

The Price of Freedom - Klusmann  
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By Chuck Klusmann

The Air War in Southeast Asia began in May of 1964. The U.S. Government had been requested to provide a show of support to the Royal Laotian Government. No one had flown over North Vietnam, and the air war in the south was still in the early stages of getting organized. The request of the Laotian Government would provide the catalyst which would lead to the most intensive air war ever conducted by anyone. The beginnings were relatively minor on a world wide scale; but the events were very real for the few involved in carrying out the missions.

Aboard the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk, the cruise was coming to an end. The ship had deployed in Sept. 1963 and was soon due to head home. While cruising off of Okinawa, she received orders to proceed to a geographic point about 100 miles east of Danang off the coast of South Vietnam. This point was to be designated "Yankee Station". In route, there was considerable discussion regarding how the show of support for Laos was to be implemented. The options being considered ranged from an air group fly over of a large number of aircraft, commonly referred to as a "group grope", to a fly over of six to eight fighters and bombers, and finally with a fly over of two unarmed reconnaissance aircraft. Fortunately for a number of pilots, the last option was selected.

There was little coordination between those at the operating level. The Navy knew that the Air Force and the Marines were operating at various locations in South Vietnam. We had been briefed that there was an organization called Air America operating in Laos delivering food and supplies to the friendly civilian and military forces. We knew approximately where the good guys and bad guys were supposed to be, but very little detail was known. We had been told that Air America had only VHF radios so another type aircraft would have to relay if we needed to talk to them. Plans for Search and Rescue, or SAR, were very limited. The ship would launch helicopters toward where the plane went down, but it might take two days to get there if the area was in Northern Laos.

This was not any great concern, because we were flying the RF-8 Crusader which was a very reliable aircraft and surely no one would actually shoot at us. Even if they did, we were protected by a sixteenth of an inch of aluminum which made up the aircraft skin. We were safe in the cockpit. That's just the way pilots look at things. Nothing is going to happen to me, we're invincible. That concept was to undergo some serious challenges over the next few weeks. The decision was made to show the flag by sending two unarmed recce aircraft over Laos. The target area was the Plaine des Jars in Northern Laos and the road leading there from North Vietnam. The first mission was flown by Lcdr. Ben Cloud, the recce team Officer in Charge, and myself flying two RF-8 Crusaders. It was approximately 500 miles from the carrier to the target area and was within range of the aircraft and would provide about 20 minutes at low altitude to get some good photo coverage. No inflight refueling was planned. The flight went well and we were flying over the Plaine des Jars separately to improve coverage; but still within sight of each other. Ben then called out that he thought we were being shot at. I had seen nothing yet but noticed some white puffs around the aircraft, then some red streaks coming up from the ground. About that time, several red lights came on and I noticed fuel pouring from the left wing. Ben told me when to turn to avoid the AAA as it started to track up my tail. There were a number of these breaks to get away from the area of intense AAA; and by the time I was clear of the area, the left wing was on fire at the wing fold area. We decided that it was time to head home and scramble for altitude in the hopes that the fire would go out. We got to 40,000 feet and after about 20 minutes the fire did go out.

On the way back to the ship, I saw pieces of aircraft flying off the wing, but Ben said not to worry. After all, it wasn't his plane. The flight back to the ship was a bit tense. I had lost considerable fuel from the hits in the wing and was trying to figure if I had enough gas to make it back to the ship. We saw some contrails heading toward us from the West and called for some fighter cover from the ship. The contrails turned out to be some USAF aircraft who were checking us out because they didn't know about us either. Weather was great and I started an idle descent from 42,000 feet toward the ship. Emergency lowering of the landing gear and raising the wing worked OK and I recovered on a straight in with about 600 pounds of fuel. Almost enough for one more pass if needed, but I wouldn't want to try it. Once on deck, I saw that the left wing fold was a mass of melted aluminum and the top of the left aileron was burned away. There were holes all over the aircraft; but, it would live to fly again about 18 months later.

The recce missions would continue both day and night for the next several weeks. Pleas from the ship and Seventh Fleet to provide armed escorts were denied. It was just the recce flights. Obviously we changed the tactics a little. The first mission we were at 3500 feet and 350 knots while over the target area. After that we flew at 500 feet and 550 to 600 knots during daylight missions. The flying was more difficult but we took fewer hits. Nothing else changed with regard to the rules of the game. No escorts, fly the same route nearly every day, no coordination with other services, and no good SAR plans. This continued until early June. The Constellation had arrived at Yankee Station and was prepared to take over. We had been deployed for more than eight months and were due to rotate back home. We had only one more mission remaining on the 6th of June and then we were on our way. For the mission on the 6th, I was to fly lead and Lt. Jerry Kuechman was going to be my wing man. Ben was to launch as an airborne spare and, if we both were OK, he was going to land on the Constellation to brief their pilots. The launch was normal and Jerry and I proceeded toward the target with some A-4 tankers so we could top off just before entering Laos. The refueling went like clock work and we headed toward the PDJ. The weather turned a bit sour and we encountered some thunderstorms and a solid cloud deck below us. Any navigation aids were far behind us at Danang, so we were navigating strictly from the map. We let down along the Mekong and picked a heading for the PDJ. We were at treetop level and just below the cloud deck but the visibility was pretty good. We were just about to abort and head for home when the clouds lifted a bit and we could see the PDJ. We headed in toward our assigned targets in the valley and then proceeded along Route 7 past Khang Khay and toward the last target which was the bridge near Ban Ban. Passing Khang Khay the AAA got more intense, just as it always did, and I picked up some hits in the wing. I was losing fuel and called Jerry to pull up and that we were getting out of there. During the pull up, I took a good solid hit on the fuselage. This was the first time, out of four times being hit, that I could actually feel the hit. I sort of knew that it must be more serious than the others. It was. The plane was going like a scalded ape, but I was losing my flight controls. The F-8 has a fully powered system and the only thing going between the stick and the actuator is hydraulic fluid and I was losing great quantities of it in a hurry. After less than two minutes the control system froze and it was time to get out and walk. I called Jerry and said adios and pulled the curtain. The punch out seemed wild but Jerry later said that it was just like in the movies; one turn, drogue chute, seat separation, and then main chute.

After the chute opened, I took a body inventory and all the parts seemed to be properly attached, so I looked around. I saw the plane hit in a ball of fire. That was tough because it was our best aircraft. Next I thought about the face curtain in my hand and thought what a nice memento it would make of the event, so I clipped it on my torso harness. All the while there was a lot of shooting on the ground. It dawned on me that there was only one target to shoot at, and that was me! I could hear bullets whizzing by but none seemed too close. I

guess it was about this time that I realized that I was about to fall into really deep yogurt. There was little I could do for the moment except continue my ride down. What anyone sees in jumping out of perfectly good airplanes is beyond me. It's like hanging in a jock strap. Boredom ceased when I got within about 100 feet of the ground. It came up in a big hurry. There was one tree in the clearing and I was going right for it. I crunched into the top of the tree and then the chute pulled me out; I crashed through the branches and landed off balance with one leg out to the side. My right hip, knee, and foot were badly wrenched and I could hardly stand. I did manage to wedge my foot in a bush and pulled until something popped and some of the pain subsided. I surveyed the situation and gathered my survival gear and made ready to get away from the site as soon as possible. My wingman, Jerry Kuechman, remained overhead for a short while until he had to head back to the ship due to low fuel. It got very quiet then. I started heading up the hill, but the grass was high and I was leaving a significant trail. I couldn't walk well at all so I half crawled and walked. Soon I heard another aircraft and spotted a Helio Courier overhead. I had no voice radio, just a beeper which I assumed was working. I set off a smoke to let him know exactly where I was. This was probably not a great idea because of the bad guys in the area, but I didn't think of that at the time. In a few minutes, the sun came out and I signaled the plane with my mirror which he spotted immediately and responded with a wing rock and revving his engine. Great! Now at least, someone knew I was alive.

The Helio was soon joined by a C-123 and a Caribou. It was a good probability that these planes were from Air America. Jerry later confirmed that after the first Mayday call, Air America responded with, "where are you and what do you need?" Aviators, like seamen, are quick to respond when one of their clan is in trouble. The aircraft remained overhead for a couple of hours, but still no sign of the ground troops. Finally, I heard the sound of helicopters in the distance and thought that I would be out of there in no time. I confirmed my position with the mirror and crawled up a small hill to a clearing on the ridge line. Soon the H-34's approached and the first one, flown by Tom Moher, started his approach. About a quarter mile out, the hills erupted with intense ground fire. It seemed like it was coming from everywhere. Tom pulled up and struggled to make it away from the area. I later heard that his co-pilot was hit in the head and the helicopter had more than eighty hits. This was kind of discouraging to both Tom and to me, but very quickly the Caribou made a low pass for ground fire suppression with people shooting from every port and chucking hand grenades out during the flyover. This was particularly exciting since one of the grenades went off about 15 to 20 feet from me. Again the ground fire was very heavy. In spite of this, Bill Cook in the second helicopter started to make an approach. As he got near, it was clear to see that there was no chance for a pickup and that a further attempt would result in more people in the same boat as me or possibly worse. I waved off the second H-34. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time, and there were never any regrets. There was also not a doubt in my mind that these guys had pulled out all the stops and made every possible effort to rescue me. It was a great effort but it just wasn't in the cards that day. Within a short time, I could see the Pathet Lao troops closing in from all sides. They were all heavily armed with automatic weapons like BAR's and Kalishnikov's, I had my trusty 38 with five tracer bullets. Not great odds! Needless to say I became their guest for awhile. My hands were tied behind me and then tied to a noose around my neck. I was thoroughly searched and then we headed off to a nearby camp or small village. They quickly saw that I couldn't walk well and they untied my hands and made a crude crutch to assist me. They let me set the pace and seemed quite patient. Upon reaching the village, about night fall, I was again searched and offered some food. Rice, some cooked greens, and a small can of "stewed pork". It was about the size of a small tuna fish can and was almost entirely pork fat. Sort of like eating raw bacon. Not great, but it was possibly nourishing. From this moment on, I was constantly guarded and usually by more than one guard.

The next morning, I was taken to a nearby cave and kept there for the day. During the day, there was a bombing raid on the village by several T-28's. When I was let out, there wasn't much sign of damage and no one seemed too concerned about the raid. In late afternoon we hit the trail to the next camp. This went on for three days until we reached the village of Xieng Khouang. There I was given a bucket of water to clean up a bit and spent the night in one of the infamous tiger cages. The following day, I was loaded into a truck and we headed toward the PDJ. We had hardly started when the sky was filled with USAF F-100's with bombs and rockets. We hid under a farm house with the guards looking very apprehensive and me quietly cheering on the Air Force. After the raid, it was back into the truck and we drove for several hours until well past dark. We were on the PDJ for awhile and then went back into the mountains past Khang Khay along Route 7 to a small village. The next day I was displayed to the 37mm AAA crew who were given credit for shooting me down. I was also on display for any and all who cared to come by. Since that time, I have never felt comfortable in a zoo. Being caged and on display is not a comfortable feeling.

That night I was taken to a high ranking civilian who I think was Prince Soupanouvong. There was also an officer in uniform; he was the first person to speak English and acted as the interpreter. He was to become my interrogator and indoctrinator for the next couple of months. His name was given as Captain Boun Kham, and he claimed to be a Laotian, but I believe he was North Vietnamese. Nothing much came of that meeting and I never saw the civilian again.

My next move was back toward Khang Khay along Route 7 to a small group of huts. I was placed in a room at one end of a small hut. There were no windows, a dirt floor, walls of mud plastered over woven bamboo, and a thatched roof. Furnishings consisted of a few boards between some logs for a bed, a mosquito net, grass mat, blanket, a metal table and chair, a cup and a canteen. The guards stayed in the other two thirds of the building and did their cooking and sleeping in that section. It was the same group of soldiers that had captured me and were to remain with me throughout my stay.

The daily routine was much the same every day. I was escorted to the latrine nearby and then down to a stream to wash and brush my teeth. Then back to the room. A morning meal was brought about nine or ten and usually consisted of a small bowl of rice, some soup, and some boiled greens. The evening meal was the same. Occasionally the guards would share some of their food. The most common thing was a fiery sauce made with fish, salt, and roasted peppers. Not bad, but a little bit went a long way. Sometimes they would have a raiding party on the nearby caves and catch a bunch of rats and cook them into a stew, or sometimes catch a stray dog for a meal. They usually shared a bit of these "special meals". It was OK if you just got your mind over to steak instead of what it really was. In that situation, you have to eat whatever you can get your hands on or you won't survive. As it was, I went from 175 pounds to 125 pounds during the three months I was to be there. The interrogator came nearly every evening for about an hour. He was more interested in talking about politics than in seeking military information. He was well informed about the military aspects and said that they knew what they needed to know. I saw that he had a copy of a book similar to Jane's All The World's Aircraft and a fairly recent copy of the CINCPACFLEET organization manual, a classified document. With that publication, he had the lists of ships, which squadrons were aboard, and who was in command of each unit. He also mentioned that he knew that our ship, the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk, had passed through the Bashi Channel north of the Philippines on a particular night in May while enroute to Vietnam -- he was correct on the date! This all seemed a bit incongruous to be sitting in a mud walled hut deep in the jungle with a kerosene lantern and listening to him talk about world politics and military history. His primary effort, I later determined, was to get something for publicity purposes, and political influence. He frequently mentioned that the radio had announced that I had

been killed in the crash and that no one knew that I was alive. He said that I could write letters early on, but later said that he couldn't deliver them for one reason or another. He suggested that I make a radio broadcast "just to let everyone know that I was alive and being treated well". I replied with reference to a well known phrase about the probability of frigid temperatures in Hades. He never asked again. He did continue to push me to write a letter to the Prince requesting my release.

My physical condition during captivity was about what could have been expected. After about four days, I was constantly bothered by diarrhea. Sometimes it was not so bad and other times it was severe, but it was always there. I had one serious bout with fever and was down and out. For about two weeks I didn't seem to care about anything and recollection of what took place was difficult. I was always coughing because the guards always had a fire going in their section of the hut and the smoke would come to my section and linger. It was smoky for the entire two months I was in solitary. I had been a prisoner for about five or six weeks when I came down with the fever and it really had me out of it for awhile. The evening sessions continued but I can't recall too much about what went on. After considerable coercion, I wrote a brief note asking to be released. It seemed like the only way I could just get him to leave me alone. Apparently it was not satisfactory, because he continued to push the issue and proceeded to dictate a letter which would be appropriate. I was in a pretty poor state both physically and mentally and wrote the letter that he told me to write. It was hard to keep track of things, I knew that things were not right, but couldn't keep everything in perspective. They'd given me some shots and some pills which were supposed to help the fever, but there is no telling what was in them.

About a week after that, the fever broke and I began to feel better. One evening, the interrogator came to the hut and proceeded to read the letter that "I had written to the Prince". When he did that, and I was more alert and attentive, it was like a bucket of cold water being thrown in my face. I realized that I had done something that I should not have done, and from that moment I was determined to escape or die trying. I had tried once, about a month earlier, to escape by digging my way under the wall. I discovered that they had driven bamboo stakes into a trench around my room to a depth of about three feet and that foiled that attempt. This session with Captain Boun Kham was to be his last visit, although I didn't know it at the time. A few days later I was moved to a prison compound about a half mile away. Enroute, we passed a two story wood frame building with many antennas on the roof. I recognized the building and had even taken photographs of it on an earlier mission, so I knew exactly where I was. The new location was in a building which was part of a group and isolated from the road and the main portions of Pathet Lao Headquarters. It was a long building divided into three rooms. I was placed in the small center room by myself. It was about the same size as the previous one but here I had access out of doors since there was a three foot gap between the building and the first barbed wire fence which went from the ground to the building eaves. There was another similar fence about five feet beyond the first and the area between was filled with concertina barbed wire. There was only one way out and that was through the gate by the guard's lean to.

The following day I was joined by about thirty-five Laotian prisoners who divided themselves between the two end rooms. I had picked up a few words of Lao but communication with my new neighbors was difficult. One of them had worked in Vientiane and had an English/Lao dictionary so we were on our way toward understanding each other, although with great difficulty. About a week after they arrived, one of them approached me about possibly trying to escape. I didn't know this fellow at all so was somewhat apprehensive. I pretended not to know where we were and he proceeded to draw me a map in some detail. The map was very good and accurate so I began to have some trust in him. Over a period of several weeks, we discussed the escape and where we should go once we got out. While doing this, we

proceeded to work on the barbed wire where it was nailed into the posts. After working on each nail where it went through the wire, the nail hole was enlarged and the nail would slip easily out of the hole. We worked on the interior strands until we had a fairly large section of wire that could be pushed out and raised to get through the inner fence.

We were occasionally allowed to wash our clothes in a nearby stream and we usually hung them on the outer fence to dry. When we did that, we managed to work on the nails of the outer fence. We could be very slow and deliberate about exactly how we hung our clothes, to the frustration of the guards. Eventually, we thought that we were ready to give it a try. There were six Laotians who intended to go with me. That seemed to be a large group, but not out of the question. The one I had planned this with, was Boun Mi, and he and I planned to stay together after we got out. After a false start one evening, we were ready to go on a rainy dark night. About nine, the guard had gone to his shelter to get out of the rain. I had changed into the dark trousers and shirt that they had given me to wear. I slipped around to the back of the building where we had loosened the wire. Someone was keeping the guard busy, talking and Boun Mi gave me the signal to go.

I pushed out the wire and crawled under the loosened section. That part worked as advertised and I was out of the compound. We had about two hundred feet to go to get to some cover of trees and bushes. I got to the cover and a small stream and Boun Mi was right behind me. Two others quickly joined us and we wondered about the other two. One of our group said he would wait for the others and join us later. We never saw him again nor did we ever figure what happened to the two others who had planned to go. The three of us worked our way around some Russian built tanks used by the Pathet Lao and got to an area where we had to cross a wide clearing in order to get to the woods and the mountains. We dashed across the clearing and made it to the woods where we followed a well worn trail for several miles.

We stopped for a bit to wait for the others, but we were anxious to move on. After about twenty minutes, I insisted that we go on, we couldn't afford to slow our travel. The key to success was to get as much distance between us and the camp before they discovered that we were gone. After some argument, they agreed and we continued on over a small mountain ridge to a small valley. We had to cross a road and wanted to do so before it got very light. We got across just as it was breaking day and made it to cover on the far side. Later that morning, the third man in our group was going to try to get some food from a farm house at the upper end of the valley. After he left us and started to the farm, I got a very uneasy feeling and told Boun Mi that we needed to move to where we could watch him and see what was going on. It was a good thing, because about ten minutes after entering the house, he emerged with his hands tied and a rifle at his back. He had walked into a guerrilla outpost. The group holding him was met by a group of soldiers coming up the road who talked with them briefly, and then took off after us.

We had a few hours of excitement with the group chasing us. There was some rifle fire in our direction, but I don't think they ever actually saw us. We managed to double back on our course and lose them eventually. We decided at that time that we would not chance approaching anyone unless we were positively sure that they were friendly. The remainder of our trek was just pure drudgery; going up over one mountain and down the next. The terrain was very rugged and steep so it was fairly slow going. We did manage to eat some bamboo shoots, corn stalks and sweet potatoes from abandoned slash and burn farms, and some wild berries and fruit. Water was not a problem since this was still in the rainy season.

One of the worst pests that bothered us was leaches. They seemed to be everywhere. We tried to use animal trails where possible to make travel easier and go faster, but the leaches were particularly bad there. We stopped occasionally to remove them just to keep from

losing too much blood. They always go back to the same spots though, so some places were getting pretty bad. We kept going, however, because our motivation remained high even though our capabilities were lagging. After three and a half days, we were crossing a high mountain and heard voices. After closing carefully on the voices, Boun Mi indicated that they were friendly forces for sure. I wasn't so sure and was all for trying to go on farther. He indicated that he was so sure, that he would go in by himself and I could watch from a safe point. I agreed to that, and he approached the small hut where the voices were coming from. Two men came out with guns and met him. They talked for a few minutes and they shook his hand and lowered their guns. Boun Mi turned and waved and I decided that it was O.K. We had reached the outpost of the village that we were heading for, Baum Long, or better known as Site 32 to Air America. They sent a man down to the village, where they had a telegraph, to notify the authorities of what was happening. We rested for a bit and then headed down the trail for two kilometers to Baum Long.

We had a warm welcome and were given food and treatment for the many cuts and scratches that we had along with the leach bites. It was late afternoon when we arrived and after about an hour, we heard the sound of an aircraft. The villagers hurried us toward the landing site on the ridge line and I saw the Pilatus Porter land. As I was hobbling up the ridge I heard an American voice calling my name. It was a very emotional moment for this was truly the sound of freedom at last. Terry Burke greeted me as a long lost brother and helped me up to the aircraft where I met Dr. Jiggs Weldon and the pilot Lloyd Zimmerman. After a few pictures, it was into the aircraft and off to Udorn. It was hard to believe, but my prayers had been answered and I was finally on my way to true freedom. We learned about two months later that the two men who escaped with us but were recaptured, had both been executed. This brought home to us that the price of freedom is never free.