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INTERVIEW

Q: Would you like to tell us some basic facts about how you got to Laos? First of all your name and what you were doing when you were sent to Laos.

From the Peace Corps to USAID, 1963-1965

KUHN: Okay. My name is Ernest C. Kuhn, Ernie Kuhn. I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand from 1963 through mid-1965 working in a...I'm going to use the politically incorrect term of Meo rather than Hmong because at the time we are talking about no one

referred to anyone as Hmong...I was living in a Meo village up near the Thai/Lao border in Loei province. While I was in the Peace Corps two of our directors in Bangkok had been AID employees in Laos and were familiar with the program and basically recruited me or suggested that I might be interested in working up in Laos. They set up a trip for myself and four other Peace Corps volunteers the summer of 1965. We went up to Laos, were interviewed and I was offered a job immediately on contract at first and later on became a full Foreign Service officer.

Rural Development Division (RDD), 1965

I arrived in Laos to work in September 1965. I was assigned to the Rural Development Division (RDD). Under the RDD there were mainly three different sections or subdivisions within that division. One was the cluster program. A cluster program was straight community development work. Working with groups of villages, hence the name clusters, anywhere from three to five villages. The AID employees, or in many cases they were IVS (International Voluntary Services) people, lived in one of the villages and worked in the cluster.

The second major office in RDD was the Forward Area Program. These again were either AID or IVS people who lived in one village which was in an area of general intermittent fighting or least civic or military tension. Hence the term, forward area, they were a little bit forward of the mainstream Lao village security.

Q: What province was this?

KUHN: Well, these were all over. There were cluster and forward area people in Sayaboury, in Savannakhet, outside of Saravane, the Pakse area, Muong Soui, generally all over.

Refugee Work, 1965-1966

Q: Did you move around from one to the other?

KUHN: I wasn't in the Forward Area Program, but they didn't really move around. They would be in one village basically conducting political, social and agricultural programs and things like that. Those people were in a more exposed area than people who were working in the clusters which was just general rural development work.

The third section, the one that got all the raised eyebrows in Vientiane, and we were all suspected of not being AID employees. In fact, people would say to our face, "You people are all CIA agents and not AID people." That section was the refugee relief program. This was the program that by 1966 was almost driving the AID program there. The refugee relief program was broad and included the whole school system, the medical system and, of course, the relief part. After the cease fire of 1973, the attention turned from relief to more resettlement. So by the early '70s we were sort of half relief and half resettlement and by 1973-74-75, we were strictly trying to resettle people. But the refugee relief work was the

most dangerous, the most exposed. We had at Sam Thong at various times, where I was assigned, anywhere from three to five people; Luang Prabang usually had one or two people and Ban Houei Sai had either one or two. Later on, people were assigned to Savannakhet and Pakse in refugee relief. When I got there the primary emphasis was in the north. The program had been started by a man by the name of Edgar "Pop" Buell. Pop, along with whatever support he could get from the CIA, whatever support he could get from any source available, really started the refugee relief program and, of course, later on AID picked it up and it became a huge operation.

Q: Was he still in the country when you arrived?

KUHN: Oh, yes. I was interviewed by Pop and hired by Pop. He was the one who had the final say as to who was sent to Sam Thong. He was there until Sam Thong fell in March 1970. Later on, he retired but still stayed in Vientiane until 1975 when he went down to Bangkok. He died in Manila visiting a mutual friend there. So, Pop was quite the character.

There were two people who were widely instrumental in promoting the refugee relief program and really making it a success, at least we considered it a success at the time. The other man was Dr. Charles Weldon, "Jiggs" Weldon, and his wife, Dr. Pat McCready, the Field Marshal. These two people along with Pop were able to put together an integrated program with medical relief, educational facilities, agricultural programs that was really quite remarkable for its breadth and scope, the number of people that we served given the conditions that we served under.

Q: Do you have any general number of people you were serving?

KUHN: Well, there were times when we were feeding well over 300,000 people. Now, of course, that included people in the south, too. I suppose in the north at any given time we probably had upward to 200,000 or more people. Those people were mostly served by air. We had an extraordinary system using both Air America and Continental Air Services. People don't really give much credit to Continental because the popular perception is that Air America was the CIA airline and did all the work. But, in fact, a major part of the work was done by Continental Air Services. Bob Six who was the owner of Continental Airlines had started up this subsidiary to get a piece of the pie. Bob Six and his wife, Audrey Meadows who played the wife of Jackie Gleason on the Honeymooners, took a personal interest in the program. In fact, they would themselves come over to Sam Thong and even donated a jeep to Pop back in the days when AID was not giving him any support. So Continental was a major player.

Later on, there were other smaller airlines, helicopter airlines. I can't think of names right now but there was a series of little airlines who got contracts with AID. The way these contracts worked both with Continental and Air America was on a cost sharing basis. Even though Air America was a proprietary airline somebody had to pay the bills. So, once or twice a year there were these huge meetings where the AID contracting people and the Air America contracting people, the Requirements Office, which supported the government

troops, and the CIA representatives all sat down and tried to figure out who was going to pay what portion of the bills. It got sort of arcane and bizarre because at any given air drop, at any given location we might have SGU troops which would get support from the CIA, we might have refugees who got support from AID, we might have dependents of FAR troops who would get support through the RO (Requirements Office). So these things became rather bizarre in trying to split up the costs of the aircraft.

Q: This raises an interesting question. How much of these costs were actually secret? Presumably the AID budget was all public.

KUHN: Many of these things were simply lumped under the category of refugee relief, AID. I honestly don't know what was published in the way of air costs, if anything. That was something I wasn't ever involved in and as long as the planes kept flying and the rice kept dropping, I was happy.

Q: Who was the AID director at the time you arrived in Laos?

KUHN: When I arrived there, it was Joe Mendenhall. Ambassador [William H.] Sullivan had just arrived not too long before I had gotten there. I guess Doug Blaufarb was the station chief.

Q: He later produced a voluminous document on counterinsurgency in Laos.

KUHN: I have seen it so many times referenced but have never gotten a copy of it yet.

Q: It is practically unreadable. It is so technical. Not the sort of thing you would read at bedtime.

KUHN: Okay, I didn't know anything in Laos was all that technical.

Q: Well, organizational rather than technical. A whole series of acronyms, etc.

KUHN: Oh.

Q: So Sam Thong was your first assignment in Laos?

KUHN: Yes, I was there until medevaced out in January 1970 with a suspected ulcer.

Q: Can you say a little bit about what was there at the time you arrived?

KUHN: Before I answer that, let me go back to one other point in terms of the refugee relief program and being hired. I was instructed by Pop...and this is how relatively secret the program was supposed to be...I was told by Pop that there were only four people whom I was ever to talk to about refugees or military operations.

Q: These did not include journalists, I presume.

KUHN: These did not include journalists, no. One was Joe Mendenhall, the director; another was, of course, Ambassador Sullivan; one was Alex Mavro, who was AID executive officer; and the fourth person was whoever the station chief was in the embassy. Everything we did upcountry was to be considered classified because no one was allowed to come upcountry and this is why whenever we came down to Vientiane and would sit in the ACA (American Community Association) and have breakfast or lunch or beer in the bar, etc., if there were more than one of us we would talk shop... “Oh, I was up at Lima Site 215 last week” or Lima this or Lima site that (Airfields in Laos were designated on air navigation charts by numbers with the prefix Lima. Thus, Vientiane was Lima 08, Pakse was Lima 11, Savannakhet was Lima 39, Séno was Lima 46, Luang Prabang was Lima 54, and so on. Smaller landing fields, basically STOL strips, were designated by numbers with the prefix Lima Site. Thus, Khang Khai was Lima Site 08, which was shortened to LS 08.) and the FAR (Forces Armées Royales), the SGU (Special Guerrilla Unit), so that anyone else listening to our conversation full of acronyms would assume that we were talking in this gobbledygook for some secret reason. In fact, we weren't, it was just a convenient, shorthand way of talking.

But Sam Thong, when I got there was still relatively primitive. There was no housing for the Americans, with the exception of one small house for the public works man who had been in charge of putting in the airstrip and building the buildings. We had one Quonset hut which on the ground floor housed the office, which consisted of a big Mark 4 single sideband radio and a backup sideband, a desk and some other junk. There was a little kitchen area in the back where we could cook. There was a big fireplace and upstairs there were three or four rooms that some of us used when we came back to Sam Thong. Often someone slept in a sleeping bag on the floor in front of the radios. We tried to monitor the single sideband 24 hours a day. Anybody who was back at Sam Thong--somebody usually took turns sleeping on the concrete floor. We would sleep on the floor with the radio on in case somebody upcountry might need assistance.

In fact I had brought all my clothes from Thailand and my mother had sent me some things. I had them just in cardboard boxes in the second floor of the Quonset Hut. I came back one time and found that the room was empty. I didn't know it, but Pop Buell used to solicit used clothing from any source and he stuffed everything in the same room where all my belongings were. While I was gone somebody came in and distributed everything out to the refugees. So I came back and all I had were the clothes that were in my knapsack. I was pretty well ticked off as you could imagine.

When I got there in September, 1965, the hospital had just been built so we had a fully functioning hospital with operating room, the nurses' quarters for the Lao nurses had just been completed and they were graduating their first or second class of nurses. This was a tremendous social upheaval in northern Laos to take 15-, 16-, 17-year-old Lao, Meo (Hmong) and Lao Theung girls out of their villages and bring them down to Sam Thong and try to teach them some sort of rudimentary skills to become nurses.

Q: Who were the teachers?

KUHN: Well, one of the first persons up there was a woman by the name of Diana Dick. She, along with personnel that the public health people, Dr. Weldon and Dr. McCready, sent up did the training. We had a Lao doctor, Dr. Kameung, who was an outstanding doctor, who did a lot of the work. And we had air commando doctors and medics. They were not involved in teaching, but certainly as full fledged doctors the nurses were there and could watch and observe what was going on. Many of the things that local nurses did were just the basic things of looking after a patient, but in fact many a patient died in the middle of the night because the nurse had forgotten to adjust the flow of medicine or saline solution, or the person developed complications during the night and the nurse on duty may have gone out with her boyfriend for the evening. It was pretty primitive but the first time something like this had ever been developed. So it was a showcase. Every time someone came up to Sam Thong, all the nurses were paraded out in their little white uniforms and it was quite a sight.

In order to give some continuity to the Lao government in Sam Thong, there was a house built for the governor and there were khoang offices built so we had a fully functioning khoang. All the different muongs had offices there.

Q: The khoang being the province and the muong being the district?

KUHN: Yes. So we had a fully functioning government, as such. Also at Sam Thong we had an ENI, a teacher training college, where village men and women who had some education were trained to eventually go back and teach in their own villages. In fact, that is where my wife was teaching, in the ENI, when I met her.

General Vang Pao was the commander for Military Region II, but his deputy commander, Colonel Chansom Pakdimonivong actually lived at Sam Thong. While Long Chieng was considered more the headquarters for the Armée Clandestine or the SGU special forces units cum CIA, Sam Thong was considered more as the administrative headquarters for the FAR troops. Colonel Chansom had his office there and all his G-1, G-2, G-3, whatever, were all located there.

Q: Military Region II covered Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces.

KUHN: Officially, MR II was Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua, but authority and operations, in the early days, bled over into Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Phong Saly, and Borikhane if it involved the Meo. When you get up in the border areas it was a little bit fluid depending on who the ethnic groups were. Based out of Sam Thong I covered a lot of activities in Luang Prabang and Phong Saly. Even though they were under command of Chao Sayavong, who was the commander for that region, when it came to the tribal movements, they looked to Vang Pao as much as anybody.

Xieng Khouang province, itself, was predominantly an ethnic group called the Phuan and Chao (Prince) Saykham Southakakoumal himself was the son or grandson of the last ruling prince of Xieng Khouang. He was also the appointed governor of Xieng Khouang. In addition to the Phuan in the lowlands and the valleys, there were also the Meo who were predominant around the Plaine des Jarres towards the Vietnamese border and on the northern part of the Plaine. And then there were several different Lao Theung groups and quite frankly I don't know the specific designations which were simply lumped together as Lao Theung. I visited different areas and can't tell you all the names. There were also lots of so-called tribal T'ai--T'ai Dam (Black T'ai), T'ai Daeng (Red T'ai), and some T'ai Khaw (White T'ai) up north. Most of the tribal T'ai tended to be under communist control, not that they were necessarily communists. For instance, Sam Teu (LS 02) was a T'ai Daeng village and made numerous overtures for arms from Vang Pao, but he never trusted them.

Misplaced Emphasis on the Meo

The one misconception...this really bothers me...most of the literature that is written about the special guerrilla units in northern Laos emphasize the Meo and implies that the Meo were the only people who were doing any fighting. I would like right up front here to say that I disagree with that completely. There were entire SGU battalions comprising solely various Lao Theung ethnic groups. There were T'ai Daeng groups amongst them. The officers were almost uniformly Meo, but of the first four SGU units, and each one had approximately 300 men, at least two were predominantly if not fully Lao Theung. Later on, SG 9 was a completely Lao battalion recruited from Savannakhet and brought up to the north. So the Meo were not the only people fighting. And also the Lao get very short shrift when it comes to being fighters and I have very strong feelings about that because Lao troops when properly led were as good a fighter as anyone else and probably could fight just as well as the Meo if not better. When they had commanders such as Colonel Khongsavan, who was commander of BV 24 (the French acronym for Volunteer Battalion) in Xieng Khouang and Colonel Douangtha Norasing, commander of BV 27 in the north, these were outstanding local commanders. Of course, one of the most tragic things for both Laos and the United States was when Colonel Thong Vongrasamy died from wounds trying to rescue an American pilot. Colonel Thong was a charismatic leader who got the best out of his men. Unfortunately, the stereotypical Lao officer was venal, he was corrupt, he was more interested in getting money by padding payrolls, etc. But when you did get a good commander...I remember Colonel Douangtha telling me when I was sitting down talking to him one day, that in the previous two years he had gone through three complete battalions of people through casualties, either dead or wounded. So, the Lao put up one hell of a fight and don't get much credit for it.

Q: And they made a lot of sacrifices.

KUHN: They made an awful lot of sacrifices and get very little credit for anything that they did.

When I first arrived at Sam Thong, I came up from Vientiane in a little small single engine aircraft. The night before I had been at the American Club having dinner and drinking, there was a little fat guy who got totally stoned and was throwing beer bottles up against the wall and generally making a great ass of himself. He was finally carried out about 11:15 and disappeared. The next morning I walked out to the airport at 5:15 in the morning to come back to Sam Thong and here was the same guy sitting out there checking the fuel and the hydraulic pump, etc. He was the pilot who was taking me up to Sam Thong that day. That pilot had a tremendous capacity for staying up half the night drinking, getting stoned drunk and five or six o' clock in the morning being in the cockpit and ready to go and you would never know that he had had so much as a ginger ale the night before.

When I got to Sam Thong, things were relatively quiet. There was an area down south of the Plaine des Jarres where there had been some heavy fighting at a site called Ban Peung (LS 95). It had been overrun and several officers had either been killed or captured and missing. One of the missing was one of the original Thai PARU, Captain Daychar. A word about the PARU. The PARU (Police Aerial Resupply Units) were a group of 90-some Thai who had come to Laos a few years before, recruited by the CIA, to work with the ethnic tribes and meld them into some kind of fighting force. Captain Daychar was a Muslim from south Thailand and was an outstanding officer. Three months later he turned up alive. He had been hiding in the jungles for three months before he made it back to friendly lines. Unfortunately, a few months later he was in a Helio that was overloaded and crashed near Muong Hiem (LS 48A). Captain Daychar died attempting to rescue other crash victims.

But things were relatively quiet. Pop sent me immediately to Hua Muong (LS 58) in Sam Neua and I had no idea what I was getting myself into. It turned out that Hua Muong had just been captured two days before. I was in the first airplane to land on the strip since it had been recaptured. The T-28s were bombing off the ridge line south of the airstrip. I thought to myself, "What am I getting myself into here? This is not where I thought I was going to be." But I had a load of used clothing and a couple of other planes had loads of clothing, and I waited there the entire day and Pop never came. So I organized the refugees that were coming in and distributed the clothing. Just before dark Pop came in and appeared to be highly agitated with the fact that I had already passed out the clothing. We sat around the early part of the evening eating cucumbers and then Pop decided that I had better go back to Site 36 (Na Khang), which I did. So I flew back to Na Khang and spent the night. I found out later that this was one of the things that Pop does to people who are new. He puts them into exposed areas or into situations where they have to sort of sink or swim on their own and if you don't handle it right then he knows you are not the person for that area. So I guess everything worked out all right and I survived that little test. Pop got an acute case of food poisoning or stomach disorder of some kind which he blamed on the cucumbers and that put him down for several days.

Na Khang was an old French base from the French Indochina war. There were two or three big Phuan villages in the area. Basically a rice paddy area, flat rolling hills, very little vegetation in terms of trees. The Lao commander was having a big party that night so we proceeded to get totally smashed. That was my first introduction to some of the more

clandestine operations in Laos. One of the people at Na Khang was an air commando named Jack Tighe. Jack Tighe's father was a congressman, I believe from Texas or Louisiana. Anyway, Jack was an air commando sent up to help coordinate air strikes. This was now September 1965. Mike Lynch was a CIA case officer. Mike's father was the lieutenant governor of California. Mike had a brother who had a rock band and he used to tell the story that if anybody would ever ask his mother how many children she had, she would always say, "I don't have any children," because one was working for the CIA and she couldn't tell people what he was doing and the other son was the head of a rock band and was too embarrassed to admit that he was her son. The third person up there was Jerry Daniels who became a legend in his own right through years of working with the Meo and years later died in Bangkok of gas poisoning. So there was a pretty good crew working at Na Khang when I first arrived there.

Another American who eventually was really covering that area, was a young American named Don Sjoström. Don had also been in the Peace Corps in Thailand and came to Laos about the same time that I did and we became very good friends. We worked together a little bit in Sam Neua in the beginning and then later on he covered Sam Neua and I went over and covered parts of Luang Prabang and southern Phong Saly until January 1967 when Don was killed during an attack on Na Khang, but that is still somewhere in the future and we will get to that later.

The people at Na Khang, their function was basically to supply the airstrips and the outposts in Sam Neua province and anything north of the Plaine des Jarres. So what happened was airplanes...C-123s and Caribous, two short takeoff and landing planes could land at Na Khang. They would bring in ammunition and supplies which would be offloaded to helicopters or small Helio Couriers or Pilatus Porters. These smaller aircraft would then take the supplies out to a smaller strip someplace and drop it to the troops. So Na Khang was really a resupply point. Also, too, by the time I got there in 1965, the Air Force was beginning to use Na Khang as a daytime deployment for their rescue helicopters for planes that might get shot down over north Laos or North Vietnam. The Jolly Green Giant rescue choppers were on station there, which meant there was also these World War II planes called AD-1s or Sandys that were constantly flying cap all the time so in case a plane had to scramble for a search and rescue, the AD-1s then could provide ground cover if the chopper came under attack.

Q: This was a major operation.

KUHN: It was a major operation. It was embarrassing, though, because most of the rescues were made by Air America helicopters. Air America choppers would just come in. They didn't give a damn...the pilot was down, they had him spotted, he had a radio they got a signal. Nine times out of ten, unless there was really heavy ground fire, they would just go in. Whereas the Air Force had all these rules of engagement that they had to abide by.

When I arrived they had just gotten their first Bell Huey, it was the short version of the Huey which only took four or five people and a small amount of cargo. A year or so later

they were using much larger Hueys. However, most of the USAID work was done with the old Marine H-34 helicopters. These Air America pilots were really good and knew what they were doing and were willing to put their necks on the line and try to pick up people.

Q: Regardless of whether the downed flyer was Air America, or Air Force or any other service, they would go in?

KUHN: I would say almost a hundred percent were Air Force or Navy. I can't recall any Air America planes that would have gone down in the early years. If an Air America Helio or Continental Porter went down, the pilot went down with the plane. The planes were too small for the pilots to wear parachutes. An Air Force jet was equipped to eject the pilot. The crews in the Caribous, C-123s and C-130s did carry parachutes.

Q: They would have more of a chance of surviving.

KUHN: If there was a C-46 or C-123, yes, they could parachute out. But I don't recall at the time any of those aircraft being shot down. It was all Air Force planes being shot down.

I am kind of jumping around but I am trying to put my thoughts in order as to what happened. I think it is important to know that what I am going to be talking about are the operational nuts and bolts of what happened. I am not somebody who was sitting in Geneva. We are not talking about high policy...

Q: Or even Vientiane.

KUHN: Or even Vientiane...

Q: On the cocktail party circuit.

KUHN: No, the circuit that I was part of was more like the saloons.

I think the operational end of Laos is not well known. The books and the things that are written are the major histories that give the broad scope and, of course, there were daily incidences going on that are unrecorded and are soon going to be lost. So, I want to make it quite clear, if I bore anybody that is too bad, but these are the nuts and bolts, what the program was. [W. Averell] Harriman could talk about cease-fires, etc., but we had to do some implementation on the ground, and that is where I came in.

In the early days it was not an easy job. I had a deferment from the draft board. The USAID director would write yearly to the draft boards of all of us who were of draftable age and explain what we were doing over there and we got deferments. It wasn't that I was trying to get out of any kind of danger, in fact, within weeks after I arrived in Laos I was sent over to a little village inside of a bowled shaped valley to check on some refugees, over near Site 95, south of the Plaine des Jarres, and while we were there during the day the chopper was supposed to come back and pick us up in the afternoon but it never came back. We spent

the night there. While we were there that night the outpost perimeters around the area were attacked. Several people came in who were wounded and the enemy was pressing clearly in an attempt to take this bowl. The next day, still no helicopters came in and it was not until late in the afternoon, when again it was evident that the fighting was getting close to where we were that a helicopter came in at extremely high altitude and dropped something. It was a cloth wrapped with a small stone. There was a message inside that said, "Ernie, if you are still down there...in those days we didn't have any radios for communication...wave your t-shirt or make some signs so we know you are there because the place is under attack all around you and we have orders not to get low unless we know you are there." So I made some signals which apparently satisfied the pilot and he came in and picked me up. It turned out that the helicopter that tried to pick us up before never even got to us because he was hit by ground fire coming in and the crew chief had been wounded and evacuated back down to Udorn. I got back to Sam Thong and Pop said that they were lining up T-28s and AD-1s at that time because if the chopper couldn't get in to pick me up the second day, they were going to have flare ships and propeller driven T-28s and AD-1s in the area all night because they didn't think the place would last. As a matter of fact, the next day the whole area did fall.

So, I have been in several villages where I have been under attack and had to walk out. So it was dangerous work, but highly exciting because here were Don Sjostrom, myself, two or three other people, 24, 25, 26 years old, doing work that was not only dangerous, but it required a lot of on-site decision making. I played God more times than I would like to think about. I would go into an area and there would be refugees coming in. I had to make a decision...do we keep the refugees here, do I try to move them, what do I do with them, who gets fed who doesn't get fed...and a lot of people died, quite bluntly, on decisions that I made, or Don Sjostrom made, or Bob Daken made or any number of the other refugee officers who were out there made. We had to make quick decisions. We had to send pilots into areas where we knew it was dangerous. We, ourselves, had to go into areas where we knew it was dangerous. I tried to develop quite early on a trust and rapport with the pilots of Air America and Continental, because I knew I had to depend on them to get my job done and perhaps to save my life. I would never send them into an area unless I was along with them on the first trip and they appreciated that because other Ops officers and CIA people did not do that and a lot of planes would get shot up and the pilots would get very upset because they thought they were being sacrificed. But if you worked with the pilots yourself, you could get an awful lot of work out of them. So, it was a very heady period of time. We were fast moving and making lots of decisions.

A Day Off

Looking at some of my letters recently, I found a note saying that Pop Buell finally sent me down to Vientiane for two days rest, I hadn't had a day off in six weeks. This was a common occurrence when you were working in the refugee program, especially during the time of the year when the enemy was attacking or we were on the offense. You were working 16, 17, 18 hours a day, day and night sometimes. So, it was a very fast moving operation which required a lot of quick decisions.

There were other times when we were able as so-called refugee relief operations officers to expand our own roles and I think it maybe would have gotten us thrown out of the country if the ambassador found out about it. I was lucky because Ambassador Sullivan had given Pop Buell carte blanche to let me go wherever I wanted to. The understanding was that if anything happened to me, it was Pop's responsibility. It was going to be carried out one step removed from the ambassador. The ambassador didn't want to know anything about it except the good things that happened. If anything bad happened to me, I was on my own and it was Pop's neck and not Ambassador Sullivan's. This was kind of funny because the CIA people were not allowed to RON (remain over night) anyplace outside of Luang Prabang or Na Khang. So, I was free to go wherever I wanted to and could spend the nights, etc.

I am going to relate something that is not important really in the sense of the war effort, but again the kind of things when you are young and foolish you do. Just south of the Plaine des Jarres the Vietnamese and PL [Pathet Lao] had built a road up near a BV 24 position. I had become good friends with a Lao officer, Major Khongsavan. He had a 75 recoilless rifle and some other little assorted things. We got together on Thanksgiving night 1966...to digress a second...this man was outstanding and later wounded in an attack with an American attaché on the Plaine des Jarres. Anyway, at that time he was a photographer and in his bunker he developed film and printed pictures...in a bunker with candle light. In fact, somewhere around here I have a couple of pictures of myself that he took of me. Anyway, we moved the 75 recoilless rifle and rockets over three mountain tops after dark and set everything up. At night, when the Pathet Lao brought their trucks in to the edge of the Plaine there...

Q: Because they would move at night.

KUHN: Yes, they didn't do anything during the daytime. We shelled these trucks with this little 75 recoilless rifle. At the time it was exciting and fun. It didn't make a rat's ass difference in terms of the war. But, it also showed the Lao battalion that the night was not all that frightening, that they could go out and attack the enemy at night just as well as the enemy attacked them. It was interesting that the Lao could do that if someone was with them and pushed them a little bit.

In those early days we didn't have much support. When we went out on a field trip for one night or any number of nights, we had no radio, no communications, if we got out someplace where we got into trouble we just had to hang in there until somebody would come in the next day or a couple of days later to pick us up. By 1966 we were beginning to be equipped with more efficient communications systems. All operations officers were given small little radios called HT2s. They had two fixed frequencies. One usually was 119.1, which was what Air America and Continental Airlines used as their standard operating frequency, and the other frequency was usually 123.7 or 118.1, which were alternate frequencies. The unfortunate thing was that although all the radios had 119.1, but not all of them had the same alternative frequency. But, at least you had something if you

got into trouble and could hopefully flag down a passing aircraft to relay a message. At night it was much more difficult to find aircraft monitoring 119.1.

And then, one of the most outstanding pieces of equipment we had was a single side band radio which was about the size of two Britannica Encyclopedia books stacked on top of each other. It was a single side band with multiple frequencies. It came with a kind of bizarre antenna which was modified basically to two wires that went out about 30 feet on each side. We just tied them on tree limbs. That little Stoner weighed about 9 pounds, was portable, could be put into your knapsack and carried on your back. It literally saved my life on more than one occasion. It had a tremendous range. You could talk all over northern Laos, even down as far as Udorn and occasionally pick up places in Thailand.

The story goes that Stoner had developed this radio and asked the CIA if they were interested in using it. He wanted them to buy some to test. They said, "Well, if you want to give us some to test, we will test it. We are not going to buy anything for testing." So, Stoner didn't do any business with the CIA, but AID came in and bought a lot of these radios. The ironic thing was that the CIA portable radios that their guys carried when they went out took a truck battery...a great big 12 volt truck or car battery...which they had to lug along with them, and make sure there was water and everything. I had been out with General Vang Pao at various places at night when he needed to get some communications and he couldn't get his radio to work at all. Whereas I would get my Stoner and called Sam Thong, catch whoever was the night duty officer and say that we need to talk to Long Chieng. They would call Long Chieng on the telephone and they would come up and use the USAID radio because CIA portable radios were nothing but a piece of garbage.

Q: Quite a piece of equipment.

KUHN: Yes, these little radios were quite a life saver. Sort of chronologically, a few things that were happening at this time. The general perception was that Sam Neua was communist. During the last election it had voted communist and it was a communist area.

Q: Of course, in the wake of the Viet Minh invasion of Laos in 1953 the Pathet Lao established their base area in Sam Neua where they were in close touch with the relevant Viet Minh command, training and logistical headquarters just over the border. Sam Neua province was one of two regrouping areas for the Pathet Lao specified in the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Laos signed in Geneva in July 1954. Thereafter, there was sporadic skirmishing between the royal army and the Pathet Lao for control of small outposts along the border of North Vietnam. But the Pathet Lao walked back into Sam Neua town itself in 1960 as an aftermath of the Kong Le coup when Phoumi's [General Phoumi Nosavan] troops abandoned it. When the war escalated and bombing began, the Pathet Lao operated out of fortified positions in the Sam Neua countryside, some of them in deep caves. That is why Sam Neua became known as being communist.

KUHN: I am glad you said that because that is all true. It is also true that on the ground huge areas of Sam Neua were not controlled by the Pathet Lao at all, were in fact controlled by either FAR or by the guerrilla units of Vang Pao.

Q: Despite the fact that it was right on the border with North Vietnam? It was kind of an enclave sticking right into North Vietnam.

KUHN: Yes, it was.

Q: Which shows the tremendous importance of geography in such a situation.

KUHN: It may have just been a question of priorities or something that the Vietnamese had higher priorities in the earlier years, etc.

Q: Well, they couldn't control every mountain top or position.

KUHN: That is true. Well, the only point I was going to make was that it would not have been impossible, really, to have by ground...walking or by truck...to have gone from Vientiane all the way up to Nong Khang, Lima 52, way up north of Sam Neua city. It would have been possible to have gone on the ground that entire way.

Q: And not be detected by the communists.

KUHN: That's right. And not even be in an area where you were in any great danger because there were enough contiguous areas. This didn't last very long because by 1966-67 many of those little enclaves had been overrun. But, even when Vang Pao in later years whenever we would lose Sam Neua would go back and try to take it, many of these areas had become friendly again for a short period of time and then they would be overrun again and try to knock us off again. So there were rather strange little pockets of support for the Lao government.

Q: So villages would change hands quite frequently?

KUHN: Villages would change hands. In some cases villagers would stay there in the village and in other cases once Vang Pao's troops were there if they were going to be overrun the villagers would pull out.

Again, there has been a lot written about villagers coming over to the Lao side because they were afraid of bombing. That I think is true to some extent, but also many of the areas we are talking about were not areas that were under extensive US bombing. Again, there were certain areas in Laos that were overbombed, there is no question about that. But, there were also vast areas that never saw a U.S. plane and never saw a bomb. As a matter of fact, I think the people in many cases were voting with their feet. They did not like the communist system, did not like the harsh rule that they were subjected to and genuinely were disposed

favorably towards the government and wanted to be under government control. I am really quite confident in that.

There were a lot of defectors too. A lot of people who were Lao schoolteachers, minor officials, who were simply tired of the whole system, didn't like the way the system was run. I think in your book you quote Win [Edwin T.] McKeithen in your references...

Q: Yes.

KUHN: ...he interviewed several people. I interviewed people that did not get published like Win's did, but basically they were the same thing. They were conscripted as coolies, they were doing things they didn't want to do.

Q: Yes, and these were civilians who had actually experienced life under communism. So they knew what they were talking about. It wasn't a theoretical thing for them.

KUHN: That is right. I don't think this is mentioned often and I think it is an important aspect of the political situation at that time, in 1965-66.

Also, too, little known are the operations that were being conducted up in Phong Saly province, another area that was basically assumed to be under Pathet Lao control or Chinese control depending on whom you talked to. We didn't have the extensive operations in Phong Saly that we had in Sam Neua. But when I got there there was a contiguous band of sites from the southern portion of Phong Saly, across from Dien Bien Phu down towards Luang Prabang that were friendly. So the first area I was assigned to was in fact that nebulous area of southern Phong Saly and northern Luang Prabang. We had sites up there like Lao Ta, Lima Site 121, very close to the Chinese border and right down from that was Chuk Chung, Lima Site 138. These were two very, very important bases.

In January, February, early March 1966, the "enemy," whoever they were, the Chinese, Vietnamese, Pathet Lao, whoever, began to take a more serious interest in the area and one by one these sites were overrun. We began to get large numbers of refugees accumulated, particularly at Site 138. I was at Site 138 for several days when the weather turned bad and we had about five thousand refugees there at the time. We went several days with no rice drops. There was a Thai PARU team there who had been training some of the villagers as militiamen. I had said that if the refugees didn't have anything to eat, I wouldn't have anything to eat either, which sounded good at the time but after the second day and the beginning of the third, I was getting pretty hungry and the weather was just absolutely down on the deck. So the Thai PARU late in the afternoon came over and said, "Ernie come down to our bunker, we have something for you." So I went down and they had a few little handful of rice that they had saved and I decided I was supposed to be the one who was getting their food through rice drops and I had to be alert enough to do some work, so it wouldn't hurt if I had a little bit of rice. Well, also on the plate was a bunch of other little things that I couldn't tell by candlelight what they were. Finally I realized they were grubs and worms and various things. So, I thought, "Gee, it is either that or nothing." I didn't watch everybody else eating very carefully and I picked up one of these little beetles and

looked at it and closed my eyes and popped that little sucker into my mouth like a kernel of popcorn. I crunched down on it and these beetles must have legs that have ten thousand sawtooth jagged things on its legs and its shell was like eating an egg shell. Well, to make a long story short I then began to watch the Thai eat these things and they very carefully peeled off the hard shell and with their finger scooped out the soft underbelly and threw away the shell and the legs. Well, it must have taken me 15 minutes to chew that beetle and swallow the shell, legs and everything. I felt so utterly foolish. But those were situations that were not uncommon where refugees would not get fed, the weather would get bad, we would try to get help and you couldn't.

Carrying Arms

Another little aside. Going up into these areas where we were again exposed to possible enemy action, I always carried a weapon. I carried a 38 Colt in a shoulder holster. And I also carried an AK47 because Ambassador Sullivan would not allow us to have any American weapons. I did it for one reason. Before I got there, there was an American who was working up in Laos and he did not believe in carrying guns, he was there to help people and everybody loved him and Pop loved him. He was absolutely well known and a great young man. He was in a village one night that was overrun. He said he suddenly realized what a burden he was to the villagers he was staying with because the last thing they wanted to have was an American in their village get killed or captured and he had absolutely no way to protect himself. He had to rely upon them to protect him. He said at that time he realized that you are putting a burden on the villagers. So, for that reason I always carried a weapon. I never had to use it, thank heavens, but I always carried one with me so that if I ever did need it I could protect myself, I didn't have to have someone else worrying about me very much.

In late 1965-66, northern Luang Prabang and southern Phong Saly sites were falling and pressure was building. Pressure always built around Na Khang, Lima Site 36 above the Plaine des Jarres, the big supply base for Sam Neua. The perimeters around Na Khang were probed nightly. They had flare ships up there at night to try to give some protection at night. Finally, Na Khang did fall, was overrun. General Vang Pao went up there to see what was going on. I don't know whether this story is exactly correct or not, but Don Sjostrom, who worked with me in AID, was up there. He said they went out to a chopper pad with General Vang Pao and they saw a Vietnamese who was still alive and coming up the backside of the pad. They flipped a hand grenade down over the side, hit the guy and it blew his head off and his head came flying past Vang Pao. General Vang Pao saw the head and when it came to a stop he walked over to examine the head, supposedly, and a sniper fired a round at him. He was hit in the elbow and grazed his neck.

Q: I remember that, it was a famous incident.

KUHN: A very famous incident. In fact, General Vang Pao was somewhat concerned that one of his own men might have tried to hit him. This was January 1966. He was evacuated. In fact, a year or two later he had to go back to Hawaii for an operation on his arm.

During this attack on Na Khang, I have in my notes at the time that this was the first time that the Air Force used napalm in Laos in trying to blunt the attack on Site 36. Allegedly there were over five or six hundred Vietnamese killed during this attack. We can't verify that, but the refugees, at least the people who lived in the villages around Na Khang who became refugees, reported that for over six hours the Vietnamese on stretchers and litters carried out wounded and dead Vietnamese troops. So whether it was true or not I don't know, but even though they captured Na Khang I think it was a big cost to the Vietnamese. The troops and refugees had retreated back towards Muong Hiem, Lima Site 48 Alpha. Muong Hiem was a Neutralist strong point. Souvanna Phouma's nephew was commander at Muong Hiem.

Q: Maybe we should point out here what some people may not know. The Neutralist army was separate from the Rightist army up to fairly late in the war and regarded themselves to be basically loyal to Prince Souvanna Phouma, who was the prime minister, rather than to General Phoumi Nosavan and his followers.

KUHN: At both Muong Hiem and Muong Soui there was pretty bad blood between the Neutralists and the Rightist troops. This was quite surprising when Souvanna Phouma's nephew actually offered to help. In fact they actually brought up two hundred Neutralist troops from around Saravane to bolster the Muong Hiem troops in case the Vietnamese decided to push on up the Muong Hiem Valley. But jets came in and totally destroyed the little base there at Na Khang. Everything was burned, the fuel dump was blown up, the headquarters was destroyed. I went in there the second day of the attack and a bunch of Thai T-28s came up with...Thai pilots used to fly planes in Lao, as you know, with Lao markings. A group of Thai T-28s came up and there were no Thai or Lao speakers in the area, so I took a Porter up and marked the targets for the T-28s. This was one of those little things that were not in your job description but one of those things you had to do in the course of a day's work. The unfortunate thing about the attack on Na Khang, I think, is there were three old villages..Na Khang, Nakut, and I forget the name of the third. They had been there for several hundred years and had these beautiful big old Phuan houses.

Q: Made out of what?

KUHN: Made out of wood. I have some cross pieces from the ends of a house. Later on after the village was burned down, a year or two later, when Don Sjostrom and I joined Daniels one day, I cut off the end pieces, they were elephant heads, I have them in the room, of these beautiful old houses. A week or two before the attack Don Sjostrom and I had been walking down through one of these villages and the people were so friendly and invited us to spend the night in the village. So, we decided to spend the night there since we didn't have to return to base. They had a little party and everything. About 9:00 at night we were getting ready to go to bed and there was a commotion out on the back porch of the house. One of the old village elders came in and said they had several village girls lined up for us so that we could choose whichever one we wanted. We thought this was not exactly building the hearts and minds of the people there so we explained to them that we

appreciated the fact...we didn't want to embarrass the girls because we found out that the Phuan were pretty loose in this area and in fact the villages were a source of amusement for all the Lao troops at Na Khang during the night. We didn't want to embarrass any of the girls by refusing them nor the village leaders, so we told them we appreciated it all, etc. And they said, "Well look, it is okay because back in the days when the French had a base here they used to come out here and they always wanted a few girls, a few pigs, a few chickens and we always let them have what they wanted. When the Vietnamese went through after the French left they wanted mostly pigs, but if they wanted a girl or two, we gave them a girl. Why don't you accept our hospitality?"

In early 1966 I spent more of my time up around the Phong Saly area. Over the next month the various sites up there one by one fell and there was never any real attempt after that to try to take back anything. At this time, the contracts that Don Sjostrom and I were on were due to expire in March. So Pop Buell in the meantime had sent word back to Washington that he wanted both of us to come back to work as direct hires. Word came back from Washington that we were going to be hired and that we should take a vacation for a couple of months and report to Washington the last part of May, which we both did. Unfortunately, I contracted some sort of unknown disease and spent most of the summer in and out of the hospital, although ultimately I was diagnosed as having schistosomiasis, which was treatable to the point where the medication became worse than the disease and I would begin to fall down and bump into things. The doctors finally realized what was happening and took me off the medication and observed me for a while and said I was okay and shipped me back to Laos. By the time I got back to Laos it was the end of summer of 1966 and I was all set to go, to get back to work. Unfortunately, things were a little bit slow during the end of the summer there and I was a little bit disappointed in the way things were going. I was all charged up and the program wasn't charged up.

Q: Were you out in the field or were you in Vientiane?

KUHN: I was always stationed all the time at Sam Thong right up until it fell in 1970. Pop was in and out and Jack Williamson was pretty much in charge for a while. Sam Neua was relatively quiet. It was decided to put another person in Luang Prabang. Tom Ward had been there and it was decided to put someone else there permanently, so that sort of took the Phong Saly program away from Sam Thong. So during the fall of 1966 and late 1966, I was hopping around in different places. There really wasn't much continuity in what I was doing, I thought.

During this time, though, several things happened. A Helio crashed near Sam Thong with one of our chief nai khong, (The term comes from the French, who appointed Meo to quasi-official positions with the title "Nai Khong." See below.) Nhia Ying, aboard. He died of burns suffered in the crash. As I mentioned earlier, another Helio crashed at Muong Hiem, resulting in the death of Captain Daychar, the Thai PARU whom everybody really respected and liked. Another Porter was shot at while it was coming right over Sam Thong and a bullet hit the pilot in the foot. We have no idea who that was or why. There were a lot of little strange things going on at the end of the summer. Somebody had picked up some

broadcasts in the Sam Thong area in a combination of Lao and Vietnamese and first someone thought they were being broadcast to Vietnam. The CIA sent in some of their radio experts and they did all kinds of triangulation exercises. Guys were running around with little radios disguised as cigarette packets to try to triangulate the radio transmitter. They spent weeks there trying to track this transmitter down and finally realized it was coming from the FAR headquarters because the sister of Colonel Douangtha had been trained in Hanoi back when there were relationships between the Lao and the Vietnamese. Her "fist" and everything had some sort of Vietnamese pattern to it, etc. That was a big fiasco with a lot of people running around Sam Thong trying to locate this alleged clandestine transmitter. It was a waste of time.

In terms of the AID operation, we were at this time still pretty much doing what we had always been doing. We were still running the refugee relief program with the rice drops. I really haven't explained what the rice drops were.

Rice Drops

Q: No, please explain what they were.

KUHN: Refugees, at least in the early days, were primarily in the north and were virtually 100 percent in areas that had no road access. The only way you could get into them was by air. So the Air America and Continental contracts that we had were for rice drops. We used the plane called the C-46, which was a plane that had been developed during World War II to fly over the Hump, over the Himalayas, from India to China. These planes, interestingly enough, were not certified to fly in the United States because they used the short electrical propellers. They were tremendous aircraft, easy to handle, easy to get on and off the ground and tremendous drop planes. I think, if I recall, a C-46 would usually carry 4.8 tons of rice at a time. The rice would be put into jute bags at first and at the very end we used polypropylene. Into jute bags would go 40 kilos of rice. And then there were two other bags sewn over that bag. The rice was stacked up on big wooden pallets, eight bags on top of one another, side by side, so there were 16 bags to a pallet. Inside the C-46 there were tracks onto which the pallets fit. They had kickers in back of the aircraft who would push the pallets right up to the door of the aircraft and then tip the pallets outside and the rice would then fall down. An optimum altitude for a rice drop was 800 feet. On the ground the villages would...each village or military position had a signal, which might be a T for tango, and A for alpha, whatever, and on the daily drop sheet for that day that the pilot got when he left Vientiane, it would list the location he was to go to with the coordinates and the signal. If he got up to that location and circled and did not get that signal he was not to drop because he would know there was something wrong down below, presumably enemy activity, etc. So they only dropped when they got the proper signal. There would be a field somewhere next to the village where the signal would be put out and the plane would come in at 800 feet and make the drop, circle around again and drop more rice, repeating this until all the rice had been dropped.

We used two methods. Originally the rice on the pallets was rolled out to the edge of the plane and then the pilot would ring the bell to drop and the kicker would kick the whole thing out, pallets and all. The pallets were highly prized because they were thick plywood and people used to build their houses out of them. Whole villages would be built out of pallets. But they were also tremendously expensive, so later on, towards the end of the program in the early 1970s, there were ways devised so that the pallet was simply tipped over on the plane and the rice slid off, but the pallet was brought back into the aircraft.

All the rice for the big sites was airdropped like that. Then, of course, if we had smaller sites with just a few hundred people or even less, we would sometimes then take a Porter (could take about 12 hundred pounds) or Helio (could take about 6 hundred pounds) of rice and re-drop rice to isolated areas. If it was some place where we really had trouble getting into, we might take out a helicopter of rice.

The commodities that we gave to the refugees were primarily taken from Vientiane up to Sam Thong by Caribou or C-123 cargo plane and stored in warehouses and from there we would shuttle them out either by Porter or by helicopter. We did make a few commodity drops, things like blankets, pots and pans, which were mildly successful. It was better to land the commodities themselves. We also gave out PL 480 [U.S. Public Law 480, no relation to the Pathet Lao] cooking oil. We actually had classes for people to learn how to cook bulgur wheat. These were disastrous. People were used to eating rice all their life and you try to feed them hard wheat, they have a lot of stomach problems. Cooking oil, vegetable oil, was highly prized.

Q: That is how they cooked their food, mainly frying.

KUHN: If they didn't have enough of their food they could always fry up some greens of some kinds and vegetables that you could find out in the woods.

Q: Being a kicker on a C-46 must have been a dangerous occupation. Wasn't there a kicker who fell out and was captured by the Pathet Lao?

KUHN: Yes. There were occasionally crew members who fell out of aircraft. I vaguely remember what you are talking about...

Q: They must have worn parachutes

KUHN: Well, they did not at first. Even then, later on, they didn't wear parachutes, but they did wear harnesses. They were strapped in and could go only to a certain point in the plane and couldn't physically go any further.

The rice drops probably killed more people. The rice drops that were done with the Porters and Helio. It was a small plane, the pilot would go into the village and there would always be some young soldier there who would either want to or was designated as the local kicker. So this guy would get into the plane not really having the understanding of the G forces,

and if the plane tips and you are at the door, and all kinds of things. There were a lot of young men, and even old men, who went out as kickers from individual sites and would fall out. In fact, there was one story that went around that there was a commander from one area who was going back up to where he was from and the pilot got instructions a little bit screwed up. This guy was lying in the back of the plane...in the back of the Porter there was a normal floor, but you then lifted out a square in the floor and there was a set of drop doors under that, so when the pilot got ready to drop he would pull a lever and those doors would open like a little bomb bay in an airplane. Well, they had loaded this plane for drop rice and this local commander got into the back of the plane and fell asleep lying on top of the rice sacks. The pilot forgot the guy was back there. They get to this outpost and see the signal and come in, pull the switch and down went the rice including the commander. That night there was a message sent back to Na Khang to the effect that rice drop and one commander received this afternoon. I don't know if that story is true or not but occasionally people did get dropped out of aircraft. There were no safety precautions of any kind to save anybody.

Quonset Hut Fire

Probably the biggest crisis that occurred in late 1966 happened right about the end of November, the first part of December. It was about 2:00 in the morning...I had said previously that we had no quarters at Sam Thong except the Quonset hut. Sometime in the middle of 1966 two or three sort of communal bunkhouses were put up at Sam Thong and Jack Williamson and I were sleeping down at one of them near the hospital. At about 2:00 in the morning I was vaguely aware of somebody shouting but wasn't really fully awake. Then I realized somebody was pounding on my door. It was Jack Williamson, who was the acting AID coordinator because Pop wasn't there. Jack shouted, "Ernie, Ernie, get up, get up, the Quonset hut is on fire." So we got dressed real quick, grabbed our guns, because we didn't know what was happening, and jumped into the jeep and drove down to the Quonset hut real quick. We had some little Lao Theung orphan kids living in the warehouse in the Quonset. So Jack kept on in the jeep and went up to Air America because Air America planes were parked adjacent to the Quonset hut and all the way back up to the Air America mess, a distance of maybe 50 meters. So Jack took the jeep up to Air America to try to get some of the pilots to move the planes real quick. I ran into the Quonset hut to see if the orphan kids were okay. They were coming downstairs and were all right. The smoke was getting pretty bad but I managed to get out two of our single side band radios that were in the back, and carry out some of our rice drop records that we needed badly. By that time smoke was just too bad and I couldn't get back in again. The Quonset hut held the office, all refugee relief supplies, all the rice we dropped, all the medical supplies for all of north Laos and a small office of USIS, United States Information Service. The whole nine yards. We figured we lost over a million dollars worth of medicine alone in the warehouse. The next day, flying over it from the air, it looked like a huge dirigible had collapsed. The whole Quonset hut just fell in on itself. For the hospital we had just gotten that day several hundred tins of kerosene and several propane and butane tanks to run things in the hospital. As these things exploded they would shoot up two or three hundred feet in the air. It was like a rocket going off, these big tanks of gas and tins of kerosene were exploding all over. We never found out what happened. We all pretty much assumed it was bad wiring because

the wiring in the place was terrible, it was all ad hoc and that sort of thing. The conspiracy kinds of people said it was a plot from the Le family that is trying to overthrow Vang Pao and burned down the Quonset hut to make him look bad and the Americans to look bad. There were all kinds of rumors going around, but we never really found out what happened.

Also, too, right about that same time was a day that I call “black Tuesday” where in one single day we had a Caribou come in and land and break a nose wheel. I took a Porter to a small strip to the east of us and on taking off the strip was a very steep angle with a lot of stumps along the side, the pilot hit a stump on takeoff and we ripped off the whole tail wheel and part of the aileron in the back of the plane. We got back to Long Chieng safely. I got back to Sam Thong and heard on the radio that an AD-1 Skyraider had been shot up and the pilot was trying to land at Sam Thong. I got on the radio and got the pilot, I thought, lined up with the runway and he came in and overshot the runway. He tried to make a go around again and came back and missed the runway and crashed. We went over to get him and he was pretty much shot up, he was dead. Then a Jolly Green Giant helicopter lost its hydraulic system at Sam Thong and almost crashed on top of a Caribou. And then that evening at Long Chieng another Jolly Green Giant was carrying lumber up to the king’s house and lost its power and crashed. So in one day we had about six aircraft crash in one sort or another. It was an unheard of set of calamities. People were superstitious anyway, and when this happened, it was really bad.

Then, about the same time in late November, John Perry, the area AID coordinator, had his two sons home from college in France and were ready to go back to France the next day. John decided he wanted to give them a ride someplace and put them in a helicopter that was going up to Nam Bac, a valley north of Luang Prabang that had been heavily contested for some time. The helicopter came in and sat down and the chopper pad had been overrun. The pilot either hadn’t seen the signal and landed anyway, or the communist put the signal out to lure the chopper in. When the chopper landed they took over a hundred rounds and John Perry’s older son was hit, dying instantly on the spot. So, it was again one of these really stupid things.

Backtrack about a month or so, during the summer of 1966, the commander of the Lao air force, General Ma, had been relieved of his command. General Ma was from an ethnic minority from the southern panhandle of Laos. He was sort of from the same mold as General Vang Pao. Ma, as commander-in-chief of the air force, liked to lead his bombing raids. The stories are that in his early days some of the new pilots went out on missions with him and planes came back to base. One of them was just shot full of holes. The pilot was fairly new and he thought he was going to get reamed out by General Ma for getting the plane shot up. The plane right behind him came in without a hole in it, in perfect shape, and the pilot was real confident having come back without a scratch. General Ma landed his plane, came over, took the pilot who had gotten his plane shot up and put his arm around him and said, “What a great job you did. If you are going to bomb the enemy you have to get right down on the deck. If you don’t get down on the deck you are not going to kill any enemy and you are not going to get shot at. You did a great job.” He went back to the plane that came back without a hole in it and really chewed out the pilot. He said, “Obviously you

were too high. If the enemy can't hit you from the ground then you are too high, you have to get down where the enemy is and hit him." This was the kind of man he was.

General Ma's Visit

General Ma had been hospitalized for general fatigue in the fall of 1966. It happened this was the 20th of October when this incident occurred. I happened to be the only American at Sam Thong at the time. We had an air commando doctor who was stationed at Sam Thong and once every two weeks he went down to Udorn and Korat to bring back supplies of fresh plasma. That morning the doctor had gone down to Udorn and Korat to bring up blood and wouldn't be back until the next day. I was in the office at Sam Thong when I looked up and the door opened and there was General Ma coming into the office. I had met him several times before...as an aside...one time myself, Don Sjostrom and John McLean, who was a USIA officer at Luang Prabang, accidentally all met at the lobby of one of the hotels in Luang Prabang one day and started talking. The ironic thing is that of General Ma, Don Sjostrom and John McLean, I am the only one that is still alive. Don was killed, General Ma was killed and John McLean was killed in a plane crash.

Anyway, General Ma was at the door and he looked very agitated. He asked me if the American doctor was there and I said, "No, but Dr. Kameung, the Lao doctor was there, if he had any problems." He said, "No, no, no, he had to see the American doctor." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. Why don't you spend the night here and he will be back tomorrow morning." He said, "I haven't got time, if he is not here now, I can't wait one minute." He left, got into his jeep and drove back to Long Chieng. Well, of course, the ironic thing is the next day he led a group of six or seven pilots out of Savannakhet, up to Vientiane in an attempt to bomb the headquarters of General Kouprasith [Abhay]. Of course he did bomb Kouprasith's headquarters, but Kouprasith wasn't there. There were 30 or 40 people killed. The planes went back to Savannakhet where word came out from the embassy that they were not to be rearmed, reloaded or refueled. As a result six of the pilots fled into Thailand in exile.

A little footnote to history...If the American doctor had been at Sam Thong and had a chance to get his hands on General Ma, would he have said, "General, I am going to put you in the hospital right now. You are showing all the signs of fatigue that you were hospitalized just two weeks ago for." Would this have prevented the attack? Because the loss of General Ma in effect meant the loss of an effective air force. The Lao air force lost much of its effectiveness.

I guess, to backtrack even further, what brought everything to a head with General Ma and Kouprasith and, of course, with General Ouane Ratthikoun, was the use of Lao air force transport planes, C-47s, which Ma wanted to use to supply troops with equipment, supplies and ammunition in the Nam Bac and other forward areas, Ouane wanted to use those same planes to run opium in and out of Ban Houei Sai and oranges out of Nam Bac. They wanted to use the planes for commercial purposes for their own gain and Ma said, "Look, this is not right. These are air force planes and we should be supporting our troops with them." That is

one of the reasons that led to his confrontation with Ouane and with Kouprasith and then later his attempt to bomb Kouprasith's headquarters.

Q: That is very interesting. Why did General Ma want to see the American doctor? Was he a particular friend or did he realize he needed some medical attention?

KUHN: I think it was because he realized he needed some medical attention and he just probably...I don't know if he knew Dr. Kameung, the Lao doctor, or not. Whether he felt he couldn't trust Dr. Kameung in what he might do or say, but did feel he could trust the American doctors. It was probably the American doctor or another American doctor who had probably insisted on his hospitalization earlier for battle fatigue. So it was a tragic thing and, of course, General Ma was later killed two or three years later.

Q: There was another coup.

KUHN: Yes, I think it was in 1973. He crashed on the runway at Wattay and I saw photographs of his body and I think it was probably true that he was injured and wounded and General Kouprasith, the man he had tried to kill in the previous coup, stood there and simply bayoneted him to death with a bayonet. The wounds in his chest and stomach were big gash wounds like a bayonet might make. Whether or not it was really Kouprasith, I don't know, but General Ma came to a very sad ending. I thought he was a very outstanding man.

In December, 1966 something else happened that was a tragedy in terms of the war effort in southern Laos. The CIA had developed a series of road watch teams which were small groups of men who went over along routes 6 and 7 and observed truck traffic and reported back the number of trucks that were involved. Later this escalated into calling in air strikes on trucks that were passing up and down the road. The program was developed around a young man by the name of Moua Chung. His call sign was "The Tall Man" because he was exceeding tall for a Meo. He established a base on a mountain called Phou Pha Lang which was just south of Sam Neua city. In fact, from the top of Phou Pha Lang on a clear day you could actually see the little Sam Neua city valley. He established a base there from where he ran his road watch teams from and was sending back a tremendous amount of intelligence. He was also becoming quite a popular individual, both locally and back at Long Chieng and Sam Thong. We had a minor problem between CIA and AID in the field in that the road watch team on Phou Pha Lang was known to all the local villagers. The villagers wanted to get away from the communists and saw that their way of escaping communism was to come to Phou Pha Lang. Well, that was soon going to destroy the secretiveness of the base, not that the enemy didn't know there was anybody up here because we used to land helicopter up there, but it was going to become an unwieldy situation. So there was a new CIA case officer assigned to Na Khang who told me that I was no longer going to be allowed to go into Phou Pha Lang to do any work. Fortunately, another case officer I had worked with for a long time was this person's boss and overruled him and I was able to freely go in and out of there. We tried to get the civilians out as people came in so they would not be a burden to Moua Chung's operation.

Well, one night, about the first week of December 1966, Moua Chung was coming back up the mountain to the peak where they had their headquarters. It was a foggy, rainy day and as they were coming up the trail, they were ambushed, assassinated, whatever, and attacked and Moua Chung was killed. Now, the people on top of the mountain claimed that they didn't know it was Moua Chung, that they thought it was the enemy coming up the trail. So, without trying to find out who it was, opened up and Moua Chung was killed. Two or three Meo who sort of admitted responsibility for it were brought back to Sam Thong and as they were hauled off the aircraft, mobs of people descended on them and just beat these guys senseless until finally the military police came in and rescued them and hauled them off. I think they were in prison for several months and eventually released. There was no way to prove that it was a deliberate assassination. But, there again, Sam Thong and Long Chieng, all the time I was there, were rife with rumors. Somebody was after somebody else constantly. There was this clan against that clan, and somebody trying to dethrone Touby Lyfong; the Les trying to dethrone the Vangs; somebody else trying to do something to someone else, so there was constant turmoil. This sort of fit right in with all these theories that were going around about coups, etc. It was about this time also that the areas around the southern rim of the Plaine des Jarres, some of the big Lao villages like Tha Thom, a big area, were lost. These places were later recaptured but the government was never able to control them.

Mendenhall and the AID Operation

One of the main personalities, of course, in the running of the USAID operation was Joe Mendenhall, the USAID director. Not only was he the director, but he also was the economic counselor of the embassy which gave him considerable influence. Mendenhall was a rather unusual individual. I don't think this has been publicly acknowledged and I have no proof of this in terms of anything written ...when he went on home leave in late 1967 or early 1968, the Lao government quietly asked he not be returned. They just felt that he was not someone who was financially able to support the kinds of things that they felt they should be getting. They were very anxious to have a person come back--Charlie Mann--who in fact did come back and we will get to that a little later. Mendenhall did not come back. His tenure as USAID director was somewhat stormy in the sense that he began to really watch the pennies. It reached the point where money was a greater concern than the program. In the summer of 1966 there were tremendous floods in Vientiane and around the Mekong area. USAID and the refugee relief were gearing up to try to provide food support and relief to flood victims and Mendenhall decided, much like the debate we are having today in Congress, that giving food to someone was a bad idea, but we should sell them rice. So he wanted to charge people for rice. Well, this wasn't so bad for those people who had money and could afford to buy rice. But thousands of people in the Vientiane area that were affected by the floods were day laborers, people who worked every day and got paid on the basis of what they did or on a weekly basis for labor that they did and had no income or savings. Therefore, they really had no money to buy rice. So it was a strange proposition that we start selling rice to people who had lost their homes because of flooding.

This is jumping ahead a little bit, but later on the Lao troops in Ban Houei Sai for some reason, and depending on whose articles or books you read what the reasons were, but the FAR troops in Ban Houei Sai decided they were going to go up and attack Nam Tha, Lima 100. These FAR troops had relatives in Nam Tha families who were still living there, so they decided they were going to go in and liberate Nam Tha. So the FAR went up and captured Nam Tha and held it for a few days, evacuated out several thousands of civilians and brought them back down into government-held territory. Word went out from the Lao governor's office in Houei Sai that they wanted to have support.

Well, Joe Flipse was working up at Houei Sai at the time. He put down a fairly routine request that they needed additional rice to feed these refugees. Well, we had a rice meeting about that same time. Mendenhall got very upset about feeding these new people because he felt this was an operation that no one had approved of in advance. It raised all kinds of problems with delicate negotiations going on between the U.S. and the Chinese in Warsaw. We had promised the Chinese that there would be no Lao operations within a certain number of kilometers from the border and here the Lao army on their own walked right up to the Chinese border, could almost spit over the border, and occupy a town that the Chinese considered as under their influence. So there was a lot of ill feeling in the embassy about this operation. Well, Mendenhall told the people up at Houei Sai, after a lot of arguing, that they had to cut the support by 30 percent. Joe Flipse sent back a message to Mendenhall asking what that meant. "Do I take all my refugees and cut their rations by one-third, or take all my refugees and cut off one-third of them and give them no support? You make the decision Mr. Director. You are the boss in this operation. Mendenhall backed down and said, "Everybody gets fed a hundred percent."

There were lots of these little kinds of things that were going on. He seemed to be at odds a lot with the Lao. After he left Laos he became assistant secretary or under secretary of state for Vietnam and Laos and he made a very, very strong pitch for myself and three or four of my colleagues in Laos to be transferred to Vietnam, which we resisted strenuously and managed to overcome. But Mendenhall...I personally had several dealings with him and never had any problems with him. But he did have some run-ins with the Lao, and he was a difficult person in terms of support, unlike his successor, Charlie Mann. Now Mann had been in Laos several years before. He had been in Cambodia as USAID director as a young man and then most recently had been in the Congo. Now, I am really getting ahead of the story, but in 1968 the Congo Mafia came over. Larry Devlin was the station chief, he came from the Congo; McMurtrie Godley was the ambassador and came from the Congo; and Charlie Mann had been in the Congo. So, you had the three most powerful people in any country all coming from the Congo. I think there is a book by Madeleine Kalb about that...something like "The Congo Cables."

Charlie Mann as Mission Director in Laos

Anyway, Charlie Mann was a totally different type of individual. He had very little sense of humor, basically a self-made individual. He was also economic counselor to the embassy.

But, when he decided he wanted to do something, he didn't want someone to tell him, "You can't do it because of regulation such-and-such." He would say, "If regulation such-and-such says we can't do it, you find me some way to go around regulation such-and-such so we can do it." Charlie Mann would never fit into today's operations in AID because people just don't operate that way.

Q: But in the Laos of the '60s this was a tremendous advantage to be able to work with such flexibility.

KUHN: Once you knew that Charlie Mann was in agreement with something, you were in good shape. At the same time, though, he was in some cases kind of nitpicky. I remember...this is now up in the '70s when I was stationed in Vientiane...every morning at 7:00 I had to present to Charlie Mann a report where every single bag of rice that had been distributed the previous day...

Q: It all had to be accounted for.

Kuhn's Relationships with AID Employees

KUHN: It all had to be accounted for. Absolutely every bag. I used to come into work about 5:00 and compile this list. We didn't have any computers in those days, it was all done by hand using a calculator. This went on for several months and we were having our semi-annual program reviews. Normally, what everyone had done in the past was to make up very complicated charts to show what we had done the previous years and all the projected refugee moves the coming year and how much rice we were going to need. It was very difficult to understand. I said, "Let's cut out all of this crap. Mann likes to see the bottom line pretty much. Let's just simplify these charts and make the projections in one chart and we will present them to him." Well, it was the kiss of death. I went in the next day and it came to be my turn for the presentation. I got up and put one big piece of paper on the flip chart. At that he said, "Where are the rest of your projections?" I said, "Mr. Mann, these are the projections right here. This is the projection for this month, here are the projections for the next quarter, the next quarter, the next quarter. All these have been calculated based upon all our analysis of refugee moves and perceived enemy moves, etc. Here is the bottom line, here is what we need." He said, "I can't understand that. I have to have everything laid out in front of me." So I went back to the office and spent almost the entire night making about a 20-foot-long chart of some kind showing all this stuff. I went in the next day and he looked at it for about ten seconds and it was fine. He didn't have a question. It was all right there.

Also, he had no sense of humor. We had a guy, Hugh Brady, who was running our resettlement program. There was a big program in Pakse at Kilometer 13. During this same meeting, Hugh got up to give a briefing on resettlement of refugees and he talked and talked about 20 minutes on Kilometer 13. Finally Mann looked up and waved his hand and said, "Hugh, where is Kilometer 13?" Well, Hugh Brady was not one of our smartest guys around, he was an old retired military officer and didn't know beans about resettlement. He

looked at Charlie Mann and said, “Mr. Mann, Kilometer 13 is halfway between Kilometer 12 and Kilometer 14,” and kept right on talking. Mann just sat there not knowing what to do. His mouth kind of fell open, you know. I think it was a month after that Hugh Brady was transferred somewhere. We never saw him again, he was gone. It just totally floored Charlie Mann that anyone would ever give him an answer like that.

On other agency people. In general, one of the station chiefs before Devlin, Ted Shackley, used to have really stormy verbal battles with Joe Mendenhall over refugee programs. We used to hold quarterly meetings at Long Chieng where the chief of station from Vientiane, the USAID director and all the mucky-mucks that were involved in political politics of refugees. These meetings would plan out what we needed for the next quarter, discuss funding levels, rice levels, etc.

Q: Would this be only among Americans?

KUHN: Yes, although some of our locals, who went out into the field with us, often would be there. They were held on General Vang Pao’s front porch so they were open to the world. Anybody could practically walk by and listen to what was going on. It was not an unusual occurrence for Mendenhall and Shackley to get into very violent arguments. At the time, I think everybody perceived Mendenhall to be an extremely intelligent individual. He may not have used it the right way, but he was a very intelligent individual. There was no question that Shackley was a very intelligent individual. Why these two men couldn’t have seen that it would have been to one of their advantages to use the other person instead of always having to knock heads about something, I don’t know. Shackley could have used Mendenhall to his own objectives simply by backing off on some of these things like whether or not this thousand person group over here were really refugees or really dependents of SGU groups. It didn’t make a bit of difference in the course of events. They would argue over things like this.

Q: Both men were career officers. Shackley was a career CIA officer and Mendenhall was a career Foreign Service officer.

KUHN: Yes, he was not an AID person, he later became ambassador to Turkey, I believe, or something. But for some reason there was just this clash of personality somehow that neither wanted to feel that they were giving into the other. I don’t know.

Q: A terrific bureaucratic struggle.

KUHN: Yes.

Q: It didn’t make your life any easier, I imagine.

KUHN: Well, once those meetings and everything were over, then we got down to the people who worked together and that was at a different level. When I first got to Sam Thong, Vint Lawrence was head of the operations at Long Chieng when I first arrived at

Sam Thong. It was a very small operation. Tony Poe had been there before that and had just recently gone up to Nam Yu up on the Thai/Burmese border, at the other end of the country. Relationships with Vint? I never knew him well and never had much dealings with him but certainly those I did have were very, very cordial while he was there. Later on John Randall came in and as Long Chieng began to build up Howie Freeman came over from Luang Prabang. There were several people who were there for only a year or two. But the relationship at the working level was very cordial. At Site 36 at Na Khang there were Jerry Daniels and Mike Lynch. Later on Terry Quill came up there. Terry and I had a lot of run-ins. We did not get along at all, but he was probably the only person. Dick Santos as did Frank Odom worked at Site 36. We all worked together very well. If one of them was out at a refugee site and somebody needed refugee rice and material they would either let me know or do what they could to get it. Likewise, if I were out at a site and needed some ammunition, or to move some troops or a medevac or something, I did. We had to work together at the lower levels. The embassy people could argue among themselves, but we couldn't do that at the field level.

On the local side, I think Pop tried but didn't get very far and gave up. No one at the embassy appreciated the power and wisdom of Chao Saykham, who was the governor of Xieng Khouang. He was the grandson of the hereditary ruling prince. He had been decorated by the French for his work against the Japanese in World War II as a young man. As a young man, as he told me, he was the person who picked Vang Pao as a little school kid running around and put him into a school recognizing his potential. I think Vang Pao has also said that Chao Saykham really got him started. Vang Pao would often call Chao Saykham and come along to Sam Thong to see him. We are talking about a man who was in his forties at the time. We are not talking about an old duck who was senile.

Chao Saykham's Relationship with the French

Q: Was he older than Vang Pao?

KUHN: Yes, he was older, but not that much. Chao Saykham was in his late teens, early '20s, at the end of World War II.

Q: Was he already governor then?

KUHN: No. In fact, I think he was some official in Savannakhet where he met his future wife. So, it wasn't until the '50s that he was sent back up to Xieng Khouang. Chao Saykham had been a guerrilla fighter against the Japanese, a guerrilla fighter against the Vietnamese. He knew what he was talking about. The Americans, I think, at the embassy, when you mentioned Chao Saykham's name they would say, "There is no use talking to him, he is with the French." The reason why I...I don't want to say pro-prejudice for Chao Saykham...but my wife is Chao Saykham's stepdaughter. Not her biological father, but Chao Saykham's wife and my wife were first cousins and she was brought up to live with Chao Saykham when she was a young child. So, I have had a chance to talk to him before he died several years ago.

But even during the days during the war I remember at Sam Thong some little outpost would call in and say they were out of rice, or meat, or need something send a helicopter over. And Chao Saykham would say, "You know, you people are ruining the ability of the Meo and the Lao Theung and the Lao to be mobile guerrilla fighters. You are putting them in positions and having them stay there, or at least they want to stay there and when they want something, rather than getting off their ass and walking two days back to Sam Thong or Na Khang during which time they could be observing whether there is any enemy activity around, anything happening. What do you do? You let them sit on a mountain top, send over a helicopter, give them their food, ammunition, etc. and they never leave their outpost from week to week. They haven't the slightest idea what is happening around them. The enemy could be slowly up, choking them off, and they will never even know it because they never have to leave their foxholes. You have got to get away from the use of helicopters. Make the troops walk."

Q: That was very wise insight.

KUHN: But we never did.

Q: What were the circumstances in which he said this? Was it written up somewhere?

KUHN: No. This is something he said to me. In this case it happened to be Site 15, Ban Na which was northeast of Sam Thong, between us and the Plaine des Jarres. It turned out that about this time some villagers who were out hunting on the very trail the troops would have been walking had they been going back and forth, noticed along the trail something that looked like the leaves and dirt had been disturbed. They brushed everything aside and dug up several small cases of Chinese canned pork and canned vegetables. Well, of course, right away the rumor began flying around that the enemy was going to attack Sam Thong and was caching supplies along the trails. Chao Saykham said, "See? If you make these people get out there and walk they would know whether or not there might be any enemy troops coming into that area." He was a person who spoke very slowly--didn't speak any English that I recall--but was fluent in French and Lao. The people in the embassy just were not interested in him. I know Pop talked to people down there. I made suggestions that we ought to see more of Chao Saykham and every time the response was that he was with the French. I believe this was a big mistake.

Meo and Guerilla Tactics

Q: When you go back and read the accounts of the French working with the Meo, right after the Second World War, and against the Japanese, their scouting ability was absolutely fantastic. They would walk for days, knew all the trails and where the Japanese were exactly. All of this was just muscle power basically and brain power. They were fantastic scouts. It is unfortunate they were put into the role of having to defend fixed positions in a much bigger war. Of course, in those days, in the forties and '50s, there

weren't the same heavy weapons and certainly no air strikes and things like that to worry about.

KUHN: But, the enemy in Laos didn't have all those things either.

Q: I suppose not, but the mobility of the Meo was probably their greatest strategic asset, wouldn't you say?"

KUHN: Yes. I was looking through some of my letters and notes here and I see I had written to myself and my parents years ago that when Shackley left, his tour in Laos ruined the program because it was basically during his period of time when the idea of mobility gave way to fixed positions and massive buildups. But, I personally, have agonized and mulled this whole thing over in my head probably hundreds of times since we left Laos and even during when I was in Laos. I am still not exactly sure where I come down on this business of mobility versus fixed positions. The concept of a guerrilla fighter, to my mind anyway, implies operating basically in an unfriendly area. I think the classic case of guerrilla fighting is in Burma during World War II. The Americans and the British--of course they had the ethnic fighters with them, the Shan, Karens, etc--but basically guerrilla fighters need to be mobile. You take Sam Neua, for instance, and you had lots of villages, some friendly and some unfriendly, but they were all mixed up. There was no clear lines, no clear borders. Now if you took villagers from the friendly areas and made them into small guerrilla groups and sent them out, where were they going to be fighting and who was eventually going to be protecting their villages when they were out being guerrillas to keep the other side's guerrillas from coming in? See, there really was no ocean for the guerrilla to fight in just for his own survival to harass the enemy. Everything was all mixed up. If you didn't protect your own village, what was the purpose of going over and harassing somebody else's village if your own village was going to get burned down while you were gone?

Q: It's a dilemma. It must be the same dilemma that faced the opposing sides in the French and Indian wars on this continent. Particularly, burning the other side's villages was the most common form of retribution. It is a dilemma.

KUHN: So, I am constantly going around and around about this idea, "What if we didn't have nine SG units. What if there had been only 3 SG units or even no SG groups, but just small village groups. How would that have made a difference? I don't know. These small groups in and among themselves would not have been able to march up to Sam Neua city and capture it or up to Phong Saly and capture it. What would they have done? They probably would never be strong enough to harass the enemy enough to draw troops off from Vietnam. So, what would anybody have gained by having a bunch of small guerrilla groups operating around Laos? I really am not sure.

Q: I suppose the answer to that is that they would have been able to prevent the North Vietnamese from installing their administration in what they called the liberated area. This is what was foremost in their minds, that they wanted to clear as much area as possible of

the royal government forces and the Meo so they could install their administration. That is the way they measured the progress of the so-called revolution. So, I suppose to the extent that the guerrilla forces could prevent that, they would be winning.

KUHN: Yes, but I would argue also that from an outsider's viewpoint, people assumed that that control was already there anyway. There were very few people in the world that knew that Nong Khang, Lima 52, was friendly for a few years or that Lima Site 87 [Pia Khan] was friendly for some time, and all these little villages around Sam Neua city where we had a presence. For example, this operation in December 1965 that went up and took Muong Het, near the border, many of the troops came from small villages and while they were up there attacking Muong Het the Vietnamese came in around behind them and cleaned out the villages.

Q: Of course the Vietnamese were masters at guerrilla warfare themselves, so they knew what to do.

KUHN: Well, the Pathet Lao were not really a force to be reckoned with in most cases up there.

Q: I think it is unfortunate that in later years of the war, the test of the effectiveness of the Meo and Vang Pao came to be how many North Vietnamese divisions these forces could tie down because that after all was not the object of the war, although it might make sense to the commander of MACV sitting in Saigon who had the 312th Division tied down defending the Plaine des Jarres. But it certainly wasn't going to determine who won the struggle in Laos.

American Relationship with the Meo

KUHN: This is another two or three days' discussion. But Arthur, I was again going through some of my papers and for the sake of anyone listening here, I have boxes and boxes and boxes of records from Laos that I'm trying to sort out. So, going through things I came across a little something I had written here which must have been written around 1967 or 1968. Some of the sentences don't make any sense but I just want to read a paragraph of it, I think, and give a comment on exactly what you said about Laos. Maybe I will make the comment first. It seems to me there are a lot of things again written or coming out about how...and of course Pop Buell was one of the biggest perpetrators of this and Jiggs Weldon is to a certain extent too...we used the Meo, we used hill tribes, we used people and then dropped them. Well, maybe we did, but I don't think we should be so cynical and sit back and say, "Gee, that was terrible," because that was already drilled into me when I first went to Laos. I was basically told that...and I believe in the domino theory. I truly believe the domino theory was correct. If Laos had been taken over by the communists in 1964, 1965 or even earlier, Thailand was in no condition to defend itself against a massive move across the Mekong. One of the things when I came back between the end of my contract and being hired as a direct hire, was to play some hypothetical "peace games" or "aid games". The names they gave two or three of these countries...we

were all people who had spent two or three years in Southeast Asia already...After the first day we said, "Let's cut out the crap here. This is Thailand, this is Laos, this is Vietnam." They said, "Okay, we will call them all by their correct names." The information we were supplied, which was supposed to be accurate, was that the condition of the Thai government was in no condition to have slowed down or stopped any kind of major incursion.

From my own personal standpoint, when I was in the Peace Corps, I was in a Meo village in what was called the tri-state area, where the provinces of Loei, Pitsanaloke, and Petchaboun come together up in the mountains, about 20 miles south of the Thai/Lao border. There were about 9,000 hill tribes in that area. I made a survey. Several times we would walk the area taking four or five days making the circuit. Anyway, in late 1964 and early 1965, there began to be some communist activity in that area. Tribal village leaders would find hex signs on the door of their houses in blood. Many of these Meo spoke Chinese and there were Chinese broadcasts coming out of China both in Chinese and in Meo directed towards the Thai border areas. These people were really concerned. They were afraid, they weren't communists. The Thai border police had several outposts up in the area. They had dispensaries, hospitals, schools. They were working very hard with the Meo. But remember back in the '50s there was a schism between the police and the military in Thailand. The United States gave significant support to the Border Police. Because there was a major training ground, Pits Camp, near Pitsanaloke, there were American advisors and their families living in Pitsanaloke. On American holidays any Peace Corps volunteers in the area were invited over for dinner.

They were aware of what was going on. When I left and went up to Laos, within 18 months after I left, all the border police had been pulled out of these border areas and replaced with Thai military. The Thai military came in and unfortunately the father of a friend of mine was a Thai commanding general for this whole operation. They came in and just wiped out Meo villages--air bombardments, shellings, everything. Of the several people in the area where I had lived--another friend of mine who worked for the narcotics bureau, told me that only 400 people out of several thousand came down to the refugee camps in Petchaboun. The rest were killed or went with the Pathet Lao. The whole mountainous region, inhabited mostly by hill tribes, from the Thai/Lao border down to Nakhon Thai and over to Dan Sai and over to Lom Kao was up for grabs. You probably remember. In the '60s it was a very volatile area.

At the same time, down on the Mekong side, the Mukdahan area, that whole area along the border there all populated by Vietnamese and you would walk into stores and see Ho Chi Minh's picture on the walls, etc. Nakhae was the communists' and CT headquarters for all of northeast Thailand. They were very strongly entrenched in the '60s. They controlled all along that border area.

At the same time you had Malaysia just coming off their big insurgency campaign. I really don't think the Indonesian military would have hung on like they did and done the things

after the Gestapu affair in 1965 had they not felt that the communists at some point were being slowed down.

So I remember distinctly being told that this was a stopgap measure. Laos is to give the rest of Southeast Asia time to regroup and... My recollection is that we had a pretty clear understanding that Laos was really the buffer that we had to hold. No one ever really said to me, "We are really concerned about what happens to these people later on." It was just assumed that there would be some miraculous ending and everybody would come out on top, which I think realistically we all knew was not going to happen.

Q: You didn't feel that you were just expending these people?

KUHN: I guess sometimes people think I don't have much feeling. I sort of made myself look at this whole situation. If I got concerned about every single person or thing that I saw or did, I was going to be a physical and mental wreck. If every time I saw a wounded person, a dead person, a refugee being run out of their house, I felt I had to look at this thing objectively. So in my mind I said that my job is to work with refugees. If it is to evacuate wounded, I evacuate wounded. I have carried people off of airplanes and as they came off the body would sort of tilt a bit and the entire insides would fall off onto the ground. I have seen people get their heads cut open by helicopter rotor blades. All kinds of things that I told myself I was not going to worry about it, not go home and dwell on it. So, when it came to the overall picture, I tended to look at myself and say, "Gee, you know these people, whether Lao, Meo, or whatever, if they are sitting up on top of that mountain and the enemy attacks, they are all going to run away. If they would sit up there they might lose one or two killed or a couple of wounded, but they probably would hold the mountain. So, what do they do? They run away and wait two weeks and then run back up and try to retake the hilltop and they lose ten people. How can I feel sorry for people who somehow have got to sit down and say 'This is it, we are going to stand here and fight.' So the Lao, and the Meo leaders who did that were successful. The only reason that they eventually became unsuccessful was because everything else was falling around them and eventually they were caught up in this whole fiasco. Colonel Chansom; Colonel Khongsavan, that is his picture there; Colonel Douangtha up in Sam Neua; Vang Pao himself. There were so many things that the Lao could have done correctly, or the Meo could have done correctly, but they didn't.

Well, at some point you have to accept your own consequences. Vang Pao, I don't want to jump ahead of the story on Phou Pha Thi because that is a major point up there. Pha Thi is the perfect example, on both the American and on the Meo side, where we should have stood pat and not abandoned the site...but by not standing up, but by giving up, and then ignoring Pha Thi for months...we just really got our ass whipped in the attempt to retake it. I used to get up into some villages...Arthur, I would do this many times, be in a really remote village some place and get everybody all whipped up and big parties going on and taking my shirt off and pounding my chest. Stupid as it sounds I used to do these kinds of things and yet I never came back and said, "Gee, what have I done? What am I getting these people into?" I just felt that people don't get into things blindly no matter how we may think they do. They knew the situation better than any of us ever could possibly know it on

the ground. They didn't do the things and make the necessary moves that they had to do to prevent certain things from happening.

U.S. Objectives in Laos

I came back from Laos and had many a night I didn't sleep, but it really wasn't because of those things, there were other reasons. I wrote back some 30 years ago U.S. objectives in Laos. I am not going to read this whole thing, but one sentence here..."The importance of Laos to overall U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia is not intrinsically related to Laos per se, but to the fact that Laos is a supply route to South Vietnam...an access to northeast Thailand, etc." We need to have access to certain parts of Laos to do certain things and I wrote them down. I go on and say, "However, to do those things there are five or six other things that need to take place at the same time. There has to be economic stability in the country. There has to be programs related to both the war effort and to the effort of maintaining a social fabric, a social life. There has to be a program to help maintain a certain level of government services. There has to be a program to maintain social infrastructure. And not only economic stability, but economic development of the country." So, it seemed to me that if we do all those things, and this may be sticking my head in the sand, somehow things are really going to come out all right in the end. There is not going to be a total disaster. I suppose most of us never ever really thought we would leave Laos in the way we did.

Integration of the Meo into Laos

Q: Okay, not to jump ahead but just to take up one point here. I think those points you made are certainly very good and certainly it comes down to the whole question of preserving the national identity of Laos and preventing it from falling apart or being taken over and made into something else. That raises a question which is often discussed these days in various fora. To what extent was all this effort we were doing with the Meo sort of autonomous from the rest of Laos and to what extent were we consciously trying to integrate the Meo into the Lao nation as such? How strong were the links? Was our presence weakening or strengthening these links? You mention that Vang Pao was making a house for the king at Long Chieng and things like that. To what extent did that sort of thing work?

KUHN: I think the king had a tremendous following among the Meo. Now I don't know when that started. I think the king's first visit to Long Chieng could even be before I arrived in 1965. I think while I was at Sam Thong the king made two visits. Vang Pao was really the first non-ethnic Lao general, certainly the first Meo general to ever be integrated into the Lao forces. With U.S. government help, he established the radio station Lao Hom Pao, which broadcast in several different Lao languages and dialects. Now, some people get a little more cynical about this next thing, but there was also the Xieng Khouang Panich, or something like that, and there were a couple of old DC-3 cargo planes available. Now, the cynics say this was a ploy to give Vang Pao and his cronies a way to make money by running goods up and back from Long Chieng to Vientiane, the way to run his opium in and out of the country. That may or may not have happened, I don't know. But, the fact is that there was an association, a cooperative as such established at Long Chieng with advisers

trying to help them get the whole thing started, which gave access to markets in Vientiane. When it became feasible a road was actually built from route 13 over to Long Chieng. So there was an attempt to incorporate Long Chieng into the fabric of everything on the road system. I think the fact that AID, again this happened before my arrival, at Sam Thong there was a complete physical structure of government built. There was a school there. The major part of the population were Meo. There was a government structure for Sam Neua although the Khouang offices were at Sam Thong, or even at Vientiane. There was always a governor appointed for Sam Neua. There were schools.

It seemed to me that what we were doing, on the surface anyway, was an attempt to create a wholeness. One of the things that I started when I was at Sam Thong, and Jack Williamson and I worked on this a lot, was to bring not official village leaders but acknowledged village leaders, male and female, back to Vientiane and to other cities. We would take people on tours. People from Sam Neua would be taken to Savannakhet to let them see what the rest of the country looked like. There was this constant effort to try to tell them that they were part of one country. Whether they believed it or not or understood it, I make no pretense of even guessing. But I think there was an effort made to try to do this. By the end of the war...before 1973 there were massive shifts of troops. There were troops from the south coming up to the north and north people going to the south which may have been more harmful than helpful.

Notion of an Autonomous Meo State

Q: Did you ever see any effort on the part of any American at all to encourage the Meo to think that what they were fighting for was some kind of autonomous entity of their own?

KUHN: No.

Q: Sometimes that charge is made.

KUHN: Unless someone would just assume that by giving Vang Pao so much authority, but certainly I never heard any ...

Q: Because he did have a lot of power. There is no doubt about it. He exercised a lot of power over his people, and they would do what he told them to do.

KUHN: Pretty much so.

Q: He was not of a mind to create an autonomous Meo state?

KUHN: I think he realized that probably would have never flown. In fact, you say that he was a powerful person. He was and he wasn't. Let's remember there are several clans. Touby Lyfong was still very important and very influential. There was also his relationship with Chao Saykham. I think that was an influence that was a strong influence on what Vang Pao did. Again, it is not acknowledged and it is hard to pinpoint, but I think it was there.

You know these things about Vang Pao walking down the street and seeing a prisoner and shooting him in back of the head, I personally never saw anything like that or any indication of any activity like that. I am not saying it never happened, I don't know. But a lot of the things that serious writings attribute to him I just wonder sometimes...it may have happened once or twice, but to think that is the way he acted all the time, I think is erroneous. This idea in terms of money, whether or not there were padded payrolls, whether he was getting kickbacks...I am not saying it didn't happen but let's look at it from a different standpoint. Anybody could go over there to Vang Pao's front porch and sit on it from about 4 in the afternoon until about midnight, and see the parade of children, widows, wounded, sick come walking up on his front porch. There would be ten dollars here, 100 dollars there, fifty dollars over there. Every night there would be somebody coming up wanting something. That took money.

Where was Vang Pao going to get that money? Even if he were running opium. I doubt that Vang Pao was a wealthy man when he came to the U.S. I never went to his place when he went to Missoula nor to his place in California. I do know, though, that there was a lot of skimming off of money collected for the re-invasion of Laos, but whether or not Vang Pao benefitted personally I don't know. But he was constantly giving things away. He had to, that is his role. If he was going to be the traditional leader, he had to be in a position to help people and he had to get the money some place. If it was phony troops or straight cash from the CIA, so what? If he was going to be in that position he had to play that role. If he didn't play the role then the whole system was going to collapse because nobody was going to give him any homage. If you are the boss and I need something and come to you and you say, "Look, I am sorry, I can't give you 20 bucks today. Just tell your mother who is starving to wait until tomorrow to get some rice." It wouldn't take me long to figure out that this guy wasn't the person I thought he was. So, there is this tremendous image that had to be maintained. Not just an image but an actual persona that had to be maintained.

Personality of Vang Pao

Q: Yes.

KUHN: Vang Pao was a mercurial personality. He was not somebody who was predictable. He, I would guess, like many Meo, may have been superstitious enough to have many whims. I remember at the attempt to retake Phou Pha Thi in December 1968, I spent three weeks with Vang Pao, with him constantly day and night. Sleeping at the same outpost and everything with him. I remember one particular time the friendly troops were making pretty good advances up the side of Pha Thi. One of the CIA people came in and said, "General we have good news. Tomorrow the air force is going to give us a max effort, we have a code name. When the air force gives a code name to something it means they are really taking it seriously. So tomorrow the sky is going to be dark with jets over Pha Thi. All you have to do is pull back down about a quarter of a mile and they will level the top of Pha Thi. It will be five inches shorter by tomorrow afternoon when they get finished with this." And Vang Pao said, "Don't need it." I said, "What?" He said, "I know that tonight I am going to

give the order to advance and I know that by tomorrow morning my men are going to be on top of Phou Pha Thi.”

I am a great believer in individuals affecting history. I think when Colonel Thong Vongrasamy got killed it affected history. When Don Sjostrom got killed, that affected Lao history. When Jerry Daniels for the first time retired...he retired a couple of times from Laos...and the new guy who was General Vang Pao's case officer just didn't know how to handle Vang Pao. Vang Pao said he wanted everything cancelled for the next day and no air strikes. I think Jerry would have been able to sit down with Vang Pao and say, "Let's just think this over a little bit." But, as it was, the guy who was working with Vang Pao said, "Well, okay, I will cancel it." That night, I think it was Colonel Douangtha, got their ass kicked. They were hauling off the dead and wounded from that attack all the next day. It was a massacre. Vang Pao came in and said, "Well, we didn't take the top so now I want the airplanes for tomorrow." This guy said, "General Vang Pao, I am not even going to call down to Udorn. After what we just cancelled today, if I call down tonight and tell them we want something for tomorrow, you will never see another airplane up here for the next ten years. You have used up your credibility in terms of this operation. We are not going to see any more aircraft up here on Pha Thi." And basically that was the end. Shortly after that the whole thing was called off. Vang Pao was so cocksure of himself. He did the same thing earlier in 1968.

I was looking at my notes here today and I see where I have written, "Just talked to Vang Pao and he said he is stopping the Hua Muong operation and in two more days he is going to attack Pha Thi again." The same thing happened on the Plaine des Jarres. All of a sudden, to try to protect Long Chieng he captures Xieng Khouang, holds it for a short period of time, and then gets pushed out. He would do these things. You could never tell what he was going to do next. That was probably okay when he was dealing with small groups of guerrilla people but he tried to translate that same thing into moving three or four hundred men in operations and it didn't work at all.

I think one of his faults, although perhaps he was just being more realistic than the rest of us, I don't know, he did not trust anybody except the Meo. When he came out to remote villages...I know at least three different...one T'ai Khaw (White T'ai), and two Lao villages, that begged for weapons and arms for training, sent people in asking for assistance. He said, "No, I don't trust those people. They are Lao." So from that standpoint, just the opposite of what I was arguing before where he was trying to get this integration, if he didn't like a group or felt they were a group that was from an area that had been patrolled by the communists for a long period of time, he wouldn't trust them, wouldn't bring them in, wouldn't go with them. So, he did have some kinds of limitations.

Vang Pao's Suspicions of Pathet Lao Refugees, 1969

Again back to the old warlord kind of concept, too, in the summer of 1969, when I had just returned from home leave and went straight out to the Plaine des Jarres area where Vang Pao had just captured Lat Sen and parts of the southern part of the Plaine. I have movies of

the first group of refugees coming across the grasslands over to where the friendly troops were. You can see the planes bombing in the back and everything. They are carrying sewing machines, have all their livestock and getting over to where the friendly forces were and it looked pretty obvious to me that there was an awful lot of cattle coming out, hundreds of heads of cattle and water buffalo. We were spending thousands and thousands of dollars in buying beef from Singapore Chinese merchants. Buying the canned beef, flying or trucking it up to Vientiane and then flying it up to Long Chieng or someplace to give to the troops. I thought, "Gee, this is the perfect opportunity. We have meat on the hoof. Before tomorrow night is over I am going to evacuate almost all of these civilians on airplanes to Sam Thong. But I am not going to take the cows and water buffalo. Here is a chance if I can buy their buffalo, we can give them some money so that when they get to Sam Thong they will have money to buy other things that they need." So I got my trusty little Stoner sideband out and called Jack Williamson down in Vientiane and said, "Here is my scheme." Jack said, "Hey, that sounds fantastic. Give me a half an hour. I have to get with the embassy, with the AID procurement people, etc." About 35 to 45 minutes later, Jack came back on the radio and said, "It's a go. I don't care how you do it. We can't get you any suitcases of money tonight, but if you can somehow talk these people into accepting some kind of IOU that we will buy so many cattle for so much kip, okay."

Vang Pao was out with me most of this day and it was hot. Looking back on it I attribute it to the ice water. Some of the guys at Long Chieng had sent over these great big metal water cans full of ice and water. It was so hot out there in August that I was just drinking this water glass, after glass, and I think it really went to my brain. I went over to Vang Pao and say, "General, I have what I think is good news," and explained to him the whole situation. He took off his hat, he used to wear one of these floppy bush hats, and threw it down on the ground and said, "What? That is impossible. These are enemy. These people are all enemy and my troops deserve those water buffaloes and cows. They get to keep those things." So, I started arguing and this is one of those times that maybe one of those stories about Vang Pao pulling out a gun and shooting somebody may be true because he was armed and I was armed. He had on a pistol of some kind and I had on my 38. I think he was actually thinking about that.

Q: I suppose from his point of view these people had been living in the Pathet Lao zone for so long with their animals that all the animals were considered to be booty.

KUHN: Yes, and I wouldn't have argued the fact that they all may have been or were enemy too.

Q: Was he opposed to sending them to Sam Thong?

KUHN: The people?

Q: Yes.

KUHN: Oh, he wanted to get them out, to get rid of them.

Q: Even if they were Pathet Lao agents?

KUHN: He didn't care. He wanted to get them out of the Plaine des Jarres. But, I think he wanted to get them out so that whatever they left behind...and in fact over the next three or four days it looked like something out of the wild west. There were huge cattle drives from the Plaine over to Long Chieng. I don't know if individual soldiers ever got their share of the cows, whether Vang Pao and other mucky mucks planned on keeping them all.

Q: But they were simply taken and not a penny paid?

KUHN: Not a penny paid. I tried. I said, "Just think of the savings. The U.S. government is spending millions of dollars trying to support this and we can save a lot of money." In 1969 there was still some congressional activity about how much money was being spent.

Q: Well, the scrutiny of expenses was growing in 1969.

KUHN: Yes. A couple of Americans who were working over there came in to talk to me and, of course, at that time Phaythoune and I were married and with Chao Saykham having family connections to the government there made everything even a little more sticky. So, there were several Americans who went over to talk to Vang Pao when he was threatening to have me physically removed from Sam Thong and never work up there again. They talked to him and calmed him down a little bit. But, after that, the relationship between Vang Pao and me was correct but nothing supergrade. Having said that, about three or four months later, January, I came down with what was thought to be a bleeding ulcer and was medevaced out and never came back to Sam Thong again. I was sent some place else. So I never had much opportunity to work with Vang Pao again. But, I always laugh because I was one of the very few people never to have gotten what they call a Vang Pao ring. He used to have these big rings made and give them to the people who were working closely with him, particularly some of the pilots, the Ravens and AD-1 pilots and people like that. Maybe one or two AID people had them. One of Vang Pao's aides had told me just before that Vang Pao was getting ready to give me one of the rings which was a very coveted things at the time, but he never did.

Nai Khongs and AID

There are a couple of other people whose names I want to mention, not only because they are really important but for their memory's sake. The operation that we had at Sam Thong, in addition to the Americans we had four or five people we called nai khongs. Nai khong is a term carried over from I guess French occupation days. Our nai khongs were officially paid by AID. They were people who had respect in the area. A couple of the younger fellows spoke some English, which made it nice to work with them. Either they would go with us or go on their own to investigate refugee moves and gather intelligence as to what was happening to civilians and refugees.

One of the nai khongs we were working with was a combination of Lao Theung and Meo, his name was Nhia Ying and just a tremendous, tremendous individual. In September 1966 Nhia Ying was coming back in a Helio Courier to Sam Thong in the afternoon and for some reason the plane crashed about a quarter of a mile from Tha Tham Bleung, Lima Site 72, near Sam Thong. The pilot of a Helio Courier sits on the left-hand side and the door to get in is on the left-hand side. So the passenger has to get in and crawl past the yoke to get over to the passenger side and likewise to get out. Well, when the plane crashed the pilot crawled out and started to run away from the airplane. He turned around and realized that Nhia Ying was still in the front seat. He ran back into the aircraft and started to pull Nhia Ying out from the seat harness and the plane caught on fire. As he was dragging Nhia Ying out it basically exploded. The pilot was partially burned on the face and hands but Nhia Ying had third degree burns over 89 percent of his body. He got him back to the hospital in Sam Thong and he was still alive. He was rushed down to Korat and was down there. He had two wives and several children. Pop arranged for one of his wives to fly down to be with him. In the meantime, Pat McCready said that she was working on a space which was normally only reserved for Americans on what was called the Red Ball Express back to Brook Burn Hospital back in Texas. Everything was getting set up to send Nhia Ying back to the States for treatment when he died in the hospital. That was a tremendous loss because he was somebody who was very well respected and the fact that he was part Lao Theung as well as Meo sort of gave him an entrée to both worlds, so to speak. We were lucky, I guess, that of all the people who worked for us in those years we didn't lose more people. Later on towards the very end we lost another nai khong, Nou Tou, when a pilot ran into a mountain. But those were the only two of our people that were ever killed during our operations, but pretty important people.

Don Sjostrom's Death, 1967

There were a few strange and unusual things that happened in late 1966. In the late summer of 1966 there was an American lab technician working at the hospital who was one of the air commandos and he was shot one night. Nobody was ever apprehended, we could never figure out any motive for the shooting although there were several theories. One of them was this man was a lab technician at the hospital and the nurses quarter was right next to the hospital. The soldiers used to come down after the nurses were off duty. This guy used to go out late at night to chase the soldiers away from the girls. The theory is that he irritated somebody one night and somebody shot him. This probably makes about as much sense as anything. Another theory was that two black American White Star soldiers had allegedly raped a Meo in 1961 and that there was some resentment among some of the Meo against the black Americans, so he was shot. But that doesn't hold water because we had other black Americans who worked at both Long Chieng and Sam Thong and got along fine with everybody and there was never any kind of racial animosity. So, I think probably it had to do with the girls and the nurses more than anything else.

At the end of 1966 and the beginning of 1967, it was obvious that the airhead at Site 36, Na Khang, was probably going to be hit and indications were that the Vietnamese were making a buildup to attack 36. I went up there...Don Sjostrom was another AID operations officer I

worked with and probably my closest friend in Laos at that time was staying at 36 along with Jerry Daniels and Mike Lynch. I went up there and spent four or five days with them. The weather was very bad. Fog was right on the deck and no planes were coming in or out for four or five days. Jerry, Don and I spent a lot of time walking around. We walked two, three, four miles out from the airstrip, all around the area...just in retrospect, rather foolishly walking around by ourselves. We went through some of the old Phuan villages that had been burnt out in a previous attack. There was no sign of any enemy at that time. So, when the weather broke I went back to Sam Thong for a couple of days because nothing was going on at 36.

It was the morning of January 6, 1967 that we got a call a little after 6:00 in the morning from Long Chieng saying that site 36, Na Khang, was under attack and they had just gotten word that Don Sjostrom had gotten killed in the attack. At Na Khang there was an airstrip with kind of a kidney shaped hill just to the north and the friendly positions and the CIA bunkers and radios were located on the slopes of that little kidney shaped hill ridge line. On top of the ridge line there was a 75 pack howitzer and a 50 caliber machine gun. The 50 caliber machine gun was facing away from the airstrip. Well, when the Vietnamese attacked they came in and got up on top of the ridge line where the 50 caliber machine gun was located and apparently were trying to get it turned around so they had a field of fire to sweep the airstrip and basically sweep the areas where the troops were located and where the CIA radios and bunkers were. In order to prevent that, the forces there...I should at this time say there was a mixed element at Na Khang. There were elements of SGUs but many of the main forces were FAR troops. Colonel Phan Syharat was the governor of Sam Neua and his battalion, I believe, was BV 26. At any rate, there were mixed Meo/ Lao and other tribal troops defending Na Khang.

Apparently in order to try to keep the Vietnamese from getting the 50 caliber machine gun turned around on the runway, they were going to try to hit the position where the gun was. There were three groups of troops involved. One group would come in from the left, one from the right and one right up the center. For some reason, Don, instead of staying in the bunker where he would have been perfectly safe, but also totally keeping in character with him, was in the center group and the reports say he was actually leading the center group up the hill to where the machine gun was when he took one round right between the eyes. All accounts were that he was dead instantly. But that did not deter the friendly groups from coming up. They overran the 50 caliber machine gun position and prevented the Vietnamese from staying on the ridge line. They pulled back down to the side.

They were still coming in across the runway. The weather broke, this was about 6:00, 6:30 in the morning, a little later on and aircraft did come in and there was heavy tactical support for Site 36. In the meantime, then, I left Sam Thong as soon as I could and went up to a location called Site 50, Phou Cum, which was near 36 to see if things were going to break, if any aircraft were going to get in. My intent was to try to get in on the first aircraft so that I could pick up Don's body and bring him back to Vientiane. I felt very strongly that I had to do this and no one argued with me. After I got to Phou Cum, Lima Site 50, and was there for a few hours, it was obvious that aircraft were still not able to get into Site 36 because of

weather and ground fire. I got word on the radio that Vang Pao was quite concerned as word got around the rest of Sam Neua, that Na Khang, Lima Site 36, had been hit and that Don was dead, that this would cause some panic and unrest and unease. He wanted to make sure that other sites up in Sam Neua got the word firsthand from somebody to cool it, things were under control, don't get excited. So I left Phou Cum late morning and spent most of the rest of the day visiting all the various airstrips up in Sam Neua talking to the leaders and explaining to them what happened and that everything was okay and calm.

In the meantime, late in the afternoon a Caribou got into 36 and picked up Don's body and took it back to Vientiane. I was heading in to 36 to spend the night there when again it was suggested that I go over to Site 50 at Phou Cum and coordinate activities from there because if 36 got hit again it might cut off communications. So I went back to Site 50. The next morning early, 36 was still in friendly hands and a pilot coming up out of Vientiane...as an aside, Air America and Continental pilots were great individuals but often times they got things screwed up...in this particular incident the pilot said he had observed an ICC (International Control Commission) C-47 headed north and supposedly someone had heard on the radio that the ICC, which was composed of Indian, Polish and Canadian diplomats and military officers, were in fact coming up to Na Khang to investigate the attack because the Lao government had protested the Vietnamese attack on a Lao outpost.

Q: That would have been rather surprising because the ICC had to debate many days if not weeks before deciding to investigate any cease-fire violation.

KUHN: You probably know better, but I don't think there was ever any case where the Vietnamese were sanctioned for any kind of act.

In fact there was panic in Udorn a little bit. During the attack, of course, Mike Lynch had been there, Jerry Daniels was the other person who had been waiting, waiting and waiting for the attack and had given it up like I did and had gone to Bangkok for a couple of days on vacation. Jerry came back the day after the attack, so there was Jerry and Mike up there. The last thing the embassy or anyone wanted was the ICC to land at Na Khang and find two CIA case officers and a whole bunker full of radios. But in one of these little quirks in diplomacy, Jerry and Mike were ordered back to Udorn and I was asked if I wanted to go into Site 36 as an AID employee and if the ICC came in I would be the cover for the radios and everything, which was pretty flimsy.

Q: But you were legitimate anyway.

KUHN: Yes..

Q: The presence of the other two might be construed as a violation of the provision of the 1962 Geneva Agreement forbidding foreign military personnel from being in Laos. This was rather nonsensical considering the thousands of so-called North Vietnamese "volunteers" roaming over the entire country.

KUHN: I said, "Yes, of course." I came in and Mike and Jerry were both still there. The problem was that the CIA radio network used upper and lower single sidebands and they had multiple frequency radios. The AID radios were fixed frequency and although we used upper sometime, we primarily used lower. Also, the CIA at night switched from upper to lower and then changed frequencies and you had to know how to calibrate the radios which I did not know how to do. So they gave me a five-minute lesson on how to recalibrate the radios for day and night time. Well, it turned out we just left them on the daytime frequency the whole time because it was too much trouble to try to recalibrate.

Anyway, the upshot was that for three days and two nights I spent at Na Khang with a Thai road watch team leader whose code name was Blue Boy. For two nights I never went to bed. I coordinated virtually all of the road watch air strikes that were going on during the night as well as coordinating U.S. flare ships. All night long for two consecutive nights we had C-130s who did nothing but drop flares over Site 36 to illuminate it in case there would be another attack you could spot the Vietnamese. There were a couple of probes in the perimeter but no attack either night. Then during the day I not only had to still continue to coordinate the refugee activities but also coordinate the air activities and sending out ammunition supplies to all the other outposts. So for three days and two nights it was absolute hell because I was the only American there and I was doing the work of the CIA and AID. The ICC never did show up, it was a false alarm. It was not an ICC C-47, it was a Continental C-47 which was kind of a whitish color.

The upshot was that Na Khang, Lima Site 36, held, although we lost our best, and most respected, operations officer in Don Sjostrom, but I think it gave the Lao and the Meo a great morale booster. For here 36 had been hit and hit and all indications were that the Vietnamese had lost a lot of men. We went out the first day I was there around some of the perimeter areas and the Vietnamese had picked up all their bodies but there was a lot of material left around. There were hats, belts, mail pouches, personal effects and things down around the airstrip and fueling dumps. So, I think the Vietnamese got hit pretty hard.

Q: We might just put in a footnote here about the weather. The foggy conditions that you were describing were quite common were they in the mountains even in the middle of the dry season?

KUHN: Fairly common depending on where you were. If you were really high up on a mountain top, say 3,400 or 3,500 feet above sea level, often times at 5 or 6 or 7 in the morning the strip would be open because the clouds and the fog would be down below you. Then, as the sun came out and it got warmer, the clouds would rise and so where you may be open at 7:00, by 8:00 or 8:30 you may be engulfed in clouds until that burned away around 9, 10 or 11 o'clock you may be closed in again. Conversely, if you were down in the valley areas, early in the morning you were apt to get a lot of ground fog and haze and as that burned off or rose, then the planes could come in under that and get into the valleys. So Na Khang was one of those places that was not all that high and often in the morning it was...but that particular time of the year for some reason, late December, we had days and days of fog. Not just haze but absolute fog where you couldn't see more than 40 meters

ahead of you. And, of course, the airstrip at Site 36 was laid out in the only way you could possibly lay it out in terms of the terrain. For some reason, there was almost constant three-quarter tail winds which made it very dangerous for takeoffs. It was tricky enough on landings but particularly dangerous on takeoffs. The Air Force had seen the utility of these little Helio Couriers so I guess in late 1966 they decided to switch their planes they used as spotters or FAC (Forward Air Controller) planes to the Helio Courier thinking it would be a better aircraft. Well, the Helio was a good aircraft but tricky on takeoffs and landings if you don't know how to do it. I think they crashed three or four of these Helios in a matter of a week because the pilots were not used to them and tried to land and takeoff from Site 36 with these tail winds and just flipped. It was a very long strip but very dangerous. The C-123s that came in came in only if they had the extra jet pods on the wings to give them an extra boost. You had to get up pretty quickly.

Development of Operation Linkup

With the death of Don, I was assigned full time the responsibility of covering Sam Neua and all the area north and east of the Plaine des Jarres. In the meantime, right after the incident at 36, someone came up with an idea to have something that was called Operation Linkup. Operation Linkup was supposedly to try to relieve some of the pressure, I think, on Nam Bac, north of Luang Prabang, and at the same time give a land bridge between western Sam Neua province and eastern Luang Prabang province. So some of the sites in that area, Houei Tong Kho (Lima Site 184), Houei Thong (Lima Site 196) and Phou Saly (Lima Site 178), were supposed to be furnishing their ADC, their home militia people, in conjunction with a SGU battalion, to start moving to the west and try to link up with troops coming out of the Luang Prabang region.

This was kind of a fun thing. Again, it was one of these things that probably turned out tragic for everybody, but when you are young and your adrenalin is going it was a fun kind of operation, if I can use that word in this kind of situation. The local leader of the area was very anxious to get in and resume operations, so to speak, in this area. USAID had a huge printing operation in Vientiane. Ken Ross was the head of the printing office there and he used to print things for USAID, CIA, USIA. We printed leaflets, school books, etc. So, we had a whole lot of leaflets printed up with the chao muong's [district officer's] picture and little safe conduct passes saying "anybody having these passes would be given safe conduct and that the Lao government wanted to come in and work with the civilians again." This was primarily up and down a little river called the Nam Xang. So, I took the leader up one day in a Helio and took in several big boxes of these leaflets and just flew at tree top level up and down the river. Every time we would see people on the river or working in fields we would fly over and drop these leaflets. We only got shot at one time. There was one farmer in his field who had an old single shot rifle of some sort and he took a shot at us. Other than that, we didn't see any troops and it looked like a pretty wide open area.

The troops began to move into the area in late January or early February, and on February 2 it occupied a fairly large former trading town called Ban Xe. Jack Williamson and I had been over at Luang Prabang doing something and were coming back in a chopper when we heard a chopper pilot say the troops were going into Ban Xe. So we took the chopper and

swung over and landed at Ban Xe. It is a big Lao village. People were very enthusiastic. They were all excited and they had all of these leaflets so I said, "Well, maybe I will just spend the night here. The people looked like they were friendly." I think that was the coldest night I ever spent in my entire life. I nearly froze to death. But the people were very excited and the next day a chopper came in to pick me up and we started working with these people. I started bringing in school supplies, brought in a medic right away. They weren't really refugees, so there really wasn't refugee supplies, but they needed some food and some things that they hadn't had for some years. It was really a beautiful village. They went along the river and cut down a series of teak trees they had planted and we put in an airstrip. Vang Pao was going to put more troops in the area and there was going to be an expansion of the whole program. Some of the men volunteered to be militia and some of them were armed. I mention this because it was one of these things where you get caught up in the excitement of it all and think, "Wow, we are going in. This village is now friendly and we are going to help them." But it was obvious that the Pathet Lao was not going to allow this to happen in their territory for very long. Things went well up until May. I was up there and things were deteriorating and I was going to spend the night there again. The villagers came up and said they needed weapons, would I please go back to Long Chieng and plead with Vang Pao to send up more guns.

Q: Because they were still relying on their old flint locks?

KUHN: They didn't even have those. These were Lao who didn't really have any guns at all. Some of them said that they had been with the French years ago, but these guys were quite elderly by this time. Ban Xe had been a large trading town and the French had been in and out. They were anxious to do something for themselves. Well, I went back to Long Chieng that night and was on Vang Pao's front porch to get an audience with him. He absolutely refused. He said that he was not giving any weapons to these Lao.

Q: Why, because he mistrusted them?

KUHN: He mistrusted them because they had been with the PL too long and he wasn't going to trust them to give weapons. So, the next morning I took off at 6:00 from Long Chieng and it was about an hour's flight up to Ban Xe. As we were approaching the village I could see smoke coming up from along the river. When we circled the place the entire beautiful, beautiful village was all in flames. The Pathet Lao had attacked about 5:30 in the morning and immediately as they came in they set fire to the village, rounded up all the people they could. We flew around the area and spotted groups here and there but there wasn't much we could do. We went over to Site 196 and told the commander there what had happened and he promised that he would send some Meo and Lao troops there to at least try to locate the civilians. Over the next month or so several hundred civilians did straggle into the east.

I remember we located two or three hundred of them in a wooded area about half way between where Ban Xe was and Site 196. I took up one of the U.S. attachés with me. The attachés were not allowed to carry guns, but the attaché at Sam Thong always had a Colt 45 and there was a tradition that when a new attaché arrived the old attaché would pass his

weapon to the new one. So this army captain had his Colt 45. That happened to be the night of a partial eclipse of the moon. Here we were out in the middle of the woods trying to be as inconspicuous as possible with not knowing where any of the enemy was and all hell broke loose. Anything that these people had to make a noise with, they were out and they persuaded the attaché to empty off one clip of his gun. It must have worked because the tradition being there is a frog eating the moon during the eclipse. This frog ate about one-third, maybe a half of the moon and disgorged it. So, I guess the whole process worked because the moon was saved and the next day we got some choppers in and started moving the civilians out. Later on this entire group relocated down at the north end of the Nam Ngum Reservoir in Vientiane province and did quite well. They were a very, very prosperous group. So, at least we got most of the people out, but their whole village was unfortunately totally destroyed.

One other incident occurred there. The night that I went back to Long Chieng we had a Lao Theung medic there. He was 20 years old and had a wife and two kids back at Sam Thong. He begged me to bring him back to Sam Thong. I asked him why and he said, "I just don't want to stay here. I want to go home. I want to get out." I said, "No, you can't, you got to stay here." Well, a villager told me later that when the Pathet Lao attacked during the morning, this kid, why, I don't know....

[change of tape] Maybe he panicked, maybe afraid of being captured by the Pathet Lao...again, I do not know, but the villagers said that when the attack started the medic put a grenade to his stomach and pulled the pin...committed suicide.

This is again one of these things when you are up country working occasionally you get involved in something that is a little more significant than you think at the time. It was in late July, early August when we got word at Sam Thong that an Air Force helicopter was bringing in a very badly injured U.S. Air Force pilot and the Air Force doctor at Sam Thong was alerted. I happened to be back at Sam Thong at the time so I went down to the hospital...

Q: This was a pilot who had bailed out and had been rescued?

KUHN: Well, presumably, but we didn't know. I went down to the hospital and the Jolly Green landed in front of the hospital and one of the crew chiefs got out and came over and talked to the doctor and said, "I think we are too late. This pilot died on route to the hospital." He said, "It is really too bad because you can tell he was not shot. His parachute collapsed and he smashed into the side of a karst. We picked him up semi-hanging there. But, we don't think he was shot, but died a few minutes ago." The doctor looked at him and very quickly confirmed the fact that the pilot was dead, and they took off. A few days later in the Bangkok Post, I think it was August 8, there was a big article that said something to the effect that a modern American hero dies in North Vietnam. The story was that this man, Carl Rickter, was apparently an outstanding squadron leader and Air Force officer. After his first 100 combat missions he volunteered to come back for a second hundred. He had cut down the rate of losses in his squadron over the year he had been there drastically. He had several kills to his credit and apparently was a rising star in terms of being a pilot. The

Air Force was planning on bringing him back to the United States using him sort of as a recruiter around the country. He was on his 198th mission, had two more to go, was in an area that was classified as very low risk in terms of picking up any ground fire and he was breaking in a new pilot, showing him the area, when he came in to hit a bridge and the plane got hit. Apparently he maneuvered, got altitude, ejected and the chute came down and brushed against the side of this karst and the chute collapsed and swung him up against the side of the rocks and smashed him up pretty badly. The Jolly Greens got in and picked him up and brought him in. Now, I can't confirm that that was the same person, but the sequence, the events and everything all came out about the same.

Senator Young's Visit, 1968

During 1967 there were skirmishes all up and down Sam Neua areas which were lost and we would retake them and they were lost again. Suffice it to say there was a lot of activity, a lot of action going on in Sam Neua at this time.

In January 1968 we had an unusual visitor, Senator Young from Ohio. I was from Ohio so I had a little personal interest in him. The man at that time was so old and so decrepit he literally could not walk off the back of the Caribou. He had to be carried in and out. He came up and said some asinine and inane things about what a beautiful country Laos was and how lucky all the children and people were to be living in such a beautiful country, when you could hear the jets flying overhead and 155s firing at Muong Soui (Lima 108) to the north of us and he was talking about how lucky people were to be living in Laos. But he did make a short speech...we gave a party for him and Vang Pao came over and gave him the traditional things that Vang Pao gives to visiting dignitaries. In his speech he said that he was in the middle of his trip to Southeast Asia, was a firm supporter of continued U.S. aid to Laos and Southeast Asia and continued effort to support the war. There was a Pentagon escort with him. After this little speech the escort came over to me and said, "Three weeks ago, Senator Young would never have made comments like that. I can't believe the 180 degree turn around that this man is publicly professing in terms of his support for what is happening in Southeast Asia." I have never gone back to look up what the record was. Apparently, this Pentagon escort was quite surprised because this did not sound like the Senator Young that he had known before.

Rumors of Phou Pha Thi Under Attack

Another bizarre thing happened in January 1968. I was over at a place called Houei Tong Kho (Lima Site 184) when I heard on the radio that Phou Pha Thi, Site 85, was under attack by at least two and possibly more, aircraft. The pilot I was with decided somebody must be playing a joke on us because Phou Pha Thi couldn't be under an air attack. In fact, it was. The story is, and there are several variations but the one I have is, I think, pretty much the standard one, is that early in the morning at site 205, Pha Hang, the local troops and the people living there spotted four biplanes passing overhead heading west and north of 205. There seems to be full agreement that there were originally four aircraft, but in the actual attack on Phou Pha Thi there were only two planes spotted. These were old Colt biplanes.

They came in and dropped some kind of ordinance on Pha Thi that killed one or two Lao and Meo civilians that were on top of the hill. They didn't really do any damage but one of the planes apparently sustained heavy ground fire and Jerry Daniels has always claimed that he was the one who shot one of them down. There was at least one Air America helicopter on the ground at the time and they took off. Dick Elder was the pilot of one of the helicopters and Dick later told me that his crew chief had an AK 47 on board and these old Colts were so lumbering and so slow that Dick maneuvered his Huey up alongside the Colt and his crew chief blasted it and it crashed. Whatever happened both of them did crash. One of the planes was found and recovered. A Thai team went in to try to bring out the aircraft and salvage whatever was possible. It was a strange thing. They came back and said that the pilot and co-pilot were very light skinned and very tall and very big. They looked more Chinese than Vietnamese but no one was really sure. Well, I never understood why they just didn't bring the bodies out and have somebody take a look at them. They claim in order to get the bodies out and to move the aircraft itself they had to take axes and chop the legs off the pilot and co-pilot because they were jammed in the cockpit. Again, if that were true why didn't they just leave the bodies in and bring them out? I examined the cockpit and aircraft pretty carefully and didn't see any signs of blood or anything that looked like somebody had their legs chopped off.

Q: So the bodies were never recovered.

KUHN: The bodies were never recovered, (a recently published book states that the bodies were displayed at Long Chieng, but I do not recall this.) but one whole plane was brought out. It was taken back to Na Khang and I photographed it almost inch by inch. The so-called bombs, they had taken what looked like old fashioned milk racks you put the cans of milk in and just take mortars and inserted them in these racks. They had a bomb bay like thing at the bottom of the plane and were just dropping these mortars out. They had some kind of rocket pods mounted on the wings which they had fired off. But a very bizarre incident. The embassy, of course, was very nervous because nothing had been said in the press about Pha Thi and what was up there. Pha Thi was a radar base. So, the embassy was a bit nervous about the question of why would the North Vietnamese come all the way over and attack Pha Thi. So, the embassy put out the word that the attack occurred at Nam Bac, which lead to even more raised eyebrows because why would they come all the way over...I mean, if they could come down from Dien Bien Phu, about a 15-minute flight, why would they come all the way from eastern Vietnam to bomb Nam Bac?

Q: But it is rather strange, this Phou Pha Thi was such a strategic site. It is strange that the North Vietnamese never tried to knock it out with some of their MiGs. Wouldn't you have thought they would try to do that?

KUHN: Well, I would assume that they probably could have. I don't know in January, February, March, 1968, whether by that time we had decimated their air force or not.

Q: They certainly would have been far more effective than these Colt things.

Eleven Americans Honored by the King of Laos

KUHN: Oh, no question about that. Again, maybe their pilots had not been trained for bombing. They were fighter pilots and were pretty effective in terms of counteracting American fighters. Whether or not they were bombers and were capable of bombing, whether their planes were rigged for bombing, I don't know. Anyway, it didn't work but it almost worked. In the first week of March, I got a call one morning very, very early that a plane was coming up to pick me up, I was at Site 111, Houei Kha Moun, and I was to return to Sam Thong immediately, no questions asked. So the plane landed getting in before the clouds started to lift. At Sam Thong I was told immediately to get a suit on and be over at Long Chieng by 9:30. Now, I can't imagine why anyone thought I would have a suit at Sam Thong. For some quirky reason I did have a grungy old greenish color Sears and Roebuck suit and a white shirt. So I got dressed and went to Long Chieng and found out I was one of eleven Americans to be awarded the Order of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol by the King of Laos, which totally surprised me. There were myself, Dr. Weldon from AID and one Army attaché and seven CIA officers including Ted Shackley, who was station chief, and Bill Lair and Pat Landry coming out of Udorn, and Jerry Daniels and Howard Freedman and I think Kirk Dimmit and John Randall were the other ones, I am not sure. We went through the ceremony where we were introduced to the king and he gave each one of us a large certificate stating that we had been given the Order (This certificate was actually dated August and sent to each of us several months after the ceremony. Recent writings have used the date of the certificate as the date of the award. This is incorrect.) and a medallion with a cloisonné three-headed elephant on it, which was quite nice. When I think of all the things I have ever gotten in the way of awards, that one certainly meant the most to me because the story came out that the prime minister had gone to Ambassador Sullivan and said that the Lao government wanted to recognize the work of several Americans in the north at Long Chieng and wanted to give us this award. Sullivan said, "No, I refuse to allow any American to accept decorations from the government." Apparently Souvanna Phouma went to the king and they decided that this is our country and if we want to give out awards we will give out awards and not tell the ambassador. So these were kind of given under the table, so to speak, and were never publicly acknowledged. Although the Army attaché who got the award later on did request permission to wear his decoration on dress uniform. The Army did approve that.

Q: But there was no public announcement?

KUHN: No public announcement. On my records in AID there is no indication of my having received the Order.

Q: Not even on your personnel records?

KUHN: No.

Q: I wonder what the rules are about Foreign Service people accepting awards?

KUHN: It is country by country. In Vietnam people were getting awards from the Vietnamese government. I think Sullivan was worried that if you get an award from the country you are working in you are somehow compromised, tainted. You know, "If you give me an award than I owe you something over and above what might be normal." I think that is a lot of B.S. Anyway, we were not allowed to publicly acknowledge the fact that we got this award.

North Vietnamese Attack Phou Pha Thi

That was the first week of March and it was just a few days later when the event which was almost the major event of the war, so to speak, occurred in north Laos and that was the Vietnamese attack on Phou Pha Thi. A quick word on Pha Thi. Pha Thi was not a mountain in the traditional sense. I have seen writing about Pha Thi talking about the peak of Pha Thi, the summit of Pha Thi and the slopes of Pha Thi. Pha Thi was not a Mount Fuji where you could walk up the sides to get to the top. It was a karst and a karst is a limestone outcropping. It was almost as if someone had taken a huge child's oblong building block--in this case a mile long and half a mile wide--and just stuck it out in the middle of northern Laos. Three sides rose up straight and on the east and southeast partway up the sheer side it starts to slope down in more traditional kind of sloping area until it got down to the river. But it was not a traditional mountain. It was a block, a karst, a limestone outcrop.

Q: Did it have some spiritual significance for the Meo?

KUHN: I have heard people say it was a spiritual symbol, but I am not sure spiritual so much as just a dominating feature. Traditionally anybody who controlled Pha Thi controlled Sam Neua. This was something that the Vietnamese recognized. Whether or not there had ever been a radar station put on top of Pha Thi or not, in my mind it was something the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao would have had to capture anyway to legitimately claim control over Sam Neua. You mentioned yesterday about the Pathet Lao concept of controlling territorial territory. So, without having this major piece of terrain they were lacking something. It was a karst that had been fought over during the French Indochina war. I knew a Catholic priest in Laos, a tremendous old man, at least he seemed old at the time, who had been with the Meo and a small French group on top of Pha Thi back in the late forties and '50s when the Viet Minh were attacking it at that time. Hearing stories about this Catholic priest teaching villagers how to fire 60 mm mortars and run reconnaissance, etc.

Q: It had a lot of other history.

TACAN- Navigational System

KUHN: Yes. When I first got to northern Laos in late 1965, I was going up to Na Khang in 1966, I noticed occasionally there were these people in civilian clothes coming through Na Khang who I was told were technicians going up to Site 85 to install a TACAN. A TACAN is a navigational beacon system. In 1966-67, the decision was made to put a full scale radar station up on the top of Pha Thi, although there was a lot of discussion as to whether it

should be done or not. It was manned originally by civilian technicians and then later by Air Force technicians who were ostensibly no longer in the Air Force, were civilians and sent back up there again. The equipment was quite complex and required months and months of construction. Bringing up big heavy pieces by helicopter and inserting them from on top of Pha Thi. This is important because of some other things that happened after the attack.

Q: It was quite an elaborate installation.

KUHN: Yes, it was.

Q: It wasn't just like a satellite dish that you put on top of a mountain.

KUHN: No. This was the kind of thing when it was operational--and it didn't really become operational until late October, November, 1967. It was a year or so in the making. But this was the kind of operation, and I don't pretend to be an expert on this and I honestly can't recall ever actually being inside the console unit itself. But it was the kind of operation where you had your bombers coming in to North Vietnam and the controller is sitting there and has everything before him on a screen. He is vectoring the plane to the target and he is telling the pilot at a certain point, "You are no longer in charge of your aircraft, I am in charge of your aircraft." He guides the plane in and hits the target, the bombs are dropped and the pilot then takes over and flies back home. Pilots apparently didn't like this because they didn't like not being in control of their own bombing runs. So I think that if you read the Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report, and if it is anywhere near as accurate as some others that have been written, the percentage of sorties flown over North Vietnam in November, December, a relatively small percentage were actually under the control of the radar station. It was not, I think, until the beginning of 1968 that the number of sorties controlled by the station increased.

At any rate, this was a key installation regardless the percentage of sorties it controlled. It was the key installation for the bombing of North Vietnam.

Q: Well, I suppose it was key in the sense that it provided the capability to run these bombing runs even in bad weather.

AID Command Post for Sam Neua--Site 111

KUHN: Bad weather, yes. You didn't have to see where you were, you were electronically guided right in and you dropped your bombs and came back out again.

About three miles or so to the north and slightly east of Pha Thi was an airstrip and a village called Houei Kha Moun, Site 111. It was a village that I had made my USAID command post for Sam Neua. It was only 16 or 17 kilometers from the North Vietnamese border. It was a long strip, we could take Caribou. It had a good local Meo leader by the name of Lao Thai, who was the civilian leader for that part of northern Laos. His brother, Captain Gia Tou, was a captain not in Vang Pao's militia army, but captain in the FAR. He commanded

a company of FAR ADCs who lived around Pha Thi. So I had made Site 111 my headquarters right after Don Sjostrom had been killed. I had a little office, made out of rice pallets and smashed fuel drums, and a Stoner single sideband radio and a small generator there. In addition to the big permanent Mark IV single sideband, I also had my portable Stoner radio.

At any rate, things were deteriorating in the area and in early 1968, January, February, the Vietnamese started the construction of a road from Sam Neua coming west towards Phou Pha Thi and literally every day the road got closer and closer. There are so many loose ends in this whole story that it is hard to give it in a continuous flow. But the assumption had always been that if anything ever happened to Pha Thi, and attack or under a threat, the U.S. Air Force would come in with massive bombing and massive bombing support to drag off the immediate attack, or even to try to slow down the road and everything. This was always the assumption. Along with the radar station...as I recall there were as many as 21 people up there at a time. I guess normally there were around 16 or 17. In addition to the Air Force "civilian" technicians, there was also a small CIA station there. There were two Americans there full time. These two Americans, I won't mention their names, but they were not the best and the brightest as far as I was concerned and things had not been going very well there. I think Udorn recognized this and they ordered Howard Freeman, who was working out of Site 36 at the time, to periodically go up to Pha Thi and stay there and sort of monitor activities to make sure things were going well. Howard and I had worked together for a long time. When I first came to Laos I was working over at Phong Saly and northern Luang Prabang and he had been over there. We got along very well. Physically we looked somewhat alike and pilots used to get us confused at times and we tried to make a joke out of that.

We were coordinating our activities very closely because I had 15 to 20 thousand civilians in the whole area up there that were getting some kind of support from us or who were friendly villages and who were certainly people we wanted to look after if there was an attack.

Defense of Pha Thi

Howie had been giving me information as he received it and, of course, I was passing along whatever I heard to him. Again, I have to take a sidestep here. The defense of Pha Thi was a real mixed bag. There were in addition to Captain Gia Tou's BV 26 ADC militia, an SGU battalion had been sent up and General Vang Pao had sent up Yu Va Ly, one of his Meo majors, to coordinate the entire activity up there. Well, this got him at odds with Captain Gia Tou because Gia Tou considered this was his territory. In addition to that there was a contingent of a hundred or so Thai troops. The Thai troops, interestingly enough, were under the command of a young lieutenant or captain at the time, who later became a general and was governor of Bangkok and ran for prime minister, Chamlong Srimuang (Chamlong has written in Thai a rather vivid account of the Thai troops during the attack on Pha Thi. He is still active in Thai national politics today.). So he was just an unknown officer in those days. Anyway, there was a Thai contingent up there.

So, there were these three or four different groups with no one having overall control of the defense of Pha Thi. As I said, Pha Thi was this mile long karst. On the west side of Pha Thi down at the bottom of the cliffs there was a little spur and we had an airstrip there called Lima Site 198. It was a big refugee area. We put them over on the west side.

I was in there one day about a week or so before the attack and we had a meeting of the civilian leaders. They said, "You know we don't quite understand what is going on at Pha Thi. We know if the Vietnamese attack there will probably be a lot of bombing, etc. We want to make sure that we can get out. But, a strange thing happened. A week or so ago, one of the Americans up there came down and said they wanted to arm us as part of the civilian militia defense and they were going to give us guns and wanted us to go out full time and patrol all around the area to the west." They said, "If we are on patrol, we are not going to be out hunting, or tending our gardens or raising any rice, etc., so we want to know if you are going to support us with rice and any kind of supplies?" Well, this was the first I had ever heard of this kind of an operation. It turned out that one of the CIA guys up there was going around to the civilian villages and refugee villages around Pha Thi, at the base, and trying to organize another set of local militia with no coordination, no training, no radios, no means of support, and it was just total chaos. It was absolutely the most idiotic thing I ever heard.

Well, Howard and I had been talking and he said, "Look, I think we got at least 48 hours before there may be any attack on Pha Thi and....I want to say something here. I have several things that I have written about Pha Thi and some of the exact details vary slightly. I wrote a long paper for USAID right after the attack which varies slightly from the letter I wrote back to my parents. It also varies slightly with my own memory. In general the scenario was like this:

It was March 10. I spent most of the day traveling around the various sites and airstrips within a 30- or 40-mile radius of Pha Thi visiting each of the strips, talking to civilian and military leaders, seeing what was happening. We came into several locations where we got no signal. If they had been under attack they put out no signal for us to land. We tried to land at one airstrip as they came under attack and we got waved off. The whole area around Pha Thi was being probed. Almost every location was getting an attack of some sort. Howard Freeman was with me on part of this trip but not the entire trip. I came back and rendezvoused with Howard again at the lower edge of Pha Thi. I should say something else about Pha Thi, too. On top of the karst was where this radar base was. Then on the east side of Pha Thi, way down off the face of the karst there is a small spur where there is an airstrip that had been closed, but there is a helicopter pad there. To get to the top you had to actually climb up bamboo ladders. Then off the southeast portion of ... [tape change] ...on top of the karst towards the northwest end and the little CIA headquarters and the chopper pad on top was more in the center of the karst. Also, an aside to this, this was an excellent opium growing area because opium likes alkaline soils and, of course, they try to plant around these limestone karsts. So, interspersed among the Air Force, the CIA, etc., there were lots of poppies growing up among the rock outcroppings.

I rendezvoused with Howard down on the lower pad of 85. Captain Gia Tou was there with a pair of binoculars. He was highly agitated. This was about three or four in the afternoon. He said that the enemy had gotten up on the upper reaches of the face of the cliff and were essentially on the top of Pha Thi. He said he could see Vietnamese moving around up there and requested air strikes on the face of Pha Thi itself. Well, Howard said that was impossible because that is basically where the Thai troops are and if there was any kind of enemy intrusion up there the Thais would be calling for help or shooting. Gia Tou said, "No, I have been told by my people that the Thais have pulled back." So, there was some confusion there, but the upshot was that Howard said that he would not call in any air strikes. Gia Tou was highly agitated and highly upset and stomped off towards the lower pad. But, he claimed there were 200 enemy up on top but it turned out there couldn't be 200 enemy because there wasn't 200 enemy in the whole attack. They might have gotten up there before dark, although again probably not.

Q: Did it turn out to be true that the Thai troops had pulled back?

KUHN: Essentially yes, but I will get to that in a second.

Howard asked me if I wanted to spend the night with him at Pha Thi and I said that normally I would but I had arranged, at their request, a meeting with all the civilian leaders over at Site 111, where I lived. I felt I had to get back there because they wanted to know what to do if Pha Thi did come under attack or did fall, where would the civilians go and where could we pick them up. So, I said I had better go back. He said, "Okay."

So, I went back to Site 111, it was just a few minutes chopper ride, and Gia Tou's brother Lao Thai and his wife arranged an early dinner. We ate very quickly and the village leaders began coming down to my little house. My house was made out of rice pallets and fuel drums and had a little front porch which overlooked Pha Thi. There was the valley down below where the Nam Het (River Het) was and then there was Pha Thi. Again, an aside, I always had 24 hour bodyguards whenever I was up there, so right outside my door was my little chair and there was my armed bodyguard standing there. The village leaders all came down to have a meeting. It was close to 6:00 and as we were sitting their talking, we heard rockets and mortars from a distance. We looked up and we could see muzzle flashes from our position east of Pha Thi. There were just hundreds of these things going off, a barrage of rockets and mortars...

Q: You had a front row seat so to speak.

KUHN: We had a front row seat. Of course, Lao Thai immediately ran down to get his radio to try to talk to his brother. He came back and said, "I can't raise anybody. I can't get anyone to answer the radio." So, again, the quirkiness of the communications up there, I didn't have any real ground to ground radio. The only way I could have talked to Pha Thi on my single sideband was if they changed their frequency from the CIA frequency over to the AID frequency, which they would never have done. So I couldn't get anybody at Pha Thi.

But I did have my little HT2 which I described earlier as being these little portable radios, walkie-talkie type things, that did have 119.1 air-ground-air and 127.1 ground-to-ground frequencies. So I flipped on my radio and started calling in the blind and I got a response. One of the civilian people over there was in fact a real Air Force guy and he was what was called a FAG, a forward area guide, as opposed to a forward area controller which is up in the air. The FAG are ground based. This kid was 19 years old and he had a little perch on the cliff east of Pha Thi and every night he would go out there and sit on this little perch and try to coordinate any of the aircraft that might come up. So, he was sitting out there, totally exposed to everything when this barrage started. He had tried to call back to the main Air Force and CIA base but couldn't raise anybody. So he felt he was isolated out there. He was very happy when he got me on the radio. He said, "I can't talk to anybody." So I got on the radio and called down to my people in Vientiane, Dr. Weldon and his wife Dr. McCready, who you call when you are in trouble. I think it was Jiggs who answered the telephone. I explained to him that the Boiling Pig Fat Area was under attack. Now Jerry Daniels, Don Sjostrom and I used to give little nicknames to things/people. Because the Meo were big pig eaters and the Pha Thi area always seemed to be "boiling" over some incident or other, we called the Phou Pha Thi area the "Boiling Pig Fat Area."

So, Jiggs started called major people in the embassy, the CIA and the Air Force and the Army attaché's office and no one believed him, that this was going on. Finally the Air attaché said that this was impossible. If it was under attack we would have heard about it by now. Jiggs said, "Look, Ernie is up there he is on the ground at 111 and is watching this whole thing take place and talking to somebody over there. Believe me, you had better get some help up there."

Well, in the meantime then, still none of the massive air support that was supposed to be triggered if anything ever happened at Pha Thi. I am not sure if I have explained this or not, but there was a program for night bombing of the Trail and for night bombing of the roads in Sam Neua and the planes that were used were converted World War II B-26s and they later called A-26s. Their code names were "Nimrods." Every night just about dusk these Nimrods, usually in pairs, would come up and strafe the road, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or if they didn't see anything would come up to Sam Neua and hook into one of the road watch teams.

So a Nimrod came up and I managed to get him on the radio. He was monitoring 119.1 so I got him on the radio and said, "85 is under attack and I can see the muzzle flashes and everything from where I am. The best I can do is give you some general areas. I think if you get over there in the general area where I can give you the coordinates and if you drop some flares you should be able to see something." He said, "Roger, I'll give it a try." So I gave him some coordinates and he got over there and in a few minutes the guy came back on the radio and said, "I have some bad news, somebody forgot to put the flares on board. We have a full load of ordinance but no flares." I said, "Well, okay. The coordinates that I gave you, the best thing I can say is that if you are in the area now where I told you, unload your bombs some place and maybe by sheer luck you might hit something." So, he did, and he said, "Sorry, that is about it." You know, kind of unconcerned. I didn't hear him say

anything like, “Don’t worry, I am going to call down to Udorn right away,” “Or I will call NKP [Nakhon Phanom] or will call somewhere else and make sure we get something up here.”

About 7 or 7:15, the shelling slowed and basically stopped. Then about 9:00 we could hear from where I was what sounded like an assault on the lower chopper pad 85. In fact Lao Thai had communication with his Gia Tou by this time and there was ground probe up on the lower pad. We could hear the grenades and automatic rifle and machine gun fire. But the lower pad held, the probe was not successful. In the meantime, I really didn’t know what was going on at Pha Thi. It appeared as if communications had been established with somebody but the ground FAG did not come back on or talk to me again. So, we really weren’t sure exactly what was going on. From what we were getting from Gia Tou, he didn’t have any communication with anybody up on top of the hill either.

As I said, the shelling stopped after 7:00 and from where we were sitting we could actually see trucks coming up the road and we presumed they were bringing up more ammunition. I am assuming too, and this is a terrible assumption on my part though, that they had expected a lot more response and air power and probably didn’t want to bring everything up at one time and have it possibly destroyed. That they had an hour’s worth or so of ammunition and then since nothing happened brought up the next load.

Q: The only response up to now had been the one Nimrod?

KUHN: Yes, that is all. It was a very tepid response from the Air Force. There was not much that I could do at 111. The only danger that we were concerned about was that if there was a shelling attack on Pha Thi, was there also going to be an attack on 111 too. Certainly the Vietnamese could have hit 111 with a lot less intensity and a lot fewer troops than they would have had to expend against 85. So, we thought there might be a possibility and Lao Thai got the local ADC militia out doing some patrolling. During the night apparently nothing that we were aware of happened. About 11:00, I guess, we all decided just to go to bed. I went in and slept with my clothes on and had the radios on all night but didn’t hear anything. So, it wasn’t really until later on the next morning that I began to get more information in terms of what happened. By 8 or 9:00 the first aircraft started coming in to where I was. I flew down to Site 36, I had heard that Vang Pao was coming there, to try to figure out what was going on and see where we were going to start coordinating and what we were going to do with the civilians and what was actually happening at Phou Pha Thi.

Q: You must have flown pretty close to Phou Pha Thi, that flight down to Site 36, did you see anything?

KUHN: Well, we flew around it, we couldn’t see anything particularly one way or another. We got down to 36 and that was when I found out that according to sources at 36 that about 6:00 there had been ground fighting up on top of Pha Thi. And, in fact, the Vietnamese came through where the Thai army contingent was supposed to have been. They were

supposed to have been the ones guarding the Air Force. By mid morning, the 11th, Air America helicopters were still landing on the chopper pad and still landing at the 105 pad and were carrying out wounded SGUs, wounded Meo and Lao. There still were SGUs up on top of the karst, so we still controlled the top of the karst. I should say, also, that before I left Site 111, the helicopters began to evacuate the Thai troops--now these were the indomitable warriors that were going to defend, and they were the first troops evacuated out of Pha Thi. They were evacuated to Site 111 where they were picked up by Caribou and flown back to Thailand. When I went down to the strip and talked to the Thai, I could not determine that there were any dead or wounded Thai troops. They seemed to be totally intact with all their gear and marched up into the planes and flew out. So, they were totally worthless in defending Site 85. Just recently, Chamlong Srimuang wrote a little biography when he was running for office in Bangkok saying what a furious fight occurred on top of Pha Thi, the Thai troops killed many, many Vietnamese and his troops really suffered. As far as anyone can tell, I don't think they fired their weapons at all.

So, the Thai troops were evacuated out. I went down to Na Khang to see Vang Pao. He by that time had already started bringing troops up out of Long Chieng to Site 36 and he was going to try to reinsert more troops into Pha Thi. That was also when I found out that of all the Americans that were on top of Pha Thi, only the ground FAG, the guy I had talked to on the radio, had gotten out. Also the two CIA people had gotten out and three, four or five of the Air Force technicians, one of whom died after being evacuated having been hit as he was getting into the chopper. I also learned at that time that Howard Freeman had been wounded in the leg. When they heard the shooting up on top of Pha Thi around 6:00 in the morning or so, Howard went out with a couple of Meo to try to see what was going on and came around the side of the karst and came face to face with the Vietnamese. Howard carried a sawed off shotgun and most of the CAS guys up there carried short barrel shotguns, and tried to fire off a round of his shotgun and it jammed. The Vietnamese took a shot at Howard and wounded him in the leg, not a serious wound. Howard managed to pump his gun a second time and apparently blew the guy away with a second round. But, he never got up to where the radar station was, never confirmed what happened to any of the Americans.

Decision to Abandon Pha Thi

At this time it looked like there was still going to be an effort to keep Pha Thi, we were not going to abandon it. About 11:00 or so, when I was at Na Khang, Vang Pao came over to me and said, "Let's start to get the civilians out of 111 [Houei Kha Moun, Lima Site 111]. So I went right back up to 111 and by talking on the radio while flying up, by noon I had nine helicopters that were already en route to Site 111 and we began to shuttle civilians over to Site 215, Houei Hin Sa. Subsequently I heard, this was some time later, bits and pieces on the radio that everybody was pulling off of Pha Thi and they were going to abandon it.

It was not until some weeks later, in talking with one of the principal people who was up on Pha Thi, that I learned that even though Vang Pao wanted to reinforce Pha Thi and not give

it up, the CIA said, "Forget it. You are wasting your time, we are not going to support it. The Air Force has shown no interest at all in taking the top of Pha Thi." This is something that I think should be looked at in detail by someone because this was obviously a key piece of territory. Ten or fifteen Americans were dead or missing in action. A top secret radar installation was being handed over to the enemy without any attempt to take it back or contest it. In this case, I think, there were a lot of wrong decisions made and Vang Pao was basically told to forget it, he would not get any support, so get your guys off the karst as fast as you can. I didn't find this out until later. I always wondered at the time what happened up there. Of course, it really wasn't until years later that I found out that a relatively small number of North Vietnamese were in the attack and that a disgruntled villager in the area had led them up a hitherto unknown trail, or at least a trail that was so obscure that the defenders on Pha Thi thought that no one knew about it, and brought them up the backside and came in virtually unopposed to the top of the mountain before anyone knew it. But a lot of things that are being written now and have been written still leave a lot of gaps as to what transpired between the initial shelling at 6:00 in the evening and the ground assault at 6:00 in the morning. Did the North Vietnamese come up at night or were they already up on top and just stayed there all night waiting for daylight to attack? Why did the Air Force not provide more support? Why did no one want to try to hold Pha Thi after the top had been hit when clearly there were still helicopters landing up there and it was safe enough for people to get in or out? There are so many unanswered questions that I still don't understand.

Anyway, in terms of my responsibilities, I spent that night at Site 215, Houei Hin Sa. During that night...Phou Tia (Lima Site 185) was a key mountain area over to the east. We heard the fighting and shelling at Phou Tia and it fell during the evening which meant that Site 215 was going to be vulnerable. At Lima Site 215 the weather was bad all morning and I didn't get up to Lima Site 111 until very late in the morning. When I landed there, the entire runway was just jammed with people. I had helicopters stacked up in the air waiting to try to do something. I got on the ground and was told by Lao Thai that to the north of us and to the west, there were enemy up on the ridge lines already and that it was getting dangerous and we had to start getting people out as quickly as possible. Well, I looked around and word came in about that same time that off the southeast of the runway, four people had just been shot and that the Pathet Lao had been seen putting up a 60mm mortar of some kind of a mortar placement there. Well, I knew right away that if they were on the southeast side of the runway, it was not safe for any aircraft to come in. So, I got on my HT2 radio and told all of the aircraft in the area to clear the area, go back to 36 and wait further instructions. There was one Pilatus Porter pilot that said, "I am going to stick around up here." I said, "You can't land because it is not safe." He said, "That's okay, I am going to stick around to see if you need anything." So he circled fairly high up above. In the meantime I got on my radio and called down to Sam Thong and explained that I was sending all the helicopters back and that there was enough enemy activity around the airstrip I didn't feel it was safe to have any planes land. We were going to try to get the refugees assembled and they were going to have to start walking out. That was acknowledged.

In the meantime we start hearing the recoilless rifle fire down over the edge of the village which was south and east of the airstrip. Lao Thai came in and thought we'd better keep out of the village, it was not safe. On my radios in my little house I had thermite grenades, so supposedly, in theory, if anything happened I would pull a pin and it would melt the radios, etc. Well, at the first mortar round, when it hit the village, I didn't waste any time on pulling the pin on the thermite grenade. I ran out and had my little radio with me. The pilot called me and said, "I just saw a round hit the village, are you okay?" I said that I was. He said, "I am coming in to pick you up." I said, "No, you can't." He said, "That's okay, I am coming in." A little aside about the Pilatus Porters. The Pilatus Porter is a turbine engine Swiss-made aircraft that has something called Beta Mode. Don't ask me to explain it, but Beta Mode is something that you put your plane almost in complete vertical dive and you just come straight down. It gives you the ability when you are almost on the ground to flare out and land in just a very few feet.

So, the pilot said he was coming in to pick me up and he was coming right down. Just about that time a second mortar round hit the village and the pilot came in and landed. Mind you, from the end of my house this little pathway came down and right at the end of the strip was this huge ammunition dump, huge fuel dump, because all the fuel that was used over on Pha Thi was air dropped here and shuttled over by helicopter. So we had the potential if a round hit that dump that we were going to have fireworks for hours and hours. So the plane landed and I jumped on. I am not exaggerating, but when I jumped on the plane I thought I was moving pretty fast. I looked up and all the civilian and military leaders were already on the airplane ahead of me. I was furious. We didn't have time to argue because we didn't know where the next round was going to hit. I slammed the door and we took off. Unfortunately I slammed the door on the Meo representative to the National Assembly who had been up there and left him on the runway. But I had all the civilian and military leaders with me on the plane. I said, "Who is going to coordinate all this?" "Oh, it's more important for us to get out to safety." I was so disappointed with all the people I had been working with up there that they had bugged out.

Anyway, we just cleared the runway when the third...I don't know why the Pathet Lao were taking such a long time to fire these mortars, I mean like 30 seconds between each one or so...mortar round was a direct hit on my house. So, that took care of my radios. And maybe they knew where I was living and were trying to vector in their mortar on the house, I don't know, but I was lucky.

We got airborne and the pilot right away...we could see down off the runway half a dozen guys with a couple of little mortars sitting there. The pilot got on the radio and used every frequency that he knew the Air Force operated on and finally got a couple of Sandys. Sandys were these World War II AD-1 Skyraiders. The Sandy designation meant that they were to fly cap for the rescue helicopters and they couldn't be diverted for anything else. Even if there was no fighting going on they had to standby. We got a couple of Sandys and they said "We would like to come over and help you, but unless we can get released from our cap job, we can't do it." So, we stood there and watched these guys pump in a few more mortar rounds, totally helpless. Then out of the woods behind where the mortars were,

there were 50 or 60 Pathet Lao troops that came up and moved up the runway and we could actually see them starting to roundup the civilians on the runway. We stayed up in the 111 area trying to get some kind of air support but there wasn't a plane in the sky. When someone told Vang Pao that the Air Force was not interested in this area, they must have been correct, because there was nothing up there.

Refugee Problem Following the Attack

We got low on fuel and eventually had to fly back down to Site 36. Now the interesting thing was that about 3 or 4:00 in the afternoon, one of the CIA guys who had a helicopter had gone up in the area and managed to land up north of 111 and there were several thousand refugees up there. For some reason the PL or the North Vietnamese got to the runway at 111 and didn't go any further. They didn't pursue the civilians although they rounded them up at first. So, about 8 or 9 thousand people then started walking out of 111 and eventually made their way down to various points to safety to the west. In the meantime, then, we were not really sure what was going to happen. Between 111 and a site called 184 [Houei Tong Kho, Lima Site 184], there was the long Muong Son Valley and southwest of that was a high ridge line, Phou Loi. Now Phou Loi was an interesting area because back in the French occupation, French archeologists had found several prehistoric sites up on top of this long ridge line. The general plan was for the people to start walking to the west, hope to get passed the Muong Son Valley which was semi-friendly and semi-not friendly, and eventually end up over in the Phou Loi area, a walk of well over 60 kilometers as the crow flies, to a place we called Point Alpha.

I came back to Sam Thong to talk to Pop and we flew down to Vientiane because we weren't in total agreement with the embassy, CIA and USAID as to what we wanted to do with these people. There was talk about trying to use airlifts, and talk about trying to walk the people out. I think we were pretty much in favor of letting the people walk to the extent they could, and we would air drop them rice along the way. So eventually over the next five or six days we got almost 10,000 people over to Phou Loi, Point Alpha.

This is one of those personal things when somebody gets killed who could have had a positive influence on the way the war was going at that time. At Point Alpha, I was spending a lot of my time there, Captain Gia Tou and Lao Thai were both staying over there also. We rigged up some parachutes as tents...

[change of tape]

After having been there for several days, it was one morning about 3 or 4:00 in the morning I woke up to a lot of noise, people talking loudly and a lot of voices. I got up out of my sleeping bag and turned on my flashlight. Gia Tou was there and there were four or five men, one or two of who were wounded, and I said, "What is going on?" Gia Tou said, "Well, these men have just walked in. They were two or three hours walk from here with a large group of refugees and a few ADCs and were ambushed by enemy and some people were killed, a few wounded. But the enemy is obviously moving up here towards Phou Loi. I said, "How many enemy were there?" No one seemed to know, but still it was enough to

concern us. Then about 4:30 or 4:45, a couple of more men came in, also wounded, and said they had been ambushed. Well, in the meantime I had already been on the single sideband to Sam Thong and had relayed to them that there was some trouble around the area and I needed at least one if not two helicopters up here on site at daybreak. They said, "Okay, we will get something up there."

The two choppers must have taken off before daybreak, must have taken off in the dark, because just after daylight they both landed. I had a habit which I think the pilots were sort of proud of but also didn't like it. I had pilots that I liked and knew were going to do the job and then I had pilots I knew were marginal. If I wanted to have a nice safe trip I would take one of the marginal pilots, if I wanted to get the job done, I would take the other guys. One of the captains of one of the planes I knew was very good and I went over to him and said, "Look, we have a problem. Some-where south of here there are some enemy, and some civilians and a few military. They have been ambushed. We want to take the chopper up with Captain Gia Tou with his radio and try to locate these people. The pilot said, "Fine." So he had a copilot which meant I had to sit down below in the belly of the aircraft. We took off and went down south a short distance and started circling around trying to locate these people and couldn't locate anyone. Finally, Gia Tou thought he could hear someone talking but it was broken up, a lot of static and everything. So, we said, well get a little lower if you can and try to hit this valley, we think we have people there. Well, the pilot came down through the clouds, we got under the clouds a little bit, and headed down through the valley. All of a sudden all hell broke loose. We had shooting not only from below us but from above us. We were actually below the ridge line of this valley and there were enemy up on this line and they were shooting down into the helicopter. We took multiple hits. One just missed the pilot went through the plexiglass canopy...it was an old H-34, the old Marine Corps choppers... We started taking rounds in the body of the aircraft. The flight mechanic was a great big Filipino and he got his great big huge toolbox and sat on it thinking if anything came up through the plane it would be stopped by the box.

In the meantime, Gia Tou and I had been sitting across from the open door in the belly and we were trying to shoot out the door, but it was kind of a useless gesture. Gia Tou took his radio to the edge of the door and tried to find someone on the ground to talk to. A round came in and hit Gia Tou right through the cheek on one side and out behind his ear on the other side. I will never forget this, Gia Tou didn't crumple or anything, he was just like a tree falling, he just went backward right into the arms of his brother, Lao Thai. Of course, Lao Thai started screaming and the helicopter captain was trying to control the aircraft. The fuel tanks had been hit, the whole body was filling up with fumes so one tracer round, one spark, and we would have been one great big firecracker. So it was a very, very dicey situation. The pilot gained enough altitude to get over the ridge line to the other side and we managed to just barely get back to Phou Loi, Point Alpha, and sort of crash landed. Gia Tou was still breathing, but he got off the helicopter and the helicopters were mobbed by people and he died right there on the helicopter pad. Well, everybody started screaming and there was just total chaos. Word got down to where the refugees were staying that Gia Tou had died and somebody shot off a M 79 round and it landed right near the choppers. Well, the pilots, of course, panicked. I didn't know what was going on. They said, "Come on, let's

get the hell out of here.” So, I jumped on, thinking that the pad was under attack. The helicopter that had been hit, we found out that only one tank had been hit and they are self-sealing so that when one tank is hit the other one is still there, so there was enough fuel. We took off, circled the area for a while. Couldn’t really talk to anybody and finally went back to Site 36. It wasn’t until later on during the day when another chopper went up with one of the other CIA people that they landed and got a signal. That is when we heard that it was not an enemy attack, but a friendly round going off in mourning for Gia Tou. Anyway, that was the situation at Point Alpha and it was obviously a very tenuous area and we would not be able to sustain the position for a long period of time.

Most of the civilians there were eventually evacuated by air, mostly over to Site 184, Houei Tong Kho. Over the next few days we started by helicopter airlifting all of the civilians over to Site 184 which was a little safer than Phou Loi. Also Phou Loi didn’t have enough water. We had 10,000 people with only one small stream, and there was no way to resettle anybody there.

In the meantime, spring and early summer, 1968, Vang Pao decided that he was going to try to retake Sam Neua again. Again, the initial plan was to go in and try to take the Hua Muong, Lima Site 58, area back again. So there were some major efforts in the Hua Muong area which really didn’t amount to much. We started getting many more refugees in. I put a big refugee area up at a place called 221, Houei Moun. We started getting refugees into 215, Houei Hin Sa. So we were getting a lot of civilians coming out, but militarily it was not all that successful.

In the meantime, Vang Pao decided that he was going to switch tactics and concentrate back up on Pha Thi again. In the meantime, then, Ambassador Sullivan had called a meeting in Vientiane of the USAID operations officers, myself, Jack Williamson, the guys from Pakse and Houei Sai, seven or eight American operations officers. I think Jiggs Weldon was there along with five or six political officers from the embassy and the DCM. We met at one of the political officer’s houses. It was a good opportunity to sit down and everyone could sort of get drunk together with Sullivan and have him talk to us about his perspective and what the plans were from the embassy side. One of my great concerns was that with the announced bombing halts in North Vietnam, or at least projected bombing halts anyway, with the holidays coming up...this was around October, 1968...that we would get less support in the north. Sullivan said, “On the contrary, whatever had been normally going to North Vietnam in the past, once the bombing halt in Vietnam was in effect, would be increased air support for the Laos.” Now, I should say that after Pha Thi when there was this non-interest by the Air Force, this did not last very long. The air support did resume shortly after that.

BBC Documentary on Laos, 1968

Q: Let me just interject briefly as a footnote. Sullivan had consulted Souvanna Phouma about this policy of increased bombing and obtained Souvanna Phouma’s complete agreement to it. This is found in the State Department’s archives.

KUHN: A couple of little side notes to this meeting. A week or two before this meeting occurred, the BBC had been allowed to bring a crew of people up to the Sam Thong area to do a documentary. We had been told by the embassy to cooperate with them. So, I was asked to go out with one of the camera crew to a refugee area and to interview some of the refugees on camera for the BBC. I went out with them and we got some refugees and we interviewed them. Then the interviewer from the BBC also interviewed me. So, I used the term "I" and "we" quite liberally. "We" were pushed off mountain top X; or "I" did this; or "We" did that. It was just natural. I was involved in all of these things and was up there with these people and would have felt kind of silly saying, "They" lost this position and "they" did this and that. It was "we," I was there.

So, when the embassy saw the first cuts of this whole thing were absolutely aghast that I had been using the terms "I" and "we" instead of "they." Well, not only that, but the BBC man in the program had identified myself and Win McKeithen as the "silent men" of the CIA.

Q: Which was totally erroneous.

KUHN: Yes, but it was kind of humorous in a way. So, it happened that this meeting with Sullivan was being held at one of the political officers' homes, down along the Mekong River. You had to go back a couple of narrow lanes to get to it. Win McKeithen and I got lost and were a few minutes late getting there. We walked in the door and there was Sullivan sitting in the middle of everybody and he looked up and said, "Oh, I see the silent men of the CIA have arrived." So, he did take it in good stride. But not only the ambassador but other people cautioned me about it after that, if I was going to be interviewed use the word "they" and not "I" and "we". Interestingly enough, I got married a few months, the next year, and a good friend of mine, Henry Ginsberg, who at that time was studying at the School of Oriental Studies in London and is now the curator of the rare book section at the London Museum...anyway, my wife and I stopped off to see Henry in 1969 and he had seen this program on the BBC so I know the program was aired.

Also, another little side note on this thing. This meeting ended about 12 or 12:30, I guess, maybe 1:00 and everybody was pretty well smashed.

Q: Referring to this BBC documentary, do you think the media were paying more attention to the war in Laos, because they hadn't been paying much attention to it up until now?

Media Attention on Laos

KUHN: Well, let's see, this would have been 1968. Well, not really. Perhaps I shouldn't say not really. You see, Arthur, I was so far removed, working in areas where hardly anybody ever got permission to come up and do anything. So, what the press may have been wanting to do in Vientiane or Udorn or someplace, I don't really know. I do know that later on we had a *National Geographic* crew come in, Bill Garrett, the end of 1968. He had

free rein to go to any place he wanted to. In fact, there were a couple of photographs in the article of planes dropping rice. I took the photographer up in a plane and was with him when he took those pictures. Also a couple of pictures up at 184 of some of the Hmong refugees were pictures taken by the photographer while I was up with him. So some people were getting access. *Life* magazine also sent a crew up. And in fact, my picture is in that *Time-Life* series of the war in Vietnam which is about a 15-volume set. Also, *Foreign Affairs* had an article about north Laos, the Plaine des Jarres area, somewhere around 1968-69, too, by a fairly well known individual, but I can't remember now who it was. He was given access to go around up there. It was a hit and miss kind of thing.

I know later on, this must have been late 1968, I guess, Keyes Beech of the *Chicago Tribune*, Bob Shaplen from the *New Yorker* and Arnaud de Borchgrave with *Newsweek*. They were given permission by the embassy to come up to Sam Thong and interview Pop and do a story. Well, nobody had told Pop this. These three guys pulled in on a Caribou about 8:00 in the morning and jumped off. Of course, if anybody knows Pop Buell, he would know that every other word is profanity, and he just promptly read them their pedigree very quickly and put them back on the plane and sent them back to Vientiane. Well, in two hours they showed up on the next flight again at which time he promptly put them back on the plane. Of course, by this time too he probably had had five or six beers in between. It got to be noon time and they came back again and he threw them out again. They got really ticked off and went back to the embassy and complained. Pop got word that he was to treat these people nicely, that they had permission, authorization to come up and to make sure they got a story. Well, I had been up north some place and had refugees just milling all around. Everything was going to pot. I had in my own mind all kinds of stories. Not that I was looking for any reporters, but if they were looking for something all they had to do was ask me. Pop got on the radio to call me back. He said, "I need help back here. I have three blank, blank, blanks back here. Can you come back tonight and go back up tomorrow morning?" I said, "Okay." I came back just before dark to Sam Thong. I got off the plane and here I was in my version of combat gear as a refugee officer carrying an AK, a 35 on my hip, knapsack dusty and dirty with all kinds of maps and guns hanging all over me and these guys standing there along the airstrip ignoring me. They were so mad at this time they had only one thought in mind and that was to nail Pop Buell. So, Pop said, "Would you take these guys down to my house, I will be along in a few minutes?" While Pop had been on home leave the previous year USAID or someone had built him a very nice house in Sam Thong with a fireplace and everything. So I said, "Okay." I drove them down to Pop's house. They didn't want to talk to me, they were belligerent, just total jackasses, all three of them. So we got to the house and they had some Scotch and opened it up and started drinking. Jiggs Weldon came in and they jumped all over him and he got, of course, very defensive. Then Pop came in and the fireworks really started. These guys sat around for three or four hours just basically calling each other names...the three reporters and Pop and Jiggs calling each other names...and I was just sitting there as an interested bystander in this whole thing. But, again, they were not really interested in my opinion, in really getting a story. Pop was ranting and raving about Averell Harriman and how he had given away all of Laos to the communists. I guess it was Shaplen who said that he had been

an aide to Harriman, one of the three had been an aide to Harriman years before, and was saying what a great man Harriman was. And Pop was saying what an idiot Harriman was.

Q: Unreal discussions.

KUHN: Yes, unreal discussions. The stories came out eventually. One was a story that supposedly had happened four or five years before that Jiggs Weldon related and Shaplen couldn't even spell Sam Thong right, misspelling it all through the article. This meeting left a bad taste in my mouth. They wanted to see Vang Pao, but he didn't want to see them. I had to drive them over to VP's house later on and we had curfew at Sam Thong and we had to pass these little checkpoints. No one had ever told these militiamen what to do except to stop anyone who came down the road, so they didn't know what to do with us. Vang Pao was not there, he never talked to them.

Q: Illustrative of a totally adversarial relationship between the officials present and the media.

KUHN: Of course, at the same time, though, perhaps the embassy or USAID was a little at fault here. We are talking about 1968 sometime. Up until this time there had been very little written about anything that had happened in Laos. Probably the most that had been written was Don Schanche's article in the *Saturday Evening Post* about Pop Buell. And, of course, either ABC or CBS did that documentary on Pop, which I have a 35mm copy of that I managed to abscond with when Laos fell. And then there was the documentary called "The Secret War" where a lot of pilots were interviewed. That came out about the same time. So, there were a few things coming out, but basically there was very little. But the mood had been, you don't talk to anybody, you don't talk to reporters, reporters are not allowed to come up to Sam Thong and Na Khang, so we never really had had any guidance on handling people. I think if the embassy had said, "Look, we are going to have to start making overtures to the press a little bit. People want to come up to see what is going on. They have to see Sam Thong, see a refugee move, etc." They could have explained that to us a little bit better. We were still operating under the old rules. Nobody goes any place. You don't tell anybody anything unless it is specific. When Garrett came up we had very specific orders that National Geographic is very sympathetic to us, they are not going to write anything that is going to be harmful to the program, take them around and give them what they want to see. We never got that with people like Shaplen or Beech, etc. So it was a very, very unfortunate situation and I think these three people could have gotten much better stories out of their stay had it been handled a little bit better.

Anyway, when it comes to Pop, he could be very abusive, especially when he was drinking. He could be very antagonistic. Another little story about Pop and his language. Charlie Mann came back to Laos and he had a new secretary. Pop used to write these handwritten notes and Pop I think had a third or fourth grade education. I loved Pop Buell, but he was a character. His grammar was unusual to say the least, his spelling was unique and he wrote like he talked using the same language. Anyway, he used to handwrite his reports back to the director. Well, Mann got a new secretary and she got one of these handwritten reports

and I guess her eyeballs just about popped out. She spent the rest of the day cleaning it up, taking out all of the bad language, correcting the spelling and grammar, and gave it to Charlie Mann. He picked up this piece of paper and said, "What the hell is this?" She said, "Well, it is Pop Buell's weekly report." He said, "This isn't Pop Buell's report. Pop Buell could never write a memo like this. I can't understand a word of it. What is he trying to say? Where is his original piece of paper?" So she had to go out to her files and pick out this crummy piece of paper and gave it to Mann. He said, "Now I understand what he says, when I read it."

Q: That's good.

Events of the Autumn of 1968

KUHN: We go back to the fall of 1968. As I say, Vang Pao had suddenly decided that Hua Muong was not going to be the focus of his attack. He was going to start concentrating back up on Pha Thi again. So troops began to be moved into place and begin to take back some of the airstrips to the south, east and southeast of Phou Pha Thi until the point came where we were right up at one point to the base of Pha Thi and the river around Pha Thi were the Nam Yut to the east and the Nam Het to the north. These areas were basically in friendly hands.

Another aside. I haven't mentioned yet a little place on the east face of Pha Thi down on the Nam Yut was a little Lao village called Muong Yut. Muong Yut was two hundred yards of interconnected rice paddies, a beautiful Lao village. But above the village were huge caves and in the river that ran through the village were hot springs. You could take a bath in the river and there were fresh water shrimp in the river. I (and before me Pop and Jiggs in the "old days") used to go down there and spend some time with the villagers and catch these little shrimp. They were just a fantastic group of people. When the government troops reoccupied the area, I went in because it had been reported that the caves were full of supplies. Well, it turned out that this whole cave area had been a big North Vietnamese camp at the base of Pha Thi. There were bamboo fences around which the Lao told us no Lao was ever allowed to go inside the fences. They had their bamboo chairs, tables and benches, a whole camp there. In the caves they had all their supplies. They had military supplies, of course, but the interesting thing was they had huge amounts of civilian supplies. Apparently they had put together a kind of cooperative there, or at least a store where people could come in and buy things. Up around the northern part of Pha Thi and on the Nam Het River the area was noted for its sugar cane. The Vietnamese had brought in these huge iron vats to boil sugar cane with. They had sewing machines. They had clothes, cooking pots, knives, axes, anything you could possibly buy as a villager. So I called back and said if someone could get me up there with a helicopter, I would bring back all these things out and give them to refugees. So, sort of like Vang Pao felt about the water buffalo, here we had with some of the supplies, because things like sewing machines and some of the more major items, the troops felt were theirs by right of booty. So, I didn't contest it, but most of the things we were able to bring out. We carried the things down to the rice paddies and choppers came in and carried the things up to Site 107 and put it on the airstrip.

Something else that was in there was a whole room of Lao school books, textbooks. So, I managed to send down to Vientiane about six boxes of Pathet Lao textbooks. Some of them were in Meo language written in Lao script and others are Lao. They had the normal stuff, reading and writing and math. There was only one book, which must have been for older school children because it was a different kind of book and the writing was different, where it was blatantly propaganda. It had big foldout colored pages of Meo, of Lao Theung, of Lao, old people, young people, children with bayonets and pitchforks pushing along an emaciated old man that looked like Uncle Sam, it said U.S. on it. There were other foldout pictures of villagers shooting at an airplane. It was really kind of a neat little book, very well done. The embassy was very much interested in this because they wanted to determine...they could send back to laboratories and see where the paper came from and whether or not they were printing these things in Laos or China, whatever. But later on, USIS wrote up a big report about how they had gotten all these school books and what a great job they were doing sending them back to the States for analysis. If it hadn't been for me they never would have known these things ever existed.

One other thing about this same time was that the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a magazine which I still read avidly, in my opinion anyway, during the '60s really never got some of their stories straight when it came to Laos and what the U.S. was doing. I have the issue downstairs so this is not something I have made up. They ran a story once saying that there was a secret U.S. Air Force jet base located at the town of Muong Yut in Sam Neua and that the U.S. was violating Laos neutrality by basing these jets at Muong Yut and flying out from there bombing everything. Well, the point being, I just described Muong Yut before. It was Thanksgiving Day and we always had a big open-air lunch for all the Meo and Lao officials at Sam Thong, and just about anyone else who wandered by. People from Vientiane were also invited. I came back and got off the chopper and was walking towards where all the people were and Jiggs Weldon and Pop came running up to me. Both of them just irate and waving their arms and Pop was yelling all kinds of obscenities at me. I said, "What is going on?" They said, "You never told us what is going on up there. We are supposed to be sharing information and you are running this secret program up there." I said, "What in the devil are you talking about?" They pulled out this *Far Eastern Economic Review* and were waving it and saying, "Why didn't you tell us you had a secret jet Air Force base up there at Sam Neua?" Well, by this time Jiggs couldn't keep from laughing. They opened up the magazine and showed me this article that this guy had written that there was this so-called secret base up there in the rice paddies of Sam Neua.

When you talk about the interest in the press, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asia Week* after it was established did run a lot of articles on Laos, more political stuff, I guess, out of Vientiane. But often times the kind of stories that were written about up country...and, I suppose, it was inevitable if no one is allowed access to anything and you can't talk to anybody who has firsthand knowledge about what is going on and you have a good imagination...stories just get written that don't have any relationship to what was going on. So I guess you can't blame these guys. But, they did used to make us pretty upset sometimes with some of their stories.

New USAID Mission Director

About this same time in October/November, 1968, Joe Mendenhall, USAID director left and did not come back. Rumors were that Charlie Mann was going to be the new USAID director. I think by this time Larry Devlin had already come in as station chief in Vientiane. I believe by this time Godley was at least in country or it had been announced that he was coming because I know it was a Congo mafia. All these three people had been together in the Congo previously and had worked together. So, we weren't sure if that was good or bad. Everybody was happy to see Charlie Mann come back, particularly the Lao government.

About this same time in November, 1968 something else happened that indirectly affected the war. The embassy and other US agencies ran what was called the milk runs. The milk runs were C-46s that came out of Vientiane twice a week making the route Paksane, Savannakhet, Pakse and return taking people and supplies. A C-46 came out of Pakse, landed at Savannakhet, took on passengers for Vientiane, took off and went about a half a mile and crashed into the rice fields killing everyone on board, 30 some people. The tragedy was on board the craft was the wife of Chao Saykham, the governor of Xieng Khouang province, his sister and niece. All three were killed. To back track slightly, you may say why does this have any effect on the war. A lot of Americans were killed and other people were killed. Chao Saykham had been in France for personal reasons and while he was there he got word that his younger brother, who was a doctor in Savannakhet had unexpectedly died. So Chao Saykham came back just in time for the cremation of his brother. His wife had come down from Sam Thong, she was the head of ENI which I think I mentioned previously. They spent a day or so together and she said she had been gone from the school for so long that she had to get back up to Sam Thong and back to the school. Pop got permission for her, and the governor's sister and niece to get on the milk run to go back to Vientiane and on to Sam Thong. She was killed. So in a short space of a week or two Chao Saykham lost his brother, his wife, his sister and a niece and I really truly think that that took the wind out of his sails. I don't think from that time on he ever really exerted himself and was the effective civilian leader that he was prior to that. I think you asked me earlier his role and his relationship in what was happening as a civilian. I think that airplane crash when his wife was killed really affected him mentally and he just never was the same again.

Vietnamese Road Built Near Pha Thi

One other thing that was interesting to get back up to Sam Neua, Phou Pha Thi and General Vang Pao's attempt to recapture Pha Thi at the end of 1968 was the fact that it gave many of us a chance to walk on the road that the Vietnamese had built. By the time Vang Pao's troops had reoccupied the area around Pha Thi, the road had gone all the way to Lima Site 107, Houei Ma. It was interesting because it is a rolling hilly area and all the road had a bank on one side and a sloping side on the other. On the bank side, about every five or six meters there were little bunkers, little indentations, for people to hid in, so if you were on the road and a plane came over or there was some attack on the road, you with a few steps

were able to duck into one of these little hollowed out holes in the side of the bank and be protected.

But there was no attempt to blow up the road. We captured part of it and that was it. But then Vang Pao decided that he was going to actually take Pha Thi itself. There was a considerable amount of bombing. The Air Force did come in intermittently, nothing sustained. Interestingly enough, and I have never seen anything that could verify this, but from prisoners and people who were there, we were told that in the caves on Pha Thi, the North Vietnamese mounted these 12.7 mm antiaircraft guns and put them on some kind of tracks with rollers. They would roll them out when attacking aircraft was coming in and making their dives and shoot these 12.7s on these tracks to the point where they could see a puff of smoke or something where a rocket or whatever was released, then would pull the guns back inside the caves so even if the rocket or shell hit the mouth of the cave, the guns themselves were pulled way back inside. I have never known anybody who actually saw this, but the Vietnamese defectors and some prisoners that were captured claimed that they had the 12.7s located on tracks.

Another prisoner who was taken later on said during the period from the time that Pha Thi fell in March 1968 until whenever this man was captured, sometime in mid to late 1968, sometimes the bombing had been so intense on top of the karst that people lost all control. They started bleeding from the ears and some people actually fell off the top of the karst because they were so disoriented from the constant shelling and bombing. I don't know whether that is true or not.

Anyway, there were periods of time when the bombing of Pha Thi was quite heavy. And interestingly enough...the question always came up within a few days after Pha Thi fell were there any Russians who came up to examine or do anything with the radar. My gut reaction is very little could have been carried off the top and unless the North Vietnamese brought in helicopters at night that no one was aware of. But sometime in 1969 I ran across some refugees who had come out of that area and one old man came up to me and talked very friendly to me as if he knew me and I couldn't place him from Adam. Finally he said, "Don't you remember me?" I said, "No, I really don't." He said, "Well, I am the one who took you to the top of Pha Thi and helped you get up there in December of last year." Well, it turned out that supposedly he had mistaken me for one of the Russian technicians or a Russian technician that had allegedly been up there. Now, this old guy was an old duffer and whether he was hallucinating, I don't know, but he claimed he remembered me because after Pha Thi had fallen he remembers seeing me and talking to me up on the top. I don't think anyone has ever confirmed that anything had ever been taken off the karst.

Q: It is possible that some Russians just went up there to look around?

KUHN: That's possible. Certainly plausible, anyway.

Q: There was a very large Russian embassy in Hanoi and they were certainly interested in technical matters.

North Vietnamese Attacks

KUHN: There is one other little incident that I want to relate that I think is indicative of what can happen when you get the right people at a location at the right time. Somewhere during 1967 or early 1968, and I don't have the exact date, there was a site way to the east in Xieng Khouang called Site 201, Sam Song Hong. And 201 was commanded by a young kid who looked about 19 or 20 years old, who was General Vang Pao's nephew. His name was Vang Fong. This kid was a clone of Vang Pao. He looked like Vang Pao, his face was like Vang Pao, his gestures, his whole personality was Vang Pao only in miniature. I should say there was this long airstrip that only held Porters and Helio Couriers. Then there was a kind of little moat and then a little village. You go on past the village and there was a trail that took you way up to a mountain peak about three quarters of a mile away. That was where everybody thought Vang Fong had his little command post. In fact, Vang Fong actually lived at this little airstrip down in the village. Well, one night the Vietnamese attacked 201 and there was one stormy fight. The next day when the Vietnamese finally pulled back, Vang Fong's people recovered I think 67 weapons which were left behind on the airstrip. He recovered 40 some bodies the Vietnamese hadn't dragged away. The Vietnamese as they attacked up the airstrip they uncoiled telephone wire almost up to where the moat was. The only thing anybody could figure out was they hadn't realized that Vang Fong was down there. And, of course, being on the spot he rallied all the troops and they just cleaned these guys' clocks. An example of when you had a good effective leader who was willing to stay in there and lead his people. These guys were as good as the Vietnamese ever were. They took out a whole load of booty from that operation.

Another incident occurred earlier than that up at this big airstrip at Nong Khang, Lima 52, which was way up north and east of Sam Neua city. There again the Vietnamese attacked one night, came in around the airstrip and tried to attack the positions there. Nong Khang was defended by a FAR battalion, BV 26, as I recall. I went up there the next morning after the attack and I personally photographed over 20 dead bodies of Vietnamese. There were no air strikes, this was strictly a ground fight. It was hand-to-hand weapons. I still have belts, stamps and all kinds of things. This was a Lao company, but the commander was good and stayed right in there with his troops and they held him off.

The biggest problem in terms of loss of manpower was when they retreated quickly and tried to retake someplace. Just like Pha Thi. In trying to retake Pha Thi they lost a hundred times more men than they would have lost if they had tried to stay up there and just hold it. This, unfortunately, happened time and time and time again. One of the times in late 1968 when Vang Pao was trying to retake back Hua Muong, before the attempt on Pha Thi, he and I were together one night up at Lima Site 215 and got a frantic call on the radio from Colonel Douangtha, who was over at a place called Phou Daeng. It was about 2:00 in the morning and Douangtha called in and said, "I am under attack." Phou Daeng had a long ridge line on top of it and Douangtha had his command post and trenches dug all the way around the top of the outpost. He said, "I am under attack and the Vietnamese are threatening one end of my command post. I don't know if we can hold them off or not. If

they come over the top we are basically finished.” Douangtha had just taken his second or third wife and had just gotten back up there. If he had been gone the whole place would probably have been blown away. He said, “I desperately need help.”

Well, over the next hour or two the North Vietnamese were able to get up over the top of the ridge and they were at the west end of Douangtha's trenches and he was at the east end of it and he said “We are throwing hand grenades back and forth. In fact, they are throwing our hand grenades back at us and we are throwing theirs back at them. We can't hold out much longer.” By this time it was about 4:00 in the morning and Vang Pao couldn't get his CIA-issued radio powered by a car battery to work. I got on my radio and called Sam Thong and Pop Buell was there. He got a hold of Long Chieng and there was a FAC there. This Raven took off while it was still dark with nothing but rockets which were basically to mark positions rather than kill enemy with. He flew up to Phou Daeng and the weather was bad. The pilot repeatedly came down in through the clouds and fired off all his rockets at the Vietnamese. By this time they were almost literally in hand-to-hand combat, and this guy came right in on the deck and blasted the Vietnamese with his rockets. They eventually pulled back and Douangtha held. Well, I felt really good about it because if I hadn't been there with my little Stoner, word would never have gotten back to Long Chieng.

Interestingly enough, in [Christopher] Robbins' book “The Ravens” this incident is noted and the pilot did get the distinguished flying cross or something and he well deserved it. But again, the communications were so screwed up that when people were out there and needed help, it was happenstance more than anything else that got people the support. But I was very happy I had my little Stoner there. Of course, this was one of the reasons why Pop always wanted to make sure that there was somebody on the radios at all times. Carol Mills was our secretary in those days, and Ann Bradley after her, and Carol actually had a radio installed in her house at one time so she could monitor everything. There was a great sense of esprit de corps in the whole operation, everybody was involved in it. Nobody had any egos about it.

Vang Pao's Attempt to Recapture Pha Thi

To get back to Pha Thi again, basically the entire month of December, Vang Pao tried to retake Pha Thi. I think I mentioned earlier how the Air Force had laid on a maximum effort one day and Vang Pao said, “No, never mind I am going to capture the mountain, I know I can take it.” And the same Colonel Douangtha took his troops up the lower slopes of Pha Thi trying to get to the very top and just got totally creamed. Vang Pao pulled back and basically that was the end of the operation and he never tried to take it back again.

Q: At this time then, the situation had been totally reversed. It was Vang Pao's men who surrounded the base and it was the Pathet Lao who were holding the top, which was completely the reverse of what it had been in March.

KUHN: It was the reverse and in fact you would have thought that we would have held the trump cards in this case because there was no water on the top of Pha Thi.

Q: Hmm. Couldn't you have just isolated the people up there?

KUHN: Yes, just waited them out. Vang Pao didn't really need to have his troops climbing up the face of the cliffs because he could have pulled back and let the Air Force come in. They were willing at that time to come back in because there wasn't much activity in North Vietnam and they wanted to bomb some place. They could have come in at random and hit them day and night if they wanted.

Q: Well, they could have just waited because without the possibility of air supplies they would have run out of supplies and surrendered.

KUHN: Eventually, yes. They couldn't have had that much stockpiled up there. Why Vang Pao didn't try to use the same kind of secret back trails...

Q: And this was in the dry season too, this was in December. So they wouldn't have been able to catch rain or anything and in a few weeks they would have surrendered without water..

Helicopter Accident

KUHN: Well, it was one of those unexplainable things that you wonder what happened.

An incident occurred during this attempt to take back Pha Thi that in itself is probably not significant, but it points out some of the dangers of working up there. I spent without a break over three weeks every night with Vang Pao. If he went up to his command post or somewhere else I would go with him. At this particular time we were at the command post and I had gone out to check some refugees. I came out of 36 and was in a Huey and was dropped off at Vang Pao's command post. There was a bunch of bags, burlap sacks and cartons of ammunition in the Huey with me. The chopper dropped me off and then proceeded to go on to another pad that was maybe three quarters of a mile away. I had just bought an 8mm movie camera and really wanted to get some good action shots. I thought about photographing this Huey as it was departing but decided to save the little film I had for something more exciting. So, I had just gotten off the Huey and had my camera there and I put it back in my knapsack. I walked over and Colonel Phan Syharat, who was the governor of Sam Neua, who was later killed, Vang Pao and myself were standing there and we watched the chopper take off from this other chopper pad and proceed down to Lima Site 107. We were far enough away that we couldn't tell the details but as the chopper looked like it was on the strip at 107 it blew up. The whole chopper just completely blew up. It was late in the afternoon. I got on the radio and started calling any aircraft in the area, "May Day, May Day, we have a chopper down, unknown casualties." Well, we could start seeing things popping. We knew there was ammunition in the helicopter and it was starting to explode. This went on for hours and finally just before dark, myself and one of the CIA guys, a chopper came in and we came down and landed at the far end of the strip and the stuff was still cooking. The pilot said that it was not safe and he couldn't get any closer, so we got back up to Vang Pao's CP and radioed down and said, "Have people secure the area

but don't touch anything or do anything." The next morning at daybreak the chopper came in and we went down. In conflicting stories it depends whose ox is being gored here as to which story was going to be the official story. There were some people who claimed that the chopper had not yet landed on the ground. It was coming in for a landing and the entire rotor assembly flew off. Okay, Air America's fault. Other witnesses said, "No that is not true, the chopper was on the ground and the kicker and the people on the ground had begun to drag off big burlap bags." Well, it turned out the burlap bags were full of hand grenades. Somewhere the cases had gotten destroyed and some of the hand grenades had apparently been taken out of the cardboard canisters and were loose.

Q: Very dangerous.

KUHN: Yes, very dangerous and I had just come up in that helicopter from 36. So, the question was, was it an "accident" for clearly there was no enemy fire that had hit it, or was it an Air America mechanical fault? Anyway, the interesting thing was the pilot was just as if he had been sitting in his plane. His legs were bent like he had been sitting in the plane, his hand looked like it still held the stick, his pants were burned off, his shoes were off but his body was just like he had been quick cooked and was lying like a tipped over chair on the ground. There was nothing left of the two flight mechanics on board. I don't know what the final outcome was. Air America eventually brought up their teams and sifted through all this stuff. But the point being that these were the kinds of things that you never knew when you got on an airplane what was going to happen because you had people loading cargo and offloading cargo and ammunition. There were no safety precautions whatsoever. The Meo, and even the Lao and Lao Theung, gave no thought whatsoever to safety precautions. Their life style was something that was totally different from ours and their philosophy. If you die in this life you are going to come back later on anyway, so what is the big deal? A kind of fatalism. So there was just this lack of caution and it was really a wonder that more accidents like this did not happen.

End of the Attempt to Retake Pha Thi and the Attack on Na Khang

By the end of December 1968, early 1969, it was obvious there would be no more attempts to retake Phou Pha Thi. Sam Neua was pretty much a backwater. However, we still had at the very, very borderline between Sam Neua and Luang Prabang, Houei Tong Kho, Lima Site 184, eight or nine or ten thousand refugees. It was decided then that all the refugees were going to be left at 184. There was not going to be any attempt to try to move them anyplace else. The same was not true at Site 215. We had about four thousand refugees at Site 215. I remember New Year's Eve of 1968/1969, Frank Becker, who was a public health dentist working with USAID, and I spent the night at 215. It was a pretty bleak night. Other areas around us were being hit and attacked. Seven different places were attacked that particular night. Sam Neua was basically off. We did manage to get most of the civilians evacuated out to other sites so we didn't really lose all that many people.

You asked a minute ago about reporters. On the 19th of October, 1969, 25 newspaper and TV reporters were sent to Sam Thong.

Q: Yes, I think the tide was turning. The media were really beginning to pay attention to the war in Laos. By then the Symington subcommittee had held its hearings in the Senate and Sullivan had testified. The "secret war" was becoming much more public knowledge. What were these reporters going to do?

KUHN: I have no idea because I don't think I was there. They showed up there for whatever reasons.

At the beginning of 1969, as I said a minute ago, that was really the end of any attempts to take back Pha Thi or move back into Sam Neua, other than to just maintain some of the areas we had over to the west near the Luang Prabang/Sam Neua provincial borders. For me, personally, January and February were pretty much of a slowdown because from a personal standpoint I was preparing to marry a member of Chao Saykham's family. The fact that his wife had been killed a couple of months before in a plane crash caused a lot of problems in terms of arranging the marriage ceremony and getting things ready. So, I was pretty much involved in personal obligations. However, there was a major thing that happened at the end of February and beginning of March 1969. My wife and I were married on the 20th of February in Sam Thong and right after that got word that Site 36, Na Khang, was under attack. Thinking I was going to be a big hero I wanted to go back up to Na Khang to see what I could do to help, which obviously would have been nothing, but I thought I could have done something. Cooler heads prevailed and I was told to just stay at home. I had just gotten married a couple of days before and my wife and I were scheduled to go on home leave back to the States on March 3 and it would have done me no good at all to have gone up there. So, I didn't. The next day we got word back that Site 36 had fallen, the Vietnamese had overrun the base. Colonel Phan, who was the governor of Sam Neua, was killed. Blue Boy, who I mentioned previously as being the Thai road watch team leader who spent two or three days with me at Na Khang when Don Sjostrom was killed, was reported to have been captured by the Vietnamese. We had civilians come out of the area who claimed they saw Blue Boy being tortured by the North Vietnamese. He never was reported in any prisoner of war lists so presumably he was killed or died during the attack.

[change of tape]

Na Khang, Lima Site 36, was the major air head for any kind of operation for the northeast. That, effectively, was the end of north Laos and Sam Neua. There were still some sites a little bit to the south and west, north of the Plaine des Jarres--Bouam Loung, Site 32, was still in friendly hands--but the loss of Site 36 was a major blow. It also, too, was a major loss of civilians in the area between 36, Na Khang, and Muong Hiem, Lima Site 48 Alpha. The Phuan who had lived in the villages around Na Khang had set up big villages between Na Khang and Muong Khout, and I had gone in there and visited them frequently. Fortunately, the enemy did not push much past Na Khang so the Phuan villages remained friendly, at least through all of 1969.

Anyway, my wife and I went to the States in March via Asia and Europe, arriving in the States in April. We spent April and May there and didn't come back to Laos until June. So, during those months I was out of the country, but during that period of time, Vang Pao, as I recall, did go in and capture Xieng Khouang Ville, and I think they lost it again, but when we came back in June there were moves on to capture the Plaine des Jarres. The Plaine des Jarres is kind of tricky because the actual location of the jars most people think about is an area of a couple hundred meters by a couple hundred meters, a relatively small area. But that is not the only place that the jars are found. There are several locations in a greater area where there are large numbers of jars. So, when we talk about the PDJ, technically it is a very, very small piece of property, in a broader sense it is the entire plateau. So it has two meanings and I guess I will use it in the broader sense, the entire plateau and not just where the jars themselves are located.

Refugee Work at Lat Sen

Now the troops came in mostly from the south at a place called Lat Sen. I was sent out to start working with any civilians that may come out. I was there when the first large group of civilians started coming in. I have movies of many of these moves with refugees coming across the grasslands of the plateau with cattle, pigs, chickens and all their personal belongings, etc. I mentioned earlier when talking about General Vang Pao the incident that occurred where he and I got really sideways over whether or not I was going to be able to buy cows and water buffalo that the refugees brought in so I could feed the troops with. This is the time when this incident occurred. Over the next four or five weeks, there were daily small groups of refugees coming out and as the troops moved up into the greater Plaine des Jarres area and captured some of the towns there--Lat Houang, for instance, Phong Savan--people living in the towns came out. Basically in generalization there were no young men, but old men and women, younger girls, small children. No teenagers or men in their '20s or early '30s which was military age. Almost uniformly they all had skin the color of white milk. The old cliché that these people lived in bunkers and caves for two or three years was basically true and not a cliché. A lot of people had big pimples and sores on their faces because they had been living in these damp, dark caves. And, in fact, at Lat Houang I went into some of the caves which were really bunkers under the ground. They were reinforced bunkers with beds, tables, chairs, little kerosene lamps. People spent their entire lives underground in some cases. I brought out a lot of notebooks and written material, some in Vietnamese and some in Lao. The interesting thing was that in these little towns, they had all been trading towns in the past, Lat Houang particularly, there were not just Lao refugees or Phuan refugees, there were Vietnamese, Cambodian, Indians, a whole range of people who just got caught up in the fighting years before and for what ever reasons could not or did not get out. A lot of ethnic Chinese there. The interesting thing was this was the early stages of the evacuation of these people so they were taken out to Sam Thong and because they were Chinese, or Cambodian or Vietnamese or Indian, we didn't try to keep them up country. They were sent down to Vientiane immediately. Each one of the ethnic groups had associations in Vientiane. So the Chinese association immediately took care of the Chinese. We never gave any of these people any refugee support. The Indian association took care of the Indians, etc.

At Sam Thong we had a mechanic who was a Frenchman. His name was Monsieur Albert Foure. Albert was a character. He was living with two women who were sisters, neither one of whom he had married. He had a daughter by one of them, a teenage girl who was absolutely, stunningly beautiful. Foure spoke a broken English, French, Lao combination. You would have to hear it to try to appreciate it and you could never duplicate the way he talked. But years before Foure had been in the French army and stayed in Southeast Asia. He had been married to a Vietnamese woman. He had applied back in the '50s to immigrate to Australia. Everything had been approved, the Australian Embassy had cleared him, all his papers had been cleared and everything was set to go. He and his wife had some kind of an argument and she took off with all of his documentation and all of his papers. In the meantime, the communists came in 1960, the Neutralists, and they took the Plaine des Jarres. Foure was separated from his wife, had no documents, no papers, nothing. Well, in one of the towns we went into, this rather middle-aged Vietnamese woman came up and asked either Win McKeithen or me if we were French. We said, "No, we are Americans." She said, "Do you happen to know a Monsieur Albert Foure?" It turned out that she was his real wife and had all the papers that he had needed ten years before to go to Australia. Anyway, Foure was a real character. Now he is in New Caledonia or some place like that.

At any rate, during the course of 1969 we started moving people out. Then later on there began to be bigger and bigger refugee moves to the point where we started setting up locations for people around the edge of the Plain to feed people.

Evacuations to Vientiane, 1969

Q: This was a relatively heavily populated area, the Plaine des Jarres.

KUHN: Yes, it was. The Plaine's area, the greater plain's area and the hills around it there were several large towns. Of course, Xieng Khouang Ville itself was not on the plain, it was down in the valley, but still there were large numbers of people there. However, in actual fact, to jump ahead slightly, the major evacuation did not occur until January/February 1970. That is when they brought in the C-130s and literally thousands of people were evacuated to Vientiane. But, when I was up there in the summer/fall/winter of 1969, we were keeping people in the area or moving them over to Sam Thong. But we didn't have these massive numbers that later came out of the woodwork.

In late 1969, December,...the 1969 period was kind of abbreviated because I was in the States for part of the time and things were not just moving. It was not a particularly exciting time for me other than the fact that Vang Pao was trying to take back the Plaine des Jarres. The old French airstrip at Phong Savan and near the Plain was rehabilitated and new PSP (perforated steel planking) was put on the strip. It was called Lima Lima or Lima 22 and became a major air head for the area up there. A fairly substantial base was built at Lima Lima by Vang Pao and his people.

But late 1969 there was some concern about what was going to happen to the eight or nine thousand refugees that we still had up at Site 184 on the border between Sam Neua and Luang Prabang. Early January it was decided we would evacuate all of these people out and bring them down to south of Sam Thong. So, once again I was faced to go back up to Sam Neua and evacuate the last of the Sam Neua people. We knew that we could never get it accomplished with only Air America aircraft. We needed help. So, we turned to the Air Force and asked for their assistance. They said, "Okay, we will give you ten of these big troop carrier helicopters." (They were called BUFFS by their crews, but please do not ask for a literal translation of that acronym!)

Attack on Muong Soui Leading to an American Death, 1969

Before I go any further, I would like to digress a moment and relate an event that occurred prior to the Sam Neua move. During the summer and fall of 1969, the situation around Muong Soui was very fluid. In fact, Muong Soui was attacked and the Neutralists that were left up there pretty much bugged out. There was an incident that occurred that I want to relate to you very shortly. Again, whether or not it is significant, it is a footnote in history. One of these unexplained footnotes, I think. All the time that I had been in Laos we had maintained a requirements officer, a RO officer, which was a USAID position at Muong Soui, to help the Neutralists out, the army. We also had had a USAID community development advisor, although by this time he had been pulled out. And the Attaché's Office also maintained two or three Americans there full time in Muong Soui with the Neutralists.

I was up country one night and got a call from Pop saying that Muong Soui had come under attack, this was called Lima 108, and some Americans had been killed and it was not clear what was going on, it was a very strange situation. The airstrip was open and Pop wanted me to go in there immediately and try to find out what the hell was going on and come back and tell him. So I got a plane and we came in and we determined there was a signal out at Muong Soui and it was okay to land. I landed but there was really nobody there. The Neutralist colonel was there and he was cordial to the extent that he showed me around a little bit, but he said really you ought to be talking to Bob. Well, Bob Parshall was the RO at the time there. I got on the radio and got hold of Bob and said, "Bob, I am here at Moug Soui and Pop wants me to look around. Could you come back up here?" He was a little reluctant but agreed he would come back up and show me around. The situation was that there were two stone houses that were built for the Americans and there was a little driveway in between which was used to park the jeeps. Just a few days before the attack occurred, there was a bomb disposal unit that had come up to get rid of unexploded ordinance at Muong Soui and had pitched some tents right in front of where the Americans lived. The attack occurred in the early hours and they were probably Pathet Lao, no one has really claimed that it was a Vietnamese attack. They came right through the Neutralists' lines, right through any patrols they might have had. They came in to the two stone houses and start shooting up the two houses. In one house there was Bob Parshall and an Air Force captain. In the other house there were a couple of enlisted men. Then there were these guys out here in this tent from the bomb disposal unit. Well, they came in and Parshall told me

that the enemy actually came to his window and held a AK inside the window and sprayed the area. I am sure it was true because the inside of Bob's bedroom was just littered with AK shells. Bob said he got up against the wall under the bed so they didn't get him. The Air Force captain was in an adjacent room and for some reason came running out the front door and there was a little tiny porch on the house that came around in front of the house and was shot and killed right in front of the house. The other Americans were unharmed and got out okay.

Q: Let me just ask a question about the identity of this captain. Are you sure this wasn't Army Captain Joseph Bush who became famous as a known American casualty on the ground in Laos?

KUHN: I think he may have been Bush. There was another attaché who was killed in a plane crash.

Q: Bush was killed on the ground and that was why he became famous.

KUHN: Yes, it was written up in *Time* and *Newsweek* and all that.

Q: Yes, he became famous in March 1970 when President Nixon made the statement that no American military men had been killed on the ground in Laos.

KUHN: This may have been that man. He was kind of a hamburger in a way because in *Time* or *Newsweek* they published excerpts from his diary and he used to say that he would sit at his house at night and listen to the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Well, he was so far away from the Trail that it was ridiculous. And also too, the pilots who worked up there with him said that he used to--if you spend a certain number of hours in the air you get air medals--so he would go up with pilots and just fly around for hours and hours and hours and hours and have the pilot certify in his log that he was so many hours in the air. I don't want to disparage the dead but he was not somebody I think that anybody was really all that crazy about. But, I think you are right, I think his name was Bush.

Anyway, Parshall said, "Okay, here is where the captain was killed." He was killed right in front of the stone porch and I looked at the stone porch and there was lots of blood still in the dust and dirt.

Q: This was the same morning as the attack?

KUHN: Although the exact timing of my visit is a little hazy, I believe that it was late afternoon of the same day, or the latest the next morning. The reason I think it was the same day was the urgency of Pop's request for first-hand information. There was still blood on the dirt. There were lots of little steel pellets in the dirt. The stone right where he had been killed was pockmarked with lots of teeny tiny holes.

Q: Seems like a shotgun or something.

KUHN: Shotgun. When I checked and asked about the tent, I was told that the bomb disposal people had shotguns for protection. The enemy came in, attacked the two houses but never touched the tent. Later on it came out, I forget whether it was through a prisoner or a villager, but someone reported about eight or ten days before the attack that the Pathet Lao had put out a sandbox model of Muong Soui. The tent wasn't there at that time. The tent had only been there for just a few days before the attack. They probably didn't even know the tent was there. If they had known, it would have been easier for them to go in and kill eight or nine people in a cloth tent than it was to attack somebody in a stone house. What I am suggesting is that it sounds to me that this captain was not killed by the Pathet Lao as he came out the front door. Somebody in the tent fired off a round either in panic or whatever. I did not imagine this. It was very clear to me that there were shotgun pellets in the ground where the blood was and the holes that were in the stone were not the kind of holes that an AK would have made. So, how this captain actually got killed, I don't know. But it just seemed to me that there were some strange things. Parshall disappeared. He came back to the States a few years later and somebody said he went to Canada, but I don't know where he is now.

Q: What happened to the people in the tents?

KUHN: They were taken out immediately. They were never attacked. By the time I got there they were gone. So it is a very strange occurrence. One of the oddball things that happen.

Airstrip at Xieng Dat

Also, too, then we were quite concerned that Sam Thong was going to get hit, or we were concerned that, with Muong Soui hit, we didn't have any big airstrips in the area. So we were frantically trying to build a new airstrip at a place called Xieng Dat, Lima Site 26. We actually had a couple of big bulldozers and some heavy equipment trying to make this new airstrip south of Muong Soui. This was also at the time when General Vang Pao's number one air ace Ly Lue was shot down in a bombing raid over Muong Soui. Of course, that took the wind out of Vang Pao's sails. Ly Lue was his main person. Anyway, we had equipment on the ground, as I recall, at Xieng Dat. When the enemy got close enough we had to finally call in a C-130 or C-123 and evacuate out our bulldozers and everything because we were in danger of losing the whole nine yards. The whole Muong Soui area then eventually went down the tubes. But, later on, by the end of 1969, Vang Pao had some troops that were sort of monitoring in the area.

The reason I bring this up is that a decision was made to evacuate the people out of Lima Site 184 and we got permission from the Air Force for ten helicopters. Well, it was unfortunate because the weather got bad. We waited around a couple of days but the weather didn't break until late one afternoon and it was too late to do any work. So, finally on the third day we decided we couldn't wait any longer, we had to get started. I got into 184 in a Porter or Helio and got on the ground. I talked to the commander who was in charge of the ten aircraft, which were flying high above the bad weather en route to Lima

Site 184, and he said, "Okay, we are going to have nine aircraft on the move and one will fly cap." In other words, if one chopper ever went down they wanted one that was going to be empty to go in and rescue the crew of the downed helicopter. So the commander said he would fly cap and the other nine would haul people. They wanted to put three helicopters on the airstrip at one time and would I make sure that I had three separate groups of people. I said, "Fine." It turned out that these choppers would take 130, 140 people as the Meo were very small. They just packed them on like cattle. He said, "Okay, we are going to approach the strip from the south, the first helicopter (and he was talking to his crew as well as me) will come in and land at the north end of the strip, the second will land in the middle and the third at the south." I had my camera and decided I wanted to get this on film when they came in. So I got up off the runway on a little nob and started filming. The first chopper came and landed where it was supposed to. The second chopper came in. The third chopper instead of landing on the south end he tried to land at the north end and, of course, this was a dirt strip and they were churning up dirt and this idiot tried to land at the wrong end and was coming down right on top of the other helicopter. I was filming all this and said to myself, "If this happens we will never see another Air Force helicopter in northern Laos if this war lasts a thousand years." I was just praying that nothing would happen. The guys were on the radio yelling at this guy and at the last minute he stopped his descent and maneuvered around and landed at the other end. In the meantime we started loading people on. It was a pretty orderly affair. They all got loaded up and all went back to Sam Thong to offload their people. They came back again and by this time the weather was getting bad and it was late in the afternoon. They said that they did not think they would be able to make another run up here, it was getting too late. Well, they weren't like the Air America pilots who could fly in any kind of weather. These guys had to have good weather, clear visibility, it was just incredible the restrictions that they placed on themselves. They said they were going to head back. They asked if I wanted to go back with them. They could not drop me off at Sam Thong but could take me back with them to Udorn. I said, "Well, I don't really want to go to Udorn." They said, "Well, we could take you back and bring you back up in the morning." I said, "Okay."

So I got on the chopper and it was late in the afternoon, weather was bad with clouds down, and they didn't want to take any more people out. They said they were going to head straight back to Udorn. But straight back to Udorn for them meant going right over the middle of the Plaine des Jarres and then down. We took off from 184 and as we approached the Plaine, weather was getting worse and worse, they diverted to the west and north a little bit and said, "We can't get through this weather, it is too bad. We are going to set down at Muong Soui." I said, "Well, in Muong Soui you never know one day from the next whether Vang Pao's troops are in there or the Neutralists or the PL." They said, "Well, we have to set down, we can't do anything else." So we landed at Muong Soui and it was almost dark. These guys had these M60 miniguns mounted on all the doors of the helicopters. Each person had a sidearm and ammo and a M16. These guys were scared to death. It was almost like the wild west and they formed a wagon train. They sat around and I honestly couldn't believe that these were the indomitable warriors of the Air Force. They couldn't make a decision--should they stay, should they go, could they fly through the bad weather, were they going to get hit if they stayed on the ground, what should they do?

For all practical purposes it was dark when we heard the sound of a Porter overhead. I had my HT-2 radio on when I heard the pilot's voice calling "Ernie, Ernie, Ernie, this is (whatever his call sign was)." I said, "Yes." He said, "I have orders to pick you up and get you out of 108, you are not to overnight there with or without the Air Force." I said, "Come on, it's pitch dark, you can't land." And he said, "I am coming in, I am going to land and come get you. Do you have any kind of a flashlight?" I said, "Yes, I have a flashlight and I will go out and wave it around." He was an incredible pilot. He landed that Porter in the dark with nothing but me and a flashlight on the runway. In the meantime, then, the helicopter crews decided they were in fact going to fly back to Udorn. So they got airborne and headed south. I got on the Porter with the pilot and he said, "I got word from Vientiane that under no condition was I to come back without you." So, we took off. It was absolutely the worst weather, we were up and down, bouncing...

Q: Thunderstorm?

KUHN: No, just rain and fog. It wasn't until we got over Vientiane that we broke out into any kind of clear weather. So I got on the ground and went into Vientiane and spent the night, came out the next morning and got on the radio. Word was that Sam Thong was still open but 184 was still socked in. I got up to Sam Thong and my wife, who was teaching at the time, had already gone over to the school. I waited and waited around as the weather was still bad. She came back home about 11:00 from school for lunch and by this time I was really nervous. By this time I was really getting nervous. There had been several plane crashes and friends of mine had been killed and lots of unusual things were happening and I was very superstitious anyway. I was just a bag of nerves. So Phaythoune came home and started to fix lunch and I collapsed on the floor of our house in absolute pain. I felt like my stomach was being ripped a part. She called the hospital right away and the American doctor again was not there, but Dr. Kameung was there and he said to get me in a jeep and get down to the hospital right away. So I got down to the hospital and Kameung said all symptoms pointed to an ulcer. He said that he had no way of treating me there, that I needed immediate medical attention. So, they got on the radio and called down to Pat and Jiggs again. Pat called up and said she had clearance for me to be admitted immediately to the 7/13th Field Hospital at Udorn but the weather was getting bad down there. Well, by late afternoon we were completely socked in, no planes could come in or out. So I was at home that night just absolutely in agony lying on the bed. It was terrible.

The next morning the weather had broken enough so a plane was able to get me out and we flew down to Udorn and landed. A jeep came out and took me over to the CAS office and I called the hospital and they said, "Oh, my God, we thought you had died last night. We got a report that you had a bleeding ulcer and since you didn't arrive last night we assumed you had already died." Anyway, they put me in the hospital and I was there for ten days. It turned out it was not a bleeding ulcer, but it was a peptic ulcer and the doctor said that under no condition were they going to allow me to go back to Sam Thong. I said, "Well, I have a wife up there and everything else." I went back up to Vientiane and the doctors examined me. They said that they concur that I can go back to Sam Thong long enough to get my

belongings out and bring my wife down to Vientiane. Well, this meant that my wife had to leave teaching her class right in the middle of the school year and she felt it was a bad deal for the school. We came down to Vientiane and I was told that I was to spend a few weeks in Vientiane and I would then be reassigned some place, probably Luang Prabang. And in fact Phaythoune and I flew to Luang Prabang and were wined and dined, it was very embarrassing, by the area coordinator up there who actually had a party that we didn't know about and introduced me to all the Lao officials as the next refugee relief officer coming up there. Well, I hadn't made up my mind yet.

Transferred to Ban Houei Sai

In the meantime, Joe Flipse, who had been over at Ban Houei Sai and on home leave just suddenly called up one day and said, "Suzie (his wife) and I have decided that we don't want to go back to Laos, I'm staying back in the States." That opened up a position in Ban Houei Sai, which was more of an autonomous, one man operation. So when I heard that I immediately opted for Ban Houei Sai which was nominally under the Area Coordinator of Luang Prabang, but in fact had a substantial degree of autonomy in the operation of its refugee program. As Sam Thong had Long Chieng, Lima Site 98 (or 20 Alternate), as its CIA counterpart, Ban Houei Sai had Nam Yu, Lima Site 118 Alternate. Lima Site 118, Nam Thouei, had been the original USAID base of Joe Flipse, who later moved the operation to Ban Houei Sai. Houei Sai was also just a fascinating place to live. In addition to the opium trade, the KMT representatives, and the like, the Shan movement was represented by a FAR officer who, sitting in my house one night in front of my wife and six-month-old daughter, tempted me to accompany him on a trip to the Salween River, guaranteed safe passage to and from. I was truly tempted. He, Colonel Phai Vilypan, later lost a leg and then some years ago, still fighting for the Shan, drowned when a boat or raft capsized. He was a character straight out of Terry and the Pirates. The leading Chinese merchant in town had been a radio operator at Muong Meung, Lima Site 193, and at Muong Sing during the French period. The primary noodle shop was run by a (self-proclaimed) ex-KMT colonel with the improbable name of Oscar, who claimed that he had once traveled to San Francisco, and whose Yao wife had syphilis. Semi-precious gems were panned in rivers just outside of town. The province was littered with ruins of old towns and the troops often uncovered old stupas and chedis when they dug in positions on hilltops. Of course, Houei Sai was just a short distance from the old kingdom of Chiengsen. I spent many hours during the dry season on the Mekong trying to locate the giant stone Buddhas that tradition says were submerged in the river when it changed course centuries ago. During late 1970 and into 1971 the major spectator sport was watching bodies, single and in bunches, floating down from China...bound and executed during the era of the Red Guards. A sidelight to Joe Flipse, Joe's wife is Lao and when he came back to the States he had two or three children and just about a year or so ago his eldest daughter, Mary, returned to Laos with a law degree and has opened up a law office in Vientiane.

Bombing of Friendly Areas by American Planes

I want to backtrack just a few months here, if I may, to something that happened to me personally but it was something that over the years happened with much more frequency than anybody would like to acknowledge. That is the bombing of friendly villages and areas. In September 1969, I had arranged through USIS to take up a mohlam team. Now a mohlam team is often times translated as a vaudeville group which usually consists of three or four or five people, generally two or three men and two or three women. In the old days, they would go from village to village in Thailand or in Laos giving a combination of songs, jokes, a little political satire, etc. It could be most anything. In this case the people were Lao government and USIS people. They would come in and give a little propaganda talk, tell jokes, but as the evening progresses usually the mohlam team becomes more open, sexual innuendoes and in many cases, if it is a true private mohlam, it degenerates into really raunchy kind of jokes, etc. It is just a good time. The Lao like to have a good time with these people. So, I had arranged to take this team up from Vientiane to a very, very remote village, Houei Sang, Lima Site 206, which was near the Xieng Khouang/Sam Neua border, east of Route 6 (Usually designated Route 61 on U.S. Air Force maps.) that comes from Sam Neua down to Ban Ban. This particular village was well east of route 6. I had taken the mohlam team with a small generator and they had some lights that could be rigged up at night so they could put on their show. The mohlam team got set up and the villagers had a little party for us before the program was supposed to start. The mohlam group went out and started their routine and I stayed back in one of the little houses drinking rice wine with some of the villagers and just generally relaxing.

About 9:00 I was beginning to hear a funny little hum, but I wasn't paying much attention, when two villagers came rushing in very quick and saying "Tan Ernie, there is an airplane circling above the village!" So, I went out real quick and sure enough there was one aircraft making big long lazy circles around the village with its running lights on. Immediately I got out my little Stoner single sideband radio and set it up with the idea that if anything happens I would be able immediately to get a hold of Vientiane and the Attachés Office or somebody who could get hold of Udorn and see what was going on.

I got on the radio and called down to the radio operator and said, "Can you get me anybody in the Air Attaché's Office." The radio operator tried and tried and came back and said, "There is no one answering the phone." I tried the Army Attaché's Office and there was no body there. Just then the plane came in and dropped the first load of bombs. To make a long story short, over the next hour and a half there were two planes that came in. They would usually circle for a long time, finally drop a bomb and then circle back up again and circle, circle and come back again.

In the meantime, I got back on the radio again and got Jiggs Weldon on the phone. I explained to him the circumstances. He said, "I'll get right back to you. Is there anything else?" Just in the middle of the sentence a plane came in, and I don't know whether it was white phosphorous or not, but whatever it was it hit in a bamboo grove that was just down from where I was and huge shower of burning something came around me, it didn't get on me. Whether it was real white phosphorous or burning leaves, I really don't know, but it scared the heck out of me because it was getting closer and closer now. I dropped the

microphone in the middle of a sentence. When I got back on the phone, Jiggs said that the radio operator had decided that that bomb must have gotten me because I stopped talking right in the middle of a sentence. Anyway, Jiggs finally got hold of somebody at Udon and they called Saigon and word came back that there were no U.S. friendly aircraft in the area where I claimed to be and that the only aircraft in the area were in the process of hitting a truck park.

Well, I was up there with a mohlam team with a generator and one electric light bulb and they had claimed that was a truck park. The villagers wanted to turn the light off when the plane came over, but I said, "No, if we do that it looks like we have something to hide." So we left the light on. Well, that was a mistake. Finally at 11:00 the planes left. It turned out that the only thing that got hit was the school, which was blown up; the Buddhist temple, the wat, was blown up and with all that bombing and strafing they had never managed to hit the generator where the light bulb was. They hadn't even been able to hit any of the houses that were in the radius of about 60 to 70 meters around the light bulb. Now these were the same kinds of guys that would go out in the night and come back and say that on a very narrow 3 meter road they had just killed 50 or 60 trucks on some massive bombing raid. They couldn't even hit an entire village. The only thing that they could hit were the school and the wat on the outside of the village. The Air Force Attaché's Office never officially admitted that they had anything to do with it, but in fact they did pay for the repairs to the school and the wat.

I say that this happened more often than not. Down in the Panhandle, east and south of the Plaine des Jarres, there was a village, Ban Done, Lima Site 28, which was the home of the number two monk in Laos. This village had an airstrip that was at least 1,500 feet long (My FIC Air Facilities Data Laos (book) describes the strip as dirt/sod 1,600 feet long by 100 feet wide) It was never used much because it was never a militarily contested area. I had been down there on one occasion and we used to have a Caribou go down there periodically and drop fuel in drums. The villagers would bring them up and line them up on the runway because occasionally if a plane was in that area it was so far away from everything that you had to refuel to get back up to Sam Thong. It was a peaceful area. It was a village bisected by a river and there was this huge airstrip there. I don't remember the exact date but it must have been somewhere in 1967 or 1968 and one or two American planes came in and wiped out about half of that village. I mean totally destroyed it. Now, the standing order was that no villages were supposed to be bombed. However, in the Panhandle there were areas where fuel pods were released or unexpended ordnance was dropped by pilots approaching Thai airspace. There were also mountainous areas that were called free bombing zones where planes coming back from Vietnam that had not expended ordnance or still had live ordnance on board could jettison their load before they went into Thailand and had to land again. Ban Done was nowhere near these places and the fact was it was a village which never should have been hit in the first place. It was a tragic thing and I don't think ever got published. It was one of those incredibly stupid blunders.

Even further on down from there, when I came back to Laos in 1966, there were two or three occasions I had to go down into that area and pay death benefits to villagers whose

family members had been killed by bombs from planes that were just jettisoning their bomb loads in the area. Who determined that area to be a free drop zone, I don't know, but there were in fact a lot of civilians living in the area and in fact a fairly large number of civilians were killed. After going down there three times, I think, I said I would never go down there again and give out money to anybody who had a family member killed. To give somebody \$50 or \$60 and say this is compensation for your husband or your son or your daughter to me was preposterous. And, I never did. I don't know if anyone else was involved in it, but I simply refused to do it.

Back up to the place where I was staying. It was a very unnerving situation and I thought for sure that was going to be my last night on earth.. If those pilots had had any kind of training at all, that whole village should have been wiped out, so obviously the pilots were very, very poorly trained. This makes one wonder how much you could really believe when pilots would come back and claim they had killed lots of trucks on the road. I know Jerry Daniels and I on a number of occasions would get reports in the morning that a plane had hit so many trucks on route 6 or route 7 at 3, 4 or 5:00 in the morning and at 11:00 Jerry and I would go out and fly over the exact spot where the pilot claimed he had hit all the trucks and never even see a scorched place on the earth, let alone what might have been craters filled in from bombing.

Q: Did you ever find out how those pilots came to be targeted on that particular village which they may have thought was a truck park?

KUHN: Well, see, many of these airplanes used to use a triangulation process. They would use TACAN that was at Pha Thi and a TACAN that was over near Sam Thong and Long Chieng and then a TACAN that was up at Site 50. And there used to be a TACAN that was further south which was overrun. It was another one of these Pha Thi operations. So, at that time in 1969, they did not have the navigational aids they had had before. This pilot just wasn't where he thought he was. He thought he was over the road when in fact he was about 19 kilometers east of the road. The fact that he saw the light down there confirmed to him that it was a truck park, but the stupid thing is...and these were these A-26s, not jets that were coming in at 350 miles an hour, these were those slow lumbering World War II planes and there was plenty of time to take a look at the situation. He could have seen, I would have thought, or used his imagination, and said, "Why is there only one single light if it is a truck part?" Truck lights go out, make beams, and the fact that this light never wavered, never went off, never did anything, should have led him to believe that there is something wrong. Then, when they started to get radio calls from Udorn or from Saigon saying, "Verify where you are there is a friendly person down there" and then say "No, no, that can't be right, we know where we are," was just total arrogance as far as I'm concerned. So, thanks to some very poor bombing techniques I am still here to do this little spiel today.

Refugee Work in Ban Houei Sai, 1970

My wife and I in early April 1970 moved out of Vientiane up to Ban Houei Sai. I was running the refugee relief operations up there. During that time I was also unofficially

keeping my eyes and ears open for word about any opium and heroin traffic because the Ban Houei Sai area was right in the middle of the Golden Triangle. A year to two before, I am not going to go into this because it is all covered in other sources, but there was the famous opium war between General Ouane Rattikoun and Khun Sa (also known as Chang Si Fu, the half-Shan, half-Chinese warlord still active until recently) and the KMT that occurred just outside of Ban Houei Sai. There were rumors and unconfirmed reports that the KMT were running heroin factories along the Mekong border on the Lao side. There were extensive reports that the KMT operations were also running heroin factories on the Burmese side of the border between Burma and Thailand. Of course, if you are making heroin you have to have lots of chemicals, especially one which I forget exactly, acidic anhydride or some such thing. For every kilo of heroin you get you have to have hundreds of kilos of chemicals. So, people were on the alert to see whether or not there were any indications of large amounts of chemicals being brought into some of these remote areas that could verify whether or not heroin was being produced from the opium.

We were running the refugee program but there were a lot of other things that were going on at the same time. The U.S. was in the process of supplying Laos with a large contingent of so-called customs agents to help the Lao bureaucracy set up customs procedures. In fact, these guys were all narcotic agents and we were getting a couple of them at Ban Houei Sai. I had gone down to Bangkok sometime after this to do some business and was coming back up on the milk run to Vientiane and there was the first group of five or six of these guys on the plane with me. I had bought a stereo in Bangkok and had forgotten to get the customs papers before I left Laos saying that I was going to bring this in customs free. So I got to Vientiane and the customs people said, "Until you get the paperwork from the embassy completed we are going to have to keep your stereo system here at the airport." I said, "Fine, it was no big deal." Well, these narcotic guys were coming up and heard me talking to the customs agents and came over. They were dead drunk having been drinking on the plane all the way from Bangkok. They belligerently barged up to the Lao customs official and said that they were American advisers who were coming up to help the Lao and that I was an American working in the embassy and Americans in the embassy didn't have to pay customs. Therefore, they should let my equipment go through free. They just really made jackasses of themselves. Well, the Lao customs agent got really ticked off and he said, "I don't care who you are. I have never seen you before and you are not advising me. I want all of you to open up your suitcases." Well, that really caused some consternation. The first guy who opened up his suitcase must have opened it upside down because when he opened it up a full box of 38 ammunition fell out and the box broke on the floor spilling out bullets everywhere. These boys were really cowboys. So this was the kind of person they were sending to Laos to try to curtail what people thought was a huge narcotics problem.

The work at Ban Houei Sai was relatively cut and dried. The legendary CIA agent, Tony Poe, was running the operation up by Nam Yu, and Tony by this time and had been for two or three years, pretty much a nonentity in terms of what was going on. He was a total alcoholic. He used to come down to Ban Houei Sai...of course, when running the refugee operation I spent most of my time at the airport Tony would come down from up country or come over from Thailand and would be so drunk that we kept a set of stretchers at the

airport so when he came we could roll him over on the stretcher and either carry him out to the airplane or carry him off the airplane depending on which direction he was going. Tony, of course, later basically was thrown out of the country by the embassy and CIA for doing things that were not his own fault, but he probably should have gone long before he did.

I had been there just a few months at Ban Houei Sai when it was decided to make Ban Houei Sai a separate area. Laos was divided up into areas with area coordinators. There was one in Pakse, one in Savannakhet, one in Vientiane, one in Luang Prabang, one in Sam Thong. But the people in Ban Houei Sai had sort of operated semi-independently but under the control of Luang Prabang. The decision was made then that Ban Houei Sai would become an Area Coordinator position. The other American who was up there had been there a little longer than I had and was actually running the Rural Development Program, and he was named the coordinator. But a few months after I got there his wife became very ill and he was forced to leave, so I was named the Area Coordinator which put me in charge of not only the refugee program, but everything else that we were running there at Ban Houei Sai--schools, hospitals, public works, well drilling, agriculture as well as the narcotics people when they eventually came up. So my role in Ban Houei Sai had changed slightly which meant I did not get out and do the field work as much as I used to. I had someone else come up to do the relief refugee work. Wayne Johnson came up and became the refugee relief officer. In fact, this period when I was up there was not exactly the most exciting time for me. It was interesting being an Area Coordinator because you were autonomous to the extent you ran your own programs, did your own budget, went down to Vientiane to go to the meetings, but I was a little bit removed from the day-to-day aspect and it was not as much fun for me. However, during this time up there there were some things that happened that were again of tragic consequences.

Amnesty is Offered to Communist Terrorists, 1970

I will speak a little bit about the Thai side of the border because this is very important. The background of that area being that the Thai side of the Mekong River and then further south where there is a land border, a mountain range. Traditionally this area had never been inhabited by Thai, mostly tribal peoples or nobody. During the '50s when the KMT (Kuomintang) was pushed out of China to the south, they occupied parts of Laos at one time until they were pushed out of Laos and occupied large parts of Burma and Thailand. The Thai decided they could use the KMT in the border areas as protection against further communist incursions. So they entrenched the KMT in many of these border areas. The KMT operated semi-autonomously. I know from Ban Houei Sai and some of the big camps on the Thai side, if you went up river at night there were planes that came over at night ostensibly from Taiwan that made night drops. There were a couple of big airstrips up in southern Burma where you could actually see planes coming in at night. So even as late as 1970 they were still a force to be reckoned with. They had their own school system, etc.

One of their sources of income, of course, was trading in opium. This was a concern to the embassy and a concern to everyone. Also, too, there were other areas where the communist terrorists were beginning to move into the mountain ranges and were contesting some of

these areas with the KMT. There had been a series of governors in Chiang Rai who had not been able to make much headway in terms of the insurgency problem in the border areas. There was a new governor appointed to come in and had a totally different approach of dealing with the KMT and the communist insurgencies. As Area Coordinator from Ban Houei Sai, I had periodic meetings with the military leaders in Chiang Rai over border operations, and to a larger extent the American consulate in Chiang Mai, as well as the embassy in Bangkok. Two or three times a year we had meetings between myself from Houei Sai, consulate people from Chiang Mai, Bangkok, as well as Thai officials to coordinate border activities. So, this governor was doing a very good job to try to clean up the border areas along the Mekong between the KMT and the communist terrorists.

Anyway, to make a long story short, the governor sent out word that communists terrorists would be given amnesty if anybody wanted to surrender. Word came out that a large and very strong group of communist terrorists were willing to surrender if the governor, himself, came up and accepted their surrender. People advised him against this. I think it was November 1970. People advised him not to do this. He said he had to do it. So, he was to take a day or two walk up into the mountains to meet with these people and accept their surrender. Well, the CIA had given him a special cane with a radio transmitter in the handle and the plan was to have a Porter come up and basically on the Laos side of the river far enough away from where the governor was so the plane would not be conspicuous, to fly up and down the river at a given altitude all night long. If the governor got into any problems or needed any help he was to relay this to the plane.

Well, no one knows what happened. The plane came up and the pilot came in to see me. We arranged everything for him to take off before dark and to go up and down the river. He got orders to cancel the trip, he was not to fly but to stay on the ground, which he did, of course. The governor of Chiang Rai went up into the mountains and the next morning was ambushed and killed. It was a very traumatic thing and I don't know what happened. Of course, it had nothing to do with me or with AID, it was the Thai government and the CIA, but somebody blew it somewhere along the line. Whether the plane should have been up in the area and there was a mistake in the set of instructions; whether the governor didn't follow his instructions, I don't know. But he was killed in the ambush. The whole time that I was in Ban Houei Sai we continued to have major problems to the extent that when I left Houei Sai to go back on home leave around September/October 1971, it was extremely dangerous to drive from Chiang Khong over to Chiang Rai through the mountains. I did it a couple of times by arranging to go in logging trucks because there were certain kinds of vehicles that no one paid any attention to. You did not want to drive that road in an official U.S. vehicle or military vehicle or an official Thai government vehicle. So I used to go in logging trucks, if I had to drive. Normally I would fly, but there were occasions when I had to drive.

Q: Could you tell us who exactly the communist terrorists were? Were they Thai?

KUHN: They were primarily Thai.

Q: They were then an indigenous terrorist movement?

KUHN: They weren't necessarily indigenous to that area, but if you take the border area of Thailand and start about where Chiang Khong is and just go down south...the different provinces are Chiang Rai, Prae, Nan, Pitsanaloke, Uttaradit, etc. On the Lao side there are Luang Prabang and Sayaboury, which includes Xieng Lom, Lima Site 274, where the CIA had personnel stationed. That border area was a major Communist terrorist (CT) area. And remember, just a little further south on the Thai side was where I lived as a Peace Corps volunteer, near the Thai airstrip Tango 20, and by the time I left in September 1965 Red Chinese-backed propagandists were making major inroads among the Meo in that area. That was much further south than the KMT ever got. The KMT never got much further south than Chiang Khong. The further south you went the more the communist terrorists consolidated their [position along the border].

Q: Were these CTs being supported by China, or North Vietnam, or the Pathet Lao?

KUHN: Probably the Pathet Lao and maybe China. I don't think the Vietnamese were involved in that area, this is just my own guess, although they may be involved in the northeastern part of Thailand. I know that there were a couple of guys up in Luang Prabang and one guy up in Nam Yu who were absolutely furious. They had spent several months infiltrating agents along the border, down around the Sayaboury area, and had located a couple of big CT camps along the border. They had infiltrated people in there and knew exactly who the leaders were in that particular area and knew virtually everything about them. They were preparing on the Lao side a major operation with a select group of people to go in and hit these camps very quickly and they thought that if not kill, at least they could capture the major communist command structure along the border. Somebody, whether it was the CIA in Thailand, or the Thai government, no one really knows, but the Lao on the Lao side were actually in place and were actually observing the people they were trying to capture taking a bath in the river right near their camp when out of the blue came two or three aircraft and came in and started bombing these communist camps and bombing along the river where these people were. Everybody escaped. The guys at Nam Yu were absolutely furious because they said they didn't know who blew it. Somebody had blown the entire operation either deliberately or whatever. But they felt that they had a chance to capture the entire infrastructure for that area in one fell swoop. As it was, they got nobody.

The border between Burma, Laos and Thailand is the source of the old "Terry and the Pirates" cartoon. It was a real wild area with about 20 or 30 different ethnic groups living in that area, all of whom had allegiances or feuds with other groups. Then you bring in the opium in the middle of all this and the opium trade, it was a pretty complex picture.

Q: Did you ever go into Burma?

KUHN: I went into Burma once and created a kind of minor incident. I hate to say why I did it, but I became an avid collector of these little things that are popularly called opium weights and I have a collection of over 600.

Q: Elephant figures

KUHN: Elephants, ducks, geese, etc. We were up on the Mekong one day and one of the guys that worked with me said he had located several good opium weights at the Burmese village across the river and if I wanted them he would go over and buy them for me. Or, if I were interested he could take me over and we would both go in. I said that I would much rather go in myself, let's go. He said, "Well, you know, it might cost you a little bit more." I said, "Well, I want to see what the Burmese side of the rivers looks like anyway." So we went over and spent about three hours in this village, which was pretty stupid, actually. We came back across the river and I got back to Houei Sai. The next morning, Colonel Khamphay Sayasith came charging up saying he had just gotten word that there was some unknown American who had been seen in a Burmese village up the river and the Burmese army had started off to find out who it was and he wanted to know if anybody had gone across the river that I was aware of. I sort of played ignorant as if I didn't know what was going on. That was the only time I ever went into Burma and as I say it was a pretty stupid thing.

But there was between the Lao and Burmese government a lot more local cooperation. There was a lot of give and play back and forth, particularly because of the different ethnic groups living on both sides. We also used to get some interesting people coming through. One particular individual was Sterling Seagrave who a few years ago wrote a book called "The Sung Dynasty." Sterling Seagrave's father was Gordon Seagrave, the famous Burma surgeon. Seagrave was convinced that there were large numbers of Americans working up in Burma flying helicopters up and down the Mekong River running opium. So, he was probing the area trying to prove his theory on that. Then he had a theory that there were prisoners of war from Vietnam, Americans, who were running helicopters up and down the river. This guy was a real nut. So, occasionally you get people like this coming through with all kinds of wild theories. But in general Ban Houei Sai was fairly quiet.

Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs' Fight Against Heroin

During the time I was up there we had what used to be called the BNDD (Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs), and the guy's name was Bill Wamzak. He came up to try to find out whether or not heroin was being produced in Ban Houei Sai. We ran up and down the Mekong River a few times in a boat and pointed out to him the areas where General Ouane had his operations. I am not sure what came of all this. He seemed to be interested in where it was being produced, how much, and where it was going, but there was very little attempt to, that I could see anyway, for anybody to stop it. A couple of times I had reports of major heroin factories that were burned down, had been destroyed, either accidentally or through struggles between various warlords in Burma. The sources that would tell me this would ask me to please be very careful how I handled the material. I found out later that my reports were going down to Vientiane and were being left in the director's office and sometimes passed around and being left carelessly on desks, etc. It got

to the point that quite frankly I didn't want to send any thing down to the USAID director's office because it became quite obvious that things were being mishandled.

Q: It is pretty certain that General Ouane, whom you mentioned, was directly involved in this trade?

KUHN: I personally can't say that he was, but everything you heard indicated that he was. In fact, the great opium war of 1967 where Khun Sa, who right today is operating and these operations are under siege by the Burmese right now. Khun Sa's conflict with the KMT, General Ouane seeing an opportunity to take everything. Certainly this is well documented that the T-28's came in and blasted both sides. I don't know the details but he was involved in some shape or form.

At the same time, not to defend what General Ouane was doing, but in general the use of opium, the control of opium, was a government-run operation, even during the French occupation. Talking to my wife and other people, it was traditional for the rulers of Xieng Khouang to be part of the trade. We are not talking now about some worldwide conspiracy like we have now. This was just something, opium was moving in and out. There were a lot of people who were very legitimate people and honest and upright in their own right, but because it was condoned and traditional, probably got some benefit out it. It just grew to global proportions and I guess that is where the real problem came in.

Reassignment to Vientiane, 1971-1975

Quite honestly, of my stay at Houei Sai I can't recall much else that was going on up there at the time that is of significance, other than we were keeping the normal USAID operation going. We had one daughter who was born in Chiang Mai. We left Houei Sai on home leave and when I came back from the States it was decided that I would be reassigned to Vientiane and put in charge of the Division of Refugee Relief countrywide.

So from late November/December 1971 until the time that we left in May 1975, I was operating out of Vientiane. About 75 to 80 percent of that time was in a desk job. There were a few operations. For instance, in late 1971, early 1972, there were some big FAR operations over near the Vietnamese border in Khammouane province and Andy Leonard of the Army Attaché's Office somehow got involved along with General Att. General Att, as a colonel, had been Kouprasith's hachetman down in Paksane, Tha Thom area, and I think he had been involved with General Phoumi and was somewhat responsible for General Amkha being captured in 1960. Certainly, he was a warlord in the Tha Thom area. It was his GM in Tha Thom that looted Tha Thom when friendly troops came back in 1967. Somehow he got involved in this whole operation with the Attachés Office. I was asked if I would go over and look at this operation and see what was happening in terms of refugees. It was one of these sad things because several thousand people came in and had rallied to a FAR initiated operation, asked for weapons...these were all Lao or various kinds of tribal Lao. These people spoke different kinds of dialects. One village over there that struck me as being strange was that the people in the village would speak Lao but use Thai words. They

would say “kap” which in Thai is a polite term and they would use “phom” which is a Thai word for “I” instead of “khai.” It is interesting because just recently Jiggs Weldon told me that Jim Chamberlain, an ethnolinguist in Thailand, is trying to locate people he has heard about, these people in Laos who have a Thai dialect appended to their Lao language. Anyway, there were a lot of strange Lao groups in this area and they rallied to the government side. There was a village leader who defected and when he came over he made a big play about it in the Vientiane press and was made a big hero. I often wonder what happened to him after 1973 and then after 1975 when the communists took over. I am sure he was executed, but that is speculation on my part. This area expanded and got a little bit bigger and a little bit bigger and USAID gave it some support. It really wasn't a refugee program because the people were primarily in place and weren't moving around. I used to go there with Andy quite often. I don't know what happened to the area after 1973. It was just one of those little raindrops here and there that are important at one time and then lost its importance.

Q: What about the main refugee program? It expanded enormously, didn't it, between 1971 and 1973?

KUHN: Yes, the main refugee program did expand. I don't know the details before that because I wasn't really involved in it, but military operations in the south...enemy operations against friendly territory was much greater later on than it was earlier. The Bolovens Plateau was back and forth. Attopeu had fallen, it was back and forth. Saravane had fallen, and was back and forth. Sedone was pretty much under enemy control. All these activities pushed out more and more refugees. All these incursions from Vietnam into Laos to try to interdict the Vietnamese supply routes, all they did was to help push the Vietnamese further to the west and as the Vietnamese pushed further to the west, right in front of them, just like the tide coming in with all the flotsam and jetsam of military activity were more refugees.

We had a big refugee program in Pakse. Outside of Savannakhet there was a huge refugee relocation program. In the south the idea was trying to get the refugees into an area and then we spent tremendous amounts of money to relocate them. Whereas in the north it was more fluid and we didn't have roads and couldn't move around as much, only by aircraft, so the tendency was to feed people to the extent possible thinking that they would probably have to move and we would feed them somewhere else. It was almost a different philosophy between the north and the south. It wasn't until about 1970 or 1971 when we really began to have the philosophy of relocating and resettling the people from the north. In February 1970, just before Sam Thong fell...because right after I was evacuated from Sam Thong with my ulcer in January, in March Sam Thong fell to the enemy. At that time I think they moved something like 8,000 people off the Plaine des Jarres. Remember earlier I mentioned we were mostly keeping people in the area. By 1970-71 a major focus of our program was resettlement which was becoming more and more important. In the north we had lost most of the areas where we were involved in relief activities and the idea was that those people we did have, try to resettle them. We still counted them as refugees and they

still had to get refugee relief support, but there was an attempt to resettle them. So there was an overlap of functions here.

Q: As division director did you deal with this fact-finding commission that came out from Senator Edward Kennedy's subcommittee in 1971? Or was that before your time?

KUHN: I know we had people coming in and out of there a lot and I can't remember talking to anybody specifically or not. There was one person, Ron Rickenback, who when he left AID, he was in the Peace Corps with me, people were upset with him because when he came back he made a lot of anti-AID, or at least what we called anti-AID statements. He maintained the bombing was done primarily with the purpose of trying to drive civilians out of areas and we just didn't agree with that. But one thing that Rickenback did give us, he inadvertently saved the program probably when he testified before the Senate subcommittee and made these allegations that got Senator Kennedy so upset that we began to get more money. Rather than Rickenback killing the program, which I think is what he wanted to do, it evoked more appropriations for the program. I say this kind of cynically, but as you recall Kennedy, I think, had some designs on great aspirations and being a Senator he was trying to find things that would put him...

Q: Well, he certainly got a lot of publicity out of this refugee thing.

KUHN: So, it did help us in the long run, although some of the publicity that we got was rather stupid. Things like Metrical, used for dieting at home, but if you took it by itself with nothing else except a minimum amount of food, you could lose weight. However, if you were eating a minimum amount of food and drinking Metrical on top of that it was an added vitamin supplement and calorie supplement. In fact, I was losing weight so badly when I was working at Sam Neua that Dr. Weldon prescribed that I start drinking Metrical because I was eating one meal a day with the refugees. I was down to 123 pounds at one time. So, Jiggs arranged for me to get shipments of metrical. Well, some reporter somewhere heard that AID was giving Metrical to refugees. Of course this created a firestorm because here we are trying to feed people and we are giving them diet food. No one ever sat down to think about what was going on. Combatants were getting 800 grams of rice grain per day and each refugee and dependent 500 grams per day...about a pound per day for an adult refugee. In addition, each refugee family initially got a can of PL 480 cooking oil, period. Later, we were forced to substitute corn meal and bulgur wheat for a percentage of the rice in order to save dollars and reduce U.S. PL 480 storage costs in the U.S. We bought canned meat for a time but then we were forced to substitute meat protein with a soya blend concoction that was rich in protein. The fact that the refugees did not know how to eat the stuff made little difference to Washington. We actually trained young women how to cook some of these PL 480 concoctions and sent them out to the refugee areas to teach people how to cook bulgur wheat, corn soya blends and the like. On top of that, we were suggesting that they drink a can of Metrical. It was that much more added supplement to their diet, but that got lost somewhere. Then, of course, we had pharmaceutical companies and food companies that would ship over foodstuffs, things that had expiration dates passed. We had inquiries as to why we were feeding our refugees food that had expired. Of

course, the companies that gave us the stuff got in trouble with the IRS because they were writing this off as a tax rebate. We had one product, I can't remember which one it was, but we were told we had to go in and bulldoze a ton or two of this stuff. Jack Williamson was furious but he said he would take care of it. They bulldozed a big pit, shoved all the stuff in it, put a few shovels of dirt on it, reporters took their pictures and went home. The Lao went back out again, dug the stuff up and put it back in the warehouse. These are absurd little anecdotes, but we had to contend with these kinds of things on a daily basis.

Another thing we had to contend with was reporters coming in. We were told to talk to a particular reporter who came in one day. Jack and I were told to give him as much information as we could. This guy said, "When something happens and a place gets overrun, how do you know what to do with the refugees?" We said, "Well, we have contingency plans. The definition of a contingency plan is if such and such happens we might do this. For instance, we had a contingency plan for Pakse if Pakse got hit, and Pakse at that time was getting nightly rocket attacks on the city itself. We had Kilometer 13 with several thousand people out there. If certain things happened we might move them in this direction, if certain other things happened we might move them over here. As part of the contingency if certain things happened we would move them...if you remember in Pakse the Mekong River is not the border there...if they get hit we might move them across the river where there was a small Thai airstrip right across the border." Well, we were just telling this guy these different things. When the story came out the headline basically was "AID officials say that if Pakse gets hit, the refugees will be moved to Thailand." We told him we didn't say that. That he had asked us what we would do and we had told him we had contingencies based on different things. These kinds of things were very frustrating.

Charlie Mann was extremely interested, he wanted to know everything that was going on at all times. You didn't want to give Charlie any runaround because he had no sense of humor. He was 100 percent workaholic and he wanted to get the job done. Having said that, there was another aspect to Charlie Mann that I think did not serve the interests of the U.S. government or the interests of the Lao government at the time. Mann made it very clear when the cease-fire occurred, February 22, 1973, that there was to be no assistance to any Pathet Lao area. Of course, to some respect you can understand that because the Pathet Lao theory was it is a cease-fire and whatever is yours is partly mine but whatever is mine is still all mine.

Q: That was the principle on which they operated. After the cease-fire, they never allowed an official on the Royal Lao Government side to go into the Pathet Lao areas on any excuse whatsoever.

Unofficial Assistance to the Pathet Lao, 1973-1974

KUHN: Right. So Mann said until we have access we are not going to give any support to anything in the Pathet Lao areas. Well, in fact, we did do this because, like I said earlier, by 1971 the resettlement part of our refugee program had overshadowed the relief part. As we phased out the relief portion of the program I assumed the position of office director of all

the normal rural development activities in Laos. So the Luang Prabang area was a fertile area to work in because you had a lot of areas that were PL, government areas, and some gray areas. Working with Luang Prabang people we were able to circumvent Mann's edict and in fact we did build schools and support dispensaries in areas that were basically controlled by the PL. Gary Byer was the community development advisor in Luang Prabang and I went up there one time. Gary and I took a ten-day boat trip up the Mekong and then up the Nam Ou by pirogue stopping off at different villages. I came back with picture after picture of not only Lao officials but Pathet Lao officials from the Luang Prabang area; Gary and myself sitting down with PL soldiers and officials all up and down the Nam Ou or Mekong Rivers planning some small-scale local development activities. We met a lot of the PL people. But this was very low key and unofficial, but again we were able to start to provide some small assistance.

The most successful instance of USAID/RLG/PL cooperation occurred in the area of the important town of Pak Ou, where the Nam Ou River comes into the Mekong. The town gained additional importance from the famous caves, Tham T'ing, which contained thousands of statues of Buddha, and are located on the Mekong across from the mouth of the Nam Ou. Pak Ou had a water problem. Frank Bewitz was our public works advisor in Luang Prabang. This was about 1973 or 1974. Bewitz along with some of the local officials up there contacted the Pathet Lao on the communist side of the Nam Ou and said, "Look, you have some big springs up here. You let us come up and tap those springs and we will put a pipe across the Nam Ou to pipe water down to Pak Ou. The PL, for some reason agreed. Frank and his technicians explored the area across the Nam Ou from Pak Ou (in PL-controlled territory) and surveyed the springs. I don't know how he did it, but Frank and his people spanned the Nam Ou, at least 100 meters wide at this point, where the distance down the vertical face of the cliff from the top to water level was probably sixty or seventy meters, with pipe suspended on a cable. The pipe extended into the village and the water came down by gravity flow. He built big water tanks and then distribution tanks which were connected to underground pipes going out to pumps all over the village. This was a major success story...the cooperation between the PL and the RLG [Royal Lao Government] side plus the water system.

Jump ahead, it is now March, 1992. My wife and I have gone back to Laos on vacation for a couple of weeks. We take a boat from Luang Prabang up the river to Pak Ou curious to see if Frank Bewitz's system was still working after almost 20 years. We walked in and the first thing we came to was this big hand pump. I pumped it a few times, no water. It looked like it had been used. We walked about 30 or 40 meters, another pump, no water. So we walked on up into the center of the village and there was the big water tank. There was a little ladder going up the side and I climbed up the ladder and looked in and there was no water. I thought, "Oh, geez, this is too bad. The whole system has fallen apart." So, just then we looked up and this old man came out and we said hello to him in Lao. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I used to work with USAID in Vientiane and just wanted to see if the water system was still working. It looks like it is not working, what is wrong?" He said, "Oh, it is working. I am the chairman of the water association. Every three or four months they shut off the system, clean all the algae and scum out of the inside of the tank, drain the

pipes, clean the pumps and then resume. We just spent all morning cleaning the inside of the tank. Tomorrow morning we will start putting the water back in again.” So I started talking to this old guy and it turned out that he had been a carpenter who had worked with Bewitz and had actually helped install the water system. So, almost 20 years later, here is a perfect example of a water system that proves just the opposite of those who say USAID never did anything that lasts.

Q: Were the pipes still obviously across the river?

KUHN: Oh, yes. When we went up the river you could still see the pipes. So I was surprised when we got into the village there was no water. So, everything is still there.

Back to Charlie Mann. Jump ahead to September 1976. At that time I was in the Philippines and the director of the program there was Garnett Zimmerly. He had been formally a program officer in Laos years before and later had gone back to Washington as deputy assistant administrator for Vietnam and Laos at one period of time. He was in Washington when the cease-fire occurred in 1973. I was accompanying him on a five-day trip to the island of Leyte and he and I had a chance to spend many nights together in little tiny rooms with mosquitoes and no electricity. One night we were lying awake and talking. I said, “Zim, one of the biggest mistakes you people made in Washington was the day after the cease-fire occurred, you should have had Charlie Mann on a plane out of Laos. He was obviously a Cold War warrior. He was obviously someone who the communists did not like and did not trust and he didn’t trust the communists.” And Zim said, “You are absolutely right. I have thought about this many, many times in the past. It was a mistake to have left him there. But at the same time, Charlie Mann was so powerful and had so much clout in AID that he refused to leave. He said, ‘I won’t leave Laos unless I have a position commensurate with my status.’” This is all rumor and I don’t know if true or not. It is too bad that Charlie Mann is physically not able to give his side of the story because I am sure he would be able to talk days and days about Laos. He apparently was turned down, so the story goes, by several ambassadors in different countries. Ambassadors didn’t want him. They had heard he was a very tough individual, very strong and they didn’t want him. The position that finally lured him out of Laos, which was not until just a few weeks before Laos fell, was Assistant Administrator for Program and Management Services, a job Charlie Mann was totally unsuitable for. That was not his forte at all and, of course, the bureau chewed him up and he retired a year or two later.

Q: Yes, that was very sad.

KUHN: But, during his time there he was the wrong person.

Evacuation of the AID Mission, 1975

Q: He stayed, you say, up to the time the AID mission evacuated?

KUHN: No, he had left a month or two before. He and Charlie Whitehouse, who had been named as ambassador to Bangkok, left...I am trying to think...Lao New Year was the middle to the end of April and Gary Byer, the person I mentioned earlier, and his wife had gone on vacation for two weeks. When Gary heard that Phaythoune and I were planning on spending two weeks in Luang Prabang to celebrate Lao New Year, he offered us his house. It was a good deal for both of us as it assured us a place to stay (hotel space being at a premium), and Gary could feel that his house was safe with us staying there. I figured this might be the last New Year's celebration, and it turned out that it was. The Lao New Year in Luang Prabang is a two-week affair. Every day there is something that the king or crown prince does for two solid weeks. We wanted to see this so we went up with plenty of cameras and film. I photographed the king so many times and it reached a point where if he saw me he would slow down to make sure I got a good shot of him. It was during that two-week period...of course all the diplomatic corps was invited up and many people drove their cars up and I wanted to. Fortunately, we didn't because if you recall during the Lao New Year celebration the Pathet Lao attacked the Sala Phou Khoun road junction and overran it cutting off the ground route between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. It was also during these celebrations that Phnom Penh fell. It seemed to me that Charlie Mann and Whitehouse had left just the week before. I am not entirely sure about that. But he was gone sometime before we were evacuated.

Since the beginning of the year USAID had been making plans to reduce the size of the Mission...people were being given the opportunity to send their families home early, etc. Phaythoune knew that she and the children would have to leave soon and that I would stay in Laos.

[change of tape]...Charlie Mann, as USAID director, and the ambassador had both left prior to the USAID compound being occupied and there was serious trouble in Vientiane.

Q: I think that happened around May 1, the demonstrations.

KUHN: Sometime in early May, yes. I think it was a little bit later than that when we were actually locked out of the compound.

Q: How do you explain those demonstrations against the AID program? It would seem that the cooperation with the PL in Pak Ou was an exception to the rule, and the PL were very much against the AID mission and were determined to see it closed down.

KUHN: No, in fact, to the contrary. The Pathet Lao made it very clear that they wanted to continue U.S. government support, but they wanted it without the Americans. They were very naive saying this for some months..."We are happy to receive U.S. assistance. Give us the program, but close down your mission. We don't need two or three hundred Americans." The embassy in one respect agreed with that, that we don't need 300 Americans, so they began to phase out non important jobs and dependents. But no, the Pathet Lao said very clearly, "We expect assistance, but we don't want all the people around." I think the demonstrations right after Lao new year's...and the reason I think we

got shut out of our mission was later than the first of May because there were massive demonstrations also in Luang Prabang, in Savannakhet. Americans in Savannakhet were under virtual house arrest for a long time. Demonstrations in Pakse. I think, let's face it, Saigon was either gone or was going, Phnom Penh was already gone and look what was happening in Thailand with the students down there. The wave of the future was communism and the Americans had been defeated in Vietnam, in Cambodia and it was just a matter of time they were going to be out of Laos, so let's get as much as we can out of them. People who had worked for AID for years and years and were considered loyal employees suddenly demanded outrageous things from AID.

Q: At the instigation of the Pathet Lao.

KUHN: Yes, but they were receptive to that. Had they thought that the PL was not the wave of the future, these are the guys who are going to be gone in a few months, it would have been a different situation. But if you are standing out there as an ordinary Lao in the middle of the street at the end of April and looking around you in Southeast Asia, there is only one conclusion that you could come up with and that is it's a one-way street for these guys and it's a one-way street for the others coming in right behind them, there is no future to be with the Americans. And the fact that there were no Americans ever harmed, no one was ever seriously harassed...the Pathet Lao did not want to hurt the Americans, they really seriously expected that they were going to get some kind of support. I think this is one of the reasons why the embassy was never closed down, we maintained an embassy there and a chargé. There was always this feeling that something is going to happen, something is going to change.

Colonel Chansom Pakdimonivong, who had been General Vang Pao's Deputy Commander of MR II when I worked at Sam Thong, frequently stopped by our house in Vientiane for a cognac. Colonel Chansom and I had been very close. He and his wife acted as my "family" and go-between in the engagement and marriage discussions with Chao Saykham and my wife's family. I had tremendous respect for Chansom as a soldier. When we came back from Luang Prabang, Colonel Chansome's visits increased in frequency. I should note that Colonel Chansom's wife was a niece of Pheng Phongsavan, the principal Neutralist negotiator with the Pathet Lao in 1961 and again in 1972-1973 (Pheng Phongsavan was the head of the Neutralist delegation at the tripartite peace talks at Ban Namone in 1961 involving the Neutralists, Rightists, and Pathet Lao). The fact that Pheng lived three houses down the street from us (and directly behind the Russian embassy) made it easy for Chansome to drop in. Also, Chansome had been appointed governor-in-exile of Sam Neua, so his influence and information went beyond the military. Chansom had been providing me with insights on what was going on in the government. The night before (we did not know it was our last night at the time) we left Laos Chansom dropped in about 11 p.m. and we drank cognac until the wee hours of the morning. He said, "Ernie, AID and U.S. embassy made a couple of major mistakes. First of all, Mann should have gone a long time ago. Then, when it was time for him to go, he should have stayed. The ambassador should have stayed. Vietnam falls, Cambodia falls, U.S. ambassador leaves, AID director leaves. Who do you have to negotiate with the PL? You have your second string at the embassy.

Chris [Christian A.] Chapman, a good man, but he is the number two man. At USAID not only wasn't there a number two man but there was a number three man in charge. You have nobody of any stature in the embassy or AID to counteract the Pathet Lao. Their leaders are the same leaders that have been going on for 20 to 30 years and you have nobody of any authority at the embassy or AID to say we will do this or not do that because they are not high enough up in the pecking order. You have given away all of your bargaining chips." And he was right. Gordon Ramsey was the acting director. Gordon had essentially nothing in his gun, in fact, he barely even had a gun, it was a gun with no cylinder in it. He had nothing to bargain with or do anything with.

Q: Do you think the ambassador or AID director could have exerted any positive influence?

Chapman Keeps the Embassy Open in Laos

KUHN: Let's face it, individual persona is important in Southeast Asia. Who a person is. If I think I am dealing with someone of importance it is one thing, if I think I am dealing with somebody who is just sweeping up after everybody else has gone home, I deal with him in a different way. Chansom, being very well connected and in tune with what was going on and having a direct pipe line into Pheng Phongsavan's thinking, I think Chansom had a point. I really do. In the long term it may not have made a difference as to what happened. It may still have ended up the same way. But, maybe we wouldn't have had to leave Laos exactly as we did. Maybe an accommodation of some kind might have been made. Someone in the State Department, although I doubt this because the mood in America was so anti-Southeast Asia by then...Chris Chapman was in a delicate position and I basically have a lot of respect for the way he handled things at the end.

Q: Well, he managed to keep the embassy open.

KUHN: Yes, and he kept the American community at bay. There was a lot of agitation in the American community. People around Kilometer 6, the largest concentration of Americans, where the American School was located, and there was a little "suburban America," who were basically surrounded were pretty upset. We lived out on the economy (In AID-speak, we had a house in a nominal Lao/other foreigner neighborhood, not in an official U.S. Government housing compound.) in another section of town and we came and went freely daily. Chris was getting daily requests...this is true...every day they had to send back to the White House how many American Foreign Service officers, whomever, had left Laos; how many dependents had left Laos; how many were still there; how many were projected for the next days; how many left the next day; how many were still there, etc. This on a daily basis.

Q: It was really a question of getting as many people as possible out.

KUHN: Getting them out but at the same time though, the point I am making that the embassy had very little leeway to negotiate anything. They were under the guns of the White House to do it. Gerald Ford was saying, "Do it!"

When I say I had a lot of respect for Chapman, I think he looked at it from a very pragmatic standpoint. He kept things under control. The son of an internationally known Foreign Service Officer was a political officer at the embassy. The guy was kind of a jackass I hate to say. He was kind of pompous. I was in the embassy one day in Chapman's office and he came running in and said, "The Russians are landing Pathet Lao troops at Watthay." And Chris said, "So?" "Well, you have to go stop it." Chris said, "What?" "You have to stop this. They can't do this." Chris said, "And what am I going to use to stop them. Am I going to go over to [Prince] Souphanouvong and say, 'Oh, please don't do this any more?'" I saw Chris a few months ago and I mentioned this and he says he doesn't remember it. But, he was looking at it very pragmatically. The U.S. really couldn't do very much. There wasn't much he could really do. Send a note to the Foreign Ministry saying we don't want the communists bringing any more troops in or something? Yet there were a lot of people in the embassy who were running around wild not really thinking things through.

Q: Well, this was the time when the top government people were also leaving including the Defense Minister. What can you do if the Defense Minister flees? Vang Pao got out safely, I wonder if there was any consideration given to evacuating his followers after the situation turned really bad in May 1975? They were more or less left sitting in Long Chieng weren't they?

KUHN: Let me answer it this way. Vang Pao had left. Chao Saykham contacted me and said, "I need help. I need to get out. If the communists catch me at best they will put me in prison, at worst they will kill me, so I have to get out." In fact, that was why I was over at the embassy talking with Chapman. First I talked with the USAID acting director and he gave me no help whatsoever. I went over to see Chapman and he said we are not evacuating any Lao out of the country. What really burned many people up was this fact as well as the fact that if you were Vietnamese you were evacuated. Congress or somebody had passed something helping Vietnamese. So there were Vietnamese who had been born and raised in Laos who were being assisted out of the country, Lao were not. Fortunately, the consul general in the embassy called me early on and said we have to get your wife out of here. He said, "I have all the papers here and everything for her green card. We want to make sure she gets out of here okay." He was helping me do that. Phaythoune, as my wife, was a legal dependent and was on my travel orders. Our daughters, one born in Chiang Mai and one in Vientiane, had U.S. passports from birth. However, on the assumption that I might one day resign from AID and go into the hotel business in Laos, Phaythoune had never gotten U.S. citizenship. Thus, the Pathet Lao had every legal right to deny her departure from the country. In the end, she had more trouble getting into Thailand than out of Laos! But back to Chao Saykham. In the meantime, when I went over to see Chapman and tell him that Chao Saykham was basically asking for political asylum, Chapman said we had no program to help any Lao out of this country. We are not about to evacuate any Lao. There again, I didn't have any clout, I didn't have any authority. If Charlie Mann had been there or

Gordon Ramsey, the acting director, they could have called over and maybe I would have had an argument.

Q: You think this resulted from orders from Washington?

KUHN: Yes. Meantime I was told that I was going to be one of seven Americans who were going to stay behind to close down the Mission. Then I got word at 4:00 on a Saturday afternoon that my wife, both the girls, and I were to be on a plane at 5:30 out to Bangkok. The word was since my wife was still a Lao citizen they were afraid of retribution against me or her family if I stayed behind. So we had to just leave. Everything you see now, my wife's sister and family packed up for us. Anyway, I got down to Bangkok and immediately went to the embassy and said that I wanted to be one of the first people to apply for or whatever to work in any of the programs based in Thailand for the refugee Lao that we bring out. They said that there would be no program. I spent 30 days in Bangkok on TDY doing other kinds of work. I left on July 2 and on that day I was still being told by the embassy that we have no plans to have any kind of program for any Lao coming across the river. I got back to the States and my mother's and father's wedding anniversary was July 4th and we were trying to get back for that. We got home on the 4th and mother said I had had a call two or three days earlier from Washington. So, the next day I called and was told I was beginning assigned to the Philippines and that was it. Then I got to Washington about three weeks later and all of a sudden the big cry was, "Oh, we need people to go to Thailand, Guam, etc. and start working in the refugee program." I don't have any inside information, Arthur, but from the external sources that people I talked to when I was offering my services to the program, I was told consistently that there was no program. I think that was probably true. If you look back at the legislation in Congress and the *Washington Post* for June, July and August, I would suspect somewhere in there you would find an authorization for the U.S. government to start working with Lao and accepting refugees. At first it was all Vietnamese and that was it. So, Chao Saykham ended up going to France. He ended up driving a nitroglycerin truck. He was thoroughly disappointed because he had received several military honors, including the Legion of Honor; he had French in-laws, his sister was married to a French intelligence agent; he had a lot of contacts; and they didn't do anything for him.

Q: He was living in Vientiane at the time of the exodus?

KUHN: Yes.

Q: So, he just went across the river?

KUHN: He went across the river. He arranged a boat with all his children and went across the river one night. We helped him, in fact, they did it somewhat semi-illegally. He had his family's passports in order. About 10 p.m. one night someone from his household came over and asked if I could make passport photos for the family that night. I had a darkroom in my house. I printed a lot of visa-sized photographs for his family. He had made arrangements in advance and Phaythoune's sister was instrumental in getting them across

the river. But she and her husband remained in Laos for about six months before leaving. He had been renting a house in Bangkok and so they went down there and stayed two or three months. In fact, my wife and I, after leaving Vientiane, stayed with them for a month. Again, no one was interested in people like Chao Saykham for asylum in the United States. He went to France and they gave him very little help. He was driving a nitroglycerin truck which was a very stressful job. He died of a heart attack in 1977 or 1978, still very young.

Q: What about Vang Pao? Have you seen him again since 1975?

KUHN: I have not seen Vang Pao since late 1974. After the incident on the Plaine des Jarres in 1969, we were not at all close. I know that there has been a lot of controversy over money that was collected ostensibly to go back and retake Laos, and things like that. But I felt, to get back to the embassy business again, that it was another one of these cases where either the embassy was not representing what was happening back to Washington properly or what, but we should have had some programs to help some of the Lao who were coming out. When the decision was made to help the Meo, I really don't know. I don't know who made the decision to bring out Vang Pao's family.

Q: I think it was done on a very last-minute, ad hoc basis. It may have even been done by an individual like Jerry Daniels stuffing them into an airplane and taking off. As far as I can see there was no governmental policy at all.

KUHN: Maybe that is what I could have done with Chao Saykham, but I didn't have any aircraft in those days. My wife wouldn't say anything but I know she always felt bad that we were never able to do anything. Then, of course, her sister stayed behind for a while and then her sister, her husband and their daughter came out. They lived in a refugee camp for a couple of years and we couldn't do anything. We were overseas and we had some Americans who were very much disliked in running the refugee program in terms of who was getting visas and who wasn't. Finally they got very discouraged and accepted an opportunity to go to France where Chao Saykham was. Then this American came over and said, "Oh, I was just getting ready to let you go to the States and now you have accepted to go to France so that disqualifies you for the States." A lot of stuff like that. I was overseas continuously so I wasn't in a position to sponsor any of my wife's family. But the whole American evacuation and the whole thing with the embassy I thought was handled well in the sense that Chris kept the lid on everything but the overall policy was a mess. Things just happened so fast that people didn't know what was going on. A couple of days we drove to work and there were reported demonstrations and we had been warned to be careful when coming to the compound. Then there was one day that they locked the gates and that was it. Yet, people who have been back to the USAID compound the last couple of years or so, say that most of the offices that we occupied are just the way they were. People still have their name plates up on the doors!

Q: That's amazing. As if the Lao were waiting for AID to return. Well, there may be an AID mission again in Vientiane one of these days.

KUHN: Well, if people in AID right now have their way there will never be an AID mission there.

Q: No? Why not? Too much emotion?

KUHN: Well, first of all we don't have much money. Even when we might have had some money a couple of years ago, I came back from Indonesia and naively thought that all the time I had worked and lived in Laos and Southeast Asia people kept telling me, "People like you are going to be important later on." When I went back and tried to get back into the Southeast Asia program and offered my expertise the quotation from Linda Morris, who was the office director, after she gave me an hour of her time, she looked at me and said, "Ernie, you have too much old baggage hanging around your neck." You know the "Don't call me, I'll call you" thing. Four or five of my friends who, like me, had spent much of their career in Southeast Asia doing similar things like I had done all were rebuffed exactly the same way. And then, people who had not spent as much time in Southeast Asia, but whose work experience had been more recent, were also rebuffed. Then we began to realize that for the entire Southeast Asia program they were deliberately bringing in people whose basic background was Africa or South America. It was almost as if there was a conscious decision that anybody who had ever worked in Southeast Asia, even those who like us were at the operational levels and not policy levels, represented a failed program and therefore they didn't want to have anything to do with us.

Q: Well, let's face it Ernie, the only people who are interested in old hands like you in Southeast Asia are historians like me.

KUHN: I am glad there is one person in the world who has sat here for two days listening to all this. You must have a pillow or something you are sitting on over there.

Q: It has been fascinating, absolutely fascinating.

End of interview