminent danger of capture or death from hostile forces surrounding them. Two Air America helicopter crews saved their lives by landing in the open field to pick them up, even though under enemy fire.
2. A Bell 205, crewed by Mr. Ted Cash, Mr. Wayne Lannin, and Mr. William Parker, rescued Captain Ron Fitzgerald, the Weapons System Officer of the fighter. Both Mr. Lannin and Mr. Parker risked their lives by exposing themselves directly to enemy fire to hoist the injured Captain Fitzgerald aboard the helicopter.
3. An H-34, piloted by Mr. Don Henthorn, landed to pick up Major Jim Compton, the Aircraft Commander of the downed fighter, while a crew member, Mr. Ernie Cortez, risked his life by exposing himself to hostile ground fire to lift Major Compton into the helicopter.
4. The two helicopters took off in a hail of enemy fire and airlifted the injured Panthers to a landing site nearby where they were transferred to an Air America Porter aircraft. They were then airlifted to a staging base, where they were attended by a surgeon and subsequently were returned to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base aboard an Air America C-123 aircraft.
5. The deep gratitude felt by the 13th TFS towards the valiant Air America crews who saved our comrades is difficult to express. There is no doubt that their prompt, heroic action saved two lives that day. We will long remember and be grateful for their actions. We all hope that we may be of help if Air America crew ever face a similar test.
6. Letters are never as warm as a drink and a handshake. The 13th TFS, therefore, cordially invites Messrs. Cash, Lannin, Parker, Henthorn, and Cortez to be our guests at a going-away "Sawadee Party" for some of our men who are completing their combat tours in Southeast Asia. The party will be held on 18 September at 1900 hours in the main banquet room of the Udorn Officers' Open Mess. The "Panther Pack" is looking forward to thanking all of these men in person.
7. To all of the personnel of Air America, the 13th TFS "Panther Pack" sends a "Well Done" with admiration for the fine work done day after day in support of our allies in Southeast Asia. Keep up the good work!



CHARLES W. COLLINS, Lt Colonel, USAF  
Commander

Commendation of 8 September 1971  
(*Air America Log*, vol. VI, no. 2, 1972, p. 8)

One more Commendation published here refers to an unsuccessful, but very courageous attempt made by the crews of 7 Air America helicopters on 7 November 1972 to pick up a downed Forward Air Controller and to a successful Search and Rescue mission flown on 9 November 1972, when Air America Bell 205 XW-PFJ crewed by Captain J. D. Fonburg, First Officer R. R. Zappardino, and Flight Mechanic T. W. Yourglich rescued a downed Lao pilot. All of these Commendations – together with many others not referring to Search and Rescue missions flown in Laos to pick up US and allied military personnel – were once published in the *Air America Log*, evidently in order to encourage others to follow those examples.





EMBASSY OF THE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

APO San Francisco 96352

OFFICE OF THE AIR ATTACHE

13 November 1972

SUBJECT: Letter of Appreciation

TO: Mr. James A. Cunningham, Jr.  
Vice President, Laos  
Air America, Inc.

1. Air America has established a tradition of heroism and bravery in helicopter operations, especially in the recovery of downed crew members. For some time now I have intended to convey my admiration for a job well done. Recently two search and rescue efforts were undertaken by your crews that were so noteworthy that I can no longer refrain from expressing my gratitude.

2. These two missions, one of 7 November and the other on 9 November, are typical of the devotion and selfless dedication of your pilots. The SAR on 7 November, although not resulting in the recovery of one of our FAC's, was so courageously supported by your company, that it has warranted the respect of all my personnel. Seven of your crews participated in this endeavor. Please extend my personal thanks to the crews of PFJ, PFH, PHD, 96W, 35F and 12F. The latter two crews performed heroically and with complete disregard for their personal safety in an attempt to save a downed airman. The other crews, although not as intimately involved, were there willing and able to assist if needed. It is reassuring to all of us to know that in the case of an emergency that a concerted rescue effort will be made. This point was dramatically proven on 9 November when a downed Lao pilot was rescued within minutes of extraction by the crew of PFJ.

3. Because of these actions and of those of the past, I extend to you and your crews my most heartfelt appreciation, gratitude and admiration.

*Hayden C. Curry*  
HAYDEN C. CURRY, Colonel, USAF  
Air Attache

**THE RESCUERS**

Here are the names, by aircraft, of the Air America crewmembers involved in the SAR (Search And Rescue) missions on 7 November, 1972:

XM-PFJ	N8535F	N1196W
Capt. F. N. Smith	Capt. M. Jarina	Capt. P. L. Colgan
F/O A. W. Wilbur	F/O G. Taylor	F/O R. H. Wright
F/M W. J. Parker	F/M T. W. Younglich	F/M J. E. Israel
F/M B. Boonreung		
XM-PHD	XM-PFH	N8512F
Capt. W. Hutchison	Capt. V. R. Broz	Capt. T. R. Cash
F/O P. G. Gregoire	F/O W. F. Collier	F/O R. A. Heibel
F/M M. A. Leveriza	F/M J. G. Dimaandal	F/M G. R. Neufeld

The rescue of the downed pilot on 9 November, 1972, involved the following crew in XM-PFJ:

Capt. J.D. Fonburg  
F/O R.R. Zappardino  
F/M T.W. Younglich

(NOTE: All the above-mentioned choppers and flight crews are based at Udorn, Thailand.)

Commendation of 13 November 1972  
(Air America Log, vol. VII, no. 1, 1973, p. 4)

**Med-evac**

Med-evac or Medical evacuation flights were frequent missions assigned to Air America's helicopters, and those flights were always very dangerous, because most of the time, the landing pad was still under hostile fire. This is underlined by the commendation from the CIA



that the crew of Bell 204B N1196W received on 7 March 72 thru the hands of Air America's Vice-President Clarence Abadie: "Dear Mr. Abadie, Capt. Herb Baker, First Officer A. R. Tafoya and Flight Mechanic G. M. Burch, the flight crew of Bell helicopter 96W on 23 Feb 72, deserve special commendation for their outstanding performance and dedication. This crew successfully medevac'ed several wounded men from an upcountry site despite the fact it was completely dark by the time they arrived at the pickup site. Although there were more injured than could be carried in one load, this crew volunteered to return for the remainder of the wounded and were only prevented from attempting this mission due to loss of security at the friendly position. Their willingness to respond caught the attention of the men who work daily with these outstanding airmen and sparked this expression of appreciation and recognition. Please convey our deepest gratitude to Capt. Baker and his crew for their gallantry and our respect for their professionalism."<sup>83</sup>

A dramatic report is preserved of the accident that occurred to UH-34D H-85 on 12 June 72: "On 12 June 1972, Air America, Inc. helicopters UH-34D, H-85 and H-86 were scheduled to medical evacuate 12 wounded personnel from UTM Grid Coordinates PB-5383. After a briefing by Customer personnel at LS-69A (Ban Xieng Lom), Laos, Captain J. E. Rausch, Jr., PIC of H-85 and Captain T. A. Richie, PIC of H-86 conducted a reconnaissance flight of the pick-up area in Air America, Inc. PC-6C, N360F. This reconnaissance flight was conducted apparently without incident and on the return to LS-69A another briefing was held. During this briefing H-85 was scheduled as the pick-up aircraft and H-86 was assigned as Search and Rescue aircraft. According to flight log records H-85 took off from LS-274 at 0805Z and picked up 8 wounded personnel at PB-5383 and transported them to LS-177 (Ban Moung), Laos as briefed. At 0835Z H-85 again took off to pick up the remaining 4 wounded at PB-5383 however the plan was changed while the aircraft was enroute and H-85 was diverted to PB-5190 to pick up 2 seriously wounded and 4 deceased personnel. The previous day 11 June 1972 Captain Rausch and crew landed at coordinates PB-5190 without incident however before proceeding to the new landing zone, Captain Rausch checked on the landing zone tactical situation from the Customer who was riding in N360F which was near the pick-up coordinates. After receiving word that the pick-up zone was reported normal, H-85 commenced the approach. As the aircraft was touching down on the HLZ, ground fire was heard and an immediate takeoff with a departure turn to the left was executed. During the liftoff the SIC, [Second in Command, name blackened] reported he heard continuous ground fire and after traversing an undetermined distance the SIC reported he heard plexiglass break on the right side of the cockpit and saw Captain Rausch's neck bend down. At this time [name blackened] stated he immediately took the controls and observed that Captain Rausch's shoulder harness was not locked. Fearing that the PIC might slump over and restrict the cyclic control, [name blackened] reported he reached across the center instrument pedestal and locked the initial reel lock on Captain Rausch's shoulder harness and also pushed the cyclic control forward to gain airspeed and commenced turning left and right for he could still hear small arms fire and felt H-85 was still being shot at. During this time Flight Mechanic [name blackened] thought both pilots had been hit and attempted to get on the controls. Once he was aware that the SIC was not hit he released the controls and suggested the SIC transmit a "May Day" distress call which the SIC complied with. The initial reported intent of [name blackened] was to land at LS-147 which was the closest landing zone but enroute he decided to land at LS-177 because he had previously dropped wounded personnel there and was aware of the security situation. Upon landing at LS-177 Captain Rausch was pronounced dead by Company personnel and Flight Mechanic S. G. Sickler from H-86 and other personnel transported Captain Rausch's body from H-85 and loaded it aboard PC-6C, N360F for further transport to LS-274. On arrival at LS-274 Captain Rausch was examined and pronounced

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<sup>83</sup> See the commendation at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266403.pdf> .

dead by a Customer Doctor and it was revealed that a small caliber bullet entered the external corner of the right eye and exited out the left side of the neck. Death was considered to have been immediate. Examination of H-85 revealed one small caliber bullet hole entered the right front windshield near the pilot mirror attaching post and no other aircraft damage was sustained by the aircraft. After personnel were examined at LS-274 Captain Rausch's body and [names blackened] were transported to T-08 (Udorn), Thailand. On arrival Captain Rausch's body was again examined and the official death certificate was prepared at the Air America, Inc., Medical Clinic by [name blackened] (see attached documents). **Conclusion:** Fatal injury to the PIC and minor aircraft damage as a direct result of hostile gun fire at a position where hostile forces were highly suspected."<sup>84</sup>

Sometimes, Med-Evac missions flown into a combat zone were made by 3 UH-34s – 2 aircraft to pick up the wounded, while the third helicopter would remain high and become the SAR aircraft in case one of the others was shot down. On 18 March 1972, Ben Van Etten and his UH-34D H-70 were the first of 3 UH-34Ds to land at a location, where Lao troops had been wounded by enemy fire, and while they were still loading litters and walking wounded, the helicopter was shot at. Only at the very last moment, the CIA case officer who had examined the terrain at the beginning could jump onto the helicopter already taking off. "There was also a wounded soldier hanging on to the wheel strut! The back of his shirt was covered with blood and as we gained airspeed and altitude, I expected to watch his body drop hundreds of feet into the jungle. Too bad. Suddenly, the muscular arm of my flight mechanic, Jim Nakamoto, reached out the aircraft cargo door, grabbed the soldier's shirt, and yanked him inside! Another life saved, as we heard later, because the soldier survived from his wounds."<sup>85</sup>

Sometimes, Med-Evac missions were combined with resupply missions: The crew of an Air America helicopter could receive the order to deliver troops or supplies to a forward position, and when fighting started, the crew would evacuate the wounded. Such a combination of resupply and Med-Evac flight happened to 4 Air America UH-34Ds on 19 October 72. "On 19 October 1972, Air America, Inc. UH-34D, H62 crewed by Captain (PIC) B. Com-Intra, Second-in-Command (SIC) S. Swangpant and Flight Mechanic (FM) S. Sittisongkram,<sup>86</sup> was assigned to work in the Pakse (L-11) area for the -0002 Customer. H62 and other involved UH-34D aircraft worked in and around the L-11 area for most of the morning and early afternoon uneventfully performing routine internal/external cargo and passenger lifts for the Customer. In the afternoon, the Customer at L-11 briefed the aircrews of four UH-34D aircraft, including H62, to conduct a troop transport from Phou Lat Seu (referred to as either LS-418 or PS-18), Laos to Saravane (L-44), Laos. This was to be the fourth troop lift of the day into the L-44 area. The first lift was uneventful. On the second lift, six helicopters (not AAM operated) had received battle damages and on the third lift, two (not AAM operated) helicopters had been hit at low level south of the runway at L-44. The Customers, however, felt that the area south and southwest of the runway at L-44 (the HLZ) was now neutralized and should probably offer the safest approach. There were supposedly eight hundred friendly forces in and around the HLZ at the programmed time of arrival of the four UH-34Ds.

The PIC of H59, as senior AAM Captain on the scene, planned the actual flight into L-44. It was to be a three helicopter transport to the HLZ consisting of, in order, H 59, H 52 and H 62 with the empty H 89 remaining high to act as a SAR (Search and Rescue) aircraft if required. Two covering aircraft ("Hobos") and a FAC (Forward Air Controller – "Raven")

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<sup>84</sup> Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B61F5.

<sup>85</sup> Van Etten, "Rescue", pp. 6-7.

<sup>86</sup> The names of all crewmembers are blackened in the accident report of this accident preserved at UTD/CIA/B61F12, but have been added from the XOXO of this accident preserved at UTD/Hickler/B27F2.

were in the area providing cover. The general plan was for each aircraft to drop the passengers and pick up wounded for evacuation. H59 made the first landing coming in at tree top level directly along the runway at 060°. The PIC received the proper ground signal, landed, dropped the passengers, picked up nine wounded troops and executed a 180° turn proceeding basically out the reciprocal route. There were incoming mortars at the time but no problems were encountered. The second aircraft, H52, proceeded along the same path and brought out several (seven or eight) passengers. A mortar attack occurred as H52 was on the ground and it was later found that one main rotor blade had been damaged. The third aircraft, H62, landed the same way, dropped the passengers, picked up seven passengers and departed along the southern side of the runway. He completed about three quarters of a turn to the southwest when hit by numerous small arms (probably 12.7 mm) fire. H62 immediately lost power and, on fire, was autorotated into a marshy area just south of the western end of the runway. The PIC of H62 called that his aircraft was hit and going down which alerted the SAR aircraft, H89. The PIC of H89 landed beside H62, also started to take fire, but picked up the three crew members and five of the seven passengers from H62. This PIC felt he could not carry all the load and called for further assistance with H59 responding. H59 also took fire seriously wounding the SIC and fatally wounding two passengers. H89 took all but two from H62, who reportedly were fatalities, and departed the area.

In summation, four passengers were fatalities. The UH-34Ds, H52, H59 and H89 received minor shrapnel/bullet strikes but were successfully flown from the scene, and one UH-34D, H62, was destroyed on the site by fire. Three Air America, Inc. aircrew members received minor and serious wounds from which they were recovering.”<sup>87</sup>

### **Flying services for other USAID programs**

But there were many other USAID activities in Laos Air America was involved with even during the early seventies. “The largest development project in Laos, the Nam Ngum hydroelectric power dam and transmission system, completed in 1971, was 50 percent funded with U. S. assistance funds. This dam and the 30 MW generating capacity it provided initially were sufficient to provide all power needs of Vientiane city and some surrounding areas as well as to earn foreign exchange from power exports to Thailand.”<sup>88</sup> When the Nam Tan irri-



Air America Caribou “171” sporting the Erawan

Air America at Nam Tan in 1971

(*Air America Log*, vol. V, 1971: photos no. 6, p.9, and no. 5, p.1)

<sup>87</sup> Accident report of this accident, in: UTD/CIA/B61F12.

<sup>88</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 6; see also *ib.*, p. 328.

gation dam in Sayaboury province was inaugurated in 1971, Air America Caribou “171” – sporting the Erawan on that occasion – transported their Royal Lao Majesties, King Sri Savang Vatthana and Queen Khampoui to Nam Tan, while 2 Air America C-123Ks brought in high-ranking Lao Government officials, members of the Vientiane Diplomatic Corps, and newsmen. In MR IV a similar project was accomplished with French and German assistance: “the electrification of Pakse. This entailed construction of the Selabam Dam on the Sedone River north of Pakse by the French, construction by the French of the generating plant at the dam site, and installation of the distribution system by the Germans.”<sup>89</sup> “In 1970-71, the A.I.D. established MR II as a ‘High Priority’ area for economic and support programs. [...] In order to improve agriculture in the area, experiments with various types of crops were conducted, fruit trees were planted in several areas, and a fish hatchery and forestry station were constructed. With the increase in roads, it became possible to market crops from remote areas. Four ‘farm service centers’ were constructed for the sale of seeds, fertilizer, rice, animal feed, and other farming and household needs.”<sup>90</sup> But also “fish culture was an important activity. A.I.D. assisted with the construction of a fish hatchery station in Nam Moh (LS 207).”<sup>91</sup> Since the early seventies, USAID’s “Agriculture” division also received a new job – to seek and develop acceptable cash crop substitutes for opium for the hill tribes of Laos,<sup>92</sup> after in September 1971, the Royal Lao Government had enacted legislation prohibiting the commercial production and marketing of opium and its derivatives.<sup>93</sup> Since Laos did not have an anti-narcotics law at that time, there was no substantive basis for the enforcement like a special police, customs etc., so the US provided help by a training program. Personnel, commodity and participant training levels reached their peak in Fiscal Year 1973 with the complement of 8 US Customs advisors under an agreement with USAID, 5 USAID Public Safety Narcotics advisors, and other specialists working in the detoxification programs<sup>94</sup> as well as contract personnel who were responsible for the inspection of all US Mission aircraft to see that no illicit narcotics were being transported on them.<sup>95</sup> These efforts probably explain some flights that Air America made for USAID’s Customs Assistance Division (CAD) or Public Safety Division (PSD):<sup>96</sup> For example, on 19 August 72, Porter N355F flew for the CAD from Vientiane to Sayaboury (L-23) and Ban Houei Sai (L-25) “as directed”, and on 28 August 72, Volpar N9664C flew for USAID’s PSD from Vientiane via Udorn to Chiang Mai (T-11) and back, and to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) and back to Vientiane on 5 September 72, to mention just a few examples<sup>97</sup> – they probably carried personnel who worked for those programs. Indeed, USAID’s anti-narcotics effort was especially strong in Laos’s Military Region I.<sup>98</sup> Finally, a high elevation experiment station was constructed at

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<sup>89</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 250.

<sup>90</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 210. They were located at Long Tieng, Ban Xon, Moung Cha, and Nam Moh. “These centers provided a wide variety of farm, and household supplies, including fertilizer, seeds, insecticide, rope, soap, dishes and cloth. The centers also purchased produce from the farmers with excess supplies at a fair market price” (*ib.*, p. 212). Chicken farms and pig farms were also built (*ib.*, pp.212/3).

<sup>91</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 217.

<sup>92</sup> A valuable cash crop (opium base) and independent lifestyle had allowed the Hmong to live successfully outside the sway of the Lao Lum-controlled central government (Castle, *At war*, p. 6).

<sup>93</sup> Previously, the Hmong produced opium for their own use and as a cash crop (Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 23+129+208).

<sup>94</sup> The National Detoxification Center run by the Lao Ministry of Public Health with USAID assistance was located in 2 rented villas on the edge of Vientiane. Another center was at Wat Tham Ka Bok, a Buddhist temple located 300 miles south and west of Vientiane (Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 145/6+149).

<sup>95</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 129-33.

<sup>96</sup> Explanations of the codes given by MacAlan Thompson in the e-mail he kindly sent to the author on 12 Nov. 2005.

<sup>97</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 19 and 28 August and of 5 September 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

<sup>98</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 206.



Phou Pha Deng near Ban Houei Sai to investigate the possibilities of potential replacements – at least between March 1973, when the Phou Pha Deng Upland Crop Introduction Center was opened, and December 1974, when political unrest forced its closure. The village of Phou Pha Deng “was initially accessible only by helicopter or by a four-hour walk from the Mekong River. In November, 1974, a dry season jeep trail was finished linking Phou Pha Deng to Ban Houei Sai.” Another location involved in that program was Xieng Ngeun near Luang Prabang, where a training center was constructed to encourage hill tribe farmers to experiment with new crops and small animals that might possibly replace opium.<sup>99</sup>



Udorn, 5 May 72: Volpar N9664C used to fry eggs at 40° C / 104° F outside temperature  
(*Air America Log*, vol. VI, no. 4, 1972, p.2)

At least in 1972, Air America operated up to 3 flights almost daily between Vientiane and Udorn for USAID’s ASB-050, mostly using Air America C-123Ks. This type of service was sometimes called a “Kangaroo” flight.<sup>100</sup> The name “Kangaroo” flights seems to have been unofficial all the time; in the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules preserved at the Air America Archives, it appears only in 1973, and then for different types of flight, always apparently meaning “just short hops”: On 19 June 73, Volpar N9664C flew Vientiane-Udorn-Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Udorn-Vientiane-Long Tieng-Luang Prabang-Vientiane-Udorn-Vientiane, and the same day, Caribou “430” flew Udorn-Vientiane-as directed-Vientiane-Udorn; both flights were for ASB-044, and both of them are marked “K’roo”, that is “Kangaroo”. The last legs that C-123K “556” flew on 23 August 73, after making a lot of drops all over the day, were from Vientiane to drop zones, to Udorn and back to Vientiane for ASB-044, and that flight is also called a “Kangaroo” flight on the Flight Schedule.<sup>101</sup> As to the regular flights between Vientiane and Udorn, on 24 May 72, Caribou “392” shuttled between the two airports all day long for the *Requirements Office*.<sup>102</sup> But the most spectacular service of this kind were the almost daily C-123Ks 1972 flights that shuttled all day long between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050 – as did C-123K “374” on 15 August 72 – on 19 August 72 C-123K “545” did the same job for the same customer, on 28 August 72 it was

<sup>99</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 132, 134, and 135 (quotation). For some time, a Bell Jet Ranger was used for transportation to Phou Pha Deng (p. 138).

<sup>100</sup> E-mail dated 12 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

<sup>101</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 19 June 73 and 23 August 73, both in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

<sup>102</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 24 May 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

“636”, on 31 August 72 “556”, on 12 September 72 “648”, and so on.<sup>103</sup> Former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson thinks that they were related to the critical situation at Long Tieng at that period: “when things got bad at 20A many of the SKY guys began RONing in Udorn or Vientiane and went back up in the morning to work. If they were in Udorn, they probably shuttled up to Vientiane then on from there. Now and then I’d catch a ride on a CASI Twin Otter Vientiane to 20A to check the rice situation there, and upcountry for the C-46 DZs. Come back mid-day or evening. A ‘side issue’ of the move was that it did remove a population base from the PDJ that the PL used for food, porters, etc.”<sup>104</sup>

On the contract side, a change occurred in July 1972. Until 30 June 72, contract AID-439-342 had been renewed several times, but on 1 July 1972, it merged with USAID contract AID-439-713 and USAF contract F04606-71C-0002. For Fiscal Year 1973, that is effective 1 July 72, the consolidated requirements of the three original customers were “contracted for by the Air Force under a follow-on to Contract 0002”,<sup>105</sup> and the new contract was still called F04606-71-C-0002.<sup>106</sup> Already between November 1965 and April 1966,<sup>107</sup> USAID contract AID-439-713 mentioned above seems to have replaced contract no. 59-069 that Air Asia/Air America had had with the “Consolidated Electric Equipment Company” (CEECO), believed to stand for the CIA’s Far East Division. As, like the one with CEECO, contract AID-439-713 seems to have covered predominantly the CIA’s Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) program, it is not treated here, but in the file dealing with Air America’s contribution to military aid to Laos.

This integration of CIA missions into USAID schedules also becomes evident by studying the Daily Flight Schedules of Vientiane, the next one available being that of 24 May 72. At that time, the political situation had worsened. With Long Tieng under daily attack and the airfield unusable, Ban Xon (LS-272) had been designated as the temporary frontline area for troop redeployment, resupply, and as a search and rescue base. Air America UH-34Ds and Bell 205s carried in wounded and dead bodies, while Air America Twin Otters and Caribous as well as CASI aircraft picked up supplies which were to be dropped to friendly troops. In the meantime, CASI Twin Otters like XW-PHF flew cover for the men still remaining at Long Tieng. This situation continued until March 72. Then, in almost a month of bitter fighting, Vang Pao’s troops moved up some two miles back up the ridge; and it took another two months, that is until June 72, until Long Tieng base was re-secured and the airstrip operational again.<sup>108</sup> Of the 35 Air America flights that left Vientiane on 24 May 72, only 10 were overtly military: C-123Ks “524” and “648” hauled “hard rice” from Udorn as directed by *Peppergrinder*, Caribou “392” shuttled between Udorn and Vientiane for the *Requirements Office*, and Twin Otter N389EX flew for the *Requirements Office* that day, as directed by Ban Xon. Some smaller Air America aircraft also flew for the *Requirements Office* that day:

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<sup>103</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 15, 19, 28, and 31 August, and 12 Sept. 72, all in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

<sup>104</sup> E-mail dated 15 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

<sup>105</sup> Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Co. Ltd. of 13 June 1972, p. 2 (quotation), in: UTD/CIA/B9F7.

<sup>106</sup> “In FY72 DOD and State Department agencies negotiated contracts with Air America for flying services in Southeast Asia. The specific contracts involved were USAF Contract F04604-71-C-0002 and US Agency for International Development (USAID) Contracts 439-342 and 439-713. After extensive DOD/State Department discussions, agreement was reached to consolidate, effective 1 July 1972, all flying services under USAF procurement cognizance. Hq USAF directed Sacramento Air Material Area (SMAMA), current procurement office for the F04604-71-C-0002 contract, to be responsible for the contract consolidation project.” (Introductory Summary, p. 2, to Modification F04606-71-C-0002-P00054 of June 1972, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F6).

<sup>107</sup> The list “Revised status of aircraft” as of 1 November 65 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1) still mentions aircraft assigned to the CEECO contract, while in the list “Revised status of aircraft” as of 8 April 1966 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1) no aircraft are assigned to the CEECO contract any longer, but most of the former CEECO aircraft are now assigned to contract AID-439-713.

<sup>108</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains*, pp. 277-87; e-mail dated 17 November 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson.

Volpar N9664C flew from Udorn to Vientiane, then to Bangkok (T-09), Hua Hin (T-10) and back to Udorn, probably some sort of courier. All the others worked for the *Requirements Office* out of some other locations that day: Porter N184L and UH-34D H-90 out of Ban Xon (LS-272), Helio XW-PEA and UH-34D H-88 out of Chinaimo (LS-279), apparently supporting the Royal Lao military based there, and Helio XW-PGM out of Ritaville (LS-53). Only four flights out of Vientiane that day were clearly civilian: C-123K “576” hauled aviation fuel first to Long Tieng (LS-20A) and then to Luang Prabang (L-54) for ASB-035, Porters N357F and N360F both flew to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) – N357F for USAID’s Public Works Division, and N360F for USAID’s ASB-039 –, and Volpar N9157Z flew to Savannakhet (L-39), on to Pakse (L-11), and then back to Vientiane for an unknown USAID ASB. Another 6 aircraft had missions that day whose nature cannot be determined: C-123K “545” departed Pakse (L-11) and Saigon (V-01), while C-123K “556” remained at Udorn as back up for “545”; C-46 XW-PBW shuttled to Luang Prabang (L-54) and C-46 XW-PBV to Savannakhet (L-39), possibly hauling rice, and 2 Helios flew for unidentified customers that day: XW-PGA to Vang Vieng (L-16) and Phong Hong (LS-133) and XW-PGI to Nam Lik (LS-356) and Ban Na Then (LS-249). All of the remaining 15 aircraft flew for USAID customer ASB-044 on 24 May 72, but the nature of those aircraft makes one believe that at least some of those flights were linked to CIA programs: C-123Ks “374” and “386”, both fitted with center line seats, flew from Udorn - Ban Xon (LS-272) – Udorn, then back to Ban Xon as directed, and back from Ban Xon to Udorn; C-130E “786” shuttled between Pakse (L-11) and Seno (L-46) all day with center line seats installed, before returning to Udorn in the evening – all this looks like movements of troops. Even the remaining 2 Twin Otters – Air America’s fixed wing aircraft for special operations – flew for ASB-044 that day: N5662 to Udorn, then to Long Tieng (LS-20A), and then on to Ban Xon (LS-272) as directed, and N774M first to unspecified drop zones and then to Ban Xon (LS-272) as directed; in the evening, both aircraft returned to Vientiane. Finally, no less than 5 Porters flew as directed by ASB-044 that day, but out of different landing strips: N359F out of Long Tieng (LS-20A), N365F out of Bouam Long (LS-32), N366F out of Ban Xon (LS-272), N392R out of Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69), and N194X out of Nam Lieu (LS-118A). Five helicopters were also operated for ASB-044 on 24 May 72, either as directed out of Long Tieng (S-58T XW-PHD and Bell 205 XW-PFH) or as directed out of Ban Xon (S-58Ts XW-PHC and XW-PHE as well as Bell 204B N8513F).<sup>109</sup> Most of these aircraft were assigned to contract AID-439-713, the successor to Air America’s contract with CEECO. So apparently, ASB-044 was related to the CIA, probably standing for the SGU program and all sort of military aid to the Hmong.

Vientiane’s Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72 gives a similar picture: That day 9 aircraft flew for *Peppergrinder* or the *Requirements Office*,<sup>110</sup> 4 aircraft were operated on civilian flights,<sup>111</sup> and 5 aircraft operated missions whose nature is unspecified.<sup>112</sup> Once again, most of the aircraft – a total of 19 – were used for ASB-044, most of them as directed out of Ban Xon (LS-272) or Long Tieng (LS-20A). These are 3 C-123Ks (“524”, “617”, and “671”) with center line seats installed, Twin Otters N774M and N5662, 5 Porters working out of other air strips (N359F, N366F, N184L, N392R, and N194X), Caribou “401” working out of

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<sup>109</sup> All details were taken from the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 24 May 72, at: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

<sup>110</sup> C-123Ks “555” and “556”, Volpar N9664C, Twin Otter N389EX, Porter N360F, Helios XW-PEA and XW-PGA, and UH-34Ds H-81 and H-91 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>111</sup> C-123Ks “545” and “617” hauled aviation fuel for ASB-035, Volpar N9157Z made a VIP flight to Pakse (L-11) for AD-150, and Porter N357F flew to Ban Houei Sai (L-25) for USAID’s ASB-039 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>112</sup> C-123K “576” came in from Saigon, Commander “2714” flew to Paksane (L-35) and back, and Porter N365F was used on training flights. C-46s XW-PBV and XW-PBW flew from Vientiane to Ban Na Then (LS-249), Pakse (L-11), Savannakhet (L-39), and back each time, but with center line seats installed; they may have been used on a refugee airlift or to carry troops (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

Pakse (L-11) as directed, 2 helicopters working out of Long Tieng as directed (S-58T XW-PHC and Bell 204B N8513F), and 6 helicopters working out of Ban Xon as directed (S-58Ts XW-PHA and -PHD, Bell 205s XW-PFG and -PFJ, and Bell 204Bs N8512F and N1196W).<sup>113</sup> Once again, flights for ABS-044 involved aircraft that are known to have been used for special projects such as the Twin Otter and the S-58T; so probably many of the missions flown for ASB-044 were related to some CIA programs.



PC-6C N366F in the early seventies with what looks like ammunition boxes in the background, taken by Parker (photo no. 1-WL1-28-5-PB51, preserved at UTD/Leary/I B28F5)

With the introduction of the new combined contract on 1 July 1972, Vientiane's Daily Flight Schedules received a new outward appearance, and sometimes CASI's flights were also indicated. In this way it becomes clear that by now many of the purely civilian flights formerly operated by both Air America and CASI, were operated by Continental Air Services Inc. only in the meantime. On 31 August 72, for example, the flights for USAID's ASB-034, that is rice and other refugee relief supplies, were all operated by CASI aircraft that also performed the "Milk Run South" and flights for upcountry USAID customers (ASB-038).<sup>114</sup> That same day only 6 out of 45 Air America aircraft listed in Vientiane's Daily Flight Schedule were operated for civilian customers: C-123K "556" shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, C-123K "648" shuttled aviation fuel to Long Tieng for ASB-035, C-46 XW-PBW flew rice and other refugee relief supplies for ASB-034, and C-123K "524" as well as Porter N360F flew out of Ban Houei Sai (L-25) as directed by customer ASB-039; finally, UH-34D H-44 was assigned to an unspecified USAID customer that day for operations as directed out of Ban Xon (LS-272). With the exception of 2 flights coming in from Thailand and 3 others whose missions are unspecified,<sup>115</sup> all the other Air America aircraft touching

<sup>113</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

<sup>114</sup> On 31 August 72, CASI used C-46s N1447, N9760Z, XW-TDG, and XW-PHL for ASB-034 (rice and other refugee relief supplies), while CASI C-46 XW-PHM flew the "Milk Run South" to Savannakhet (L-39) and Pakse (L-11), and C-46 XW-PHN came in from Bangkok (T-09) on a flight for ASB-037. The same day some CASI Porters flew out of Ban Xon as directed by several USAID customers, that is XW-PCI and XW-PEF for ASB-038, and XW-PFW for ASB-043; Porter XW-PDI operated out of Luang Prabang (L-54) for ASB-045. Still the same day, only three of CASI's aircraft flew for paramilitary (Porter XW-PEO out of Pakse as directed by ASB-044) and military (Porter XW-PHG and Baron N5700K for the *Requirements Office*) customers (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>115</sup> C-47 B-933 flew Udorn (T-08)-U Tapao (T-18A)-Udorn, and Porter N3612R arrived at Vientiane coming in from Chiang Mai (T-11) (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7). Porter N366F and C-46 XW-PBV flew to Savannakhet and Pakse, and Commander "2714" remained stand by at



Vientiane's Wattay airport that day were either operated for military customers, that is for *Peppergrinder* (C-123Ks "386" and "545", plus one flight by "636") or for the *Requirements Office* (10 aircraft),<sup>116</sup> or for ASB-044, which is believed to cover CIA programs like the Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) program and to include many paramilitary operations. Indeed, ASB-44 operations involved no less than 23 Air America aircraft on 31 August 72, that is 4 C-123Ks,<sup>117</sup> one Volpar,<sup>118</sup> 4 Caribous,<sup>119</sup> 1 Twin Otter,<sup>120</sup> 3 Porters,<sup>121</sup> 4 UH-34Ds, 4 Bell 204B, 1 S-58T, and 1 Hughes 500 – all helicopters<sup>122</sup> being operated out of Long Tieng (LS-20A) that had been secured for flight operations by then. The period between August and November 1972 is quite well documented by the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules preserved at the Air America Archives,<sup>123</sup> but the picture given by those documents is more or less the same during the whole period: Aviation fuel continued to be hauled by Air America C-123s or



Fuel drums being transported in an Air America Caribou  
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

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Vientiane, all of them probably for the *Requirements Office* (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>116</sup> C-123K "616" plus one flight by C-123K "636", Twin Otter N389EX, Volpar N9664C, and Porters N194X, N5302F, N359F, N184L, and N392R, plus UH-34D H-85 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>117</sup> That day, C-123Ks "617", "576" (with center line seats installed), and some flights of "636" were operated out of Long Tieng as directed by customer ASB-044, and C-123K "374" worked out of Vang Vieng (L-16) as directed by ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>118</sup> That day, Volpar N9157Z flew Vientiane-Udorn-Savannakhet-Nam Phong (T-712)-Udorn-Vientiane for ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7). This was probably a courier flight, as there was a training camp at Nam Phong (T-712). In 1972, Thai Unity forces and the Hmong forces of *Groupement Mobile* 30 were trained there (Conboy /Morrison, *Shadow war*, pp. 328 and 334, note 11).

<sup>119</sup> That day, Caribous "401" and "389" worked out of Vang Vieng (L-16), "392" out of Pakse (L-11), and "430" out of Ban Houei Sai (L-25) – all as directed by ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>120</sup> That day, Twin Otter N774M worked out of Vang Vieng (L-16), as directed by ASB-044 (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>121</sup> That day, 3 Air America Porters flew as directed by ASB-044: N355F worked out of Bouam Long (LS-32), N357F out of Nam Lieu (LS-118A), and N367F out of Long Tieng (LS-20A) (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>122</sup> These helicopters were: UH-34Ds H-52, H-63, H-80, and H-91; Bell 204Bs N1196W, N8512F, N8513F, and N8535F; S-58T XW-PHD; and Hughes 500 N354X (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 31 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7).

<sup>123</sup> All in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

Caribous for ASB-035, but most other civilian flights were made by CASI aircraft, while Air America concentrated on military customers (*Peppergrinder* and *Requirements Office*) and even more than that on ASB-044, believed to be the CIA's Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) program. Quite often, one or two C-130Es are also mentioned in those Daily Flight Schedules,



500 and 250 gallon fuel bladders we offloaded at LS 272

C-130E “787” had carried aviation fuel to Ban Xon (LS-272) in 1972/73  
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

mostly operating out of Udorn for *Peppergrinder* or for ASB-044, however.<sup>124</sup> One or two purely humanitarian flights per day<sup>125</sup> were still flown by Air America during those final days

<sup>124</sup> As former USAID employee MacAlan Thompson recalls, the February 1970 airlift was the only time when the C-130 was used for refugee movements, “but I did use it now and then to haul rice to Long Tieng, and possibly Luang Prabang. The way it worked was that I’d have a requirement to fly rice, usually 100 kg bags, and about the only places that needed this were 20A, and occasionally LP. AirAm operation folks would decide how the haul would be done. For 20A, would normally be C-123, but I do remember a few times that the C-130 was used, this probably in 1971 or ’72” (e-mail dated 13 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson). The Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 1972 preserved in UTD/Severson/B1F7 note the following C-130E flights for ASB-044: 24 May: “786” shuttled between Seno (L-46) and Pakse (L-11) with centerline seats installed, so troop movements; 2 August: “787” flew Udorn - Long Tieng (LS-20A) – Udorn; 15 Aug.: “786” shuttled between Udorn and Long Tieng; 18 Aug.: “786” shuttled between Pakse (L-11) and Keng Ka Boa (LS-235) with centerline seats installed, so troops; 19 Aug.: “218” from Udorn to Nam Phong (T-712) and Phitsanulok (T-01), then as directed with centerline seats installed, so troops; 30 Aug.: “405” shuttled between Seno (L-46) and Luang Prabang (L-54); 3 Sept.: “786” Udorn-Nam Xieng Lom (LS-69)-Udorn with centerline seats installed, so troops; 12 Sept.: “218” flew Udorn-Seno-Ban Xieng Lom-Udorn-Seno-Ban Xieng Lom-Udorn with centerline seats installed, so troops; 5 Oct.: “787” and “405” shuttled Phitsanulok (T-01)-Pakse (L-11), both with centerline seats installed, so troop movements; 7 Oct.: “787” flew out of Udorn as directed by ASB-044; 21 Oct.: “218” shuttled Udorn-Nam Phong-Pakse and Udorn-Luang Prabang, and “786” shuttled Udorn-Nam Phong-Pakse, Udorn-Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A), and Udorn-Luang Prabang, both with centerline seats installed, so troops; 11 Nov.: “786” shuttled Udorn-Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A) with centerline seats installed, so troops; 17 Nov.: “218” shuttled Udorn-Long Tieng-Seno-Udorn, and “786” made 2 trips Udorn-Pakse-Nong Saeng (T-338)-Udorn. Evidently, in most of the cases, the C-130E flights for ASB-044 were movements of troops.

<sup>125</sup> On 15 August 72, C-123K “386” shuttled rice and other refugee relief supplies to Long Tieng for ASB-034, and Porter N360F flew for USAID’s Agriculture Division in the morning, but for the *Requirements Office* in the

of the official war in Laos – and sometimes even the C-130Es were used to haul aviation fuel –, but most of Air America’s activities had shifted to military and paramilitary operations.

### **B) Humanitarian work in Laos after the Cease-fire Agreements of 1973**

After the Cease-fire Agreements of February 1973, Air America’s activities in Laos were reduced to a minimum, while many of their flying requirements for 1973 were turned over to Continental Air Services Inc. Indeed, it seems that since Air America’s rice drop flights were left to CASI in July 71, many people thought that CASI was mostly responsible for humanitarian aid in Laos, while Air America brought in most of the military supplies. Indirectly, this is confirmed by a letter dated 23 March 73, in which James Cunningham, in the meantime Air America’s Vice-President Laos, explains the current situation to the Company’s Managing Director Paul Velte: “At about 3:30 yesterday afternoon, Bill Leonard came in to ‘informally’ advise me that a decision had been made in the Embassy to ‘reduce Air America’s profile in Laos’ through the machinery of rather rapidly turning over to CASI almost all that remains of our flying requirements for FY 73 [= Fiscal Year 1973]. There is no forecast for FY 74 at the present time which I can reliably report. Apparently the political sphere locally decided that of the two alternatives offered by Air America and CASI, the latter was the least potentially offensive to the Prime Minister and the Pathet Lao.”<sup>126</sup> This was a purely political decision that had little to do with reality, because CASI had done the same things as Air America.<sup>127</sup> The following day, James Cunningham sent another letter to Paul Velte, whose message was even more clear-cut: “The Ambassador has personally made the decision to play down Air America’s role in Laos with CASI being pushed to the front as the chosen instrument for much of the U.S. Mission air support requirement.”<sup>128</sup>

Although both letters underline that at the time of writing no reliable forecast could be made for FY 74, both of them also indicate minimum requirements by aircraft type for the following months: So the 2 Grant C-46s (XW-PBV and ’PBW) were to be retained by Air America until the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 1973, as they were marked with the Lao National Insignia and did not contribute to Air America’s profile. The U-4 already painted in RLAf colors was to be turned over to the RLAf at the end of May 73. A decreasing number of C-123s was to be used in a training program for RLAf pilots between 16 April and 30 September 73, with some of the aircraft remaining in service even after that date. The fate of the C-7As was still uncertain in late March 73. Four Volpars were to remain in service in Laos, 2 out of Vientiane – including one for the USAID Director – and 2 out of Udorn primarily for use by AB-1. Two C-130Es were to be used even in May and June 73, especially to withdraw the Thai irregular troops and all their equipment still operating in Laos at that time. Three Twin Otters were to

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afternoon. On 17 August 72, Porter N194X flew Ban Houei Sai (L-25)-Vientiane for ASB-039. On 18 August 72, Porter N366F flew for ASB-039, and Porter N392R made a flight to LS-53, L-54, and LS-133, whose costs were shared by USAID’s Education program and by the *Requirements Office* (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedules of 15, 17, and 18 August 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7). These are typical examples that show to what extent USAID’s humanitarian programs had been reduced by that time.

<sup>126</sup> Letter dated 23 March 1973, sent by James Cunningham to Paul Velte, in: UTD/CIA/B31F4.

<sup>127</sup> Former CASI pilot Lee Gossett points out: “I found it very interesting where the Embassy considered CASI to be the AID carrier and Air America was considered to be the Military carrier. Actually, this was in print form only. CASI did exactly the same missions as Air America and most of our STOL work was for the Agency, up country. CASI had the sole Agency contract for the STOL work out of Pakse in the South, which included night drops along the trail most nights. We operated 4 Porters out of Pakse. At LS-20A, the big Agency base North of Vientiane, we flew extensively for the Agency. CASI was the first to fly the Twin Otters in Laos under Agency contract. CASI had 3 operating up country before Air America brought over their first one. As you know, Air America lost one of their Twin Otters in a fatal crash not far from LS-20A. The pilot, Ben Coleman was a good friend of mine. CASI had the sole Agency contract out of L-54, Luang Prabang and we operated between 2 and 3 Porters there for the sole purpose of supplying rice and hard rice to the troops up North” (e-mail dated 28 June 2006, kindly sent to the author by Lee Gossett).

<sup>128</sup> Letter dated 24 March 1973, sent by James Cunningham to Paul Velte, in: UTD/CIA/B31F4.

remain in service with Air America, but for use out of Udorn, together with some 7 UH-34s and 2 CH-47s. The number of PC-6s Porters to be used out of Vientiane was calculated to go down from 6 or 7 in April 73 to zero in June 73.<sup>129</sup>



C-46D XW-PBW at Vientiane in the early seventies  
(UTD/Anthony/F9)

Immediately after the Cease-Fire Agreements, a lot of business as usual was done. On 3 March 73, for example, Connie Seigrist flew C-130E "787" from Vientiane to Pakse (L-11) on what was apparently a flight for USAID, transporting things like engines and outboard motors, batteries, 3 washing machines, household furniture, a generator, and a motorcycle.

CARGO MANIFEST					
Airway 787 (130E/ASAP)		Flight No. 0002		Date March 03, 1973	
Point of loading VIENTIANE, LAOS		Point of unloading L-11		Station reference TPO/VTE-73	
Alt. No.	Number of packages	Nature of goods	Gross weight	Use only by owner or operator only	Use official use only
		(Last Trip)		ACL 10,000	
				Fuel	
	1	Battery (P.3)	220	SG-57853-FG	
	4	Set C-130 Pallets (For shoring)	1600	Lbs (DO NOT EFF L.A.D)	
	2	Cleaning Compound (P.3)	28lb	SN-39920-FE	
	2	Grey marine engine (P.2)	3850	RE-73-1529-TM	
	1	Battery 12 Volts (P.3)	59	SG-59111-FE	
	1	Filter for Air conditioner	11	SD-VTE-1579	
	1	Vegetable (P.1)	120	RL-73-1530-WF	
	70	Q. M Supplies (P.2)	1330	RL-73-1531-WF	
	3	Seat (P.3)	300	MRL-73-S-014	
	1	Acid (P.1)	92	RO-73-3255	
	1	Wire safety (P.1)	2	SD-VTE-GFP-0435	
	1	Fluorescent lamp (P.1)	14	SD-VTE-1443	
	1	Johnson outboard motor (P.3)	380	RE-3287 (CHAMPASAK)	
	1	Johnson outboard motor (P.3)	380	RH-3200	
	3	Washing machine (P.4)	1480	MRL-73-0278	
	1	Fuse (P.1)	2	SD-VTE-1453	
	1	Elect, Iron (P.1)	11	SD-VTE-1455	
	1	Box (P.1)	132	SD-VTE-1571	
	3	Tap marking (P.1)	50	SD-VTE-1551	
	1	Light bulbs (P.1)	2	SD-VTE-1546	
	1	Platates (P.1)	39	SD-VTE-1553	
	7	Household furniture (P.4)	261	MHS-73-0283	
	4	Fan desk type (P.4)	80	MRL-73-0281	
	3	Wetset construction water	97	SN-39788-06	
	1	Washer (P.3)	120	SN-39785-06	
	3	Pump dispensing band (P.3)	77	SH-39787-06	
	2	Night pressure air (P.1)	264	SD-VTE-1459	
	3	Fire extinguisher (P.1)	187	SD-VTE-1460	
	1	Transmitter (P.1)	113	SD-VTE-GFP-F-73-0031	
	1	Packing material (P.1)	11	SD-VTE-1557	
	1	Battery (P.1)	9	SD-VTE-0296	
	1	Motorcycle (P.1)	187	SD-VTE-1457	
	1	S.A.P.U Assy (P.1)	830	SD-VTE-GFP-F-73-001	
	2	Engine Assy (P.1)	1100	ME-73-S-002	
	1	Battery (P.4)	616	SG-5798L-PK	
	1	Generator OMAN (P.1)	1364	SD-VTE-GFP-F-73-007	
	1	Sweeper (P.2)	2100	RO-73-3335	
	25	Auto parts (P.2)	6750	RE-73-1516-TM	
	1	Battery (P.3)	132	SG-59457-FE	
		Grand total:	25736		
			18888		
				Lbs	

Cargo manifest for C-130E "787" flight Vientiane-Pakse on 3 March 73  
(in: UTD/Leary/I B9F16)

<sup>129</sup> Letters dated 23 and 24 March 1973, sent by James Cunningham to Paul Velte, both in: UTD/CIA/B31F4.



On 7 March 73, to give another example, C-123K “524” carried rice from Ban Houei Sai to Luang Prabang, before it was loaded with 40 empty cargo pallets for the return trip to Ban Houei Sai, and on 30 March 73, Bell 204B N1196W carried “452 pounds of consumable cargo” to “HU” helipad north of Long Tieng.<sup>130</sup> When C-123K “524” disappeared enroute from Luang Prabang (L-54) to Ban Houei Sai (L-25), Laos on 7 March 73, a Search and Rescue (SAR) operation was carried out that lasted several days and involved more than 40 Air America aircraft.<sup>131</sup> But in spite of all those intense SAR efforts, the crew, comprising Pilot in Command James H. Ackley, First Officer Clarence N. Driver, and Air Freight Dispatchers Chudchai Chewcherngsuk, and Kenekeo Narissack, was never found. Then, on 14 March 73, the wreckage was discovered by Air America’s PC-6 N366F and Hughes 500 N354X at coordinates QB 2398. The radio messages (XOXOs) of 14 March 73 report: “Due to ground fire, both SAR aircraft departed the scene [...] Due to area insecurity and political situation, access to site not fore-seeable in immediate future. [...] Debrief of pilots of N366F and N354X indicates wreckage confined to 400 foot area at QB 2398 and destroyed by impact and fire. No apparent survivors and no parachutes sighted in area.” Probably, the aircraft, which carried 40 empty cargo pallets, was shot down over the Chinese highway, although thunderstorms, rain and strong southwest winds were reported in the area at the time of the accident.<sup>132</sup> Air America also operated med-evac flights after the Cease-Fire Agreements, even at darkness. During such an med-evac mission, S-58T XW-PHD suffered an engine failure in the Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) area at coordinates TG 8528 on 3 October 73: “Aircraft was attempting Medevac at approximately 2200L to a landing zone at 6,000 feet. On final approach, which was relatively flat and was being conducted with reference to lights on the LZ, aircraft started to settle. PIC increased collective pitch but settling accelerated, wave off was then attempted to the right. Flying speed was not regained and aircraft crashed in an upright position in brush and trees approximately ½ mile from, and 1,000 feet lower than the LZ.”<sup>133</sup> Finally, until the very last moment, Air America helicopters carried aviation fuel to upcountry positions.<sup>134</sup>

But already in 1973, Air America’s activities in Laos started to slow down. How fast business in Laos grew smaller and smaller after the Cease-Fire Agreements of February 1973, is best shown by the Company’s Daily Flight Schedules of Vientiane and Udorn: The Vientiane Flight Schedule for 5 May 73 still lists 28 Air America flights touching the Laotian capital that day: Nine of them were purely military: Air America C-130E “404” and C-123K

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<sup>130</sup> Accident reports for the accidents of 7 March 73 (C-123K “524”) and 30 March 73 (Bell 204B N1197W), both in: UTD/CIA/B62F2.

<sup>131</sup> SAR missions were flown by PC-6s N365F and N367F on 7 March; C-7A “392” and “430”, DHC-6s N6868 and N389EX and Volpar N9542Z on 8 March; C-7A, DHC-6, Volpar and Hughes 500 on 9 March; C-7A “430”, DHC-6 N6868, Porters N360F and N366F, Hughes N353X and N354X and Volpar N3728G on 10 March; C-7A “430”, DHC-6s N6868 and N389EX, Porters N360F and N366F, and Hughes N353X and N354X on 11 March; C-7As “392” and “762”, DHC-6 N6868, Porters N365F, N366F, and N392R, Hughes N353X and N354X and Volpar N9671C on 12 March; C-7As “392” and “762”, DHC-6s N6868 and N389EX, Porters N365F and N366F, and Volpar N9542Z on 13 March; Porter N366F and Hughes 500 N354X on 14 March 73 (see the XOXOs of these dates in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12).

<sup>132</sup> XOXOs of 7 to 14 March 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12; quotation taken from the XOXOs of 14 March 73; Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3.

<sup>133</sup> XOXO of 3 October 73, in: UTD/CIA/B50F5.

<sup>134</sup> When UH-34D H-45 crash-landed at coordinates TG 6233 on 18 April 74, it had “departed LS-20A with 5 Lao passengers, 500 pounds of cargo, and 500 pounds of fuel for Tango Pad” (XOXO of 18 April 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F14).



Air America C-130E “404”, probably taken at Udorn in the early seventies  
(with kind permission from Dan Gamelin)

“636” transported arms and ammunition for the Royal Lao military as directed by *Peppergrinder*, C-123Ks “386”, “545”, and “576” were used to train RLAf pilots, and 4 aircraft (Porter N359F, UH-34Ds H-80 and H-89, as well as Hughes N353X) flew for the *Requirements Office*. No less than 13 aircraft, so once more the majority of Air America’s aircraft operating into Laos that day, that is C-123Ks “556”, “617”, and “671”, Twin Otters N389EX and N6868, 5 Porters (N355F, N360F, N365F, N184L, and N194X), Bell 205s XW-PFG and -PFJ, and UH-34D H-54, were used for ASB-044, believed to stand for the CIA’s SGU program. Porter N367F flew out of Udorn for an unknown customer, and only 5 Air America aircraft operating in Laos that day were used for civilian flights: C-54 B-1016 came in from Saigon, C-123K “546” shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, C-123K “577” shuttled aviation fuel out of Long Tieng for ASB-035, Porter N392R came in from Ban Houei Sai (L-25) for ASB-039, and Porter N5302F worked out of Ban Xon (LS-272) for USAID’s Public Works Division.<sup>135</sup>

One month later, on 18 June 73, we have a similar picture: Eleven Air America aircraft were used to support the Royal Lao military: C-123Ks “546”, “576”, and “577” were used to train RLAf pilots, some flights of C-123K “617” carried arms and ammunition as directed by *Peppergrinder*, and Caribou “389”, Volpar N9664C as well as 5 Porters (N184L, N5302F, N5304F, plus – code-shared – N367F and N392R) and UH-34Ds H-54 and H-91 were operated for the *Requirements Office*. Once again, ASB-044 believed to stand for the CIA’s SGU program, was Air America’s biggest customer that day: C-130Es “404” and “405” as well as C-123Ks “617” and “671” evidently carried back the Thai irregular troops mentioned above, as they shuttled between unknown locations in Laos and T-712, that is Nam Phong (the C-130s) and T-338, that is Nong Saeng (the C-123s). Caribou “762” plus Twin Otters N389EX, N774M, and N6868 were also operated for ASB-044, but out of Long Tieng, as were Porters N359F, N365F and – code-shared – N367F, while Porter N366F flew for ASB-044 out of Ban Houei Sai (L-25). No customer is given for C-46s XW-PBV operated that day

<sup>135</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 5 May 73, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

out of Udorn and XW-PBW, which flew Vientiane-Savannakhet-Pakse-Savannakhet-Pakse-Savannakhet-Vientiane on 18 June 73, while C-123K “636” was used on a “Kangaroo” flight that day on the route Udorn-Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Ban Xieng Lom-Ban Houei Sai-Ban Xieng Lom-Luang Prabang-Vientiane-Udorn, also for an unknown customer. Only 4 Air America aircraft had civilian customers that day: Caribou “392” shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, Porter N355F flew to Ban Houei Sai for ASB-039, Porter N194X operated out of Ban Xon (LS-272) for USAID’s Public Works Division, and Porter N392R flew Vientiane-Hin Heup (LS-365)-Vientiane for USAID’s Federal Highway Administration, before it was turned over to ASB-044.<sup>136</sup>

On 23 August 73, only 20 Air America aircraft appear on the Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule. Six out of 7 C-123Ks were operated for the Royal Lao Air Force: “617”, “671”, and “576” were used out of Vientiane for training RLAf pilots, while “386”, “577” and “636” made regular flights for the RLAf. Volpar N9664C made a number of drops for the *Requirements Office*, and Porter N359F flew to Pakse for the same customer. The number of flights made for ASB-044, believed to stand for the CIA’s SGU program, had been largely reduced by then, and some of the flights were even code-shared with other customers. So after only one flight to Long Tieng and back for ASB-044, C-130E “786” shuttled and dropped aviation fuel for ASB-035 all day long, while C-123K “556” also dropped aviation fuel for ASB-035 and other supplies for ASB-044 during the whole day. Only 3 more aircraft are listed as operating for ASB-044 on 23 August 73: Twin Otter N389EX out of Pakse and Porter N5302F out of Long Tieng, while Porter N359F made a flight to Pakse that was code-shared with the *Requirements Office*. Two of the Twin Otters (N774M and N6868) departed Udorn in the evening of 23 August 73 “as directed”; the customer for whom those flights were operated is unknown, but it is believed that these were intelligence gathering flights. The remaining flights were civilian: Caribou “389” shuttled between Vientiane and Udorn for ASB-050, Volpar N9671C made a courier flight to Bangkok, and Caribous “430” and “762” were used for training.<sup>137</sup> The 2 Grant C-46s made drops that day: XW-PBV dropped aviation fuel for ASB-035, and XW-PBW made drops for an unknown customer, possibly to refugees. For “at the time of the cease-fire, there were approximately 135,000 refugees on the food support rolls. Most were located in the Long Tieng, Ban Xon, Moung Cha crescent area. [...] Secondly, the land had never been surveyed to determine its production potential. To overcome the latter deficiency, aerial photography and interpretation were undertaken. [...] One of the first priorities in the post-cease-fire period was to complete a road network which would obviate the need for costly air transportation of construction materials, medicines, and refugee relief commodities. To make the area accessible from Vientiane, an all weather road was completed from Houei Pamon on Route 13 to the A.I.D. depot at Ban Xon. This eliminated the necessity of flying all the A.I.D. commodities from Vientiane to the warehouse in Ban Xon.”<sup>138</sup>

In November 73, only 5 Air America aircraft were still based at Vientiane: C-123Ks “576”, “617”, and “671” used to train RLAf pilots and the 2 Grant C-46s XW-PBV and XW-PBW used for drops. By 1 December 73, no Air America aircraft was based at Vientiane any longer, as the last 3 C-123Ks had been turned over to the Royal Lao Air Force and the 2 C-46s to Royal Air Lao.<sup>139</sup> However, Air America continued to fly into Laos out of its Thai base of Udorn, and in December 73, no less than 34 aircraft were assigned to contract F04606-71-C-0002 for operations out of Udorn, most of them evidently into Laos, with more aircraft unassigned. Probably only one Volpar plus some of the 4 C-7As, 3 Porters, and 7 UH-34Ds

<sup>136</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 18 June 73, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

<sup>137</sup> Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule for 23 August 73, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

<sup>138</sup> Ramsey *et. al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, p. 212.

<sup>139</sup> Flight Operations Circulars nos. DOC-C-73-015 of 1 November 73 and DOC-C-73-016 of 1 December 73, both in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C.

were used for USAID, which – as will be recalled – was one of the contractors of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002.<sup>140</sup> In April 74, Air America operated only 22 aircraft out of Udorn,<sup>141</sup> and in May 74 this number was further reduced to 14 aircraft. Only one Volpar plus some of the C-7As and UH-34Ds may have been used by USAID in 1974.<sup>142</sup> This continuous reduction of flying services into Laos was accompanied by a steady process of phasing out all ground activities in Laos. On 11 April 1974, Air America's President reported to the Executive Committee of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Co Ltd the following initial phase-out plan for ground operations in Laos:

A. 8 April 1974

(1) Commence turnover of all communications/navaids sites as proposed in schedule of ground services contracts, FY75. All actions to be completed on or before 10 May.

(2) Commence inventory and/or turnover to USAID, the base power plant. Retain AAM personnel for familiarization training of USAID personnel or excess those that can be picked up by USAID. All actions to be completed 20 April.

B. 1 May 1974

(1) Turn over base security services to TAPS and excess personnel as appropriate. All actions to be completed prior to 10 May.

(2) Turn over all traffic and cargo functions to designated contractor(s) as appropriate. Excess all personnel for separation and/or transfer. Complete all actions by 10 May.

(3) Turn over flight operations and flight watch activities to designated contractor(s). Retain a suitable Company representative until all flight operations by AAM are completed.

(4) Cease operations of main dining room, retaining a capability for soup and sandwiches until 15 May. Close local mess as soon as conditions permit, but not later than 15 May.

(5) Cease upcountry POL operations and retain only those personnel necessary to transfer equipment and supplies as directed. Complete entire turnover prior to 10 May.

(6) Cease operation of aircraft maintenance activities at Vientiane and at LS20A. Utilize TDY [= temporary duty] personnel from UTH [= Udorn] to perform services required until termination of flying contract.

(7) Cease all facility maintenance activities.

(8) Terminate all teletype traffic to VTE [= Vientiane]. Subsequent traffic to be routed to UTH for referral by phone or pouch.

C) 10 May 1974

(1) Close medical clinic.

(2) Cease all but limited operations of GTD [= Ground Transportation Department].

D. 15 May 1974

(1) Cease all training activities.

(2) Cease operation of fire brigade.

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<sup>140</sup> In December 73, more aircraft than needed were assigned to Udorn. The 34 Air America aircraft actually operated out of Udorn into Laos under the provisions of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 were 2 out of 5 C-130Es, 4 C-7As, 3 Twin Otters, 4 Volpars, 3 out of 8 Porters, 3 out of 6 Chinooks, 3 out of 5 S-58Ts, 3 Bell 205s, 2 Bell 204Bs, and 7 out of 18 UH-34Ds (Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-73-016 of 1 December 73, both in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).

<sup>141</sup> In April 74, again more aircraft than needed were assigned to Udorn. The 22 Air America aircraft actually operated out of Udorn into Laos under the provisions of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 were 1 out of 5 C-130Es, 3 out of 4 C-7As, 3 Twin Otters, 3 out of 4 Volpars, 2 out of 6 Chinooks, 2 out of 5 S-58Ts, 3 Bell 205s, and 5 out of 17 UH-34Ds (Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-004 of 1 April 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).

<sup>142</sup> In May 74, again more aircraft than needed were assigned to Udorn. The 14 Air America aircraft actually operated out of Udorn into Laos under the provisions of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 were 1 out of 5 C-130Es, 1 out of 4 C-7As, 1 out of 3 Twin Otters, 3 Volpars, 1 out of 6 Chinooks, 3 out of 5 S-58Ts, and 4 out of 17 UH-34Ds (Flight Operations Circular no. DOC-C-74-005 of 1 May 74, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).



(3) Cease all GTD operations.

[...]

The President further reported that regarding Laos connected flying a target of 51 days from “D Day” (5 April 1974) had been established for cessation of such flying and efforts were underway to reduce this to 45 days.”<sup>143</sup>

“D Day” was the day when the new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) was to be established that was to have several communist ministries. So, by mid-May 74, all Air America operations at Vientiane were phased out, and on 3 June 74, the last Air America aircraft – C-7A “389”, piloted by Captain F. F. Walker and Captain M. W. Shaver – crossed the border from Laos into Thailand at TE5878 at 1113Z en route from Vientiane to Udorn.<sup>144</sup>

QK WASAYFA`TNNKBFA`HKGXTFA`  
BKKXTFA 031403

REC'D WAS JUN 03 1974

TO : ~~CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICE WAS~~  
INFO : PRES SVP-OCA VP-L RVP-OSG T/C WAS AVP-TSR INN MAAL  
CEO P/T HKG AVP VPIR DMCA ALC FORD BKK VP-SVND SGN  
CACR DO DAM MFA UTH  
SUBJ : LAOS OPERATION

1. TODAY WAS AAM S LAST DAY IN LAOS. UDORN-BASED AIRCRAFT WERE ALL OUT OF LAOS AS SCHEDULED, THE LAST ONE OUT BEING C-7A 2389 PILOTED BY CAPT. FF WALKER AND CAPT. MW SHAVER WHICH CROSSED THE BORDER AT TE5878 AT 1113Z ENROUTE FROM VTE TO UTH.
2. VP-NTD, DO, CACR, A/MFA AND MAS-VTE WERE IN VTE THIS AFTERNOON TO SAY OUR FINAL FAREWELLS TO CUSTOMER REPS AND TO ASSURE THAT ALL LAST MINUTE BILLS AND COMPANY AFFAIRS WERE CLEARD, IT APPEARS WE ARE LEAVING IN GOOD GRACES !
3. THE VTE CLOSE OUT WENT WELL AND THE DEPARTURE OF AAM FROM LAOS WAS WITHOUT INCIDENT ALTHOUGH SOME LUMPS ARE VISIBLE IN THE THROATS OF THOSE WHO PUT SO MUCH OF THEMSELVES INTO THE OPERATION OVER THE YEARS. WE WILL ALL REMEMBER MCCORMICK S MILD MANNER, STITT S YOEMANSHIP, HICKLER S "DONT FORGET", DUNN S FLOATING HAT, AND CUNNINGHAM S ADDRESS TO THE NATION, AND IN REMEMBERING WE WILL SMILE AND LOOK AHEAD TO THE NEXT CHALLENGE. WE GRIEVE FOR THOSE MISSING AND DEAD IN LAOS AND REGRET THAT THEY TOO COULD NOT HAVE ENJOYED TODAY.

VP-NTD UTH F74 031200Z  
;  
AF 064

NNNN#

*JP*

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

During the last days at Udorn much time was spent with establishing an inventory in order to sell the base. Except for an occasional VIP flight, most Air America flights departing Udorn were ferry flights – mostly to Saigon, but also to Bangkok. This is well illustrated by the Udorn Daily Flight Schedule for 23 June 74 depicted below. That day, only Volpar N3728G made a revenue flight, a VIP flight to Bangkok. Apart from Porter N367F that remained at Udorn as a back up aircraft, all other Air America aircraft listed in that schedule were ferried elsewhere: Volpar N9671C to Bangkok (T-09), and Porters N359F, N360F and

<sup>143</sup> Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Company Limited of 11 April 1974, in: UTD/CIA/B10F1.

<sup>144</sup> Telex of VP-NTD to the C.E.O, Washington, dated 3 June 74, in: UTD/CIA/B31F10.

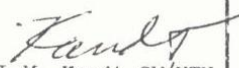
N5302F as well as Bell 205s XW-PFH and XW-PFJ to Saigon (V-01) via Bangkok (T-09) and Phnom Penh (C-01).

**AIR AMERICA - UDORN**

REVISED **FLIGHT OPERATIONS SCHEDULE**

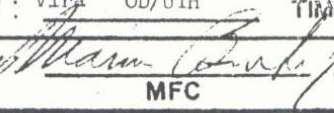
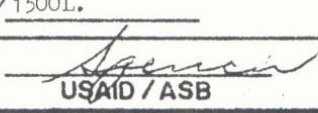
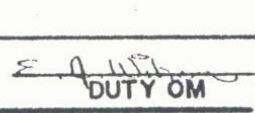
Sunrise : 0532L  
 Sunset : 1828L

SUNDAY  
 Date: 23 JUNE 1974  
 Page 1 of

ACFT.	CREW	ETD	ROUTE	FUEL	REMARKS
				ACL	
N3728G	KING/HUGHEY	0930L	T08/T09-S/B-/T08 (VIP FLT)		M.TOW TO QWH 0400 VIPKIT/CONFIG"B".
N9671C	<del>COOK/</del> THOMASSON	1500L	T08/T09 (FERRY FLT)		RON T09
N359F	NOLAND	0930L	T09/C01/V01 (FERRY FLT)		RON V01
B60F	WILKINSON	0930L	T09/C01/V01 (FERRY FLT)		RON V01
B02F	SOELBERG	0930L	T09/C01/V01 (FERRY FLT)		RON V01
B67F	Back up				
XWPFH	BURKE/EILER	0800L	T09/C01/V01 (FERRY FLT)		RON V01
XWPFJ	MILLER	0800L	T09/C01/V01 (FERRY FLT)		RON V01
* E N D *					
 REVIEWED BY L.M. Kandt OM/UTH					

SCHEDULE CONTINUED ON PAGE(S) \_\_\_\_\_  AIRCRAFT/CREW NOTES ON REVERSE SIDE

PREPARED BY: Vira OD/UTH TIME: 1500L.

APPROVED BY:  MFC  USAID / ASB  DUTY OM

Udorn Daily Flight Schedule for 23 June 74, in: UTD/Spencer/B1F2

At Udorn, operations were phased out on 30 June 74, when contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 expired.<sup>145</sup> The last flight schedule “was dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny”, as was noted on the schedule by W. R. Leonard (C/ASB/USAID), C. J. Abadie Jr. (VP-NTD), E.W. Knight (DO-NTD), and W.F. Palmer (MGS-NTD). And the last Air America flight out of Udorn was Beech Volpar N3728G, which, piloted by Jim Rhyne, left Udorn at 1000L for the ferry flight to Saigon.<sup>146</sup>

**AIR AMERICA - UDORN**

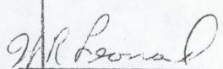
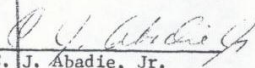
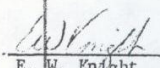
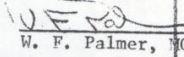
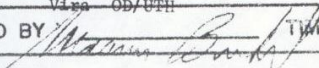
**FLIGHT OPERATIONS SCHEDULE**

Sunday  
30 June 1974

Sunrise : 0534L  
Sunset : 1831L

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Page 1 of \_\_\_\_\_

ACFT	CREW	ETD	ROUTE	FUEL ACL	REMARKS
19542Z	King	0800L	T08/T09/V01 (Ferry Flt.)		
13728G	Rhyne	0600L 1000L	T08/T09/T08 (ASB 044/VIP Flt.) T08/T09/V01 (Ferry Flt.)		
<p>So ends the last sentence of the final paragraph of a saga that may have an epilogue, but never a sequel. It has been to each participating individual an experience which varied according to his role and perspective. However, there is the common bond of knowledge and satisfaction of having taken part in something worthwhile and with just a slight sense of pity for those lesser souls who could not, or would not, share in it.</p> <p>This last flight schedule is dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">* E N D *</p>					
 W. R. Leonard C/ASB/USAID		 C. J. Abadie, Jr. VP-NTD		 E. W. Knight DO-NTD	
 W. F. Palmer, MGS-NTD					
<input type="checkbox"/> SCHEDULE CONTINUED ON PAGE(S) _____			<input type="checkbox"/> AIRCRAFT/CREW NOTES ON REVERSE SIDE		
PREPARED BY:  TIME: 1600L					
APPROVED BY: _____ MFC      _____ USAID/ASB      _____ DUTY OM					

Udorn Daily Flight Schedule for 30 June 74, in: UTD/Abadie/B1F6

<sup>145</sup> Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc. and Air Asia Company Limited of 9 July 1974, in: UTD/CIA/B10F2.

<sup>146</sup> Udorn Flight Operations Schedule for 30 June 1974, in: UTD/Abadie/B1F6.

After the end of Air America's operations in Laos, USAID / Laos did not survive for a long time. On 5 April 1974, the new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) was established, with 4 of the most influential ministries for the political Right ("Vientiane-side"), 4 for the political Left (Lao Patriotic Front: LPF), 2 to appointees considered Neutrals. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was accepted politically by both sides as a Neutralist. In June and July 74, the US Ambassador and the A.I.D. director asked the LPF Foreign Minister and the LPF Minister of Economy and Plan if the new Lao Government wanted any changes in the US economic assistance program. As in the late summer and fall of 1974, both Ministers asked for more leadership and management responsibilities, the A.I.D. mission began to arrange for the transfer to the PGNU of large elements of or total projects it had been funding. At the same time, Lao students began to ask for more political influence and power, possibly just imitating similar student movements that had shaken Thailand in 1973. Then, in the fall of 1974, other groups began to organize in Laos for political and economic purposes, and on Christmas Eve of 1974, a "rebel" group attacked Ban Houei Sai and took over the military command of the city. The American A.I.D. employees in Ban Houei Sai were held as hostages for six days before they were evacuated to Vientiane. "Two new elements were involved in this [...] Ban Houei Sai incident: (1) armed Lao student leaders, who were the spokesmen and most powerful element, and (2) Pathet Lao forces who occupied all villages and surrounding areas of Ban Houei Sai. It soon became evident that the students were receiving instructions and support from the LPF. The method of takeover in Ban Houei Sai became a prototype for similar operations throughout the Vientiane-side zone of Laos, culminating in late August 1975 with a formal declaration by the LPF that all of Laos had been 'liberated.' [...] Through the use of demonstrations (usually spearheaded by students) the LPF managed to force out the principal Vientiane-side Ministers and Military Commanders, as well as the Vientiane-side leadership in all provinces of Laos and to harass A.I.D. operations and employees to the extent that all American and TCN [= 'third-country nationals'] employees were obliged to depart first the provincial posts and eventually Vientiane. [...] An agreement was finally signed on May 27, 1975 between the PGNU and the American Charge d'Affaires that the A.I.D. Mission would be terminated no later than June 30, 1975. Termination was completed on June 26, 1975."<sup>147</sup>

© University of Texas at Dallas, 11 August 2008, last updated on 23 August 2010.

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<sup>147</sup> Ramsey *et.al.*, *USAID Laos Termination Report*, pp. 9-10.