

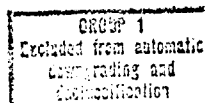
~~SECRET~~Air America in Laos, Spring 1970

The enemy reaction to Meo General Vang Pao's highly successful offensive operation in the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) area of North Laos began in mid-September 1969, but did not gain momentum until mid-November of that year. By mid-December, the enemy began to dislodge friendly forces from recently won forward positions east of the PDJ. By January 1970, the enemy's drive was in full swing rolling up friendly positions on key terrain features overlooking Route 7 NE of the Plaine. In late February, Xieng Khouang airfield on the PDJ fell to the enemy offensive, and by mid-March he had advanced to a position just north of Sam Thong in what was to be the farthest extent of the 1969-1970 dry season effort.

General Vang Pao's sweep across the PDJ had hurt the enemy badly and yielded a tremendous amount of captured materiel and equipment. In order to recoup his losses, the Communists had to reinforce their forces in north Laos. By the time they launched their dry season offensive, they had fielded a two-division plus force consisting of the 316th and 312th NVA Divisions plus supporting artillery and tanks. The 312th Division, for example, was a training organization which was sent directly from North Vietnam into combat.

For all practical purposes, the friendly presence had been swept from southeast Laos and more particularly from the PDJ area. Only Site 32 at Bouam Long and Site 50A at Phu Kum remained in friendly hands. Vast numbers of refugees were generated by the enemy's counteroffensive. Some 161,000 refugees were displaced and eventually gathered north of Ban Som (Site 272). The evacuation of these hopeless people was both a humanitarian gesture as well as a strategic necessity in that their movement denied the enemy a population which he could impress into service as laborers and supplies of foodstuffs.

To meet this situation, the resources of Air America were heavily taxed. The North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao offensive necessitated evacuation of entire villages and areas, and the relocation of troops as well.

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- 2 -

The first critical period was the evacuation of the Plaine des Jarres in early February. Precise statistics can never be assembled since all aircraft were used to the limit of the Available Cabin Load (ACL) without regard to the mission for which they had originally been dispatched. This meant that Porter aircraft, for example, dispatched to points in the general area for specific support missions would be diverted on the return flight to move refugees from one landing site in the path of the coming enemy force to a relocation or refugee center.

However, 109 sorties by Air America's larger aircraft were flown in direct support of the evacuation operation and each sortie carried not only the evacuees, but their necessary personal effects which amounted to many thousands of pounds.

No sooner had this operation been successfully accomplished than it became necessary to evacuate L-03 to another position, LS-113. This involved 330 refugees and military personnel, and 9,000 pounds of cargo. It was accomplished with the STOL C7A aircraft.

When the enemy moved on LS-20 and LS-20A, there were two critical periods, 17 to 20 March and 1 to 3 April. Refugees had to be evacuated, troops moved up, cargo of critical material had to be relocated. During these periods, in addition to the nonscheduled movement of smaller fixed-wing aircraft,

- 16 C-130 sorties were scheduled and five of them were for the movement of 750 Lao troops with their weapons and equipment into LS-20A. On the backhaul, 183,000 pounds of cargo were brought out.
- 18 C-123 sorties evacuated 1,855 refugees and 65,000 pounds of cargo from LS-20.
- 24 C7A sorties brought 750 passengers and 23,000 pounds of cargo out of LS-20.
- 21 Additional C-123 sorties brought 320 passengers and 75,500 pounds of cargo out of LS-20A to LS-272, the new USAID refugee center.
- 14 Additional C7A sorties took 66 passengers and 16,500 pounds of cargo from LS-20A to LS-272.

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SECRET

- 3 -

While not as impressive in statistical terms as the role of the larger Air America aircraft, the smaller aircraft such as the Porter performed outstanding service in bringing refugees out of small, irregular and, indeed, substandard airfields where no other aircraft could operate.

Air America personnel at all levels were deeply involved in these critical evacuation operations. Supervisors volunteered for and were assigned as Air Controllers on the Plaine des Jarres and at the points where refugees and their supplies were being reassembled. The Medical Staff, assisted by the Fire Brigade, took care of the many wounded, injured, and aged refugees. Flight Crews worked tirelessly from dawn to dusk without relief, and often without meals, in order to get the maximum use of the available aircraft. Air America traffic personnel were sent to LS-20A to assist in expediting the turn-around of aircraft and on-loading of Agency cargo and personnel. In Vientiane, the entire remaining traffic complement of Air America turned out to assist the Vientiane Metropolitan Police and the Royal Laotian Army in the off-loading, relocation, and settlement of refugees as they arrived at the Air America terminal.

In a meeting with the Board of Directors of Air America in Washington, the Director stated that it would not have been possible to accomplish so much with the limited resources available in Laos had it not been for the existence of Air America.

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