

operation report information for AIR AMERICA LAOS

For date 601115

AIR AMERICA LAOS was a Air America unit

Primary service involved, Air America

Laos

Location, Vientiane

Description: Air America and the H-19A by Clarence J. Abadie (extracted from the Air America website HOTLINK:A) I heard about the AA operation while I was still in the Marine Corps and getting ready to rotate out of Okinawa with Charlie Weitz, Jack Leister, Barry Cox, J.J. McCauley and Ed Subowsty, among others, to return to the States. I had no compelling reason to return to the States and had an offer of employment with AA so, in August of 1960, I processed out of the squadron, off the island, and out of the Marine Corps, all at the same time. My first stop was Taipei, for a short orientation, then directly to Laos to fly the H-19. The other five guys, mentioned above, did not get out of the Marine Corps at that time but went back to the US with the rotating squadron and came out a year or more later. There were four CAT/SAT pilots who started the H-19 program. Art Wilson, Herbert Liu, Gordon V. Smith and Dale Williamson were given minimal training. Gordon has this to offer. "We four helicopter trainees were given 18 hours training in B's in Japan, and about 14 hours more in B's, in the Philippines. I had, earlier in the year checked out and flown about 30 hours in the little Bell (47-G2) in Japan. It was great fun. I loved choppers because you could do so much more with them than with fixed wing. The strange deal of training in B's and then being given these old A's in Laos caused my feelings about the intended operations to become rather less than enthusiastic. This made my resignation easy." The aircraft had come out of mothballs at Clark AFB and were shipped to Vientiane by C-124 aircraft. Because of this, it is reasonable to assume they had some bugs and the initial fliers got to experience them first hand. I am sure some of the problems were related directly to lack of experience in those machines but they can't be faulted for that. It must have scared the hell out of them (one engine, no wings, vibrating and unstable even when there was no turbulence, flying within rifle range from the ground, poor IFR cockpit, etc.). In addition to the CAT/SAT pilots, Charlie Bade, Tom Moher and Mike Weinberg, were already in Laos. They were from USMC HMR-261 which rotated from Okinawa ahead of HMR-362 and they were hired before me. They had been flying in Laos for several months before I arrived; the hottest and wettest months for the H-19's poor performance. Charlie Bade was the senior pilot at that time reporting to Fred Walker. The aircraft were designated H-A, H-B, H-C, and H-D as I recall and only two were operated at any one time. The fixed wing guys tried their best to operate them but inexperience and the helicopter's inherent instability and marginal power factors had them leaving the machine in rice paddies and they had no confidence in them. Not that they were the only ones to leave a machine in a rice paddy. As we, the first four Marine pilots, were told when we were hired, the program was on its last leg and if we could show that the helicopter was able to be operated effectively and could be useful in Laos, then we might get better machines. Ray Shourds, Asst. Station Manager at Bangkok, remembered that the H-19 required a 60-hour maintenance check. The flying time from Vientiane to Bangkok was about 7 hours one way which meant 14 hours of its allotted time between checks was spent getting those helicopters to and from Laos. He also remembered that the wheels always looked funny to him; like an old iron bed. Another time he remembered seeing Tom Moher off for his return flight to Vientiane. Ray was back in his office which looked onto the parking lot. Before long one of the old Austin Taxi's pulled up and Tom got out. He had an unscheduled landing someplace north of Don Muang. G.V. Smith pointed out that it was Art Wilson who crash landed in May of 1960, close enough to walk, in his "shower shoes," to a main North-South road where he hitch-hiked back to base. While flying the H-19A, following the road was a necessary safety factor. It increased the flight time from Bangkok to Vientiane, via Korat, or Bangkok to Korat then Ubon and Pakse, but we could always get help in case of an emergency. Korat and Ubon were refueling stops going east and Korat and Udom going north. As it happened, the old H-19 was a good ship even though it was not really suitable for the altitudes and temperatures encountered in Laos. The A model was the original with a straight tail boom, a 900 hp engine and a very weak nose gear. I could only carry two bags (200 lb. Each) of rice with a full load and had to roll it off from most take off locations such as Attopeau (L-10). The political situation was unstable and civil war was the order of the day. It was not long after my arrival that Kong Le, a former ally (trained by our Special Forces in the U.S.) turned "neutralist," staged his coup de tat and the whole AA operation moved south to Bangkok. We operated out of there and would go to southern Laos for our week of work "in Country." A few mechanics were positioned in Pakse (L-11) to handle our daily maintenance needs and to support the fixed wing aircraft as well. It was in the south, around Pakse, Attopeau and Saravne (L-44), that we worked the H-19 to good advantage and often flew payroll from Pakse and Savannakhet (L-39) to the troops as far east as the Vietnam border and south to Khong Island (L-07). On one of those flights I landed a Paymaster at an outpost due east of Thakhet (L-40) on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was just before that area was completely overrun. General Phoumi Novasan, the Royal Lao forces top man, was trying to hold that area and all southern outposts while also working to run Kong Le out of Vientiane. As the Royal Lao forces were successful in beating Kong Le's troops back toward Vientiane, we moved north with them. On one occasion, Kong Le's troops were halfway between Paksane (L-35) and Thakhet, when the Royal Lao forces, aided by Thai Army troops with heavy guns, began the push. I carried a US Army Major, West Point Graduate, who was working directly with the Thai troops, up the Thai side of the Mekong River to see where Kong Le's troops were located so he could "spot" for the big guns. This particular time he had me land on the Thai side, just one tree line from the river, in a rice paddy. I shut down and we began walking toward the river. All hell broke loose. The gunboats on the Lao side of the river started shooting recoilless rifles at the spot where they saw us disappear behind the trees. It was the dry season, December I think, and the rice husks were blown up into the air, by the rotor wash, pin pointing our location. Several rounds hit in the trees on the far side of the rice paddy just behind the helicopter. We ran for the helicopter and got it started. I knew they had us zeroed in and I knew that the gunboats had 50 caliber machine guns and if I lifted straight up they would have us in their sights. So, to put some confusion in the game, I hovered low, to the down river end of the rice paddy. I hovered there long enough to have the rice chaff blow up into the air above the trees. When one round came our way, and hit in a treetop to our left, I started a low hovering takeoff toward the north. The rice paddy was bordered on all four sides by tall trees. I stayed just off the ground, and left the chaff behind, and was able to gain flying speed before reaching the tree line on the north end. At the last moment I pulled up to clear the trees and as we got to treetop level I could hear the 50 caliber machine guns vibrating the sides of the gunboats where they were mounted. I hadn't taken time to strap in or put on my helmet so I could hear that sound very clearly and won't forget it for a very long time. I knew it would not be long before they would swing the guns in our direction. Just on the other side of the tree line there was another rice paddy so I nosed the helicopter down and made it back near the ground and behind the trees before they could track us. I continued to gain speed to the end of that paddy and pulled up again. This time I turned west to go deeper into Thailand, away from the river, and just at treetop level which put us beyond reach of those guns. We continued to climb to about 1500 feet and turned south so we could still see the river but from a safe distance. We were on our way back to Thakhet when we saw a group of Royal Lao forces battling it out with more of Kong Le's men from gunboats in the middle of the Mekong River. We could see splashes in the water but did not see any direct hits. On yet another occasion, in an about the same location in Laos, I was sent to make a resupply run for the Thai's. They had cleared a landing zone for me on the side of the road using a technique they learned from their US advisors. They did it with C-4. That usually left stumps and debris all around but that was not the problem this time. It seemed they had misjudged the approach path and left two tall trees standing too close to the LZ. There was just room to get through (since that was the "approach of choice" into the wind) by turning the helicopter on its side at 45 degrees and thereby reducing the effective width of the clearance needed to pass through while also sinking to the LZ at a steep angle. I managed to perform that maneuver OK, with the help of God, and made a controlled crash landing on the LZ. The H-19 had difficulty hovering with a load and high-density altitude (temperature and humidity) conditions. The main gear was strong and took the shock well. Luckily, I didn't put undue forces on the nose gear. As was often the case, I was alone since carrying a mechanic or even a full load of fuel meant limiting the cargo. I much preferred to refuel at the LZ for the return trip rather than leave cargo behind at home base. We did our own refueling with a hand pump from drums that were either carried in by truck or dropped by C-46 at the LZ's. We used a chamois to filter the fuel before it went into the tanks. We followed the troops up the road as they pushed Kong Le's troops north toward Vientiane. I think it was mid December 1960 when the Royal Lao forces retook Vientiane and I flew General Phoumi from Pakse to the ThaiDon ferry landing. From there he went by jeep into Vientiane after his troops

Royal Lao forces retook Vientiane and I flew General Thounn from Paksane to the Thaboua ferry landing. From there he went by jeep into Vientiane after his troops had retaken the city. It was on my way back to Paksane, after leaving the General, that I lost a mag over Thailand. It was getting dark when I contacted Ron Sutphin over Savannakhet where he was testing a Helio, out of maintenance. He was at high altitude and talked with me on VHF. He stayed up while I limped into the airfield at Paksane where Bienvenido "Ben" Sabino, the flight mechanic, and I spent the night. I tried to take Ben with me as often as possible and over the months I managed to give him some stick time. He got a US pilot's license in 1970. There was a serious problem for me with the instrument panel warning lights in the H-19A. I was en route from Pakse to Bangkok via Ubon and Korat when, about 30 minutes out of Bangkok, I had an engine failure while descending through clouds and autorotated to a rice paddy dike. I had run the forward tank dry and didn't see the warning light. The instrument panel has a glare shield at the top which obstructs the pilots view if, his seat is fully up and, he's over 5 feet tall. No excuse, just the facts! This was not the first time I had a problem with the fuel warning lights. The H-19 has two fuel tanks and a warning light for each. Those lights are located on the instrument panel above the other instruments. Since I always flew with the seat full up, for better visibility, I had asked for the lights to be relocated but nothing had been done. The autorotation was successful and the helicopter wheels just fit on top of the flat narrow dike. When I put it down, following autorotation, it rolled (turned) to the left as the nose wheels had no locking pins and torque was being reduced as I lowered the collective. I immediately applied the brakes but the left nose gear had already gone over the crest and the nose continued to turn left until the right nose wheel had also rolled down the dike and the lower part of the engine was in water. I knew immediately what had happened and told the passengers below to get out and away from the helicopter. After making a quick visual inspection of the machine and finding that the nose gears were both bent over, I climbed back in, switched fuel tanks and started it up again. It was nose down at a 40-degree angle so when the rotor blades started turning the tips were very close to the water. I was concerned about that fact since in order to get the blades away from the water required that the stick be moved backward which would put the blades dangerously close to the tail boom in the rear. The engine exhaust was in the water and made it sound like a boat. I got up rpm and jerked it up to a hover with collective and not too much back stick and turned it so it was again straight over the paddy dike. I couldn't set it down because both nose wheels were bent under the engine and fuselage. I told the flight mechanic to get the passengers back inside while I held the nose up with the main wheels on the dike. We were off again to Bangkok. During this mishap the radio antennas, which were mounted on the bottom of the helicopter, were pulled off so I had no radio contact with the tower at Don Muang in Bangkok. I flew low on the approach and kept in the middle, between the two active runways, until I was near the tower and could move to the grass area near the taxiway. I put the main gear on the ground and unloaded the passengers while the flight mechanic ran for some board to make a platform under the nose. Shutdown was normal