

April Fools Day - Kong Le Style - LaDue
01/03/2002 2:00 PM

By: Mike LaDue

A year of employment with Air America, based primarily in Laos, certainly tended to make one feel that the phrase "routine work-day" was every bit as much of an oxymoron as was the previously mentioned modern Vientiane.

For the twelve months following my arrival in April 1962, almost every day seemed to hold in waiting, something unique from those that preceded it. The drop schedule rose to four missions (occasionally five) per day as sorties to the besieged garrison at Nam Tha were added to the drops we were already making in support of the forces of Colonel Vang Pao and the northern refugees, as well as to the White Star teams throughout the country. In addition, there were occasional (& never boring) "nocturnal drops" to be conducted. The permanent office building/restaurant and separate operation building were completed at the end of the ramp and the sometimes-pyrotechnic Mama Chu was hired to do the cooking. The Russians donated, some LI-2 transports to help the leftists offset the work which we and Bird & Son were doing, but they were stingy with their spare parts, so the olive colored C-47 wannabe's mostly just sat on a nearby ramp and rusted. Dutch Brongersma introduced two Pilatus Porters into Laos but soon found their piston engines to be under-powered. Both had crashed within seven months of their arrival and the next Porters to be seen were powered by French Astazou turboprop engines (which though quite an improvement power-wise, suffered from prop-reverse problems, besides being noisy as hell).

Other new aircraft to be introduced were 851 & 853, the first two of the wonderful Caribous from Canada, complete with their own DeHavilland tech rep. Thereafter, we Air Freight Specialists began to get to know the up-country areas more immediately as a result of the Caribou landings made there courtesy of such PIC's as Ed Eckholdt, Tony Durizzi, Joe Hazen, Paul Crews, Don Schwabel Bob Laturner, Paul Quackenbush and others. It was early during this period that Chief Pilot Fred Walker took one of the "Boos" up to Long Chieng, to make the first "larger-than-a-Dornier 28" multi-engine landing on that small village's dirt runway - this original strip being considerably shorter than, and aligned on a somewhat different azimuth from, the later-constructed and better-known paved runway at what was then LS-30.

In late summer, as demanded by the Geneva Accords on Laos, many of the White Star teams were assembled at Wattay Airport and physically counted by Canadian, Indian & Polish members of the "International Control Commission," before being flown out of the country. Their North Vietnamese Regular counterparts however, mostly just hunkered down in their many camps to wait and to watch for a chance to strike.

Sadly during these twelve months, Tom Dieffenbach was shot down and killed south of Padong (the crash site was only located when his badly burned Meo (Hmong) passenger Gu Yia walked out). Bill Bird's C-46 "77 Victor" hit a hill near Phu Fa, while making a low-level drop in bad weather to PARU Capt. Dachar at the LS-16 strip - the crash taking the lives of pilots Campbell, & Reno, PERU trooper Manop and his two indigenous "kicker" trainees. On November 27", Fred Riley and Don Heritage lost their lives when their C-123 was ambushed on final approach to a Plain of Jars airstrip - this mission. Being a part of a Lao Government-approved plan to aid General Kong Le's neutralist paratroops force (the shoot-down was ironically, ordered by none other than Kong Le's second-in-command, Colonel Deuan Sunnalath, with whom Kong Le had had a recent falling out). Little more than one month later (5 Jan '63), Bird & Son's converted Lockheed Ventura, 55 Charlie, was shot down east of Ban Houei Sai. On this occasion the four-man-crew was able to jump from the burning

aircraft on its way to impacting in high elephant grass. While one kicker died from injuries suffered as he landed by parachute, the two pilots and the other kicker were-successfully recovered the following day. ("The Black Knight," who had been the PIC, was yelling something about having to defend himself during the previous night against "man-eating-pigs," as he was being helped into the rescue H-34, but that's another story.)

On the evening, of 1 April 1963, I was (following a long day of missions and Gray House giant prawn dinner - the hired cook's specialty) sitting at a corner table of the Lido's outdoor street level veranda, watching the cars, buses, samolors, and bicycle traffic pass by while ingesting a few cold ones and talking over some business with a company associate (the old city generator was being cranky again and a nice light breeze was blowing, making the veranda far more attractive than the nightclub upstairs with it's ceiling fans stilled). The Constellation Hotel's open bar was lit up down and across the street to our left: the That (pagoda) Dam near the U.S. Embassy could be seen across the Samsenthai intersection and further down Chanta Khumman and an expensive-looking, Mercedes was just pulling up to the French-style white house diagonally across from us, to the right-front obviously the vehicle of some Lao royalty and/or politician. Some Indian merchants down towards Jack & Johns were arguing with each other over whatever and the smell in the air was that given off by the flat-spiral-formed lengths of punk which the waiters had placed on the tables and lit to repel mosquitoes.

The sound which suddenly, put an end to this tranquil scene, erupted from the direction of the white house across the street - an unmistakable burst of about eight rounds of sub-machine gun fire, followed shortly thereafter by two or three more single shots. Immediately, my associate and I cleverly reacted by launching our beers straight into the air and freezing for a second or two, dumbly wondering if what we had heard was something else - the celebration of some obscure Lao holiday perhaps. We both then dove for the cover of the low concrete retaining wall which skirted the outside of the veranda and provided about a foot of vertical cover between us and the suddenly dangerous far side of the intersection. When all was quiet for a time and we chanced a quick look, we could see two or three of General Kong Lee's neutralist paratroopers walking around the front yard of the house near the Mercedes. Later still, following a strategic withdrawal back in the direction of the Gray House, a Lao we met told us - in a broken style which seems funny today, Those soldiers have been busy shooting seriously at the foreign minister. And so - as we learned later - they had been. It turned out that Kong Le had held a grudge against left leaning Lao Government Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena ever since the previous February's assassination of the General's friend Ketsana Vongsavong by communist agents on the Plain of Jars. And April Fools day just happened to be chosen as "pay-back time." Quinim's house guards (who belonged to Kong Le's airborne unit) shot him and his wife in the legs as they stepped from their car following an ambassadorial reception given by King Savang Vatthana. After the couple was down, one of the soldiers walked over to the helpless diplomat and provided the coup de grace, thus squaring the score for Ketsana's murder while also providing yet another unexpectedly exciting evening for those of us sitting on the Lido veranda across the way. So exciting even, that I don't believe I ever had the presence of mind to pay the evening's bar tab and leave a tip.