

The Blue Goose and the Steel Tiger - Bonansinga  
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Air America's B26 Night Drop Project  
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A dark blue long nosed twin engine airplane showed up at the AA ramp in Udorn, Thailand in May of 1967. It was to make night drops to supply infiltrated indigenous troops in unfriendly territory. These surveillance teams operated between the Mu Gia Pass to Tchepone in east central Laos. This area with its jagged hills, called karsts, had a network of roads from North Vietnam snaking in and out of the jungle cover toward South Vietnam. The network of roads was referred to as the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the area was code named "Steel Tiger." The sleek machine was a B26.

#### Blue Goose B-26

This AA B26, N46598, was painted blue with white trim stripes and nicknamed the "Blue Goose". It was also affectionately referred to as the "Blivit" which implied something-stuffed full of more than it could hold. This was true, as it had everything from A to Z when it came to electronic equipment and then some!

The Blue Goose was considerably different from the WWII Douglas A26 Invader; a medium bomber whose designation was changed to B26 in the 1950's. This hybrid B26, arrived with many of the modifications taken from the OnMark Company's corporate Marketeer and a few from the OnMark USAF B26K attack bomber also known as Nimrods when flown at Nakhon Phanom in eastern Thailand.

The similar modifications consisted of wing tip tanks, copilot instruments and controls, and enlarged rudder for better control, oversized anti-skid brakes and an air stair door on the starboard side. The engines had reversible props and with water injection, gave each P&W engine 2500 hp on take off. Also our Blue Goose had the bomb bay doors removed and the addition of a large couch with several seats as in the corporate Marketeer modification.

The paramount changes featured in this B26 were Terrain Following Radar; precise navigational gear and a cargo drop ramp. These additions enabled "598" to deliver supplies at night, at low level and in most any kind of weather. The TFR was new at that time. In fact, the only aircraft to have it was the new USAF F111, an all weather twin jet fighter bomber not yet deployed in SEA. Installed in the B26 nose, this unique radar enabled it to fly low at night over any terrain getting to the drop area and away from it as quickly as possible. The auto pilot could be coupled to the TFR and the navigational equipment was checked before and after each flight with exceptionally accurate results.

The other major feature in AA's B26 was its cargo drop ramp, similar to that in the C123 and the Caribou aircraft, but much smaller. A pallet of approximately 500 pounds of supplies was pushed out of the 26's cargo ramp by the Air Freight Specialist (AFS) or as commonly called, the kicker.

The B26's main wing spar still ran through the fuselage causing the 3 man cockpit crew to crawl under the large metal main spar to enter the cockpit from the cabin. This made hasty egress via the cabin impossible. Also, the cockpit hatch couldn't be used for bailing out, without the high probability of hitting the wing root and/or the tail section. Thus, parachutes were sat on and seldom hooked up, except by the kicker.

Navigational equipment besides the radar and computer was a military type Tacan, an ADF and the VOR/ILS nav/landing aid. Communications gear was UHF, VHF and HF radios and an IFF encoder, a radar altimeter and one black box in the center console, its use never explained and never used.

The navigator was stationed behind the pilot with his table and chair where he operated the navigational equipment and radar. Besides this important job, he helped spot the drop zone (DZ) lights on final run in to the drop site.

The crews flying in the 26, as best remembered, were: Chief Pilot Jim Rhyne, Pilots, Berl King, Gene Hughes and Bonansinga. Copilots, Walt Darran, Bill Reedy, Ed Dudeck, Dave Krebs, Bill Harvey and Terry Luther. Navigators, Roger "Mac" McKeon, Richard Andrews, Raymond Feind and (?) Richey. Kickers, Billy Hester, Miles Lechtman, Mick Swift, Bill Buzard, Robby Roberts and Cliff Hamilton.

Pilot Don Gearke along with electronic technician Paul Byrne and Mechanic Leonard Billotee, all from Intermountain in Arizona, gave us a short ground school on the aircraft and its electronic equipment prior to check out in the B26. After about 7 hours and a similar number of landings (from my log book) AA's check captain Albert "Rocky" Meier gave King, Hughey and Bonansinga, line checks with Don Gearke observing the rides. We then flew together making practice day drops at the Thai Border Police camp outside Udorn followed by several night drop missions to road watch teams, training in Laos.

On one such night training flight northeast of Savannakhet (L-39), "practice" tracers were coming our way. Berl and I stopped dropping and returned to Udom. That night, at the Club Rendezvous, we learned the troops where we had dropped had to expel attacking unfriendlies. Only then could they call it a night after their "training" exercise.

The typical mission was to supply the surveillance teams with food, hard rice (ammo) and whatever they required. A road watch team, "Stag & Quail", were two code names remembered, would radio in their needs, giving a drop zone location and receive an agreed upon drop time and signal; usually it was a T or L made with flash lights. The DZ signal was turned on just prior to the expected drop time or when the 26 was heard. There was no communications between the infil team and the Blue Goose, so if no signal was seen, it was a no drop. And only one pass to the DZ coordinates was made. The aircraft was normally towed to the Udorn customer's warehouse, referred to as the AB-1 ramp for loading and briefing. The kicker supervised the loading while the navigator and pilots figured the flight plan, usually departing Udorn after dark. The flight called for the plane to descend to a low altitude entering the Steel Tiger after crossing the Mekong River into Laos.

We'd hit an initial point (IP) at 7 or so miles from the DZ, slow to approximately 140 knots and the kicker lowered the ramp. After the DZ lights were spotted and the load dropped, we headed back to Udorn or sometimes to Savannakhet to reload for a different DZ.

AA had excellent, if not the best maintenance in SEA and this was particularly true at Udorn. We were most fortunate to have Stan Wilson and crew at AA's Savannakhet base. They furnished the 26 with excellent service and maintenance, besides keeping the Volpars going on their "all niters".

Nonetheless, problems occurred as in all machines. Several in flight engine shut downs and an electrical fire are well remembered. Another time, a load got off the tracks and the AFS somehow managed to kick it out and kept from going with it. Then once, departing from the customer's warehouse at Udorn, a prop got damaged when a wheel dropped into an unseen

pot hole one very rainy night. Fortunately, soon thereafter, the entire customer ramp and taxi way was repaved.

The B26 was similar to dropping in AA's other aircraft except for two problems. First, it was too fast, with a minimum drop speed of 140 knots (163 mph) compared to 122 knots in a lighter A26 Invader. This minimum safe control speed, if an engine failed (V<sub>mc</sub>), was higher than most of our other drop machines and cut down the maneuvering or line up time once the DZ lights were spotted.

The other major problem was seeing out to drop. The pilot's forward vision was hindered by the Blue Goose's nose. Once the DZ was spotted, a slightly curved approach in a left turn was required to keep the DZ lights in sight to make a successful drop. Somewhat similar to having to turn to see the LSO's signals making a carrier landing approach to a straight deck carrier in days of old. This problem was particularly true flying the long "hose nosed" F4U Corsair.

Darkness was not a factor in the project's outcome. But a DZ surrounded by high jungle cover could pose a problem when coming in low for drops. We did have a couple missions where no DZ lights were displayed; it's likely the night watch team had more steel than tigers to worry about, in the unfriendly Steel Tiger. Our last night drop mission was with Terry Luther, Ray Feind and Cliff Hamilton aboard the Goose on the night of October 7, 1967. Shortly thereafter the project was canceled. The results indicated the other AA drop aircraft at Udorn could do the job better than the Blivit. The project was somewhat reminiscent of the AD4N Skyraider missions with crew members who operated electronic equipment during night carrier missions. Reliable teamwork was a must in getting the job done in both missions. The support crew at AA were professional, reliable and you couldn't find better anywhere.

The Blue Goose was one going machine and I enjoyed flying it. The night drop missions were always interesting. But that one black, super secret, box will forever remain a mystery. Probably was a fax machine!