

Declassified 1980

Project 404/Palace Dog History

The Geneva Accord of 1962 established the neutrality of Laos. When the North Vietnamese began violating this neutrality with the incursion of troops, Prince Souvanna Phouma requested US assistance in upgrading the capabilities of his Army and Air Force so that they could combat the North Vietnamese aggression. He also authorized US aircraft to strike hostile targets within Laos.

The Special Operations Force (then Special Air Warfare Center) detached personnel on a TDY basis to Udorn AB Thailand and began Waterpump, the training of Laotian pilots in the T-28 aircraft. Personnel were also sent TDY to command Air Operations Centers (AOC) located in two of Laos' five military regions. This program expanded and eventually became Detachment 1, 56th Special Operations Wing. Still operating out of Udorn, Det 1 also was in charge of the Raven FAC program, US pilots who flew O-1's in Laos. Manning of the AOCs eventually expanded to include all five military regions under the unclassified title of Project 404/Palace Dog.

From October 1968, USAFSOF provided continuous personnel manning of Project 404. Deployed on a 179-day TDY rotation basis the personnel were assigned to APO 96237 (Udorn AB, Thailand) with duty actually performed in Laos under the operational control of the Air Attaché to Laos (OUSAIRA). In 1968, a AOC commander, line chief, medic AND COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST WERE ASSIGNED TO EACH OF FOUR AOCs LOCATED AT Vientiane (Lima Site 08), Savannakhet (Lima Site 39), Luang Prabang (Lima Site 54) and Pakse (Lima Site 11). A fifth officer was deployed to Vientiane as advisor to the Lao Combat Operations Center (COC) and a medical officer was deployed to Long Thieng (Lima Site 20A). After approximately nine months of operations, the COC advisors position was converted to an AOC commander slot at 20A and two more personnel, a line chief and a communications specialist, were added to the 20A AOC. A medic was later added to assist the doctor. In October 1970, USAFSOF deployed an additional officer, AFSC 1045Z to Project 404 to function as an advisor to the Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) AC-47 gunship program. This TDY was also on a 179-day rotation basis. As the process of "Laoization" continues, the number of personnel required has decreased. The following positions were now deleted: AC-47 Advisor, the doctor, a medic, four communications specialists and the AOC commander and line chief. There were 9 personnel at this time deployed on Project 404 distributed as follows:

- a. Military Region I-Luang Prabang AOC (54)
AOC commander 1115Z
Line Chief 43171/91
Communications specialist 304x0/29350
- b. Military Region II-Long Thieng AOC (20A)
AOC commander 1445Z
Line Chief 43171/91

Communication Specialist 304X0/29350

Because of the military situation at 20A, USAF personnel stay overnight in Vientiane and commute each day to site 16 Vang Vien where all aircraft are now located.

- c. Military Region III-Savankhet AOC (39)
AOC commander 1115Z
Line Chief 43171/91
- d. Military Region IV-Pakse AOC (11)
AOC commander 1115Z
Line chief 43171/91
- d. Military Region V-Vientiane AOC (08)
AOC commander 1115Z
Line chief 43171/91

The following is a brief description of the duties performed by SOF Project 404 personnel:

- a. AOC commander. Assisted by his own personnel and augmented by USAF ground support specialists from Detachment 1 of the 56th SOW, he is responsible for maintaining the combat ready status of the assigned RLAFF T-28/AC-47 strike force and the C-47/H-34 airlift support program. Through coordination with special agencies and with the senior staff of the Laotian Forces Army Royal (FAR) in his military region, he developed targets for strikes by both RLAFF and USAF and advises the country team and Lao military authorities on the correct employment of air resources. With the exception of certain designated strike zones and special activities area, he was responsible to the Air Attaché for the employment of all USAF and RLAFF air in his military region in coordination with Airborne Command Control Center (ABCCC C-130) and Raven FACs. He exercised operational control over the USAF piloted O-1/Raven FAC program at his location. It was his judgment and initiative that ultimately insures adequate RLAFF and USAF air support for the Laos Army Guerrilla Groups and for special agency programs in the military region.
- b. Line Chief (AFSC 43171/91): Functions as a maintenance officer, munitions officer, supply officer, transportation officer and first Sergeant at the AOC. He personally supervises the maintenance of all assigned aircraft including T-28's, O-1's, C-47's, AC-47's, H-34's and U-17's and ensures maximum possible instruction and advice to Lao counterpart ground support personnel.
- c. Communications specialist (AFSC 304X0 is preferred, however, in accordance with USAFSOF OPLAN 2, 29350's may be used): maintains radio communications between the AOC facility and all other points of contact including the air attaché, other AOCs, special agencies, airborne command and control center (ABCCC) assets, local Lao Army facilities and assigned aircraft. He functions as both radio operator and maintenance specialist and provides instruction to local communications personnel on procedures and techniques associated with communications systems.

- d. Medical specialist (AFSC 902X0): Primarily responsible for providing appropriate medical services to assigned USAF personnel. Beyond this he administers medical attention to Lao military personnel and their dependents and to local native civilians, especially refugees, in that order of priority. He performs independent duties with services ranging from simple first aid to minor surgery. For instance, the medical report from Long Tieng hospital for Oct-Nov 1971 shows 516 inpatients (161 military, 355 civilians), 27 live births, 53 major surgical and 962 dental patients. Outpatients totaled 1224 military and 454 civilians for injuries. Other outpatient visits totaled 3277 military and 16,927 civilians on everything from dysentery to tuberculosis to venereal disease. He is also responsible for instructing RLAF medical counterparts in techniques associated with base dispensary programs.
- e. Medical officer: Normally assigned to Long Thieng (20A) he visits all the AOCs on a rotational basis. He treats USAF pilots who are forced to bail out or crash in Laos. He also provides medical services to the AOC staff and the Raven FAC pilots at the locations. He conducts civic action programs and has trained a great number of Lao medical services technicians including nurses. Doctors volunteering for this position come from TAC-Wide resources.

3. All USAFSOF Project 404 personnel are selected from the highest qualified volunteer resources. Criteria for final selection is listed in detail in USAFSOF OPLAN 2 dated 26 October. Until recently all AOC commanders came directly from SOF units, however, due to a lack of qualified volunteers, permission has been received to use TAC-wide resources to select the most highly qualified personnel. Currently there is one AOC commander not directly assigned to SOF.

4. All personnel selected for Project 404 are required to attend the mobile assistance team supervisor's course (MATSUCO); a one-week course conducted by the USAF Special Operations School at Hurlburt. MATSUCO is the only Air Force course specifically designed for mobile assistance teams (MAT) and their associated aspects. A new course is currently geared toward 404 but will be expanded in the future to include all MATs. All pre-deployment training is conducted at Hurlburt. AOC commanders are all qualified as pilots in the T-28, which is conducted by the 4407 CCTS. The course is two months long and incorporates 39 training days (35 flying and 4 academic), 40 flying hours. All line chiefs not previously qualified on the T-28 are given T-28 FTD and two weeks OJT. Other than MATSUCO, there is no formalized course of training for line chiefs, communications specialist or medics prior to their deployment. Deployment of personnel is timed to provide approximately two week of over-lap at the duty site. Optional courses for all 404 personnel are COIN, SEAOC, MAAC, COC, and COSC-all held at Hurlburt Field either at AGOS or the SOS.

5. The objective of Project 404 has been to maintain the RLAF Air Operations Center (AOC) in fighting condition for the defense of Laos. A major consideration over the long term, however, has been the influence that current USAF participation will have on the RLAF's ability to support itself if and when they are ever left on their own. The degree to which RLAF personnel identify with USAF attitudes and ideals will ultimately

determine the nature of future air operations and the country's defense posture. This is especially true in the case of the younger USAF-indoctrinated officer pilots who will eventually and hopefully take over RLAF commando positions presently occupied by French-oriented Army commanders. The prime ingredient in this case is the quality of USAF personnel who are in contact with the Lao and from whom the RLAF take their clues and adopt critical attitudes and methods. For example, in 1970 while assigned PCS to Laos, Lt Col Keeler (now USAFSOF/DOX) wrote what was to become Royal Laotian General Staff Manual 1-1. This manual provides operational doctrine for the military tactical control system of the combined Operations Center (COC) and the Joint Operations Center (JOC) throughout Laos. It was the first manual specifically written for the Lao. Until that time, all operational manuals used were either French or US. Many strides forward have been taken since the Laoization is becoming apparent as USAFSOF requirements for Project 404 begin to scale down as mentioned earlier by the recent deletions in personnel at various AOCs

6. Current Operations and problem areas: The need for highly qualified personnel for Project 404 continues. CSAF MSG 152000Z Nov 71 states that personnel will be required through FY 4/73 at the minimum. As always there are rumors as to when this project will end but to date they remain just that rumors.

- A. Communications with AIRA have been such in the past that INFORMATION AS TO CURRENT OPERATIONS IS MANY TIMES SKETCHY TO SAY THE LEAST. Our best means of keeping abreast of the situation has been through end-of-tour reports (required by OPLAN 2) and informal conversations with returning personnel. LtCol Landen, SOF/DOO and a former AOC commander (2 tours), is deployed this month on a PCS move to become AIRA Deputy for Operations. In this position he will be in charge of all AOC's and we expect a marked improvement in communications between AIRA and USAFSOF Headquarters.
- B. Selection of personnel has always been a problem. No one can totally predict how a person will function in a 7 day-a-week, 24 hour-a-day situation such as this and we have had several people, both officers and enlisted, relieved from duty by AIRA and returned early. Anyone relieved is of course an unacceptable situation. Sometimes it is unavoidable but in a majority of cases it can be prevented. One method of prevention is to have the managers of Project 404, both at Wing and Hq SOF levels, be personnel who are thoroughly acquainted with the program and who understand its importance. Project 404 is one of these assignments that, "if you haven't been there, you probably don't know what its like." It is from the instructors in the T-28 program and the medics, communication specialists and line chiefs who have previously served on 404 that a new volunteer learns a majority of his information about Project 404. It is also these experienced personnel who can best judge how well a new man will perform. In the past, the 1st SOWG has not taken a detailed look at some volunteers and ignored warnings about a person's performance. Hq SOF has at times been remiss in their thoroughness

also. All this has been done in the name of expediency and because there has never been a wealth of volunteers to choose from.

As a side note, one may ask, “Why so few volunteers?” Though all who have been on Project 404 agree that is one of the greatest experiences of their Air Force career, they also agree it is an extremely mentally and physically demanding job. It is also a job where one is under the gun his full 179-day tour. It requires stamina, perseverance, understanding and, above all, diplomacy to be able to succeed. Many men do not feel the rewards on Project 404 balance with the risks. For a variety of reasons, these personnel in there past have not received the recognition they deserved (AFSC’s, Job Titles, OER’s etc).

If the T-28 section commander at the 4407th (traditionally a 404 returnee) was also the 1st SOWG Project 404 monitor and if an ex-404 officer was kept in charge at SOF HQ, then I believe the selection process would greatly improve, as would the quality of deployed personnel. The process of interviews by the commander of USAFSOF and USAFSOF/DO, which was initiated by BG Knight, should be continued. These measures, coupled with extensive personal study and preparedness by personnel prior to deployment, will give us the highest quality personnel throughout the remainder of this program.

One additional problem is the forecast phase out of USAFSOF T-28’s at the end of FY 2/73. This would mean that after 1 Jan 73 AOC commanders would not be T-28 qualified. **In accordance with the 1962 Geneva Accords, US personnel cannot fly combat missions in the T-28.** Their flying duties have been restricted to ferry flights and test hops. Informal information from LtCol Sambogna, the current USAFSOF liaison to 7th AF (SOF LO), from his talks with AIRA, indicates the AOC commander’s slot is being somewhat downgraded and his primary function will now be AF liaison to the Lao Wing Commander—title AIRA Regional Representative. If all this comes about, the necessity to be T-28 qualified will be lessened also.

Information just received by LtCol Landen prior to his departure indicates that the T-28’s will be retained until Dec 1973. Last minute change has been the CSAF MSG, which deletes the requirements for AOC commanders to be T-28 qualified.

For a further in-dept study of Project 404, Waterpump, and the history of the Laotian situation, there are two Project Checo reports, which are:

1. USAF control of Airstrikes in support of indigenous Laos ground forces, TS/NOFORN/LIMDIS, 19 Jul 1972.
2. The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970, S/NOFORN.

There is also the Air Attaché year-end report for calendar year 1970.

RECONNAISSANCE IN LAOS

While many remarkable exploits of individual marines have been chronicled throughout the Corps' history, an equal number have never been recounted beyond the immediate circle of those involved. This is such a story.

The setting is Southeast Asia, the country Laos, the time late 1959 and early 1960. It is the story of a one-man reconnaissance by Col Loren Haffner through the back country of that land. His mission, as then-Commandant of the Marine Corps David Shoup put it personally to him, was to crawl on his belly, walk over mountains, wade through swamps and report what operational conditions would be at the "field-boot level" should the Marine Corps ever get involved. And that's just what he did

By Col. Loren Haffner (USMC (Ret))

When Indochina became independent of French control as a result of the Geneva Accords of 1954, Laos became an independent and neutral country. (I want to emphasize the word "neutral" because it was actually a farce.) The agreement called for the French to gradually phase out their forces and a Royal Lo Government (RLG) to be formed. Under the terms of this agreement, Laos was to be considered neutral and free of outside involvement. This all sounded well and good since the majority of Laos' three million people were not committed to communism or any other political ideal for that matter. Nonetheless, the Communist elements that had been fighting the French, along with their mentors, the North Vietnamese, saw to it that the RLG included Communist party elements. These elements became known as the Kahn Laos Party.

In addition to these developments, two battalions of Communist troops called the Pathet Laos were incorporated into the RLG Army known as the Force Armeé Royale (FAR). Of course this arrangement was destined for disaster. Even though the First Indochina War was supposedly over, Communist elements in the government and in the field were constantly causing trouble. These elements were being supported by Communist guerrillas in the hills who had never really laid down their arms.

The U.S. Government, which was concerned about the continuous expansion of communism in Southeast Asia, had set up a small clandestine logistics organization in Laos made up of reservists and retired military officers from all of the Services. There was, for example, a retired Marine colonel in Vientiane, the administrative capital. The

organization proved too small for the task at hand and was expanded into what was to become known as the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO).

In addition to this logistics support, a limited number of Army Special Forces were brought in country to provide technical training to the FAR, the regular army. Like the logistics support people, the Special Forces boys were supposedly incognito. However, they dressed like American tourists while training Laotian soldiers in the basics of infantry weapons, hand grenades, etc. They then turned to their pupils over to the few French officers still in country for field firing exercises. This culmination of weapons training was minimal at best, for example, 10 rounds of familiarization firing with a BAR (Browning automatic rifle).

There also existed what was known as Force Speciale, supposedly a sort of spy or information gathering outfit, consisting of ordinary villagers, haphazardly uniformed and equipped with a variety of American and French small arms. As village militiamen will never make a battleground of their own village at the risk of getting their families killed off, these troops were much as a fighting machine. Indeed, they provided a pipeline of equipment to the Communist irregulars in the hills. The guerrillas would come down to a village, shoot the community leader and the villagers would happily turn over their weapons to the Communists and go back to their rice paddies.

In 1959 retired Marine LtGen Graves B. Erskine was a special assistant to the Secretary of Defense. He was responsible for setting up and supervising military assistance groups (MAGs) in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. In November of that year he planned an inspection tour of the various groups and requested the Marine Corps provide an active duty colonel to accompany him Commandant of the Marine Corps (designee) Gen David M. Shoup had a nose for trouble and could foresee expanding American involvement in the area. For some reason he was particularly interested in Laos. He nominated me to accompany Gen Erskine. More to the point, he arranged that I was to break off from Gen Erskine's entourage in Bangkok and take off on my own for Laos.

My selection may have been influenced by the fact that following my tour in Korea, where I commanded the 7th Marines, I had been assigned to CinCPacFlt where I'd been involved in a delayed military assistance under the French and had made several trips into Vietnam, both North and South. I even recall in one incident on one of those trips that I actually witnessed the surrender of the French at Haiphong.

At a meeting in his office my instructions from Gen Shoup were forthright and simple: "Haf, I want you to go into that goddamn country, I want you to crawl on your belly, walk over mountains, wade through swamps, and tell me what operational conditions would be on the field-boot level. I don't want you to come back and report on the cultural attributes of the country, crap that I can read in Life, Time, and Newsweek.

A week later I joined Gen Erskine's party and we were on our way. Our stops included Taipei, Saigon, and finally Bangkok. We always received a red carpet treatment everywhere we went, which allowed us to avoid the usual check-in process through the various immigration authorities with our passports. As a result, when I retraced my steps coming back from Laos, my passport showed where I got into countries but never left, or left countries but never got in. As I was alone and no longer a part of this official delegation with all its fancy treatment, I nearly got locked up in virtually every country I went through. At any rate, in Bangkok I bid farewell to Gen Erskine and his entourage and headed north by train to a small town, Nong Kai, on the Laos border.

My disguise was quite simple. Since 1959 was a geophysical year and scientists were running all over the world investigating such things as the puckering of the earth under the influence of the moon and other such stuff, having had a college course in geography, I decided to pose as a scientist.

I was also some sort of an artist, and in my pack, I had some art gear stowed, which I could pull out and give inquisitors the art angle if cornered. Of course, if I did get cornered by real scientists, I was going to feign, "no speak the language" or something because I really did not have a scientist's knowledge of geography.

On arrival at Nong Khai, I realized that some of my inoculations had expired so I went to a small Thai hospital where I presented my short card to a young nurse, who probably had no more than six weeks of medical training in her life. Since no doctor was present, she proceeded to administer my shot by filling up a single needle with tetanus, typhoid, diphtheria, and whatever else she could come up with from the three separate bottles and shot me in the arm. I nearly died with convulsions and fever. After finally recovering, I left Thailand and crossed over in to Laos where I was able to hitch a ride into Vientiane.

Once in Vientiane, I went over to the headquarters of the clandestine logistics organization that we had in place there. For something supposedly undercover it was a bit ridiculous. All the Americans were in a uniform of sorts. Everybody wore a white blouse, natty white trousers, white ankle-length socks, and white shoes. They conducted themselves quite formally and occasionally even made the mistake of saluting one another. We had a lot to learn in those days about how to conduct secret military operations.

Gen Shoup had given me the name of a Marine on duty with the group, a Maj "Mutt" Emils, who said he might be able to help me. I didn't know if Maj Emils knew I was coming, but he accepted me for what I was. First, he briefed me on the general situation in Laos. In my opinion, he was, at that time, the most knowledgeable American about the current political situation in Laos, the good and the bad points of the leaders, and the ongoing power struggles of anyone I was to meet. When I told him what I had to do, he just looked at me and said, "Boy, oh boy! I hope your insurance policy is up to date." He then got me a .380 caliber semiautomatic pistol, embassy type, and two clips of ammunition and advised me that if I ever ran into a tiger to find a tall tree and not to irritate him with my popgun.

I told him I was eager to get on with my mission and get up country. After reassuring him that my schoolboy French, English-Laotian phrase book, and "country boy" sign language would get me by, Maj Emils introduced me to the PEO's Army attaché on duty at the U.S. Embassy. Forgetting I was supposed to be a scientist, Emils told the Attaché I was a journalist and asked him if he could get me up north. The attaché was agreeable. Emils then went and arranged for me to stay in one of the houses in Vientiane occupied by Americans till my departure the following day.

It seemed that the attaché was going up north to Phongsali, along the Chinese border, to investigate a certain Col Kong. Although Col Kong had Communist leaders for relatives, he was a non-Communist and consistently showed his loyalty to the RLG by murdering suspected Pathet Lao troops and their sympathizers in the villages, which seemed to be almost half the population - at least in his mind. The work had just gotten out that he had recently beheaded an entire family of seven, including a four-year-old girl. The RLG was quite upset, and the attaché said he was going up to investigate and that I could come along if I wished.

The next morning, with my field gear and pistol tucked away, we went out to the airfield. I had a heavy pack loaded with a change of clothes, medical items, emergency rations,

one light blanket, a Chinese-type poncho, a heavy Laotian machete, and a string hammock. The Marine Corp had given me some spending money before I left Washington, most of which I had changed into Lao kip at the rate of 80 to the dollar. The money was wrapped in a skivvy shirt, inside my pack.

Our plane was a small propeller driven STOL (short takeoff and landing) job, for years the up-country workhorse plane in Laos. It was so loaded with communication gear that normally only two passengers were allowed on flights at the height altitudes where we were heading. I was introduced to our pilot and immediately notice a strong odor of wine on his breath. With some persuasion and a lot of hemming and hawing on his part, he finally agreed that I could go along.

We took off obviously overloaded. About half way to Phongsali we were flying over some hills, supposedly friendly territory. Possibly just for fun, some hill tribesman decided to take a shot at the plane. He must have been an expert marksman. The bullet came up through the floor, wiped out the communication gear, bounced off the overhead, then dropped on the deck. I picked it up. The slug looked like a wad of chewing gum. On examination I realized it had been cut from a sheet of lead then rolled up to fit the barrel of whatever sort of homemade rifle the native used to fire it.

Now out of radio communications, we continued on, finally approaching the 1,500-foot runway at Phongsali where we saw literally hundreds of people on the strip, apparently dancing. After our plane buzzed then a couple of times, they moved off to the sides and we landed. The plane skidded to a stop no more than 15 feet from a cliff marking the end of the runway. With the sad face of a basset hound, the pilot turned to me and remarked, "Cheated death again."

As we emerged from the plane, a big, fierce, fat, laughing mandarin of a man came up to the plane and introduced himself. It was Col Kong welcoming us to Phongsali. Soon after the hundreds of villager returned to the airstrip and resume their dancing. As we quickly found out, this wasn't dancing at all but Col Kong's method for flattening the surface of the relatively new airstrip. No iron rollers for him, just buckets of water and hundreds of bare feet stomping up and down.

That evening we had a hard drinking session with Col Kong. He admitted perhaps he had been a bit too rough in squelching Communists and promised not to be so mean in the

future. Then he invited us to a party. We watched the former airfield-leveling girls dancing around a bonfire and drank a bit of the local beverages. The following morning we left Phongsali and headed off to the Plaine des Jarres. It is interesting to note that within a year or two Col Kong joined the Communists and became one of their strongest leaders in northern Laos.

When we left Phongsali I asked the Army attaché, who was heading back to Vientiane, to drop me off in the Plaine des Jarres. This is the vast plain in north central Laos, rising some 4,500 feet above the surrounding jungle. In 1953-54, a French regiment, supported by a squadron of American-built Navy Corsairs and a tank battalion had been stationed on the Plaine. The idea was to lure the Vietnamese out of the jungle and onto the open plains in a set-piece battle involving French dug-in positions, pillboxes, barbed wire barricades, barrage zones, and interlocking zones of fire. Of course, the Vietnamese were not stupid enough to fall for such a trap, and they just ganged up on the less well-defended French forces to the north at Dien Bien Phu.

The 4th Military District Headquarters of the FAR was located on the Plaine, at Kong Kai, also the site of an old French military airfield. Here we landed. My contact was to be a Marine major there by the name of Howard Johnson. Attached to the Joint U.S. MAG in Thailand, he had been sent over to Laos to find out just what was going on in the Plaine des Jarres. Somewhat earlier the Communist Kahn Laos Party elements in the central government had been kicked out of the ruling coalition. Consequently, the two Pathet Lao battalions in the FAR, one stationed on the Plaine, had promptly deserted. Thus began the Communist-Lao War in earnest. By the time I arrived in Kong Kai it was difficult to tell just where the Indian territory really was. That was something I had to worry about.

On my way to the military district headquarters, I made my first real contact with the FAR. A sentry stopped me and demanded to inspect my pack. When I nodded, allowing him to do so, the soldier handed me his rifle, complete with bayonet, the better to go through my belongings. Another sentry also came up and got interested in the search and handed me his rifle as well so he could get in on the act. So there I stood, giggling to myself, my arms full of weapons, while two Laotian soldiers took my pack apart. Fortunately, they paid no attention to the bulging skivvy shirt loaded with money, and, once the inspection was complete, I stuff my gear back into its pack and went on to the headquarters.

On my first night on the Plaine des Jarres I slept in a mud hut with a very flimsy partition between me and the room next door. In that room a young soldier had a Lao girl in bed. All night long they made love to the tune, "I Love You Truly," which was being replayed over and over again on some old squawky phonograph. The two of them were lying practically along side me, really having a ball. Finally, at one of the high points in their activity, she spread her legs out and her foot went right through this flimsy partition and kicked me in the face. Having enough of this, I gathered up my blanket and went outside to spend the rest of the night on the wet grass out there.

In the morning when I awoke, I went into the hut and almost fell over, stunned. "My God," I thought to myself, "He's killed here!" There was blood all over the place, all over the floor, on the wall, and everywhere else. I ran out and grabbed a villager and showed him the gore. He spat on the floor and pointed to his mouth- it was beatlenut juice and spittin' it all over the place. Nature in the raw.

A short while later I got involved in a little incident that laid the ground work for future war. Near a place called Mounghet on the old colonial route into North Vietnam, there had been a firefight with the Pathet Lao. Five Lao soldiers had been badly wounded and two captains from the FAR rifle companies involved were at the 4th Military District Headquarters desperately trying to get air or truck transportation to Mounghet to evacuate the wounded.

At the time, the district commander, a Col Kham Kong, was arranging a big party at his headquarters and was planning on bringing in some invited guests. He absolutely refused to release an airplane or even a truck to go after the wounded. The two captains, one of whom was named Kong Le, were both bright, energetic guys, who had been educated abroad. They were simply beside themselves over the colonel's refusal. This situation, however, gave me the opportunity I was looking for to get over to the North Vietnamese border.

At that time, Air America, the Central Intelligence Agency-controlled aviation outfit, was operating in Laos. Even American civilian newspapermen, like I was known as, could hire an Air America plane. So I had Maj Johnson call Vientiane, contact Air America, and tell them I'd pay for a plane to come to the 4th Military Region Headquarters for an air evacuation assignment. Air America agreed.

The next day the plane came up. It was a large, weird-looking biplane made in Canada. It had a powerful radial engine capable of carrying a pilot and seven passengers. The cost from my skivvy shirt was \$550. With Kong Le and his fellow officer we took off for Mounghet. As we flew over the countryside I made sure to take copious notes of the surrounding terrain and noticeable landmarks, particularly the inroads to the villages.

Once on the ground, we began loading the wounded into the plane. One soldier had been shot through his stomach and was clutching a dirty, fly-covered water bandage to his belly. Another soldier had been hit by a ricocheted bullet, which had torn out the greater part of his thigh. As I recall, two other victims had burns from incendiary Russian bazooka rounds. Once we got them back to the 4th Region Headquarters, we unloaded them and I released the plane back to Louangphrabang where it had a previously scheduled job to finish. At the time we landed, there were two military DC-3s parked on the airfield that we assumed could be used to immediately haul the wounded to a hospital in Vientiane. Not so, however Col Kong still refused to lift the wounded because he was planning on sending the DC-3s to Louangphrabang for some royal guests who were to attend his party that night. He added that there would be a flight to Vientiane late that afternoon and the wounded could go along then.

For the next five hours these critically wounded kids lay on the blazing hot tarmac before they were finally sent on to Vientiane. Three died soon after their arrival. One of the dead was Kong Le's half-brother, and Kong Le was absolutely pathological with grief and hatred for Col Kong, the Lao Government, and even us Americans. He contended our program nurtured such bastards as Kong and swore he was going to do something about it. Later he did, becoming a leading figure in the armed opposition to the Laos government. Indeed one of the struggles was named after him-the Kong Le War.

The Plain des Jarres was a major center for the dope trade in Laos. Opium runners were well equipped. In addition to motor vehicles they had airplanes, Beachcraft and other types, some twin engined, all quite expensive. Some were parked right on the tarmac of the Kong Khai airfield. In the town they even had a one-story hotel much like a stateside tourist place, comfortable, and with a restaurant serving French cuisine. As a supposed American scientist, I was able to get a room there.

It wasn't long before I became acquainted with some of the dope runners. They were mostly Corsicans, Humphrey Bogart types, and for some reason they were friendly to me. A few even spoke excellent English. You could say that they sort of took me in.

In those days drugs weren't as big a problem in the United States as they are today. It was a marriage of convenience. The drug merchants had the transportation and a willingness to do business, I had money and a need to get around. At the time, the end seemed to justify the means. One of them, Marseilles, as he was called, gave me some advice, "Don't ask too many questions and don't get too nosy, or you just might end up with a red necktie." I heeded that warning.

One of the hotel residents I met was an old guy named Karl Volcher. He had been a Berlin cop and later a member of the French Foreign Legion, from which he was now retired. Although he now ran a huge vegetable farm selling produce to the Laotian Army I suspected he too was in the drug business. Volcher explained to me that he was planning to drive his Toyota jeep up to Sam Neua, a small town about a hundred miles away and wanted to know if I would like to come along. I jumped at the opportunity. The next morning we left, heading north to the hills on an old French road running across the Plaine des Jarres. We had gone about 45 miles to a place known as Hua Mmong when a torrential rain came up and turned the road ahead of us into a sea of mud; we could go no farther by jeep. Karl decided to return to Kong Kai. I, however, made up my mind to keep going. Gen Shoup had said that I was to find out what Laos was like at the field-boot level. By God, I thought, this was my chance to do just that.

According to my map, Sam Neua was 55 miles away, an underestimate as it turned out. I figured I could make it there in three or four days. Saying goodbye to Volcher, I started out on foot. For the next four days and nights I sloshed along, traveling a lot of the way on the seat of my pants as I slid down the slippery trail.

One night I rested in a native village unable to do much communicating with the locals. I have often wondered what they thought of this dirty foreigner roaming through their countryside. If no village could be found, I'd climb a tree at dusk, string my rope hammock between two limbs, rub myself with bug repellent, and hope the 10 feet or so between me and the ground would put me beyond the reach of any tigers that might happen to be on the prowl that evening. Nevertheless, even with bug repellent, leeches got to be real bad. My pants soon became stiff with blood.

As I came within about 15 miles of Sam Neua, I began to run out of food. Earlier, I had seen several native deer running about. They were cute little things; twice the size of a

jack rabbit and capable of barking like a dog. As luck would have it, that very afternoon I spotted one. Resting my .380 automatic on a log, I dinged one off at about 75 yards. I gutted and skinned my Idaho style, stuffing some bamboo shoots in its body cavity. I trussed the carcass with a jungle vine, built a fire, and had myself a delicious barbecue. The only thing missing was the sauce.

After five days on the road, dirty and bedraggled and suffering from a bad cold, I finally reached Sam Neua. As I approached the village, made up mostly of mud-filled huts and a few old French buildings, the first thing I saw was an old French wood-burning steamroller. In the driver's seat was what turned out to be a priest. He was wearing what appeared to be a wide cowboy-type hat rolled up on the side, as was common with his order. The priest was sort of jumping up and down, his chain with a crucifix heaving in circles, and he was screaming in French. On moving closer I could see what the trouble was. The priest had apparently been packing the ground in front of his mission. The roller had caught the very tip end of the tail of an 8- or 10-foot King Cobra which was now swinging itself wildly in an arc, striking the engine and anything else within its range. In fact, it barely missed the priest on top of the contraption. I drew my pistol, trying without much success to aim it on that small, fast-moving target.

Suddenly there was a loud shot. The snake's head popped open. Whirling around I saw a little teenage soldier grinning from ear to ear. He was cradling an M1 rifle almost as long as he was tall. The Lao maybe lousy soldiers, but many of them are crack shots. As a protein-starved people, they expend most of the ammunition we supplied them hunting food. Indeed, nothing was considered too small to kill. Oftentimes, Lao villagers would go out to shoot even the smallest of birds with the big M1s we provided them. It's really something to see, a Lao soldier moving along a rice paddy, suddenly blasting a tiny bird with a big rifle, then bringing the remains, which by now are nothing more than a gob of feathers and blood, back to the stock pot.

The first night I was in Sam Neua I found a place to stay in a guest house of sorts that belonged to the village chief. The next two or three days I stayed in a Chinese hotel. In those days the Chinese seemed to be all over Laos, running small stores, operating restaurants, and in this place renting out a lodging house. For a couple of days I looked the place over and took notes. During the French Indochina War, Sam Neua had been the scene of perhaps the largest battle in Laos. A road led out of the town to Dien Bien Phu about 150 miles to the north. As I mentioned above, most of the dwellings were mud and walled, thatched-roof buildings, unlike the grass shacks common in the lowlands. On the outskirts was an airfield with a runway just long enough for DC-3s and CH-47s to take off and land on it.

While I was looking the airfield over, I spotted a plane parked on the side. My first impression was that it was only a single seater; on closer inspection, however, I discovered it was capable of holding up to four people. As I was checking on the plane, who should drive up by one of my old Corsican friends in the dope smuggling business. We greeted each other like long lost brothers. He informed me that he was on his way to Ban Houei Sai, a town on the Mekong River across from Thailand in northwestern Laos, about 50 miles from Burma.

Figuring I'd seen about all I wanted to see of the Plaine des Jarres, I offered my Corsican buddy \$200 to take me along. "Oh, no charge, just give me that bottle of wine you've got sticking out of the top of your pack." It was an offer I couldn't refuse. After he refueled using a couple of oil drums located at the end of the airfield, we took off. About half way across northern Laos we landed at a small village named Nam Bac. It had recently been liberated from Communist guerrillas by the FAR. My pilot left me briefly and returned with a bag of his peculiar type of commodities, black opium balls. He threw it on a seat and I used it as a pillow when I tried to nap.

Finally, we landed at Ban Houei Sai. While I wandered around the town my friend went across the Mekong River to dispose of his commodities. There wasn't much to see - an old French fort, Beau Geste-style, still occupied, and a few houses and other buildings. While sightseeing, I noticed a DC-3 passing overhead course northwest. When my friend returned, I asked why a DC-3 would be heading that way. "To Tom Dooley's hospital at Muong Sing on the Burmese border." I offered him \$100 if he'd take me there and he agreed. So off we went.

When we landed I was amazed. Unlike the dirt strips common throughout Laos, the airfield was a hard surface macadam one. A macadam road ran off it as well, down a valley and apparently to nowhere. Nearby was Dooley's hospital, quite a first-class place as compared to the others I'd seen in country. The whole setup spelled money, lots of money. I went in and met Tom Dooley. He was a former U.S. Navy medical officer who had participated in the massive non-Communist evacuation from the north in 1954. Subsequently, he got out of the Navy and came to Laos.

His book *The Night They Burned the Mountain* and one or two others by him had become best sellers. The proceeds helped support his hospital and in the process made

him somewhat of an international figure. The DC-3 I had seen and a couple of others that came in while I was there were bringing little old ladies up to the place with donations for his good work. At the time, the song "Hand Down Your Head Tom Dooley" was a favorite in Thailand and Laos. Only the natives couldn't figure out why we'd want to hang such a nice guy.

Admiration for Tom Dooley, however, was not universal. I talked about him to two journalists, one British, the other Australian. Dooley was trying to sell them on the idea that the Russians were out to get him because he was doing so much for the Free World and gaining such favorable publicity in the process. He used as evidence the fact that a man next to his quarters had been accidentally stabbed while in bed with a woman - an obvious assassin after Tom Dooley. The newspapermen never did ask why the "assassin" would have thought Dooley was in bed with that particular woman. Needless to say, they weren't impressed and had decided not to give him any written line. They considered him a headline grabber and obviously didn't like him.

A day or so later I learned a Laotian DC-3 was going to Louangphrabang, the royal capital. One of the newspapermen and I bought ourselves a ride. The capital then was a beautiful Shangri-La, which housed a few American Special Forces men in the city. I introduced myself to them, showing them my Marine ID card and telling them why I was there. They were a bit surprised; it wasn't very usual to find an American moving around the country like I was, especially in out of the way places. They were kind enough to put me up with them in their quarters. While wandering down a street with one of them, I spotted what I thought was a large animal tied to a chain. It turned out to be a long-haired Laotian man in filthy rags. The other end of his chain was tethered to a ring under the stairs of a government building. Alongside him was a pail of dirty water and scraps of food that had been thrown to him by passers by. As I discovered, this semi-animal was a convicted arsonist, condemned to be publicly chained up for 10 years. He had four more to go.

The next day I saw another shocking sight. As I went by a grim, high walled prison, its wide gate was thrown open. A work detail was loading a pile of bodies on a flat bed truck inside the compound, throwing them around like so much cordwood. Later, a Special Forces guy cut me in on what the scoop was. It was all part of a big mistake. It seems that a Laotian prison officer sent a message to Vientiane. He wanted to know whether or not a prisoner, properly tried and found guilty, should be guillotined or shot. Before he got a reply, however, he went off duty. His relief, who didn't know about the query to Vientiane, was on watch when the answer came back. "Shoot the prisoners," the message said. So, along with the convicted felon, the entire prison population of 17 newly captured Pathet Lao were all rounded up. The prison officer organized a firing

squad, like up the Pathet Lao, and mowed them down. You could say there had been a slight error in communications.

Til this point in my trip, I had little opportunity to take a look at a real jungle. The Plaine des Jarres had been a more or less open forest and to get a real feel for the land I wanted to explore some of Laos' rain forests. The area round Louangphrabang offered just that. Using a map, I laid out a compass course from a town named Tha Deua on the Mekong River, which took me across a mountain range, through a Meo village on top of a ridge, then down to the other side to a village called Xieng Ngeun that one of the Pathet Lao battalions had deserted when they went up in the hills.

At first all went well on my hike. Leaving Tha Deua, I plunged into the jungle. That night I pitched my hammock as usual, 10 or 15 feet up in a tree, just to be safe. As I settled in for an uncomfortable rest, on a bright moonlit night, a whole troop of Gibbon apes came swinging through the trees above me. They were making a great racket, which made sleep difficult to say the least. This went on and on until I notice this one little ape, who looked younger than the rest, crawling out on a limb right above me. He kept looking down at me, real still. I thought to myself, "If I was a dirty little boy and there was a strange creature down below me, what would I do?" Just as I thought this, I threw myself back toward the end of the hammock. Too late. He let fly with everything he had; it went all over my pants and the end of the hammock. I had to crawl out, untie it, go down to a nearby creek and wash everything off. Then I took out my pistol and fired a couple of shots and the scrambled away to cause more mischief and havoc elsewhere. Since that time in 1959, nobody's been able to get me back into a hammock.

I hit the Meo village right on the nose. The natives were friendly and hospitable; offering me the glutinous rice that they preferred. I spent a day and a night in the village, seeing how the natives lived. I watched them make gunpowder out of boiled charcoal, saltpeter, and sulfur while a local gunsmith made a homemade rifle. Since these weapons usually gave them about a 50/50 chance of hitting a small animal, hunting was a real sport. The guns were made out of a seamless steel tube, no more reinforced in the back than in the front. The gunsmith drove a sort of steel wedge in one end, hammered it closed, put in a primer hole, then attached a flintlock arrangement. Safe standards were minimal. About every sixth or seventh shot, the barrel would burst someplace. Consequently, many of the villagers has scars on the side of their face, were missing a finger, or even a hand.

The next morning I started out down the hill from the village. I took an azimuth on a gray rock on a low mountain about 2,500 yards away. When I got to where the rock should have been, it wasn't there, nothing. Trying to retrace my steps back to my aiming point, I got off course. Wandering around a bit, I finally found a lumber camp with a bunch of domestic elephants in it. The lumberjacks were looking for a lost elephant. Apparently I had shot my azimuth on the rear end of one of these beasts, somewhat hidden in the jungle.

With their help I finally hit the old colonial route, but not at Xieng Ngeun. Since I didn't know whether I was north or south of the village, I took off to the right and hiked, for what seemed and exceeding long time, all the while steadily going up in elevations. By the time I realized I was going in the wrong direction, a group of five elephants, happened to come by. They were roped to a lead elephant on whom was perched a driver. I took out a 500 Kip note, pointed to it, then pointed to an elephant. The guy nodded, got his elephant down, and I got on its back.

The next 11 miles back to Louangphrabang were like making a trip on the back of a huge scrub brush. It's not so bad riding on the head of an elephant, however, I was in the middle of his back with my legs spread out. It was one of the worst rides I have ever taken in my life. The elephant's bristly hair went through my trousers and rubbed my legs raw.

Back in the capital I found out that the elephants were being brought in to take part in a ceremony. The king had just died and his body had been placed in a big casket on a high pier. On both sides were two long ladders. A stream of villagers went up to the casket, pouring water over the casket. The next day the whole works were set on fire, and he was cremated in true Buddhist fashion. His subjects really appeared to be grieving for the old boy because, as was explained to me, he had been a real regular "Joe" - a guy who when he went tiger hunting, as is customary for royalty in that part of the world, he always did it flatfooted on the deck, never on the back of an elephant or with anybody else along. His subjects seemed to really appreciate this.

I had now been in Laos about three weeks, traveling around the country more freely than any American - official or civilian - could do. One of the Special Forces men in Louangphrabang, who knew my real identity, clued me into the fact that our ambassador in Vientiane was getting a bit curious about this Yankee who kept poking about, turning up at remote, out of the way places. Before I got into trouble, I decided I'd better get back to Vientiane before the ambassador made up his mind to do something drastic.

At a bar I met a newspaperman who was under the impression I was really a scientist on the prowl. Over a few drinks he and I figured out a plan to get back to Vientiane by river boat. For 240 Kip, about \$3 each, we booked passage on a diesel-powered sampan headed that way. We had to provide our own food and cooking gear. We bought some tinned meat, cans of condensed milk, a dozen or so pickled duck eggs, and some French bread. For refreshment we took along some sterilized water and a couple bottle of English gin. We were also careful to pack away some sleeping mats, mosquito netting, and a Lao-style hibachi with charcoal to cook our food.

When the sampan was fully loaded it carried two tons of oranges, two cows, four cages of chickens, two monkies, and a silk Buddha in a crate. In addition to the crew and ourselves, there were 17 native passengers. Sanitary facilities were primitive. A rickety old two-hole toilet hung over the stern. Bathing was simply a matter of hanging over the side on a knotted rope and sloshing about. Each of the three nights we were aboard, the sampan pulled up to a sandbar so we could go ashore and cook dinner. Cocktails were simply a matter of squeezing and orange over a mug of gin. After dinner drinks were no problem as well since the natives who lived nearby had plenty of rice and booze and were quite willing to share it.

I don't remember much about my activities once I reached Vientiane. I do know I spruced up and went, somewhat fearfully, to a cocktail party thrown by our ambassador. I was sure he would nail me to a bulkhead for not letting him know what I had been doing. When we met, he asked me who I was, and I decided to drop the charade. I told him I was a Marine colonel. Since he didn't probe any farther about what I was doing there, he must have assumed I was on some kind of official business.

While I had covered northern Laos pretty well, so far I hadn't been south of Vientiane. Over the next few days I made up for that omission. Now that my identity was no longer a secret - at least to the U.S. Embassy, I could be more open in getting around and in using American mission transportation. Through the air attaché, I was able to catch a flight to Savannakhet on the Thai border in southwest Laos. From there I flew on down to Pakxe on the Mekong River.

At Seno, not too far away, the French still had an installation. There, I met some of the officers, one of which agreed to be a sort of guide. Together, we went down to Tchepone,

in far southeast Laos right on the Vietnamese border. Much later Tchepone was to figure prominently in our war with North Vietnam. It was smack on what was to become the Ho Chi Minh trail. At the time of my visit, late 1959 or early 1960, the most visible Communist takeover effort seemed to be in Laos. If I had even a glimmer that this part of Laos was to become so important in the Vietnamese war, I might have spent more time in the area.

I must admit my reconnaissance in southern Laos was a lot more pleasant than on the Plaine des Jarres or in the jungles outside Louangphrabang. I didn't have to spend uncomfortable nights in a tree on a string hammock or on the dirt floor of some native shack. The food there was certainly much better. On foot on the trail, I had to rely on canned meat, fish, and condensed milk purchased at some small Chinese store I happened by. Only occasionally, in some of the larger towns, would I come across some street vendor selling freshly fried chicken, or what I was assured was chicken. Many a day I would have been delighted to have had a few C-ration cans, or even a K-ration for that matter.

After four or five days down south, I figured I had enough information to satisfy even Gen Shoup so I returned to Vientiane. A day or two later, after turning in my pistol, I caught a ride on the air attache's plane to Bangkok. After spending a couple of days in a hotel putting my notes together, I headed back to the States. It was a roundabout trip by way of Okinawa and Pearl Harbor, briefing commanders and staff of various Marine and Navy commands along the way. My last stop was Headquarters Marine Corps where I delivered my final report. After almost two months on the road, I was at last back at my home base, the 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton.

Although my finished report was extensive, the guts of it were quite simple. Contrary to the opinion of some of the civilian "Whiz Kids" in the Pentagon at this time, I concluded that we wouldn't find any problems conducting military operations in Laos that we hadn't already met and overcome in World War II in New Guinea and Burma. Contrary to those moaning and groaning that any operation in Southeast Asia would soon find us bogged down, disease-ridden, tangled in the jungles, unable to support our troops, I believed we could fight there and win. I also strongly recommended the wide use of helicopters in support of any operations in that part of the world, particularly during the rainy season when the rice paddy areas would cause you to be completely bogged down when you had to use ground-based vehicles.

Now, so as not to leave Laos completely up in the air, let's consider the things that developed for a couple of years after that period. Probably due to my experience in Southeast Asia, a few weeks after I reported back to the 1st Marine Division, I was assigned to the billet of Head, Southeast Asia Plans and Policy Office, CinCPac. As a novice on that staff, I was getting a lot of help from Maj Emils who just happened to have wound up there as well. He had been there longer than I had and was quite helpful, when we began to receive reports that a young captain named Kong Le had engineered a coup against the incumbent RLG headed by Souvanna Phouma. We met in the CinCPac warrom in a hurry with the big question being: What side were we really on in this affair? The State Department said Kong Le was reputed to be a "Communist sympathizer." I disagreed with that report but being a novice member on the staff I wasn't paid much attention to. It seemed that we always tended to support incumbent ruling regimes just as long as they toed the anti-Communist line, no matter how corrupt and incompetent they were.

The lines were drawn. We lined up behind Phoumi, who later proved to be a congenital liar and corrupt as they come. But he was the head of the Government. Kong Le looking around desperately for backing for his small group of so-called neutrals found a ready helping hand from the Communists, which were strongly backed by Vietnam, China, and the Soviets. Kong Le's forces were incorporated into the Pathet Lao-Vietnam forces; Vientiane was sized, and the RLG displaced to Savannakhet. Eventually, the Plaine des Jarres became loaded with Vietnam vehicles brought in along old roads believe to be impassable while the Soviets flew hundreds of tons of equipment daily into the area. The war fronts oozed back and forth for almost two years with our side usually losing under lousy leadership. The PEO had even got into the act shedding its civilian clothes and becoming MAG Laos.

There was U.S. concern that the war in the jungle kingdom might grow and flow over into the rest of Southeast Asia at this time, and there were plans in the files to contend with massive Sino-Vietnam invasions into that area. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization met every six months on matters of concern, and I attended all of these meetings as a military representative. Then the Marine Corps got in the act. Here was a combat area far from the sea and yet the Marine Corps had been the primary, in fact one of the only combat organized the Americans had there.

So we decided to use helicopters to provide logistic support to our wavering Laotian forces strung out in jungle areas there. Since the only Service with helicopters ready to go as part of a complete package was the Marine Corps, a Marine brigade under BGen Orm Simpson was dispatched to Udon Thani in northern Thailand. The heard of the brigade was a helicopter unit, supported by infantry to provide local protection. Since

Titled Air America in Laos II

<http://www.utdallas.edu/library/collections/speccoll/Leeker/laos2.pdf>