

THE MOUNG PHINE MISSION

As Igloo White missions decreased, flights in support of the CIA increased. Sometimes we had to combine the resources of the 20th and 21st if there was a large troop movement but usually it was just our own H-3s. It was all based on numbers of indigenous and distance to the LZ from the pickup point in Laos. In the fall of 1969, the 20th moved from Udorn to NKP and we joined forces under the 21st umbrella.

The CIA ran their own private war in Laos and I don't know enough about it to make any type of judgement. All I will say is, I wasn't excited about their operation. I guess the results were as good as the indigenous troops that worked for them and the Washington 'elite' who tried to control and restrict their activities.



On several missions I left NKP, loaded with 55 gallon drums of gas, and flew to a CIA operating location on the Bolovens Plateau in Laos. The gas would be off-loaded and used if we needed it to return to NKP after flying the mission. While the flight mechanic was checking the helicopter and loading the troops, I would fly with one of their FAC's in a Porter aircraft to survey the target area. We would then make a real time decision on where we would off-load the troops. They felt this was the only way they could insure security for, if they communicated with Saigon for any reason, their chances of surprising the enemy was non existent.

My final mission in Southeast Asia turned out to be on 6 October 1969 and one I will remember for the rest of my life. I guess it can be summed up by the following RECOMMENDATION FOR DECORATION submitted by the 21st Special Operations Squadron after I returned home.

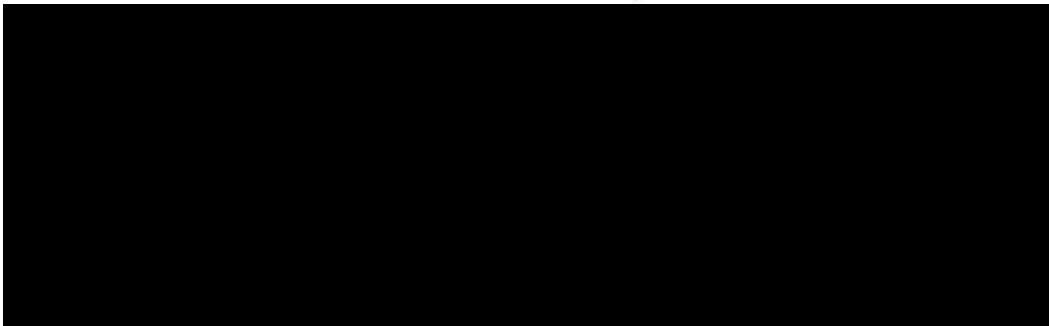
This recommendation was a good mission summary so the following serious and humorous comments are only included to give the story my personal touch.

After landing at the CIA operating bases in Laos, we received a very casual intelligence briefing stating that the mission would be a "piece of cake". All we had to do was transport about 125 indigenous troops into a secure landing zone at the Moung Phine Airstrip in Laos. Its location was between Routes 9, 23 and the Xe Chon river. We would then return to NKP and be home for lunch.

I now ask, how did the enemy move upwards of two thousand troops over friendly territory without being detected by our 'outstanding' CIA intelligence network? The answer is they couldn't, unless our forces were asleep at the wheel or totally compromised. In this case I feel it was the later because the enemy knew we were coming and set a trap that was almost successful. Thank God we had fantastic air cover throughout the day or I wouldn't be around to bore you with this summary.

The troops we transported were an interesting group of young Laotians. Some were kids no older than twelve or thirteen and they sounded like they were going on a picnic. Some even had chickens with them. Just before boarding the helicopter, they rung the chicken's neck and pulled its head up under their belts where they also had bags of rice hanging. Then, picture ammunition belts hanging around their necks and you have quite a sight. Their weapons were a combination of M-16s, AK-47s and a few rifles I never saw before or after.

Once on the ground, after setting up the defensive perimeter, I asked for a volunteer to help me strip Ted Silva's helicopter (Knife 61, tail number 222) when I discovered they had not taken the two M-60 Machine Guns off their bird. A Laotian, I named Charlie, was the only individual to step forward. We ran to the helicopter and I climbed in and passed the guns, ammunition and parachutes down to him. We had to make several trips carrying the equipment back to our encampment. Whatever I asked Charlie to do was immediately accomplished with a smile and friendly words that I didn't understand but he did a fantastic job as my partner.



The following picture (next page, upper left) shows me with a smile on my face as I was passing a M-60 and ammunition to Sgt. Reynolds, one of our gunners. I just couldn't believe the situation. Here, I had just returned from the helicopter where I was almost killed and Ted Silva asked me to stop so he could take my picture. All I could do was laugh. The enemy had a clear shot at me when I was in the helicopter and they let go with a volley of bullets that penetrated the cabin. It was a miracle I wasn't hit. The bullets ricocheted back and forth inside the cabin and fell to the floor when their energy was spent. I actually found it quite stimulating but it expedited my departure from the helicopter.



Another picture Ted took (upper right) showed me resting with 'Charlie', the Laotian volunteer, next to my helicopter (Knife 62, tail number 579) early in the day before things started heating up. If you look close, you might notice several bullet holes in the side of the cabin. That happened during the approach when one of the bullets struck and killed a Laotian.



Two additional pictures above show the landscape. There was a dirt strip and a few bomb craters or cisterns that were probably used as garbage dumps for the few huts that were in the area. We used some of them as defensive positions and they smelled like a used septic tank, which they probably were.



Lets talk about our air support. It was fantastic. I think the air war stopped in Laos so the USAF could concentrate on protecting our group. The fast movers (F-4s and 105s) made a lot of noise but were not much help since they couldn't accomplish pinpoint bombing. I won't knock them because they still dropped a lot of bombs in the outlying area.

The A-1s were our saviors. They flew low and slow and did a fantastic job. Towards the end of the afternoon, I had them dropping bombs and starting strafing runs right over my head. When I stood up I could see the enemy so, using my compass, I called for drops on such and such headings commencing right over me. Unfortunately, the enemy could also see me when I was standing up and that was when I got shot. The bullet, when it hit my leg, felt like a hot rod but it wasn't that painful. I guess my adrenaline was sky high so I didn't think that much about it until after I was rescued and then it hurt like hell. It was amazing the amount of fire power we used yet the enemy kept closing the circle around us. They deserve a lot of praise for their courage because it must of been hell for them. They were being blown apart right in front of my eyes but they kept coming.

One time I looked up and saw a foot long projectile passing over my head heading straight for one of the helicopters. It was a direct hit and the helicopter was engulfed in fire within seconds. It was just amazing. It seemed as though it was in slow motion.

No matter how much armament we expended, the enemy fire power kept getting stronger and closer. About four in the afternoon, a Jolly Green H-53 made a stab at picking us up but he was driven off by heavy fire after receiving three or four direct hits. A good try but no soap.

Now we started to get worried. It was going to be dark in an hour or so and our ammunition was running low. One M-60 jammed in the early afternoon and the other one was just about out of bullets. I had one clip left for my M-16 and whatever number of bullets I carried for my 38 pistol. The Candlesticks (night flare C-123 aircraft) were overhead and ready to start dropping flares whenever we needed them and we would in about an hour. But, we were beginning to wonder if we would see the sun rise.

Four Sawdust A-1s (aircraft with CBU-19 canisters carrying CS tear gas) also launched from NKP. I heard that, under the rules of engagement, this type of gas could not be used unless cleared by higher headquarters. So, even though the aircraft were orbiting the area, the pilots didn't have permission to drop it. What a terrible way to fight a war!

Our vice wing commander, I think his name was Col Darrell Tripp, also felt we wouldn't last the night so he made the decision to use the gas and the hell with the consequences. The result were fantastic. The A-1 pilots set the rescue in motion. Two came north to south on each side of us and another two came east to west. This put us inside the box and, since there was little wind, the gas did not drift far by the time the H-53 Super Jolly pilot made his approach and landing. Then all hell broke loose.

The plan called for the H-53 to pick up the round eyes and any wounded indigenous. The rest would stay and met up with their comrades who were scheduled to be there by fifteen hundred. Since it was already after seventeen hundred, I doubted this would happen. Another CIA screw-up in my humble opinion.

The helicopter landed but, by the time we got to it's back ramp, it was already filled with the indigenous troops. I made the mistake, which worked out OK, of yelling "let's go to the side door". I was thinking the H-53 was like the H-3. Instead it had a Dutch-door with a mini gun mounted so that it could swing out on top of the bottom portion of the door. This, since the bottom door was closed, put the opening about six feet off the ground. I got down on my hands and knees and Ted Silva climbed on my back. Then, the others pushed while the H-53 gunner pulled and Ted was in head first.

You may have remembered me mentioning Ted earlier when I told you about him getting in the way of the cyclic as I was making an approach. Well he still weighed the same, about 240 pounds, so it was no easy task getting him in. I also forgot to mention he was wounded and it was quite an interesting wound. At about fifteen hundred hours, while he was lying on his stomach, a bullet went in his back on his left side. It came out behind his back bone and back in on his right side. In other words, he got a free fat liposuction operation. It was a miracle his spinal column wasn't hit.

The others then climbed in and pulled me in. I was half way in the door as the helicopter lifted off the ground. The gunner, as I came through the door, was positioning his mini gun and firing at a few of the enemy troops who were just a stone's throw away. As I look back on the rescue I can hardly believe it happened. The H-53 lifted off with 44 indigenous and 5 round eye passengers. I'll bet it was one of the most successful rescues during the Vietnam War. I can only thank God they used the gas. It gave me dry heaves and burning, tearing eyes. Without it, we would have been dead ducks. The H-53 crew used gas masks so they weren't affected. I had a sore throat for about six months and a terrible allergy for about seven years. I'm sure you don't remember the many times my eyes swelled shut and crusted over while we were living in Hawaii. Mike, you probably thought it was great because I couldn't see what mischief you were in.

After getting back to NKP, I was taken to the hospital, had the wound cleaned and received shots to prevent any infection. After reviewing the X-Ray, the doctor told me I had a very lucky leg. The bullet hit the main bone but, instead of going through, only went half way. It then bounced back and curled around the bone to lodge itself on the other side. The doctors stated they would do more damage to the leg if they tried to remove the bullet so they left it in. (



Col Crosby presenting the Purple Heart to Ted Silva and myself

The Red Cross was notified early in the afternoon that we were missing in action. Their local representative asked them to withhold any Next of Kin notification because there was a chance we would be rescued. I found this out after I got settled in the hospital. I contacted the local rep who didn't know what action was taken by the regional office. Knowing the 'catch 22' system, I got permission to call home to let your mom know I was alive and well. I forgot it was 4:00 in the morning and your mother couldn't understand why I woke her for no good reason. I couldn't tell her anything over the phone based on the security classification. I just let her know that if she received any message in the morning she should not be alarmed. "Just remember you talked to me this morning". Fortunately, the Red Cross complied with the base request and withheld notification.

After a couple of days in the hospital, I was discharged and just hobbled around on crutches while orders were processed to ship me home. I packed my belongings with some help from my roommate, Jim Dunn, and departed NKP for Bangkok and the good old United States of America. After a short hop

from Travis AFB via San Francisco, I arrived in Burbank and was greeted by your mom with a big kiss and hug. I was one happy boy to be home.

Everything worked out great. Your mom sold the house on Nob Hill just before I arrived (the luck of the Irish). We had the car and furniture shipped to Hawaii and we flew to Connecticut for a visit with the families before going on our next assignment at the 6594th Instrument Test Group.

I feel my war came to an end while we were in Avon. My mother was not well so the parish priest came up to the house and said mass for her with all her children and their families present except my brother Paul. During the thanksgiving prayer, Father asked if anyone had anything to say. Nobody spoke except for a little ten year old boy named Shane. He said "Thank you God for bringing my dad back from the war". Tears came to my eyes and I thanked God for such a great family.



There are many more stories but I think I covered the highlights except for three postscripts.

1. The unit submitted me for the Congressional Medal of Honor . I was told it was approved by the Air Force but the White House personnel would not approve it. President Nixon was telling the American public that the United States had no troops in Laos and he was not about to present the MOH to someone for something accomplished in a place we were not suppose to be. This was about the time the killings took place at Kent State and he had much more important things to think about. I was disappointed, but I didn't feel that bad since many troops performed far greater acts and never received anything but a Purple Heart and the American flag on top of their coffin. I did receive the Air Force Cross which is the highest award approved by the Air Force.

2. The second postscript covers my health problems resulting from the Moung Phine mission. About six months after we got to Hawaii, I started coming home from work so tired that all I wanted to do was eat and go to bed. I felt it was just the flu so I never went to the Flight Surgeon. Instead, he came to me after receiving a message covering the health problems of some of the other troops who were on the mission. They were infected with worms and these were not little worms. They were foot long ones. The hospital personnel took some of my blood and found I had them. They had gotten out of my intestines and into my blood stream and that was the reason I was so tired all the time.

The doctors stated there were two ways to treat the problem. The easiest was to try to poison the worms. If that didn't work, they would have to open me up and pull them out. We started with the poison and went through three stages with increasing doses before victory was declared. When the first two treatments failed, the medical staff admitted me to Tripler Army Hospital where they administered the maximum dosage without killing me. I remember them standing around with needles ready to stick me if I went into a coma. I had to stand after they fed me the poison but that didn't last very long. I lost all feeling and floated into a grey fog. I could hear muffled sounds but couldn't see anyone and I don't know how long I was in that condition. I wonder if it was the twilight zone before death that we hear about? Interesting question! I guess I won't know the answer until it is too late to let you know if I was correct. But, in any case, the treatment was successful. The poison killed them before they killed me.