

CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974

William M. Leary

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The largest paramilitary operations ever undertaken by the CIA took place in the small Southeast Asian Kingdom of Laos. For more than 13 years, the Agency directed native forces that fought major North Vietnamese units to a standstill. Although the country eventually fell to the Communists, the CIA remained proud of its accomplishments in Laos. As Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Richard Helms later observed: "This was a major operation for the Agency... It took manpower; it took specially qualified manpower; it was dangerous; it was difficult." The CIA, he contended, did "a superb job."¹

Air America, an airline secretly owned by the CIA, was a vital component in the Agency's operations in Laos. By the summer of 1970, the airline had some two dozen twin-engine transports, another two dozen short-takeoff-and-landing (STOL) aircraft, and some 30 helicopters dedicated to operations in Laos. There were more than 300 pilots, copilots, flight mechanics, and air-freight specialists flying out of Laos and Thailand. During 1970, Air America airdropped or landed 46 million pounds of foodstuffs—mainly rice—in Laos. Helicopter flight time reached more than 4,000 hours a month in the same year. Air America crews transported tens of thousands of troops and refugees, flew emergency medevac missions and rescued downed airmen throughout Laos, inserted and extracted road-watch teams, flew nighttime airdrop missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, monitored sensors along infiltration routes, conducted a highly

successful photoreconnaissance program, and engaged in numerous clandestine missions using night-vision glasses and state-of-the-art electronic equipment. Without Air America's presence, the CIA's effort in Laos could not have been sustained.

A Distorted View

Air America's public image has fared poorly. The 1990 movie *Air America* is largely responsible for this. It featured a cynical CIA officer who arranged for the airline to fly opium to the administrative capital of Vientiane for a corrupt Asian general—loosely modeled on Vang Pao, a military leader of the mountain-region-based Hmong ethnic group. The film depicts the CIA man as having the opium processed into heroin in a factory just down the street from the favorite bar of Air America's pilots. The Asian general, in return, supplied men to fight the war, plus a financial kickback to the CIA. Ultimately, we learn that the Communist versus anti-Communist war in Laos was merely a facade for the real war, which was fought for control of the area's opium fields.

Air America pilots in this film are portrayed as skilled at landing damaged airplanes, but basically as a wildly unprofessional menagerie of party animals, including a few borderline psychotics. These ill-disciplined airmen are not the villains of the story; they are merely pawns in a drug game that they either disdain or oppose outright.

A Bum Rap

The connection among Air America, the CIA, and the drug trade in Laos lingers in the public mind. The film, according to the credits, was based on Christopher Robbins's book about the airline, first published in 1979 under the title *Air America*.²

Although Robbins later claimed that the movie distorted his book,³ it closely followed the book's theme if not its details. Both movie and book contend that the CIA condoned a drug trade conducted by a Laotian client; both agree that Air America provided the essential transportation for the trade; and both portray the pilots sympathetically.

Robbins provides factual details that the movie lacks. Citing Alfred W. McCoy's 1972 study, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, he relates how Air America helicopters collected the opium harvests of 1970 and 1971, then flew the crop to Vang Pao's base at Long Tieng in the mountains of northern Laos, where it was turned into heroin at the general's drug laboratory.⁴

My nearly two decades of research indicate that Air America was not involved in the drug trade. As Joseph Westermeyer, who spent the years 1965 to 1975 in Laos as a physician, public health worker, and researcher, wrote in *Poppies, Pipes, and People*: "American-owned airlines never knowingly transported opium in or out of Laos, nor did their American pilots ever profit from its transport. Yet every plane in Laos undoubtedly carried opium at some time, unknown to the pilot and his superiors—just as had virtually every pedicab, every Mekong River sampan, and every missionary jeep

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between China and the Gulf of Siam.”⁵

If the CIA was not involved in the drug trade, it did know about it. As former DCI William Colby acknowledged, the Agency did little about it during the 1960s, but later took action against the traders as drugs became a problem among American troops in Vietnam. The CIA's main focus in Laos remained on fighting the war, not on policing the drug trade.⁶

How It Began

The story of the real Air America begins in 1950, when the CIA decided that it required an air transport capability to conduct covert operations in Asia in support of US policy objectives. In August 1950, the Agency secretly purchased the assets of Civil Air Transport (CAT), an airline that had been started in China after World War II by Gen. Claire L. Chennault and Whiting Willauer. CAT would continue to fly commercial routes throughout Asia, acting in every way as a privately owned commercial airline. At the same time, under the corporate guise

of CAT Incorporated, it provided airplanes and crews for secret intelligence operations.⁷

In the 1950s, the CIA's air proprietary, as it was known in the lexicon of intelligence, was used for a variety of covert missions. During the Korean war, for example, it made more than 100 hazardous overflights of mainland China, airdropping agents and supplies.

Supporting the French

CAT also became involved in the French war against Communist insurgents in Indochina. In April 1953, the French appealed to President Eisenhower for the use of US Air Force C-119 transports and crews to fly tanks and heavy equipment to their hard-pressed forces in Laos. "Having such equipment," the French emphasized, "might mean the difference between holding and losing Laos."⁸

While reluctant to commit American military personnel to the war in Indochina, the Eisenhower administration was anxious to assist the French. This led to a decision to use CAT pilots to fly an airlift in US Air Force-supplied C-119s. In early May, a group of CAT personnel arrived at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for 72 hours of concentrated ground and flight school on the unfamiliar C-119s. On 5 May, they flew six of the transports, now bearing the tricolored roundels of the French Air Force, to Gia Lam airbase, outside Hanoi.

Operation SQUAW began the next day. It continued until 16 July, with CAT pilots making numerous airdrops to French troops in Laos.

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With the waning of the Vietminh offensive, which was due more to the weather than to French resistance, the CAT crews were withdrawn.⁹

The war in Indochina, however, continued to go badly for the French. In November 1953, French paratroopers occupied Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam, 10 miles from the Laos border, and established an airhead. Gen. Henri Navarre, the French military commander, wanted to lure the Vietminh into a setpiece battle in which superior French firepower could be used to good effect. Among the many mistakes made by the French in placing their troops 220 miles from Hanoi was their miscalculation of the air transport resources needed to keep their isolated forces supplied. Col. Jean-Louis Nicot, head of the French Air Transport Command in Indochina, lacked sufficient aircrews to meet the Army's demands. Unless additional assistance could be obtained, the French garrison could not be kept supplied.¹⁰

In early January 1954, Washington alerted CAT for a possible return to Indochina. Under a contract signed with French authorities on 3 March, CAT would supply 24 pilots to operate 12 C-119s that would be maintained by US Air Force personnel. Operations from Hanoi's Cat Bi airfield to Dien Bien Phu got under way just as the Vietminh began their assault on the French position. Between 13 March and the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the beleaguered French troops. One plane was shot down in early May, and the two pilots were killed; many other C-119s suffered heavy flank damage, and one pilot was severely wounded.

CAT operations continued in Indochina after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Between mid-May and mid-August, C-119s dropped supplies to isolated French outposts and delivered loads throughout the country. CAT also supplied 12 C-46s for Operation COGNAC, the evacuation of civilians from North Vietnam to South Vietnam following the signing of the Geneva Agreement on 21 July 1954. Between 22 August and 4 October, CAT flew 19,808 men, women, and children out of North Vietnam. It also carried members of the CIA's Saigon Military Mission north of the 17th parallel. Attempts by the CIA to establish staybehind paramilitary networks in the north, however, proved futile.¹¹

Concern About Laos

The Geneva Conference of 1954, in addition to dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel, confirmed the status of Laos as an independent state. The nation would be ruled by the Royal Lao Government from Vientiane on the Mekong River. Members of the pro-Communist Pathet Lao would regroup in the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly pending integration into the central regime. The French were allowed to maintain a small military presence in the country to train the Royal Lao Army (FAR).

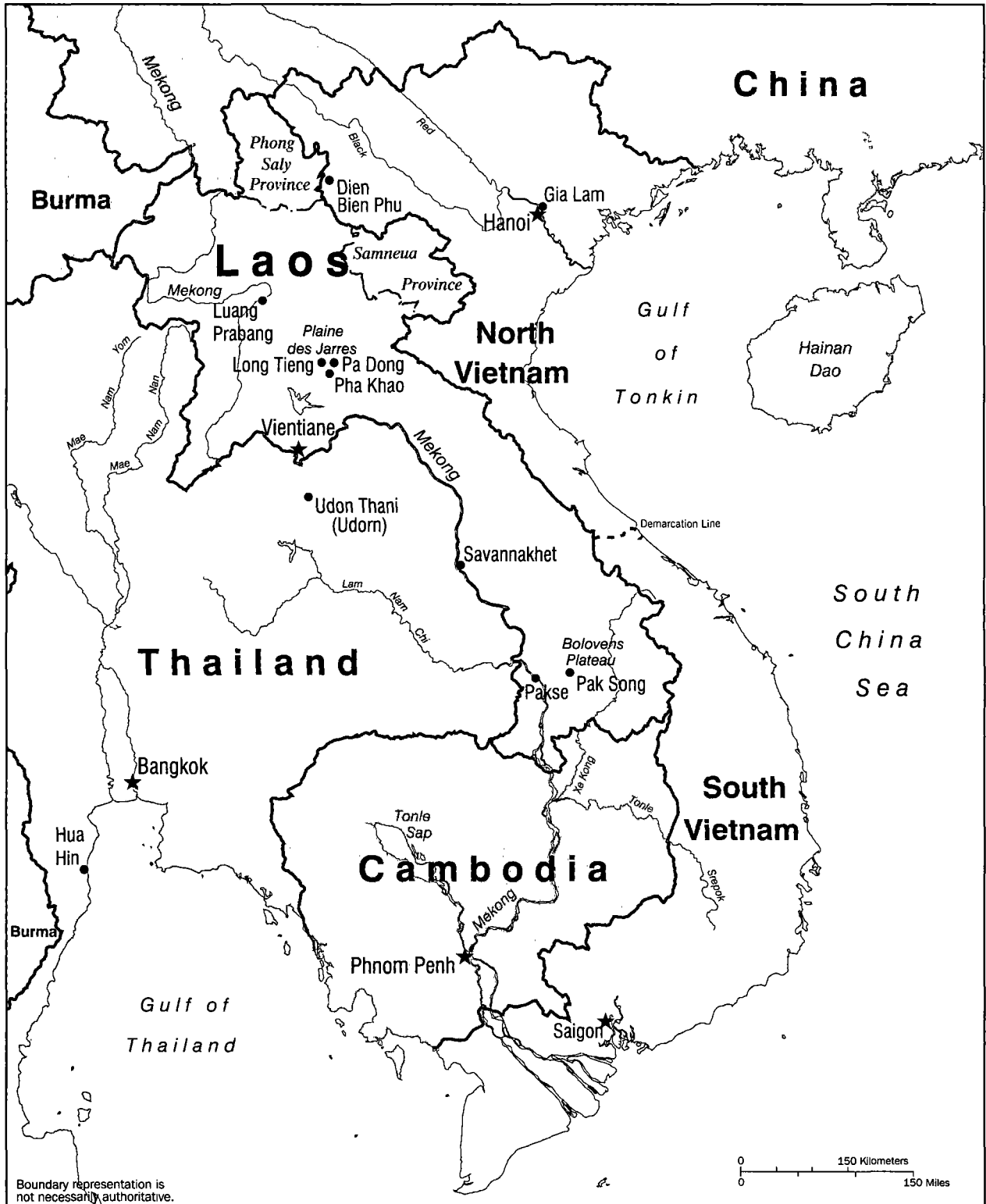
Laotian independence suited the policy of the United States, so long as the government remained non-Communist. Laos represented one of the dominos in Southeast Asia that concerned President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Although the country had little intrinsic value, its geographical position placed it in the center of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. If Laos fell to the Communists, Thailand might be next, according to the domino theory. And the collapse of Thailand would lead to Communist domination of Southeast Asia—and perhaps beyond.¹²

US Aid

Under an agreement signed in 1950, the United States had been supplying economic and military aid to Laos. Following the Geneva Conference, Washington decided to expand this program. In January 1955, it established the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Vientiane to administer economic assistance. At the end of the year, the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO)—staffed by reserve or retired military officers and akin to a Military Assistance Advisory Group—was set up within USOM to handle military aid.¹³

CAT soon became involved in USOM's aid program. In July 1955, USOM officials learned that a rice failure threatened famine in several provinces in Laos. Because a number of these areas were in remote, mountainous regions, airdrops would be the only feasible means to delivering essential supplies of rice and salt. Three CAT C-46s arrived at the northeastern railhead of Udorn, Thailand, on 11 September to begin the airlift. By the end of the month,

PRE-1975 INDOCHINA



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CAT had flown more than 200 missions to 25 reception areas, delivering 1,000 tons of emergency food. Conducted smoothly and efficiently, this airdrop relief operation marked the beginning of CAT’s—and later Air America’s—support of US assistance programs in Laos.¹⁴

CAT’s permanent presence in Laos began on 1 July 1957, when CAT pilot Bruce B. Blevins brought a C-47 to Vientiane to service a new contract with the US Embassy. Blevins found flying conditions primitive in Laos. At least Vientiane had a pierced steel plank runway and the only control tower in Laos. Elsewhere, he usually landed on dirt strips that had been built to support Japanese fighters during World War II. There were no aeronautical charts available, so he had to use French topographical maps. The only radio aid to navigation in the country was a 25-watt nondirectional beacon at Vientiane that was operated by employees of Air Laos, the country’s commercial airline, who turned it on when it suited them.¹⁵

Between 1957 and 1959, the unstable political situation in Laos led to a growing American presence in the country as the United States increased its support of the FAR. Air America—the name changed on 26 March 1959, primarily to avoid confusion about the air proprietary’s operations in Japan¹⁶—provided essential transportation for the expanding American effort in Laos. The airline’s C-47s and C-46s passed more frequently through Vientiane to fulfill urgent airdrop requests. Blevins also was kept busy, landing throughout the country and making numerous airdrops to isolated FAR posts. He developed an especially close relationship with a CIA case

officer who had arrived in October 1958 and who was assigned to support neutralist Capt. Kong Le’s parachute battalion. The case officer frequently called on Blevins to carry personnel and supplies.

The summer of 1959 saw the introduction into Laos of a US Special Forces Group, codenamed Hotfoot, under the command of Lt. Col. Arthur “Bull” Simons. Twelve Mobile Training Teams took up duties at Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannekhet, and Pakse.¹⁷ The appearance of the Americans coincided with the outbreak of fighting between the FAR and Pathet Lao. In light of these developments, CIA officials in Laos requested additional air transport resources.

Increasing Air Support

In August 1959, CIA headquarters ordered its air proprietary to send two pilots to Japan for helicopter training. Robert E. Rousselot, vice president for operations, remembers being called into President Hugh L. Grundy’s office in Taipei and shown the message. The requirement had “come out of the blue.” He assumed that the CIA had a special operation in mind that called for the use of a helicopter and that it would be “a one-time deal.” Little did Rousselot realize that this would be the begin-

ning of a major rotary-wing operation in Laos.¹⁸

Eventually, four CAT pilots were trained on US Air Force H-19A helicopters in Japan and the Philippines. The CAT contingent did not reach Laos until March 1960. Due to the operating limitations of the H-19s, the underpowered helicopters could fly only at lower elevations in the country. Generally, they were used to carry CIA case officers to meetings in outlying areas and to distribute leaflets during elections.¹⁹

By June 1960, it had become clear that helicopters would form a permanent part of Air America’s operations in Laos. It was equally apparent that neither the underpowered H-19s nor the inexperienced Air America rotary-wing pilots could do the job. Both Rousselot and the CIA recognized that better equipment and properly trained pilots were needed to accomplish the mission. Rousselot hired four experienced US Marine Corps helicopter pilots who obtained their discharges in Okinawa to fly the H-19s. Later in the year, the CIA arranged for the Marine Corps to transfer four UH-34 helicopters to Air America to replace the H-19s.²⁰

The Helio Courier

At the same time that Air America was trying to develop a rotary-wing capability in Laos, the company also was taking steps to introduce STOL aircraft into the country. Maj. Harry C. Aderholt, a US Air Force detailee with the CIA, had supervised the development of the Helio Courier while serving with the Agency’s air branch. Convinced that the aircraft could survive the short, rugged

airstrips often found in remote areas, he became the foremost advocate for Air America's adoption of the Helio Courier.²¹

Air America obtained a Helio for trials in Laos in the fall of 1959. The STOL program got off to a poor start. The Helio's engines proved temperamental, frequently developing vapor locks on starting. Mud, rocks, and gravel tended to block the aircraft's crosswind landing gear. The rudder needed modification so that it would not jam. Also, the first pilots who flew the airplane were used to multiengine transports and did not receive adequate training on an airplane that demanded special handling techniques.

Air America came close to abandoning the Helio. It was saved by Aderholt, who believed in the aircraft's capability and was determined to see it work, and by Rousselot, who feared that the CIA would give the STOL mission to a rival company—Bird & Son—if Air America proved incapable of doing the job. Early in 1960, Rousselot assigned Ronald J. Sutphin, a talented light-plane pilot, to the project. Both Aderholt and Rousselot agree that it was Sutphin's skillful demonstration of the extraordinary capability of the STOL aircraft that led the CIA to greatly expand the program.

Supporting the Anti-Communists

In August 1960, President Eisenhower complained at a press conference that "Laos is a very confused situation." Civil war had broken out between the neutralist forces of paratroop commander Kong



Air America UH-34s at Sam Thong, Laos, 1961. The shirtless man at the left is Edgar "Pop" Buell, senior USAID official at Sam Thong. Photo courtesy of E.C. Eckholdt.

Le and rightwing Gen. Phoumi Nosavan. The Communist Pathet Lao supported Kong Le, while the US military and CIA lined up behind Phoumi. As Adm. Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, explained: "Phoumi is no George Washington. However, he is anti-Communist, which is what counts most in the sad Laos situation."²²

As Phoumi prepared to march on Vientiane from his base in Savannakhet, US assistance to the rightwing general increased sharply. Special Forces personnel conducted intensive training of Phoumi's troops, while Air America transport flew in supplies from Bangkok. Phoumi also obtained support from his close friend, Thai Prime Minister Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who sent teams from the elite Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit to work with Phoumi's soldiers.

Heavy fighting took place in December as General Phoumi drove Kong

Le out of Vientiane. By the end of the year, Kong Le—now receiving support from a Soviet airlift—had retreated north to the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ), securing the vital airfield complex in that area.²³

The appearance of the Soviets alarmed American military authorities. Admiral Felt cabled the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 29 December: "With full realization of the seriousness of the decision to intervene, I believe strongly that we must intervene now or give up northern Laos." Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Arleigh Burke agreed. "If we lose Laos," he told the Joint Chiefs on 31 December, "we will probably lose Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia. We will have demonstrated to the world that we cannot or will not stand when challenged." The effect, Burke warned, would soon be felt throughout Asia, Latin America, and Africa.²⁴

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In preparation for possible US military intervention in Laos, the Joint Chiefs ordered the emergency mobilization of a task force at Subic Bay in the Philippines. On New Year's Day, the American warships left port and headed north. At the same time, President Eisenhower was looking for ways to stabilize the situation in Laos without having to introduce American troops into the conflict. He therefore viewed with favor a CIA proposal to arm and train Hmong tribesmen.

The PARU Program

The Hmong project was primarily the work of CIA paramilitary specialist James W. (Bill) Lair. A veteran of World War II, Lair had joined the CIA at the outbreak of the Korean war. Assigned to Thailand, he had worked as a civilian instructor with the Thai Police Department in a CIA-sponsored program to enhance the organization's ability to deal with threats from Communist insurgents. Attached to the Border Police, Lair soon encountered the problem of assisting remote border outposts. When police units in outlying areas of Thailand were attacked by Communist guerrillas, it often took a week to get reinforcements to the stations. Lair argued that it would be better to have a parachute-trained unit for such emergencies. Although the Thai Army was not happy about the appearance of a paramilitary police organization, Thailand's government approved its creation. Aware of the Army's sensitivity, Lair selected an innocuous name for the new organization: Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU).²⁵

Lair was proud of his role in developing the PARU program. He selected

a training camp in south Thailand and initiated a rigorous program to create an elite paramilitary force. At one point, the PARU program was in danger of losing CIA support. It was saved through the intervention of Desmond FitzGerald, chief of the Far East Division in the Clandestine Service. By 1960, the PARU force numbered more than 400 highly trained individuals.

Enter Vang Pao

The key to the Hmong program was Vang Pao, a Hmong military leader who commanded the FAR's 10th Infantry Battalion on the PDJ. A talented and ambitious officer, Vang Pao had earlier come to the attention of Americans in Laos. In April 1957, the PEO had selected him to attend a six-month counterinsurgency training program at the Scout Ranger Base in Manila.

When fighting broke out in Laos at the end of 1959, Vang Pao had grown concerned that the Hmong were likely to suffer reprisals from the Communists because of the Hmong's

previous close association with the French. Encouraged by General Phoumi and assisted by a US Special Forces team, he began to organize a Hmong staybehind force on the southeastern edge of the PDJ. If the Communists occupied the Plaine, Vang Pao intended to relocate the Hmong to seven strategic mountaintops surrounding the PDJ and carry on the fight.²⁶

Aware that Vang Pao was seeking General Phoumi's assistance, Lair decided to look into the possibility of an expanded program with the Hmong commander. In late December 1959, Lair met with Vang Pao. VP, as he was known to the Americans, said that he either had to fight the Communists or leave the country; if the United States supplied the weapons, Vang Pao said that he would fight and that he could easily raise an army of 10,000.

Impressed with the Hmong commander, Lair returned to Vientiane and reported the contact to station chief Gordon L. Jorgensen. As it happened, Desmond FitzGerald was passing through Vientiane en route to Vietnam. Jorgensen suggested that he and Lair get together with FitzGerald for dinner. FitzGerald told Lair that the PARU's assistance to General Phoumi during his campaign against Kong Le had been worth everything that the CIA had spent on the program. Lair then outlined a program to support the Hmong. FitzGerald asked him to write up the proposal and send it to Washington.²⁷

Although Lair "never thought they would do it," he quickly dispatched an 18-page cable. A positive answer, he recalled, came back "surprisingly soon." Lair's proposal also gained the

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support of Admiral Felt and the State Department. President Eisenhower, looking for ways to avoid direct American involvement in Laos, was willing to go along with the CIA’s scheme.²⁸

Backing the Resistance

With authorization to arm and train 1,000 Hmong as a test of the concept, Lair again visited Vang Pao and arranged for an arms drop at Pa Dong, a mountaintop base south of the PDJ. In January 1961, Air America delivered weapons to the first 300 trainees. The program nearly got off to a disastrous start when an Air America helicopter, carrying Lair and the PARU training team, crashed after failing to clear a ridgeline when approaching the Hmong camp. Fortunately, there were no injuries.²⁹

The PARU team conducted a three-day training program for the Hmong, involving the use of their weapons and basic ambush techniques. Lair also asked Vang Pao to select 20 men out of the 300 for training as radio operators. These individuals were sent to the PARU training camp in south Thailand for instruction.

With the Hmong scattered on mountainous terrain surrounding the PDJ, Lair recognized from the beginning that good communications would be crucial for effective operations, and he turned to Air America. In the early months of 1961, Air America had only a handful of helicopters and STOL aircraft available to support CIA operations in Laos. This changed in early March, when the new administration of President Kennedy became alarmed after Kong Le and the Pathet Lao captured a key

road junction and threatened Vientiane and the royal capital at Luang Prabang. Kennedy again placed US military forces in the region on alert, and he also authorized the transfer of 14 UH-34 helicopters from the Marine Corps to Air America to be flown by Marine, Army, and Navy “volunteers.”³⁰

On 29 March 1961, pilot Clarence J. Abadie led a flight of 16 UH-34s from Bangkok to Air America’s new forward operating base at Udorn in northeastern Thailand, 40 miles south of Vientiane. The helicopter forces soon became involved in supporting Hmong forces engaged in a fierce battle with the Pathet Lao at Pa Dong. On 30 May, the first Air America helicopter pilots died in Laos, when Charles Mateer and Walter Wizbowski crashed in bad weather while trying to land supplies to the besieged Hmong.³¹

Driven from Pa Dong, Vang Pao moved his headquarters to Pha Khao, 10 miles to the southwest. In July, Brig. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale—at that time a US security adviser—reported to Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, President Kennedy’s military adviser, that 13 PARU teams (99 men) were working with the Hmong, assisted by nine US Special Forces personnel. Nine CIA case officers were assigned to the Hmong program, with two backups in Vientiane. More than 9,000 Hmong had been equipped for guerrilla operations, with the possibility of securing 4,000 additional recruits.³²

As the Hmong force grew, so did Air America’s presence in Laos. To connect the scattered Hmong outposts that were separated by mountainous terrain, Lair ordered the construction of a chain of airstrips, labeled Victor Sites (later called Lima Sites), that could be used by Air America’s STOL airplanes. In April 1961, William R. Andersevic arrived in Vientiane to take charge of Air America’s Helio program. Under his direction, the number of STOL sites expanded rapidly. Andersevic would locate suitable areas, then arrange for local people to cut down trees and level the ground as best they could with their primitive equipment. By the summer of 1961, Andersevic had given Lair a firm foundation upon which to build what would become an extensive network of STOL fields throughout northern Laos.³³

Air America transports were also the key to feeding the people in the Hmong villages where the men had gone off to fight. Lair had enlisted the assistance of Edgar M. (“Pop”) Buell to deal with this program. An Indiana farmer who had arrived in Laos in June 1960 to work with the International volunteer Service, Buell proved an inspired choice for the task. After a two-month trek around the perimeter of the PDJ, Buell arranged through Lair for Air America to make scheduled airdrops of rice to the Hmong villages.³⁴

The Diplomatic Track

While the Hmong program was expanding, President Kennedy had been seeking a diplomatic solution to the situation in Laos. At a meeting in Vienna in June 1961, Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev issued a joint statement of support for



Air America Dornier DO-28 being refueled by buckets at a mountain airstrip in northern Laos, 1963. Photo courtesy of E.C. Eckholdt.

“a neutral and independent Laos.” At the same time, negotiators met in Geneva to try to work out a settlement to the problem.

On 23 July 1962, a formal “Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos” was signed in Geneva. It provided for a coalition government and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country by 7 October. The United States pulled out its 666 military advisers and support staff, and Air America stopped dropping weapons to the Hmong. Assistant Secretary of State Averill Harriman, who was intent on ensuring US compliance with the Geneva accords, allowed the CIA to retain only two men in Laos to monitor Communist compliance with the agreement.³⁵

Air America’s operations declined sharply in 1963. Restricted to food

resupply to the Hmong, which averaged 40 tons a month by summer, the airline laid off people and mothballed airplanes. By May 1963, the number of UH-34s assigned to Udorn had dropped from 18 to six. Flight hours, which had averaged 2,000 per month before the Geneva accords, dropped to 600. As helicopter pilot Harry Casterlin wrote to his parents: “There are 37 of us over here and not enough work.... We are doing virtually no flying in Laos anymore.”³⁶

A Broken Agreement

Reports reaching CIA Headquarters from its two officers in Laos suggested that the apparent quiet was deceptive. It soon became clear that 7,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops had not left the coun-

try. In fact, the NVA was expanding its areas of control, attacking both neutralist and Hmong positions throughout Laos. As Hmong ammunition stores dwindled, William Colby, who was head of the CIA’s Far East Division, pleaded to Harriman to allow the resumption of air shipments. “My arguments became more forceful,” Colby recalled, “reflecting the intense cables I was receiving from the two CIA officers who were still up in the hills observing and reporting on what was happening.” Harriman reluctantly approved an Air America arms drop—along with instructions that it be used for purely defense purposes. Further shipments followed. As Colby pointed out, however, Harriman personally approved “each and every clandestine supply flight and its cargo.”³⁷

Conflict Intensifies

As Hanoi sent additional troops into Laos during 1963, the Kennedy administration authorized the CIA to increase the size of the Hmong army, now headquartered in the valley of Long Tieng. By the end of the year, a reported 20,000 Hmong were armed. They acted as guerrillas, blowing up NVA supply depots, ambushing trucks, mining roads, and generally harassing the stronger enemy force. Air America again took a greater role in the slowly expanding conflict. “The war is going great guns now,” helicopter pilot Casterlin informed his parents in November 1963. “Don’t be misled [by new reports] that I am only carrying rice on my missions as wars aren’t won by rice.”³⁸

Full-scale fighting broke out in Laos in March 1964, when North

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Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces attacked across the PDJ. By mid-May, the Communists had taken control of the strategic region, bringing an end to the already shaky coalition government.

Search and Rescue

While contemplating direct American military intervention, President Johnson ordered Navy and Air Force reconnaissance flights over the PDJ to provide intelligence and to send Hanoi “a message of American resolve.” On 6 June, a naval reconnaissance aircraft was shot down over the PDJ. As the military services lacked a search-and-rescue capability in Laos, Air America undertook the responsibility.³⁹

This unsuccessful attempt to rescue Lt. Charles E. Klusmann—who later escaped from his captors⁴⁰—marked the beginning of what was perhaps the most demanding and hazardous of Air America’s operations in Laos. The airline’s pilots were neither trained nor properly equipped for the dangerous search-and-rescue task, but there was no one else to do the job. This mission became even more difficult during the first half of 1965, when the air war expanded into the northwestern portion of North Vietnam.

As Air America crews in helicopters, transports, and T-28s risked their lives to save downed US airmen, rumors grew that the civilian pilots were receiving a bounty of \$1,500 for each rescue. This story apparently originated with a US Air Force captain in the air attaché’s office in Vientiane. Charged with briefing military pilots on rescue capabilities

in Laos, he visited Air Force bases and US Navy carriers, spreading the word that airmen who were shot down over Laos did not have to worry about being picked up: Air America’s pilots would be there to get them out, competing for the \$1,500 bonus.⁴¹

When the story reached Air America, it created a good deal of resentment. In June 1965, after an especially hazardous long-range mission into North Vietnam in which two helicopters were badly shot up and a local Lao commander killed in what turned out to be a successful rescue of two Air Force officers from a downed F-4C, one of the Air America helicopter pilots wrote: “The AF doesn’t, I’m sure, appreciate what we are doing for them at great risk to ourselves... . What makes us mad is that the AF thinks we get \$1,500 for a pickup. We get nothing—but ulcers.”⁴²

Not Very Secret

The year 1965 marked the beginning of major military activity in what became known as the secret war in Laos. Although the full extent of the conflict was not revealed to the American people until 1969-70, the war was not all that secret. News of the fighting frequently found its way into the pages of *The Bangkok Post*, *The New York Times*, and other newspapers. Congress was kept well

informed. As former CIA Director Richard Helms has pointed out, the Appropriations subcommittees that provided the funds for the war were briefed regularly. Also, Senator Stuart Symington and other Congressmen visited Laos and gave every indication of approving what was happening. They believed, Helms noted, that “It was a much cheaper and better way to fight a war in Southeast Asia than to commit American troops.”⁴³

The CIA was largely responsible for conducting military operations in Laos, but the US Ambassador was the man in charge. The secret war in Laos, author Charles Stevenson has emphasized, “was William Sullivan’s war.” Ambassador from December 1964 to March 1969, Sullivan insisted on an efficient, closely controlled country team. “There wasn’t a bag of rice dropped in Laos that he didn’t know about,” observed Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy. Sullivan imposed two conditions upon his subordinates. First, the thin fiction of the Geneva accords had to be maintained to avoid possible embarrassment to the Lao and Soviet Governments; military operations, therefore, had to be carried out in relative secrecy. Second, no regular US ground troops were to become involved. In general, Ambassador Sullivan and his successor, G. McMurtrie Godley, successfully carried out this policy.⁴⁴

Activity at Udorn

The Ambassador in Vientiane delegated responsibility for the tactical conduct of the war to his CIA station chief. The primary headquarters for supervising the war, however,

was in Udorn, Thailand. Located adjacent to the Air America parking ramp at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, the 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment was the CIA's command center for military operations in Laos. Lair was in charge of the 4802nd until the summer of 1968, when he was replaced by his long-time deputy, Lloyd ("Pat") Landry.

Both Lair and Landry had excellent rapport with Gen. Vitoon Yasawatdi, commander of "Headquarters 333" at Udorn, the Thai organization in charge of that country's forces in Laos. The Thai general, who had direct, private access to both the Lao and Thai prime ministers, had been identified by one senior CIA officer as "the single most important player in the Laos program."⁴⁵

Weather and the War

The early years of the war took on a seasonal aspect. During the dry period, which lasted from October to May, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao went on the offensive, applying pressure on the Hmong in northern Laos and on government forces throughout the country. During the monsoon, lasting from June to September, the anti-Communists took advantage of the mobility provided by Air America and struck deep into enemy-occupied territory. The situation was a mirror image of Vietnam. In Laos, the Communists acted as a conventional military force and were tied to fixed supply lines. The Hmong, at least at first, countered with guerrilla tactics.

The limited nature of the war was reflected in the modest losses—that is, modest in comparison to what was



Air America C-123 on ramp at Long Tieng, 1970. Photo courtesy of D. Williams.

ahead—suffered by Air America during 1965, 1966, and 1967. Despite a rapid growth in personnel, Air America lost only 11 crew members in Laos during these three years, five of which were due to enemy action.

North Vietnamese Pressure

The character of the war began to change in 1968. The North Vietnamese, impatient with the progress of the Pathet Lao, introduced major new combat forces into Laos and took control of the year's dry season offensive. By mid-March, they had captured a strategic valley north of Luang Prabang, successfully assaulted a key navigational facility that was used by the US Air Force for bombing North Vietnam, and threatened to push the Hmong out of their mountaintop strongholds surrounding the PDJ.

On 21 March 1968, CIA Headquarters issued a Special National

Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) to top-level policymakers in Washington on *Communist Intentions in Laos*. Despite the presence of 35,000 NVA troops in the country, CIA analysts concluded that Hanoi was mainly interested in protecting its supply routes to South Vietnam and did not wish to destroy the general framework of the 1962 Geneva settlement.⁴⁶

Events soon proved the SNIE to be correct. The NVA offensive ended with the onset of the monsoon in May. The Hmong, however, had suffered heavy casualties, losing more than 1,000 men since January, including many top commanders. A recruitment drive turned up only 300 replacements: 30 percent were between the ages of 10 and 14, 30 percent were 15 and 16, while the remaining 40 percent were all over 35. According to "Pop" Buell, those between those ages were all dead.⁴⁷

Offensive and Counteroffensive

As the strength of the Hmong waned, the United States tried to redress the growing imbalance of forces in the field through increased use of airpower. Between 1965 and 1968, the rate of sorties in Laos had remained fairly constant at 10 to 20 a day. In 1969, the rate reached 300 per day.⁴⁸

During the rainy season of 1969, Vang Pao abandoned the use of guerrilla tactics and launched a major offensive against the NVA/Pathet Lao forces, using the increased airpower to support a drive against enemy positions on the PDJ. Operation About Face was a huge success. The Hmong reclaimed the entire PDJ for the first time since 1960, capturing 1,700 tons of food, 2,500 tons of ammunition, 640 heavy weapons, and 25 Soviet PT-76 tanks.⁴⁹

But the victory was short-lived. In January 1970, the NVA brought in two divisions that quickly regained all the lost ground and threatened the major Hmong base at Long Tieng. For the first time, B-52s were used to blunt the enemy drive.

NVA strength in Laos had reached 67,000 men, but CIA analysts continued to argue that the enemy did not want to risk a decisive action. "The Communists believe that when they obtain their objectives in South Vietnam," the CIA's Office of National Estimates predicted in April 1970, "Laos will fall into their hands."⁵⁰

Losing Ground

The monsoon season of 1971 saw the last major offensive operations by the Hmong, now assisted by growing numbers of Thai volunteer battalions, trained and paid by the CIA. Vang Pao again captured the PDJ in July and established a network of artillery strongpoints, manned by Thai gunners. Vang Pao's hope of retaining the PDJ during the dry season went unfulfilled. In December 1971, the North Vietnamese launched a coordinated assault against the artillery bases. Using tanks and 130-mm guns that outranged the Thai artillery, the NVA quickly recaptured the PDJ.⁵¹

The last days of 1971 and early months of 1972 saw increased enemy pressure on the main Hmong base at Long Tieng. Air America suffered heavy losses during this period. In December alone, 24 aircraft were hit by ground fire and three were shot down. Between December and April, six Air America crew members died in Laos.⁵²

The war also went badly in southern Laos, where the CIA recruited, trained, advised, and paid indigenous personnel who were organized into Special Guerrilla Units. Heavy fighting erupted in 1971 for control of the strategic Bolovens Plateau, with Air America providing the essential air transport for the CIA-led forces. By the end of the year, however, the NVA clearly held the upper hand following the capture of Paksong, 25 miles east of the Mekong River town of Pakse, on 28 December.⁵³

On 24 April 1972, Air America's vice president for flight operations sent a telex message addressed to all crew members. Noting that "the past few

months have produced an appalling toll in lives and serious injuries," he urged all flight crews and supervisors to reappraise the factors "which make flying in our operations 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 navigational/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." Everyone, he warned, should exercise extreme caution when conducting flight operations in Laos.⁵⁴

Closing Down

At the same time that Air America crews were being reminded about the hazardous nature of operations in Laos, DCI Helms was deciding the fate of the air proprietary. On 21 April 1972, he ended a lengthy debate within the CIA over the continued need for a covert airlift capability, and ordered the Agency to divest itself of ownership and control of Air America and related companies. Air America would be retained only until the end of the war in Southeast Asia.⁵⁵

On 27 January 1973, the Paris agreement on Vietnam was concluded, providing for the withdrawal of American troops. The following month, a cease-fire agreement was signed in Vientiane, leading to the formation of a coalition government for Laos. Although the end of the



Air America complex at Udorn, Thailand, 1973. Photo courtesy of Judy Porter.

war was clearly in sight, Air America continued to lose people. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that Air America suffered its heaviest losses in the two years following the CIA's decision to terminate the company. Between April 1972, when Helms issued his orders, and June 1974, when Air America left the country, 23 crew members died in flight operations in Laos.

On 3 June 1974, the last Air America aircraft crossed the border from Laos into Thailand. The end went well, Air America's operations office in Vientiane informed Washington "...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 grieve for those missing

and dead in Laos and regret that they too could not have enjoyed today." In all, 100 Air America personnel had died in Laos.⁵⁶

The base at Udorn was shut down at the end of June. Operations in Vietnam continued until the fall of Saigon in April 1975. When plans for a new stay-behind company in Thailand, staffed by a contingent of

select helicopter and transport pilots, fell through, all Air America personnel were discharged. The company finally closed its doors on 30 June 1976, returning more than \$20 million to the US Treasury.⁵⁷

A Distinguished Record

CAT/Air America performed superbly for the CIA. The skilled aircrews and ground personnel of the air proprietary had given CIA the air transport capability required for a variety of covert operations in Asia. Although this "air complex"⁵⁸ had caused legal problems for the CIA's Directorate of Administration, there is no question that personnel in the Directorate of Operations considered CAT/Air America as an essential tool for their work.

During the war in Laos, Air America was called upon to perform paramilitary tasks at great risk to the aircrews involved. Although lacking the discipline found in a military organization, the personnel of the air proprietary continued to place their lives at hazard for years. Some Air America pilots flew in Laos for more than a decade, braving enemy fire and surmounting challenging operational conditions with rare skill and determination. As pointed out by a senior Agency official during the dedication of a plaque to Air America personnel at CIA Headquarters in May 1988: "The aircrew, maintenance, and other professional aviation skills they applied on our behalf were extraordinary. But, above all, they brought a dedication to our mission and the highest standards of personal courage in the conduct of that mission."⁵⁹

The exploits of CAT/Air America form a unique chapter in the history

of air transport, one that deserves better than a misleading, mediocre movie.

and *CIA Covert Operations in Asia* (University of Alabama Press, 1984).

8. See Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, 12 books (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), Book 9, p. 38.

9. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, pp. 164-67.

10. Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966). This remains the standard account of the battle.

11. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, pp. 181-92.

12. In US policy toward Laos, see Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Policy of Neutralization*, revised edition (New York: Praeger, 1971), and Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

13. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, pp. 16-17.

14. "Rice Drop Over Laos," *CAT Bulletin* 8 (December 1955), pp. 4-5.

15. Leary interview with Blevins, 11 July 1987.

16. See "Minutes of Meeting on Name Change," 4 April 1959, in microfilm collection of Air America legal records, in the author's possession.

17. See Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, pp. 20-21.

18. Leary interview with Rousselot, 10 August 1987.

19. Leary interview with Dale D. Williamson, chief pilot of the first helicopter contingent to Laos, 13 July 1987.

20. Leary interview with Rousselot, 10 August 1987.

NOTES

1. Ted Gittinger, interview with Richard Helms, 16 September 1981, Oral History Program, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX. For recent studies of the war in Laos, see Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Jan Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, The Americans, and Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995); and Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1996), which is the revised edition of *Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Links to the War in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

2. Christopher Robbins, *Air America: The Story of the CIA's Secret Airlines* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979).

3. See Robbins, "Air America' Doesn't Fly Right," *The New York Times*, 28 August 1990.

4. Robbins, *Air America*, p. 138.

5. Joseph Westermeyer, *Poppies, Pipes, and People: Opium and Its Use in Laos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 51.

6. Ted Gittinger, interview with William Colby, 2 June 1981, Oral History Program, LBJ Library.

7. For a detailed account of CAT, see *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport*

21. Leary interview with Aderholt, 28 August 1990.
22. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960-61* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 641; Felt is quoted in Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict: From Military Assistance to Combat* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1986), pp. 24-25.
23. Stevenson, *End of Nowhere*, pp. 110-120.
24. Felt and Burke are quoted in Marolda and Fitzgerald, *United States Navy*, p. 55.
25. Leary interview with Lair, 3 July 1993. Lair's story is best told in Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*.
26. Jack F. Mathews to the author, 15 February 1998.
27. Leary interview with Lair, 3 July 1993.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 86-94.
30. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, pp. 29-30, 43-44.
31. Abadie to Leary, 10 June 1990; Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 108.
32. Lansdale to Taylor, "Resources for Unconventional Warfare in S. E. Asia," [July 1961], in *The Pentagon Papers - New York Times Edition* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 130-38.
33. Leary interview with Andresevic, 19 June 1987.
34. On Buell, see Don A. Schanche, *Mister Pop* (New York: David McKay, 1970), and Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, *passim*.
35. William Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 191-93.
36. Casterlin to his parents, 24 January 1963, copy provided to the author by Captain Casterlin.
37. Colby, *Honorable Men*, pp. 192-95.
38. Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 113-26; Casterlin to his parents, 11 November 1963.
39. Marolda and Fitzgerald, *United States Navy*, p. 378.
40. For Klusmann's account of his escape, see his "The Price of Freedom," *Air America Log 14* (October-December 1997), pp. 12-15.
41. Leary interview with James L. Mullen, who worked in Air America's Flight Information Center in 1965, 13 July 1987.
42. Casterlin, "For Posterity," 21 June 1965.
43. Gittinger interview with Helms, 16 September 1981.
44. Stevenson, *End of Nowhere*, pp. 208-18.
45. See the informative staff report of a visit to Laos by James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose: US Senate Subcommittee on US Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, *Laos: April 1971*, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 1971; Leary interview with Landry, 3 July 1993.
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56. Telex, VP-NTD UTH to Chief Executive Office, 3 June 1974, Hickler Papers.
57. United States Senate, *Foreign and Military Intelligence*, p. 239.
58. An oft-used term at the time, encompassing all of the various elements of CIA's air proprietary in Laos.
59. Remarks by James N. Glerum at the annual ceremony for CIA employees who died in the line of duty, 31 May 1988.