

AIR AMERICA: A DAILY ADVENTURE on Friday, May 2, 1969  
by John Kirkley

john\_kirkley\_1969.jpg (85178 bytes) It was still dark at quarter past five in the morning when the blue and white Air America VW shuttle bus pulled into the driveway. "Sawadi kulp," I greeted the Lao driver while stowing my flight bag in the rear. Wattay Airport in Vientiane, Laos was a short drive and there was enough time to have breakfast before my dawn departure.

Following a few pancakes, I walked over to flight ops to check the weather and see if any changes had been made to my flight schedule. It confirmed that I'd be flying with Pilot Rayford "Jeff" Jeffrey and Co-pilot Frank Reniger in a C-123(K), with a remain over night (RON) in Udorn, Thailand. As I

walked up to the plane, Jeff was doing the pre-flight inspection and Frank was checking the fuel supply. "Hey Jeff, where we headed?" I questioned. "Outa Pepper Grinder", he answered in a southern drawl. Jeff grew up in Alabama, as I had, and flew combat missions as a Flying Sergeant in North Africa the year of my birth, 1943. Frank was from North Carolina and trained in the Navy. Having flown with both of them over the years as a "kicker" (Air Freight Specialist), I trusted their flying abilities and judgment in the one twenty-three.

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Udorn Thani was a 20 minute flight due south across the Mekong River and site of one of the largest U.S. Air Force bases in Thailand. Here we worked out of AB- I or Pepper Grinder. AB-1 was where we loaded humanitarian supplies i.e., live pigs, chickens, water buffaloes, white rice and passengers. Pepper Grinder was where we loaded "hard rice" e.g., ammunition, howitzer shells, rockets and bombs, as well as 55- gallon drums of aviation gas going to up country Laos. Today's 10,000 pound load of 250 lb. bombs and 50 caliber ammunition would be re-supplying the T-28s flying out of Long Tieng, Laos, aka, Lima Site 20 Alternate (LS-20A).

Following a 45-minute flight, we landed on the dirt strip of 20A and taxied to the offload ramp. Long Tieng nestled among the mountain tops about 150 kilometers north of Vientiane. This was the head quarters of General Vang Pao and his Hmong (Meo) guerrilla army and where the "Customer" (CIA) directed the not so secret war in Laos. While I helped Lao soldiers unload, the Customer walked over to Jeff and Frank as they exited the plane to stretch their legs. We were informed that overnight Vang Pao had secured control of the town of Xiengmap.jpg (143677 bytes) Khouang on the PDJ, (Plaine Des Jarres). Our plane and another C-123(K) flown by Bob Watson, a Missoula smokejumper '51-'52 and Co-pilot Joe Conde would fly in and pick up captured Communist weapons. The Plaine Des Jarres gets its name from the hundreds of jars carved out of granite. Ranging from 3 to 10 feet tall and weighing up to seven tons, these jars are an enigma as to what purpose they served 2500 years ago. Theories vary from brewery cauldrons to funereal urns. In the early 1960's Vang Pao and the Hmong moved to Long Tieng out of necessity when the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forced them off the PDJ. Xieng Khuang Province was a strategic area of Laos. Many U.S. military and Air America planes had been shot up and shot down over this region. We had avoided the unfriendly PDJ for over five years and now we were directed to land there. In this work there were times of boredom while on standby waiting for weather or mechanical problems to be repaired, mixed with times of white-knuckle awareness. There was never a typical day, circumstances happen in wartime that changes things immediately. This profession was impromptu, spontaneous and at times, combustible. Air America was the perfect occupation for anyone who enjoyed living on the edge in an exotic environment.

The Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines fired up as we headed to the front lines. Reaching flying altitude, the reverberation and lower pitch of the engines being throttled back lulled me

into reflective reverie as I looked out the rear door at the jungle a few thousand feet below. Anticipation of "what if" surged thru my body, that funny feeling which comes with adrenaline when about to enter the realm of the unknown. This emotion was now summoning up similar rushes from my past, like getting in the open door of a Twin Beech as a smokejumper and waiting for the john\_kirkley\_pics.jpg (131877 bytes) signal to exit to fight a raging Oregon forest fire 900 ft. below. This sensation was also ever present when flying night missions for the company. Since hiring on in 1965, I had endured several types of night missions. There were night flights out of Savannakhet, Laos in a Caribou (DHC-4), night flights out of Naha, Okinawa (Kadena) in a DC-6, but the ultimate gut check of all was the night flights out of Udorn, Thailand in a modified Onmark B-26. These unmarked B-26s were equipped with terrain following radar that allowed us to fly in the dark below the tops of the limestone-karst mountains and above the trees at 250+ mph. The mission was dropping supplies to reconnaissance outpost along the Lao/North Vietnam border on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Mugia Pass. It took four guys up front to fly this baby with two kickers in the rear dropping cargo out a 3 by 3 foot hole in the floor. All of us remained wide awake on this duty, especially when the North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns started lighting up the night sky. Kickers lovingly referred to this plane as the 'flying coffin', no jumping out at low altitude, we were all in for the ride.

Meanwhile, as we entered the PDJ, two U.S. A1-Es passing below us brought me back from deja vu doo. Grabbing my camera, I photographed the bombs from the A1-Es hitting anti-aircraft gun emplacements over looking the airstrip where we were about to land. When the wheels dropped I stuck in the gear pins and buckled up. As we taxied to the end of the short dirt runway we were met by General Vang Pao and Edgar "Pop" Buell and several dozen Hmong soldiers. The captured booty of Russian 37mm anti-aircraft guns and French vehicles would be shuttled to Long Tieng. To our relief flying in and out of the unstable PDJ went without mishap, no bullet holes or emergencies. As dusk came we headed to Udorn to overnight. First stop, Club Rendezvous tojohn\_kirkley\_articles.jpg (230045 bytes) wash down the upcountry dust, play darts, gossip and chow down. After dinner Jeff suggested we call it a night, first light came early. As we exited and rounded the corner we came upon Frank dangling by one arm from the awning covering the walkway. His eyes were closed as he hung perfectly still. "Hey Frank, what the hell you doing up there," I chuckled. He opened one eye and with a sly grin exclaimed, "Just hanging around!" We burst into laughter as much at the spectacle of him loitering 4 feet above the pavement, as the profundity of his usual calm Frank-ness. These were temporary and uncertain times we experienced together and it wasn't just about the hazardous duty pay, it was more about 'just hanging around' to see what adventure the morrow would bring.