

# U.S.A.F. CHECO Report (UNCLASSIFIED)

## REPORT

### THE FALL OF SITE 85

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HQ PACAF

Directorate, Tactical Evaluation  
CHECO Division

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## PROJECT

**C**ontemporary  
**H**istorical  
**E**xamination of  
**C**urrent  
**O**perations

(Excerpts taken from the original report. Comments added afterward. CAS is CIA)

## FOREWORD

Site 85 was an important friendly guerrilla base in Northeast Laos. In mid-1967, steps were begun to establish a TSQ-81 facility near Site 85 atop a steep 5500-foot ridge called Phou Pha Thi, located only 25 kilometers from the North Vietnamese/Laotian border and 45 kilometers west of Sam Neua, Laos. A TACAN facility had already been established atop Phou Pha Thi and was operational in August 1966. This base and its facilities were commonly called Site 85.

In essence, the TSQ-81 was a modified version of the Strategic Air Command's (SAC) Radar Bomb Scoring (RBS) system. While the SAC system was designed to predict bomb impact points for simulated drops, the TSQ system was used to direct and control attacking jet fighters and bombers to their targets and also provide them with precise bomb release points, under radar control.

Similar systems had been established earlier in South Vietnam and one existed in Thailand. (These systems were grouped under a common nickname, Combat

Skyspot.) The TSQ facility at Site 85 differed primarily in that the equipment was specially designed in small packages to be Heli lifted to remote locations. The nickname for operations under Site 85 direction was Commando Club.

However, Site 85 was much more unique than a specially designed radar bombing facility. Site 85 was the only facility of its kind in Laos. It was the only facility which could provide ground vectored radar bombing in the northern target areas of both North Vietnam and Laos, thereby enhancing USAF all-weather strike capabilities in these two areas. Finally, the site was established and operated by American technicians in a manner designed not to violate the 1962 Geneva Agreements and to "guarantee" the "neutrality" of Laos. However, the location of a site at Phou Pha Thi to direct bomb strikes against North Vietnam was ultra-sensitive from both the political and military standpoint.

(Hmong) guerrillas trained by CAS personnel provided the primary force for defense of the site on Phou Pha Thi. In the event these defenders came under heavy enemy attack and loss of the site appeared imminent, plans called for evacuating the American personnel manning the TSQ/TACAN facility and destroying the equipment to keep it from falling into enemy hands. However, early on the morning of 11 March, a force of twenty heavily armed infiltrators launched a surprise attack on the facilities atop Phou Pha Thi before the evacuation plan could be implemented. Of the 16 American personnel manning the site, only six were successfully evacuated, with one being killed by enemy forces firing on the rescue helicopters. Four of the five remaining personnel had been wounded during the enemy attack on the site. This report relates the story of the fall of Site 85 and attempts to place events surrounding its loss in proper perspective. As conceived in evacuation plans, the decision to evacuate was reserved for the Ambassador, Vientiane. First priority of evacuees was allocated to the 13 TSQ/TACAN personnel; however, enough helicopters were to be provided to permit a total of 155 to be lifted out. The others, guerrillas, were to be extracted when the Local Area Defense Commander deemed appropriate. Five helicopters, three USAF and two Air America, were designated as the force required to accomplish the evacuation.

(Excerpt)

To provide an immediate capability, the two Air America helicopters were to remain overnight (RON) each night at nearby Lima Site 98 (20 Alternate); USAF helicopters were to come from Thailand-based resources. Subsequently, some USAF messages expressed the desire for Air America helicopters to RON Site 85, not 98 (20 Alternate). However, this was not changed; it was feared helicopter presence at Site 85 would have provoked an enemy attempt to destroy these

lucrative targets. If they had been destroyed, the planned emergency lift capability would have vanished. But the point was well taken, for weather also might have disrupted the rescue flight from Site 98 (20 Alternate) to Site 85.

Following a decision to evacuate, the Ambassador was to notify 7/13 AF TACC at Udorn AB, Thailand who could in turn notify 7AF at Tan Son Nhut AB, Vietnam. Weather permitting, 7 AF was to scramble or divert four A-1 aircraft to provide cover for the evacuation, suppress enemy fire, and FAC or subsequent jet strikes. The LADC and an attaché-provided FAC were to help direct the strikes. The plan allowed a limited night evacuation capability (the RON helicopters at Site 98), but pre-supposed a daylight effort.

The (Air America) helicopters were then able to come in and perform the rescue attempts. Of the 19 Americans at the site, only five technicians and two CAS people were extracted. One of the CAS people was wounded; five of the six technicians were wounded, one of them being hit while in the helicopter---this man died enroute to Site 36 and Udorn AB, Thailand. The remaining eleven Americans were presumed dead.

(The Air America pilot and Flight Mechanic who rescued the five technicians at the top was Ken Wood and Rusty Irons. Philip Goddard saved CAS personnel at the landing strip. The rescue was extremely precarious and challenging because the top helicopter had to hover out of ground effect at a high altitude while under enemy fire. The helicopter was struck as it was departing shattering the Flight Mechanic's survival weapon and mortally wounding one of the technicians. Those who survived are fortunate the aircraft was not shot down and owe their life to the flight crew. It is interesting to note that Air America was planned as an integral part of the joint rescue force, but ended up being the primary rescue unit merely because they were stationed closer than the USAF helicopters.)