

## **Operation MILLPOND: The Beginning of a Distant Covert War**

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***Operation MILLPOND became the taproot for what eventually emerged...as the “largest, most innovative program of irregular warfare ever conducted by CIA.”***

Much has been written about the CIA-led Bay of Pigs operation in mid-April 1961, the failed covert paramilitary operation intended to overthrow Fidel Castro.<sup>1</sup> When it became public, the botched operation became a deep personal embarrassment for President John F. Kennedy and set off considerable domestic and international debate regarding the credibility and competence of the new administration.

Responsibility for the overall Cuban program, then known as JMATE,<sup>a</sup> lay with CIA Deputy Director for Plans Richard M. Bissell Jr. With the failure and exposure of the Bay of Pigs landing, Bissell, who was said to be in line to replace long-time Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles,<sup>2</sup> quickly found himself a major target of Kennedy’s supporters who sought to shift blame from questionable presidential decisions on to faulty intelligence and poor military advice.<sup>3</sup>

Scant scholarship, however, has focused on another risky covert operation scheduled to begin the same week as the Cuba landing, Operation MILLPOND, which was a joint CIA-Pentagon plan to attack Soviet-supplied military stores and antigovernment forces in neutral Laos. The plan included the use of

Thailand-based B-26 bombers flown by CIA contractors.<sup>4</sup> As the CIA’s top representative to President Kennedy’s Laos Task Force, Bissell was concurrently responsible for two military operations with profound Cold War implications.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, as the assault on Cuba faltered, the Laos airstrikes were abruptly canceled. Nonetheless, and perhaps unintentionally, the presidentially-authorized preparations for Operation MILLPOND became the taproot for what eventually emerged, in one veteran’s words, as the “largest, most innovative program of irregular warfare ever conducted by CIA.”<sup>6</sup>

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### ***Introduction***

Watching President Kennedy play golf on Sunday afternoon with his sister and brother-in-law, an uninformed observer could reasonably conclude the new leader of the United States harbored not a care in the world. In fact, on 16 April 1961 Kennedy had plenty on his mind. US-directed forces were about to launch nearly simultaneous covert airstrikes on two sovereign countries.<sup>7</sup>

Inheriting from the Eisenhower administration serious foreign policy challenges in Laos and Cuba, Kennedy had agreed in both cases to allow

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a. The plan’s original cryptonym was JMARC.

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Bissell and his covert action specialists to continue planning begun during the Eisenhower administration for significant military interventions.<sup>8</sup> While ordering movement toward the brink of employing “deniable” armed action, the president remained cautious and insisted that the military and intelligence operators be kept on a short leash—the final OK to launch the strikes would be his.<sup>9</sup>

Just before his departure to Virginia, Kennedy had markedly changed the CIA-developed and Pentagon-reviewed plan for an air attack on Cuba at the 15 April onset of JMATE. Bissell and his staff had decided to use 16 readily available WW II B-26 bombers in a pre-invasion attack on key communications facilities and airfields. The destruction of Castro’s offensive air capability was judged a key element in protecting the mostly defenseless rebel air attacks and amphibious landings.<sup>10</sup>

Kennedy, however, had concluded that the CIA air plan was “too noisy” and wanted Bissell to tone down the strikes. There was no further discussion as Bissell slashed the force in half. With grave consequences for the overall JMATE operation, the eight bombers were only partially successful in destroying Castro’s air force.<sup>11</sup> The disastrous outcome of the landing on the beach in the Bay of Pigs is well known and has been the subject of numerous histories

In the wake of the operation that was publicly tagged “a perfect failure,” a humiliated and angry Kennedy exclaimed to Advisor Theodore Sorensen, “How could I have been so

stupid?”<sup>12</sup> The president’s poor, mostly CIA-influenced, decisionmaking on Cuba had resulted in a monumental foreign policy nightmare.

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***Meanwhile, Across the Pacific***

But, there was another covert action to account for, Operation MILLPOND in Laos. Kennedy had also ordered the CIA and Pentagon to arrange other covert airstrikes on the other side of the globe. A full examination of Kennedy’s post-Bay of Pigs mindset must, therefore, include a thoughtful consideration of concurrent events in Southeast Asia.

Nearly 9,000 miles away at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base (and 11 time zones ahead of Washington, DC), a mix of pilots including those flying for CIA’s proprietary Air America and “sheep-dipped”<sup>a</sup> US military pilots were asleep in their bunks. They had been recruited to fly 16 unmarked B-26 aircraft in a daring move to deliver decisive bombing support for a Royal Lao military ground offensive.<sup>13</sup> A few hours earlier, they had received their final instructions to make a surreptitious crossing of the Thai-Lao border to bomb an airfield and attack other communist positions on a strategically located area in central Laos known as the Plain of Jars.<sup>14</sup> (See map on facing page.)

When Kennedy gave Bissell the order on the afternoon of the 16th to

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a. US military personnel who assume civilian status in order to support specialized CIA missions.

proceed with the Bay of Pigs landings both men were fully aware that the MILLPOND pilots and their loaded bombers were less than four hours from a scheduled 17 April takeoff. A few hours later, in a decision that has remained obscured for more than 50 years, Kennedy suddenly canceled the MILLPOND strikes. The debate continues as to the circumstances, but sometime around 9 p.m., Kennedy also called off the next day’s JMATE airstrikes.<sup>15</sup> To date, very little attention has been focused on the nexus of these simultaneous events in Cuba and Southeast Asia.

Piecing together declassified DoD and Department of State records and the recollections of MILLPOND participants, however, this article details this key chapter of US Cold War involvement in Laos. Moreover, an examination of the Thailand-based B-26 scheme provides a fuller understanding of America’s artfully hidden foreign policy goals in Laos. Flagrant communist breaches of Laotian territory brought about equally prohibited US contraventions of the 1954—and later the 1962—Geneva agreements. Searching for a politically tenable strategy to oppose further communist expansion in Southeast Asia, the Kennedy administration ultimately chose to secretly employ CIA and DoD resources. These US policies continued until 1973, when the White House ended CIA paramilitary programs in Laos.<sup>16</sup>

The president’s cancellation of the MILLPOND airstrikes, however, left in force plans to greatly expanded the covert action he had approved in Laos. The authorization paved the way for CIA’s decade-long paramilitary programs in Thailand and Laos. Most importantly, MILLPOND

generated a surge in the growth of the Taipei-headquartered Civil Air Transport (CAT)/Air America (AAM) air support complex known within CIA by the cryptonym HBILKA.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, I will address the important support links between the JMATE and MILLPOND operations. Veteran CAT and AAM employees were deeply involved in training the Cuban exile transport pilots and two of these HBILKA fliers ultimately joined their trainees and flew combat missions over Cuba. So, too, volunteers from the Alabama Air National Guard (AANG) secretly provided maintenance and flight training for the attacking Cuban force. As the rebel air missions were battered over well defended Cuban positions, the guardsmen bravely entered the fray and American blood was spilled.<sup>18</sup>

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### ***Handed a Mess***

Looking over histories of the costly and lengthy Vietnam War, more descriptively and properly called the Second Indochina War, it is easy to forget the small country that initially captured the attention of the Kennedy administration. In his first State of the Union address on 31 January 1961, the president mentioned South Vietnam just once:

*In Asia, the relentless pressures of the Chinese Communists menace the security of the entire area—from the borders of India and South Viet Nam to the jungles of Laos, struggling to protect its newly won independence. We seek in Laos what*

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***“An American invasion, a Communist victory or whatever, I wish it would happen before we take over and get blamed for it.”***

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*we seek in all Asia, and, indeed, in all of the world—freedom for the people and independence for the government. And this Nation shall persevere in our pursuit of these objectives.*

Kennedy then chose to end his foreign policy section by placing tiny, and virtually unknown, Laos in particular (if hyperbolic) prominence.

*The hopes of all mankind rest upon us—not simply upon those of us in this chamber, but upon the peasant in Laos, the fisherman in Nigeria, the exile from Cuba, the spirit that moves every man and Nation who shares our hopes for freedom and the future.”<sup>19</sup>*

With Kennedy just into the second week of his presidency, few could have imagined the imminent and stunning impact of his ongoing secret decisions related to Laos and Cuba.

A month later President Kennedy reassured Thai prime minister Sarit Thanarat of Washington’s continued commitment to the “historic friendship and close partnership” between their two countries. Alluding to the on-going crisis in the ostensibly neutral kingdom of Laos, which shared a long and porous border with Thailand, Kennedy wrote in a personal communication,

*I fully appreciate your Excellency’s deep concern over the events now taking place in Southeast Asia and I wish to assure you that Thailand will have our unswerving support in*

*resisting Communist aggression and subversion.*

The president went on to affirm US responsibilities under the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), “We shall fully honor our obligation to Thailand as an ally and friend.”<sup>20</sup>

Laos was not a new presidential headache. By late 1960, according to Theodore Sorensen, who has provided an early insider’s description of the new administration, Kennedy was well aware of the Laotian “mess” he would inherit. “The president-elect said to me, ‘An American invasion, a Communist victory or whatever, I wish it would happen before we take over and get blamed for it.’”<sup>21</sup>

In the final months of the Eisenhower administration the political and military danger to the Royal Lao government consisted of a mix of former army paratroopers led by Captain Kong Le and communist Pathet Lao (PL) forces under the nominal control of Prince Souphanouvong. Half brother of Prince Souvanna Phouma, the on again, off again Lao Prime Minister Souphanouvong was widely regarded as Hanoi’s puppet.<sup>22</sup>

In August 1960 Captain Kong Le successfully staged a coup against the US-supported right wing Lao government. Declaring himself a neutralist, within weeks Kong Le turned the government over to Souvanna. Royal Lao Army (FAR) general Phoumi Nosavan, staunchly anticommunist and a US and Thai favorite, then requested and received logistical assistance from Bangkok and Washington in recapturing the capital of Vien-

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***Seeking to cut off Soviet military assistance to the Lao rebels, on 3 March the president ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan the seizure of the Plain of Jars.***

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tiane. According to an official US Air Force history, “substantial deliveries were made by [Air America] contract C-46s and C-47s to the royalist base at Savannakhet.” The Phoumi forces were also augmented by the arrival of 200 Lao paratroops that had just completed training in Thailand.<sup>23</sup>

Kong Le and his troops then moved to the Plain of Jars in central Laos, where they joined with Souphanouvong’s soldiers. For months the Soviet Union had been airlifting supplies to the rebels, and the weak Lao central government had virtually collapsed under intense internal bickering. With Kennedy determined to save Laos from communism, and the USSR under President Nikita Khrushchev sensing an opportunity spread its will in Southeast Asia, tiny Laos gained the potential to become a Cold War conflagration.<sup>24</sup>

Sorensen wrote that the president ultimately decided there were four courses of action open to the United States in Laos: do nothing; provide overt military assistance; divide the country and defend the southern half with outside forces; seek negotiations aimed at the establishment of a neutral coalition government.<sup>25</sup> A close examination of previously classified documents, however, shows that, in fact, Kennedy actually embarked on yet another choice.

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***MILLPOND***

Seeking to cut off Soviet military assistance to the Lao rebels, on 3 March the president ordered the

Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to plan the seizure of the Plain of Jars. With a JCS response, the MILLPOND plan, in hand, Kennedy moved forward on 9 March and approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) No. 29, which laid out a comprehensive and dramatic stand against North Vietnamese and Soviet-backed rebel activity in Laos.<sup>26</sup> His rationale for covert military action was partially influenced by advice from State Department officials who believed “that if the PDJ plan is successful, and if it were to trigger a peace-seeking by the Communist side, we would then hope to continue about where we were in the Geneva Accord.” Although Kennedy told the bureaucrats their assessment was “nonsense,” he had no good options.<sup>27</sup>

NSAM 29 contained a list of 17 measures intended to promote Laotian sovereignty and US-sponsored Thai military assistance. The measures authorized CIA to increase the recruitment of Lao irregular forces, ordered the Pentagon to assist CIA in the immediate expansion of the agency’s regional helicopter and fixed wing air assets, brought together CIA and DOD capabilities in the establishment of a covert B-26 bomber force, set the stage for increased US covert military logistical support into Laos, and directed senior US military and State Department leaders to press for improved Thai and Lao government cooperation.<sup>28</sup>

The president charged CIA with primary responsibility for a covert war in Laos that, because of the passivity of the conventional Lao military, was principally fought and

supported by surrogate ground and air forces. CIA assigned the Laos program the cryptonym CYNCOPE.<sup>a</sup> The Pentagon would also be heavily involved in Laos, but it would operate mostly from Thailand. American diplomats, in Washington, Bangkok, and Vientiane would become quasi-military commanders and, as was often necessary, be tasked to bring about the cooperation of Thai and Laotian authorities.<sup>29</sup> Managed by only a few hundred paramilitary officers, project CYNCOPE “became for nearly all its CIA participants the adventure of their professional lives.”<sup>30</sup>

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***Thailand’s Essential Role***

In order to conduct a successful and plausibly deniable war in Laos the United States required a reliable regional partner. Thailand’s strongly anticommunist leaders, Prime Minister Sarit in particular, were understandably concerned by the expansion of Soviet and Chinese influence.<sup>31</sup> When the 1954 Geneva Agreements established a neutral government in Laos fears in Bangkok and Washington were heightened rather than allayed because the Lao government could not be trusted to not support communist activities in the region.<sup>32</sup>

Thai officials were anxious to halt the spread of communism on their side of the Mekong River lest it proliferate in the poor regions of Thailand’s northern and northeastern border provinces and eventually threaten the kingdom.<sup>33</sup> The US stake was definitively declared on 5 Sep-

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\* Not its true cryptonym.

tember 1956 in National Security Council policy statement 5612/1.

*The United States is likely to remain the only major outside source of power to counteract the Russian-Chinese Communist thrust into Southeast Asia. Thus, the retention of this area in the free world will continue to depend on the extent and effectiveness of US support as well as on the local efforts of the countries themselves.*<sup>34</sup>

Kennedy's approval of NSAM 29 was a bold use of his covert action authorities and created a watershed moment for US-Thai paramilitary cooperation in supposedly neutral Laos. The president directed high priority negotiations with Prime Minister Sarit "for immediate availability of up to four 105mm batteries (Thai soldiers, equipment, and supplies for six cannons in each battery)" for deployment into Laos.

Sarit, who concurrently held the rank of field marshal of the Thai Army, approved the request and thereby set in motion a more than 12-year long covert relationship of the CIA and a joint Thai military and police organization known as Headquarters 333. The placement in Laos of regular Royal Thai Army artillery units, later substantially expanded with Thai volunteers placed into CIA-controlled Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs), would be one of the most important aspects of US-Thai security cooperation. By 1971 the movement of these soldiers and police into Laos would represent the greatest deployment of Thai "expeditionary forces" since WW II.<sup>35</sup>

A significant challenge to CIA's program was the extremely moun-

tainous Lao countryside and undeveloped infrastructure. A security force capable of protecting a country with virtually no roads would require air mobility.<sup>36</sup> CIA historian Thomas Ahern's history of the Laos war says, "Unanticipated by any of the program's managers, air support almost immediately became the single most important ingredient in [deleted] administration of the Hmong irregulars. Panhandle operations, launched at the end of the year, came to rely on it too."<sup>37</sup>

NSAM 29's directive that the Defense Department provide "16 H-34 helicopters to CIA for CAT use" was, therefore, an essential contribution to CYNCOPE. The addition of the aircraft energized a critical flow of military-trained pilots into the Air America proprietary. Brig. Gen. Andrew Boyle, chief of the US Military Assistance Group in Laos, told an Air Force civilian contracting officer, "I want airplanes to fly where I want

them, when I want them, and with no interference. Now get me a contract that will get what I want as soon as possible."

Justification for the arrangements included the statement that the services were "in the interest of National Defense, which because of military considerations, should not be publicly disclosed and for which Air America, Inc. is the only known source." Arrangements for H-34 personnel and maintenance, based with Thai government approval at Udorn, were formalized in July 1961 when the Air Force signed an \$2.5 million per year contract with Air America.<sup>38</sup>

Why did the historically cautious Thais decide to involve themselves so completely with US actions in Laos?<sup>39</sup> Since the 1950s Thai leaders had unsuccessfully sought a firm US defense umbrella for Thailand. The 1955 establishment of SEATO, with headquarters in Bangkok, failed



A US H-34 helicopter in operation in Laos (Photo from Ahern, *Undercover Armies.*)

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to assuage Thai security concerns, however. As Sarit repeatedly reminded the Washington, the group's requirement for member unanimity in all decisions virtually guaranteed SEATO would take no action against the growing communist threat in Laos.<sup>40</sup>

Agreeing to assist the Americans with secret operations in Laos allowed the Thais to win a major and public US security guarantee outside the problematic SEATO protocols. On 6 March 1962, the Department of State issued a communique, known as the Rusk-Thanat Agreement, saying, "The United States regards the preservation of the independence and integrity of Thailand as vital to the national interest of the United States and to world peace."<sup>41</sup> In return the Thais opened their country to the eventual basing of nearly 50,000 Americans engaged in bombing targets in the neighboring states of Laos, Cambodia, and in North and South Vietnam.<sup>42</sup>

NSAM 29 also authorized CIA to increase to 4,000 the number of Hmong to be recruited for an irregular armed force in northeastern Laos.<sup>43</sup> Why the Hmong? Finding the lowland-based conventional Lao army to be unmotivated and riddled with weak and politically driven leadership, the CIA turned principally to the socially well organized, historically hardy, and self-reliant Hmong hill tribe clans. As communist forces increased their activities in Laos, often moving on routes near Hmong villages, the outsiders represented a

real danger to families, livestock, and crops. It was not difficult, therefore, for the clan leaders to accept CIA-provided weapons and training.<sup>44</sup>

To avoid the introduction of US military trainers and reduce the total number of Americans working with the Hmong, CIA increased its association with the Royal Thai Army and the paramilitary Thai Border Patrol Police. The most elite of these police elements were known as the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU).<sup>45</sup> These specialists, working in Laos since at least 1960, were especially important in providing CIA field officers with interpreters, advisers, and trainers.<sup>46</sup> The integration of the Thais, with a similar language and physical appearance to the Lao, helped to maintain the deniability of US intervention in Laos. Having found surrogate trainers and warriors, CIA officers began building an important fighting force.

Under CIA direction and the leadership of Vang Pao, a charismatic FAR officer, these mountain fighters would become a major irritant to communist troops operating in northeastern Laos. With Thai assistance CIA officers would also recruit and train southern Laos hill tribes to conduct anti-infiltration operations in the Laotian panhandle. In addition to advisory and support cadre, Bangkok also provided artillery specialists for deployment in defense of key Lao transportation arteries and military bases.<sup>47</sup>

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***Takhli, Thailand***

Located in rural central Thailand, some 140 miles northwest of Bangkok, Takhli air base was a tangible demonstration of Thai support for American covert operations. Since the late 1950's HBILKA employees and USAF personnel had used the nominally Royal Thai Air Force facility to launch and recover East Asia special air missions.<sup>48</sup> In January 1960, a feisty USAF major on detail to CIA's air branch, Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt, took command of the Okinawa-based Detachment 2, 1045th Operational Evaluation Training Group. The transport unit was established to provide CIA with military support to a growing Southeast Asia mission and Aderholt was soon a constant presence at Takhli.<sup>49</sup> Aderholt's talents would quickly extend to providing advice on clandestine air operations and the development of hundreds of small landing strips throughout Laos known as "Lima Sites."<sup>50</sup>

NSAM 29 provided CIA with a huge infusion of aircraft, and HBILKA responded by gathering the personnel and aircraft needed to support the Lao operations. Thomas Jenny, a former US Marine Corps fighter and ground attack pilot, had served as a Japan-based Air America DC-6 copilot for just over a year. In January 1961, while in Taipei for company training, Jenny was asked by Air America Chief Pilot Robert Rousselot if he would consider flying the B-26 for a special project.<sup>51</sup> Within the AAM community such direct and confidential arrangements were standard practice and Jenny quickly agreed. Three other Air America pilots, Ronald Sutphin, William Beale, and Truman Barnes, joined Jenny.<sup>52</sup>

Beale had just returned from assisting with the JMATE training program in Guatemala, but he never mentioned this to any of his fellow pilots.<sup>53</sup>

The four HBILKA fliers, using unmarked B-26s already at Takhli, were designated to take charge of the planned 16-ship attack on the Plain

of Jars. Each of the pilots was to lead a flight of four aircraft. The men rarely flew the B-26s; Jenny could only recall two early April flights around the Takhli field. As they stood by for their bombing mission, when familiarization flights in the B-26 would have been possible, the pilots were instead called on to fill other Laos

flying assignments. Along with other HBILKA crews, the four began flying C-46 transports on twice-a-day arms and ammunition drops into Laos.<sup>54</sup>

One ammunition resupply mission was particularly eventful and nearly caused the cancellation of MILLPOND. Bill Beale and copilot Tom Jenny, accompanied by a mixed American-Thai parachute delivery crew, had trouble locating the drop zone. Flying in Laos, with changing weather conditions and ever-present mountains and enemy gunfire, was always a challenge. Despite good visibility, Beale suddenly realized he was flying the airplane directly at a limestone ridge line. With no room to maneuver, the C-46 barely passed over the formation. Luck quickly gave out as the plane then struck the top of a second karst and hit a tree. With the airplane now in an engine stall and essentially falling along the side of the mountain, Beale used the steep drop to regain engine power and control. The pilots managed to save the aircraft and the badly damaged C-46 made an emergency landing in Thailand at Udorn airfield.<sup>55</sup> According to an eyewitness, "On the left side, a branch a foot in diameter had passed between the fuselage and the propeller arc, missing the prop but driving a hole two feet deep in the wing root. Everywhere there was damage that just barely missed being fatal."<sup>56</sup>



Map from Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, xxvii

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**What can be confirmed is a sudden end to the Laos airstrikes mission.**

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others took custody of 12 B-26s and two RB-26Cs (photo reconnaissance models) and returned to Takhli.<sup>57</sup>

Under the command of Major Aderholt the men immediately began a much-needed training program. Aderholt later explained, “Only two of the men had been in combat and none had flown the B-26. Most had never dropped a bomb, so the first thing I had to do was build a bombing range in the Gulf of Siam, go down there, and teach them how to bomb.”<sup>58</sup> Jenny’s recollections confirm that the military pilots were poor choices for the tricky bombing mission ahead.

*Only about three seemed up to the task. They were the only ones who were confident enough to do the dive-bombing we [HBILKA pilots] believed was necessary. This was the only way to hit the target. The others—some of whom were very emotional about this pos-*

*sibility—wanted no part of the tactic.*<sup>59</sup>

On the evening of 16 April Major Aderholt gathered together the MILLPOND pilots and passed out final targeting instructions. The men were given commissions in the Royal Lao Air Force, blood chits with some gold coins, and sent to bed. There was no doubt that the mission to attack the Laotian Plain of Jars was going forward.<sup>60</sup>

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**The No-go Decision**

Where historians of the Bay of Pigs fiasco now have much in the way of declassified materials and participant recollections to root through and ponder,<sup>61</sup> details on the final hours of MILLPOND have remained largely unavailable and incomplete. Based on the notification to the pilots in Thailand, 3 a.m. local time on Monday 17 April, the president must

have canceled the Laos airstrikes a few hours after he authorized the *continuation* of the JMATE operation.

What can be confirmed is a sudden end to the Laos airstrikes mission. Thomas Jenney recalled in an interview that he was awakened with the other pilots and told by Aderholt the mission “was dead.” Although the fiercely proud Alabama native was aware that his hometown guard unit was heavily involved, Aderholt told the stunned pilots only that “events in Cuba had forced cancellation” of their mission. The “events in Cuba,” later known to be the failed JMATE plan, had reverberated from *Bahia de Los Cochinos* to Washington and suddenly upended events in distant Takhli. There was nothing else to do, Jenny recalls, but “go back to sleep.”<sup>62</sup>

The president’s Laos Task Force met on the afternoon of 17 April (by then the early morning of 18 April in Thailand) and mostly considered a looming communist threat aimed at Thakhek, a key town on the Mekong River. In a memorandum to the president, Rostow wrote, “The B-26s, while capable of shooting up supplies in the Plaine des Jarres, are unlikely to be able to stop the investiture of Takhek [sic] if the Pathet Lao proceed to that point.” Signaling the very sensitive nature of the decision to halt the Plain of Jars strikes, there is no mention of the aborted MILLPOND plans.<sup>63</sup>

A week later, concerned that communist forces were being positioned to attack a number of important Lao cities and towns, US ambassador to Laos Winthrop Brown requested presidential authority to draw upon the firepower of the Takhli-based



The remains of a HBILKA aircraft that crashed into a Laotian karst formation. (Undated photo from Ahern, *Undercover Armies*.)



B-26s. By now, of course, there was no White House support for covert airstrikes in Laos.<sup>64</sup> Instead, in accordance with SEATO Plan 5, on 26 April Kennedy authorized the deployment of US carrier forces to the area. Before US conventional military forces could be employed, however, a ceasefire was declared in Laos and the United States agreed to participate as a full member in a new Geneva peace conference.<sup>65</sup> In technical violation of the ceasefire, Kennedy allowed the continuation of limited assistance to the Hmong,<sup>66</sup> and after the 1962 agreements were trampled by communist violations, CIA would ratchet up CYNCOPE operations.<sup>67</sup>

Soon after the decision to cancel the Laos airstrikes, the MILLPOND pilots left for other assignments.<sup>68</sup> For some months, because of continued Lao government military setbacks, the B-26s and some of the military men remained at Takhli as a contingency force. During this period Ronald Allaire and Claude Gilliam were sent on a reconnaissance mission over the northeastern Laos town of Nape. Flying an RB-26 the men made a successful initial film pass over the town. On a second, and unwisely chosen similar flight path, a 37mm anti-aircraft gun raked the airplane's left horizontal stabilizer and elevator. Uninjured, but surely more schooled on enemy tactics, Allaire and Gilliam managed to safely return to Takhli. By August all the B-26s had been flown to storage on Okinawa, and the military men returned to their more mundane lives.<sup>69</sup>

The US-Thai alliance continued, however. In a matter of a few years, more than 300 Air America pilots, copilots, flight mechanics, and airfreight specialists were operating

### **JMATE, HBILKA, AND THE AANG**

HBILKA's role in the Bay of Pigs operation began in the fall of 1960, when half-a-dozen CIA proprietary pilots delivered C-46 and C-54 transport planes to a CIA training base (JMMADD) in Retalhuleu, Guatemala. CIA deemed airpower essential for the operation. The transports would provide platforms for much needed resupply drops and the insertion of the paratroops of rebel Brigade 2506 onto the island. Two of the American ferry pilots, Connie Seigrist and William Beale,<sup>a</sup> went to work training the Cuban aircrews in combat airdrop procedures.<sup>71</sup>

Pentagon air experts also recognized the invasion would require an aerial punch to destroy Castro's offensive and defensive air capabilities and protect the amphibious landings. Just as the CIA had turned to the B-26 for MILLPOND, JMATE planners selected the durable and readily available bomber. Planners also believed that choosing an aircraft that was also flown by the Cuban military would provide a measure of deniability.<sup>72</sup> Maintenance and training for the Brigade 2506 B-26 unit was tasked to the Alabama Air National Guard (AANG).

- Based in Birmingham, Alabama, the hometown of MILLPOND air commander Henie Aderholt, the 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing was the last US Air Force unit to fly the B-26. Sending the bombers to the mothball fleet in 1957 the 117th then transitioned to flying RF-84F jets. Despite being asked to accept a foreign training mission and a return to flying a propeller plane, CIA officers found an eager reception when they briefed the wing's commander, Brig. Gen. George Doster and his boss, Alabama Governor John Patterson. Sworn to secrecy and dressed in civilian clothing, beginning in December 1960, a group of some 80 AANG aircrew members, armament specialists, and maintenance men began flowing to the JMMADD base.<sup>73</sup>

In March the rebel air force and their American trainers moved from Retalhuleu to a CIA facility (JMTIDE) at Puerto Cabeza, Nicaragua. CIA staff officer Garfield "Gar" Thorsrud arrived from air branch to become the base chief and quickly became an essential link between the field and headquarters. An HBILKA veteran who had served with Seigrist and Beale in Indonesia during the anti-Sukarno government "Operation HAIK" campaign, Thorsrud was no stranger to air proprietary covert operations. Seigrist was designated head of transport operations and General Doster remained in charge of the B-26 training unit. Douglas Price, another CAT veteran, assisted with transport pilot training.<sup>74</sup>

a. Beale would leave the Cuban program by year's end and, as detailed above, become a MILLPOND pilot.

some 50 fixed wing and 30 helicopters, in support of Laos operations. Most of these personnel, their families, and the essential maintenance facilities, were located in Thailand.<sup>70</sup>

### ***"Totally unbelievable!"***

Kennedy's late Sunday order to cancel the imminent D-Day airstrikes

over Cuba was relayed to the CIA Deputy Director, Air Force General Charles Cabell, by national security advisor McGeorge Bundy. Cabell and Bissell quickly appealed this most unwelcome order in person to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, presumably repeating the point consistently briefed to White House officials that air dominance over Castro's military was critical.<sup>75</sup> In the presence of the CIA officers, Rusk telephoned

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***“By about November 1960, the impossibility of running Zapata as a covert operation under CIA should have been recognized and the situation reviewed.”***

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the president, who held fast to his decision. Offered the opportunity to speak directly to Kennedy, Cabell and Bissell declined. Both agreed, according to Bissell, further discussion was pointless and they returned to the CIA command center at Quarters Eye about 10:30 p.m.<sup>76</sup>

Saturday morning’s surprise airstrikes had failed to destroy all of Castro’s parked T-33 jet trainers and B-26 and British-built Hawker Sea Fury airplanes.<sup>77</sup> When notified of the president’s decision on Sunday evening to cancel D-Day airstrikes, Gar Thorsrud exclaimed, “totally unbelievable!” and concluded JMATE was lost. General Doster’s angry response, “There goes the fucking war,” well described the AANG’s gut level reaction.<sup>78</sup> Over the next days Castro’s aircraft were spectacularly deadly in the sinking of exposed rebel boats and ships and the downing of numerous Brigade 2506-flown aircraft.<sup>79</sup> Especially lethal were the T-33’s, which, unknown to CIA, had been fitted with .50-caliber machine guns and rockets.<sup>80</sup>

Awash with a sense of futility, seemingly abandoned by the United States, the brigade air crews were now near the breaking point.<sup>81</sup> Despite a standing CIA prohibition against the direct combat involvement of Americans, HBILKA pilots Seigris and Price sought and received Thorsrud’s permission to fly B-26 strike missions over the communist island. Attacking in the late afternoon of 18 April with six aircraft (CIA headquarters insisted Cubans be a part of the American action) the air-

men reportedly “destroyed 30 vehicles and inflicted some 900 casualties on the Cuban militia.” The hastily arranged strike force was lucky. Two of Castro’s T-33 jet fighters “appeared in the area less than a minute after the B-26s had departed.”<sup>82</sup> With their slow speed and limited self-defense capability, the B-26s would have been easy targets for the jets.

The next day eight Alabama guardsmen, four pilots and four crewmen, “stepped forward” to join the crumbling Brigade 2506 air and ground assault. Flying the vulnerable B-26’s, but with the expectation of air cover from the nearby carrier USS *Essex*, only two of the American-flown aircraft survived. Major Riley Shamburger and observer Wade Gray died when their airplane was jumped just offshore by a T-33 and shot-down. Attempting to attack an inland target, Capt. Thomas Ray and crew member Leo Baker survived a shoot-down but were killed in a fire-fight with Cuban militiamen.<sup>83</sup>

With the promise of US fighter protection, Seigris and Price launched again. Unable to gain radio contact with the *Essex*, the pilots nonetheless decided to continue their bombing runs. However, as they began to cross the Cuban coastline the airmen were told to abort their mission.<sup>84</sup> The facts remain cloudy as to why US Navy jets failed to appear as planned.<sup>85</sup> Seigris later wrote,

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a. In 1978, CIA honored the four airmen posthumously with the Distinguished Intelligence Cross, the Agency’s highest decoration for bravery.

“There was no way to back up and start again. We had lost. Period.”<sup>86</sup>

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***Burying the Bodies***

JMATE had ended in a rout and the recriminations and writing of history quickly ensued.<sup>87</sup> There were two formal investigations. Kennedy handpicked retired Gen. Maxwell Taylor, a former US Army Chief of Staff, to chair a commission called the Cuba Study Group.<sup>88</sup> At CIA, Director Dulles asked the inspector general (IG), Lyman Kirkpatrick, to conduct an internal review officially known as the Survey of the Cuban Operation. Among the principal findings, the Cuba Study Group reported to the president:

*By about November 1960, the impossibility of running Zapata as a covert operation under CIA should have been recognized and the situation reviewed. The subsequent decision might then have been made to limit the efforts to attain covertness to the degree and nature of U.S. participation, and to assign responsibility for the amphibious operation to the Department of Defense. Failing such a reorientation, the project should have been abandoned.*

*The leaders of the operation did not always present their case with sufficient force and clarity to the senior officials of the Government to allow the latter to appreciate the consequences of some of their decisions. This remark applies in particular to the circumstances surrounding*

*the cancellation of the D-Day strikes.<sup>89</sup>*

The CIA IG results, which were not shared outside the Agency, set off a firestorm within the Directorate of Plans. According to a CIA historian the survey placed unfair blame on the JMATE principals, particularly Richard Bissell. The report stated:

*When the project became known [via media leaks], the Agency should have informed higher authority that it was no longer operating within its charter. A civilian [Bissell] without military experience, and the DDCI, an Air Force general, did not follow the advice of the project's paramilitary chief, a specialist in amphibious operations. And the President made this vital, last minute decision [to cancel] without direct contact with the military chiefs of the invasion operation.*

*The Agency became so wrapped up in the military operation that it failed to appraise the chances of success realistically. Furthermore, it failed to keep the national policymakers adequately and realistically informed of the conditions considered essential for success.<sup>90</sup>*

Kennedy did not wait for the investigations to end before taking action. After a 22 April meeting with President Eisenhower, during which Kennedy reportedly received a “tongue-lashing” for the failed operation, Kennedy is quoted as saying “I’ve got to do something about those CIA bastards.”<sup>91</sup>

Under pressure from the White House, Allen Dulles, who, at Bis-

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**Rusk would later concede “his failure to voice his skepticism clearly at [planning] meetings did not serve Kennedy well.”**

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sell’s urging, had been absent from CIA headquarters and out of the decisionmaking loop during the operation, resigned seven months later.<sup>92</sup> Bissell was also expected to resign by year’s end. However, the new CIA chief, John McCone, convinced Kennedy that Bissell should remain and head the newly created directorate of science and technology. Bissell declined; he had always sought the top job and he knew that position was now a “closed option.” In February 1962 Bissell retired from CIA, writing in his memoir “with successes and regrets and a legacy that still has not been put to rest historically and perhaps never will be.”<sup>93</sup>

But, Bissell’s reputation was not the only one left hanging in uncertainty. In an unpublished paper on the JMATE program cited in Bissell’s memoir, a reflective Allen Dulles declared at the time, “[O]ne never succeeds unless there is determination to succeed, a willingness to risk some unpleasant political repercussions, and a willingness to provide the basic military necessities. At the decisive moment of the Bay of Pigs operation, all three of these were lacking.”<sup>94</sup> Dulles’s successor McCone has also authored a pointed critique. In 1986, McCone wrote to Bissell:

*I have lodged in my mind two and only two serious errors by individuals. First, it seemed to me Allen Dulles made a serious mistake in judgment by darting*

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a. Bissell had suggested that Dulles go ahead with a scheduled speaking engagement in Puerto Rico during the operation because it would be “good cover.”

*off to Puerto Rico ... on the very eve of the most serious undertaking of his career as Director of CIA. The second responsibility rests squarely on the shoulders of President Kennedy, who apparently was persuaded by Adlai Stevenson and possibly others to “stand down” the B-26 air support which was vital to the success of the brigade landing.<sup>95</sup>*

McCone’s assessment, of course, does not address the passive stance of both Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Ultimately, as Brigade 2506 was at greatest risk, Rusk advised the president to cancel the critical D-Day airstrikes. Rusk would later concede “his failure to voice his skepticism clearly at [planning] meetings did not serve Kennedy well.”

According to his biographer, “Rusk did, in fact, have misgivings about the plan, but he had been too silent on the issue and Kennedy had been too determined.”<sup>96</sup> As to McNamara, Bissell has written, “In the Cuba operation, it was the CIA, above all other government agencies, that had the action.” In a further attempt to describe the Washington jungle he observed, “Reframed within the context of bureaucratic prerogatives, McNamara’s and [JCS Chairman] Lemnitzer’s behavior suggests that from their perspective a failure at the Bay of Pigs was a loss for CIA but not necessarily for the Department of Defense.”<sup>97</sup>

Bissell may have been correct that DoD leaders believed they would

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***Aided by the US military, aggressive US diplomats, Thai support, and the unique capabilities of Air America, the secret war saved Laos from dismemberment.***

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not be held responsible for the Bay of Pigs muddle, but their credibility in the White House became nil. Eminent historian William Rust has well described the scattered pieces of advice Kennedy received from the JCS, including the Army chief of staff's declaration that the United States could not "win a conventional war in Southeast Asia" and should "consider using nuclear bombs." Rust also noted National Security Advisor Rostow's tart statement, "I never saw the American military less clear in mind, less helpful to a President, than in the first four months of Kennedy's administration."<sup>98</sup>

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***The Immediate Aftermath***

On 21 April 1961, the day Kennedy addressed the US press and accepted responsibility for the Bay of Pigs operation, Walt Rostow advised the president, in effect, to stay the fundamental, anticommunist course in Southeast Asia:

*Right now the greatest problem we face is not to have the whole of our foreign policy thrown off balance by what we feel and what we do about Cuba. We must bring to bear all the*

*resources—technical, economic, and intellectual—we have to prove that Viet-Nam and Southeast Asia can be held. The ultimate outcome in Laos will substantially depend, I believe, on the Viet-Nam exercise.<sup>99</sup>*

The Kennedy administration would thus adopt a two-pronged approach in Laos. Publicly it turned toward a negotiated settlement in Laos.<sup>100</sup> Privately, "CIA was still racing to complete its guerrilla organization in northern Laos when its operation at the Bay of Pigs came to a catastrophic end."<sup>101</sup> Over the next 12 years CIA officers assigned to CYNCOPE continued their effort to build and manage a reliable and effective unconventional army in Laos as an alternative to the deployment of thousands of American troops into Laos—a conventional military operation that would most certainly have exploded the region into a far larger and bloodier war.

That war would eventually arrive, but in the meantime, aided by the US military, aggressive US diplomats, Thai support, and the unique capabilities of Air America, the secret war saved Laos from dismemberment. Regrettably for the people of Laos and a generation of CIA officers

who served there, the kingdom's fate would indeed be determined in Vietnam. Following victories by the People's Army of Vietnam in South Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, in December 1975, North Vietnamese-backed Lao communists established the Lao People's Democratic Republic.<sup>102</sup>

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***The Legacy for CIA***

In fact, intended or not, Kennedy's initial push for the Laos program through NSAM 29 proved quite prescient.<sup>103</sup> The decisions that fueled MILLPOND established a covert intelligence and security assistance framework involving the Departments of Defense and State and CIA that was embraced and expanded under the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon administrations in the conduct of the war in Vietnam. During the years up to the 1973 withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, "CIA had run the only serious ground incursions into Hanoi's supply corridor in the [south Laos] Panhandle. Its flexibility—tactical, logistics, and managerial—and the economy of its effort represent admirable features of the Agency's performance in Laos."<sup>104</sup> Three decades later, well-read CIA officers in Iraq and Afghanistan would aptly have applied the hard earned lessons of Laos.



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Endnotes

1. See especially Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Peter Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (Simon and Schuster, 1979); Trumbull Higgins, *The Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs* (WW Norton & Company, 1987); William M. Leary and Leonard A. LeSchack, *Project Coldfeet* (Naval Institute Press, 1996); Richard M. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (Yale University Press, 1996); Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men: The Early Years of the CIA* (Simon and Schuster, 1995); Warren A. Trest and Donald Dodd, *Wings of Denial: The Alabama Air National Guard's Covert Role at the Bay of Pigs* (NewSouth Books, 2001); and Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam. U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government 1955–1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Many relevant primary documents can be accessed on-line at <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB341/index.htm> and in the Freedom of Information Act Reading Room at [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov).
2. Kennedy is reported to have told a senior State Department official earlier in his administration that Bissell was “going to take Allen Dulles’s job on July 1.” Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 239.
3. Michael Warner, “The CIA’s Internal Probe of the Bay of Pigs Affair.” [https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter98\\_99/art08.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter98_99/art08.html).
4. I first wrote about Operation MILLPOND in 1993, using mostly oral history interviews, well before Defense and State Department declassification efforts provided additional written records. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 34–36. The Douglas-built B-26 was a light bomber originally designated as an attack platform; the A-26 *Invader*. Following the retirement of the older Martin-built B-26 *Marauder*, the Douglas aircraft was redesignated a bomber and became the B-26 *Invader*.
5. Writing in his memoir about his attendance at a major Joint Chiefs of Staff presentation on Laos, Bissell says he had “close involvement for well over a year” with Laos, including a recent visit to the Lao capital of Vientiane. In somewhat of a contradiction, Bissell then says he “did not pretend to be an expert on Laos” and, therefore, did not speak out at the meeting against Pentagon plans that seemed “surreal.” Bissell goes on to make a startling observation. “Later, when I would make similar presentations to the president about our covert military plans to overthrow Castro, the Joint Chiefs chose to remain silent about their reservations. This was quite simply the etiquette of bureaucracy, and it exemplifies the way ingrained Washington habits are sometimes detrimental to policy making.” Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 147–48.
6. Thomas L. Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos* (Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), 6. The redacted, declassified version is available at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/vietnam-histories>. The collection contains four other redacted, declassified histories by Ahern of CIA activities in Southeast Asia.
7. Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 257; Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (Simon&Schuster, 1994), 91. Kennedy much preferred escaping the White House for an ocean venue.
8. On the eve of Kennedy’s inauguration the two men spent a good deal of time discussing the distant kingdom. Cuba, however, was also discussed. Eisenhower told Kennedy the plans were not finalized, but said, “We cannot let the present [Castro] government there go on.” Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 32. Exactly what was said, especially with regard to Eisenhower’s view on unilateral US military intervention in Laos, remains a matter of interpretation. William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954–1961* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012) 256–59. See also Fred Greenstein and Richard Immerman, “What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy About Indochina? The Politics of Misperception” in the *Journal of American History*, September 1992. I am much indebted to my longtime mentor and friend Professor Immerman for his generous insights and assistance in the preparation of this article. Any errors, of course, are mine.
9. Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963 Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis, Document 25, “Memorandum of Conference with President Kennedy,” 9 March 1961. As to Cuba, following an 8 February briefing by Bissell (also attended by senior Pentagon officials), Kennedy asserted that he “reserved the right to cancel the operation up to the end.” Higgins, *Perfect Failure*, 85. In early April, Kennedy asked Bissell “how the operation might be cancelled at the last minute” and was told the rebels could be diverted to Puerto Rico “with little notice.” Higgins, *Perfect Failure*, 116.
10. Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 35 and 10. Grayston L. Lynch, *Decision for Disaster: Betrayal at the Bay of Pigs* (Potomac Books, 1998) 23. A factor in the decision to use the B-26 was that the Cuban Air Force also had them, thus offering, it was thought, another element of plausibility to denials if they became needed. As it turned out, however, Castro’s B-26s were visibly different from those flown by the rebels and their American pilots.
11. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 193; Trest and Dodd, *Wings of Denial*, 64–66
12. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (Harper and Row, 1965), 308–309.
13. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 34.
14. Thomas Jenny, interview with author, 28 July 2014. Notes in author’s possession. Jenny was a MILLPOND pilot.
15. Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 258–59; Lynch, *Decision for Disaster*, 76–77.
16. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 120–22.
17. Central Intelligence Agency History Staff, *Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation, Vol 1, “Air Operations, March 1960 – April 1961,”* 98 (CIA, 1979). The 300 plus page document was released in July 2011 and can be found at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/>

### Endnotes (cont.)

- official-history-bay-pigs-operation-volume-1-part-1. In March 1959 CAT Incorporated was renamed Air America, Inc. (AAM) and its Chinese subsidiary Asiatic Aeronautical Company Limited (AACL) became Air Asia Company Limited (AACL). All of these organizations were part of an “air complex” of proprietary companies owned by CIA – all referenced under the HBILKA cryptonym. James N. Glerum, interview with author, 7 February 2013. Notes in author’s possession. As a CIA operations officer Glerum was assigned to various aspects of the HBILKA program for more than 15 years, including lengthy service at Udorn, Thailand. Glerum went on to senior positions in the CIA, including director of personnel.
18. Trest and Dodd, *Wings of Denial*, 14-15 and 84–86.
  19. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8045>
  20. President John F. Kennedy to Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, 28 February 1961, John F. Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Thailand, Vol. I, 1/61–5/61. Secretary of State Rusk prompted Kennedy to send the letter. See FRUS, 1961–1963, Vol. XXIII, Southeast Asia, Document 397, “Memorandum From Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, 24 February 1961. For a review of America’s response to the 1954 Geneva Accords, see Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 11–12. SEATO was formally established in 1955, five months after the signing of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, known as the Manila Pact. SEATO membership consisted of Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, France, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, and the United States. For details on U.S. military assistance given to Thailand in the 1950’s see Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 12–13.
  21. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 640.
  22. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 6–7.
  23. Ibid, 23 and R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950–1985* (University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies: 1986) 38. The acronym FAR comes from the French *Forces Armée Royale*.
  24. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 23–25.
  25. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 641–42.
  26. William J. Rust, *So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Foreign Policy in Laos*, (Lexington, 2014) 16–19. Mr. Rust has been especially generous with his own research and provided me key MILLPOND documents.
  27. FRUS, 1961–1963 Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis, Document 25, “Memorandum of Conference with President Kennedy,” 9 March 1961.
  28. The most complete copy of NSAM 29 can be accessed at the National Security Archive website <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB342>
  29. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 2.
  30. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, xvii.
  31. Sutayut Osornprasop, “Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina, 1960–1974,” Doctoral dissertation, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University, (Cambridge University, 2006), 13–14.
  32. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 36; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 20–21.
  33. Donald E. Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia* (Cornell University Press, 1965) 139.
  34. FRUS, 1955–1957 Vol. XXI, East Asian Security; Cambodia; Laos, Document 119, “National Security Council Report, 5 September 1956, Document 119.
  35. Sutayut, “Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina,” 169 and 212.
  36. For a review of these internal Laos obstacles see Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 3–6.
  37. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 93.
  38. These contracts were processed under the name “Project Mad River.” About half of the original Mad River pilots and mechanics were “sheep-dipped” active duty military personnel. Most would eventually return to their uniformed jobs, while others left the military and joined Air America as civilians. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 43–44.
  39. John L. S. Girling, *Thailand. Society and Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1981) 231–32; Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 10.
  40. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 36–37 and FRUS, Vol. XXIII, Southeast Asia, 1961–1963, Editorial Note, Document 413.
  41. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 51.
  42. Donald Kirk, *Wider War. The Struggle for Cambodia, Thailand and Laos* (New York, 1971) 180–81; Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 65. From 1965 to 1976 the United States spent \$388 million on Thai facilities alone. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 76.
  43. National Security Archive website <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB342/doc05b.PDF>
  44. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 5–6.
  45. CIA’s relationship with the PARU is revealed in a 10 August 1961 memorandum “Meo Operations,” written by Deputy Director Bissell. “The major assistance furnished to the Meos in the form of specialized personnel involves PARU which is a CIA developed and controlled and funded asset.” FRUS, 1961–1963, Vol. XXIV, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 12, Document, 194. Cited in Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (University of Indiana Press, 2002), 484. The acronym PARU is also sometimes written out as Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit or Police Aerial Resupply Unit.
  46. Sutayut, “Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina,” 62–63; Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 37–38.

**Endnotes (cont.)**

47. Sutayut, "Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina," 169 and 212.
48. In the years to come Udorn RTAFB would become the administrative and air hub for Agency and U.S. military Laos-support operations. Takhli, known by the American airmen as the "Ranch" for its austere conditions, would remain a critical and well-used covert air resupply base. For a lengthy review of CIA's involvement in Cold War Tibet air operations see Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet* (University Press of Kansas, 2002).
49. Warren A. Trest, *Air Commando One: Heinie Aderholt and America's Secret Air Wars* (Washington, 2000) 84–92. As the Southeast Asia air war expanded, conventional US units were stationed at Takhli to carry out the "Rolling Thunder" bombing missions. During 1967–68 Takhli-based F-105 "Thud" fighter-bombers would be vectored by a USAF radar site in northeastern Laos to targets in North Vietnam and Laos. Timothy N. Castle, *One Day Too Long. Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 52–54.
50. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 35.
51. Jenny, interview. Later, as part of a special group of Air America pilots called the "A" team, Jenny would fly the heavily armed T-28 aircraft in sensitive search and rescue and ground attack missions in Laos. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 69–70.
52. Sutphin would become an Air America legend in Laos flying the helio-courier light aircraft. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html>
53. Leary and LeSchack, *Operation Coldfeet*, 113; Jenny, interview.
54. Jenny, interview.
55. Beale reported to management he had encountered "poor visibility" in the drop area. Jenny remained silent. Ibid. With a total of four fully qualified bomber pilots it seems likely, had Beale and Jenny been killed or badly injured in the crash, that the MILLPOND strikes would have been cancelled.
56. Jenny, interview, and Donald Courtney, "Above & Beyond: Ration of Luck," *Air and Space Magazine*, November 2002. Courtney was a former smoke jumper and HBILKA employee.
57. Allaire's recollections are detailed in the papers of the late University of Georgia aviation and intelligence scholar William M. Leary. "Air America Notebooks From the William M. Leary Papers." Air America Chronology. Book One, 6–8. (Undated). Much of the material amassed by Leary for a book on Air America can be accessed on-line from the University of Texas at Dallas aviation collection. See <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/index.html> Dr. Leary was a deliberate and generous scholar who spent decades researching a history he regrettably never completed.
58. Trest, *Air Command One*, 111–12. Allaire, in an interview with William Leary, says that he had previously flown the B-26. "Air America Notebooks From the William M. Leary Papers." (Undated)
59. Jenny speculates that the pilots who showed up at Takhli were there because of "a bad economy, the possibility of advancement in the military, and poor record checks." Jenny, interview.
60. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 35.
61. CIA waited decades to declassify much of its JMATE holdings and some materials remain classified. See <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20140521/>. See also endnote 17 above.
62. Jenny, interview; Trest, *Air Command One*, 115.
63. FRUS, 1961–1963 Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis, Document 56, "Memorandum From the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to President Kennedy," 17 April 1961.
64. The towns believed at risk were Luang Prabang, Thakhek, Paksane, and Savannakhet. FRUS, 1961–1963 Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis, Document 60, "Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State," 26 April 1961.
65. Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 25–26.
66. Repeatedly communist attacks on the nearly defenseless mountain people caused a reversal in this policy. William E. Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York, 1978), 192–93.
67. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 138 and 161.
68. William Beale, a participant in the MILLPOND and JMATE programs, was killed the next year in Laos when his small plane hit a tree. Courtney, "Above & Beyond: Ration of Luck."
69. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 35.
70. Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955–1975." [www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html)
71. Joe F. Leeker, "Air America at the Bay of Pigs," 2–3. This essay, available only online, can be accessed at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/Leeker/history/index.html> Dr. Leeker, a German academic, has authored an extraordinary set of CAT and AAM essays. His voluminous data on the HBILKA air fleet and corporate identities is especially helpful to researchers. Moreover, Dr. Leeker is a most gracious and always helpful colleague.
72. 76. As it turned out, selection of the B-26 was problematic. Because Castro's pilots also flew B-26s the US planners hoped that painting the brigade aircraft in Cuban Air Force colors would make it appear the attackers were disaffected pilots. Unfortunately, the rebels were flying later model aircraft with a different machine gun configuration and appearance. In particular, the Cuban Air Force B-26s had a very noticeable Plexiglas nose. Following the initial 15 April air attacks on Cuba, when this obvious difference was exposed in

### Endnotes (cont.)

- the press, CIA's cover story of an internal revolt was badly damaged. Lynch, *Decision for Disaster*, 75. US Ambassador to the United States, Adlai Stevenson – who was unwitting of the air strikes – went before his colleagues at the United Nations and supported the phony story that the attacks were the work of defecting anti-Castro pilots. When Stevenson learned the truth he was furious with the White House. Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 81.
73. Trest and Dodd, *Wings of Denial*, 38–51.
74. Leary and LeSchack, *Operation Coldfeet*, 107–15. Thorsrud, a former smokejumper and military jet pilot, was considered an especially gifted airman and air operations manager.
75. Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs*, 99; Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 175–76 and 184.
76. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 184; Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 259.
77. Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs*, 193. It was believed that Castro's offensive air resources consisted of six B-26s, four T-33s, and two to four Sea Furies. Higgins, *Perfect Failure*, 73.
78. Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs*, 202.
79. Trest and Dodd, *Wings of Denial*, 71–76.
80. Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 110.
81. Michael E. Haas, *Apollo's Warriors: US Air Force Special Operations during the Cold War* (US Air War College, 1997) 159.
82. Leary and LeSchack, *Operation Coldfeet*, 118–19.
83. Trest and Dodd, *Wings of Denial*, 12–13.
84. Leary and LeSchack, *Operation Coldfeet*, 119.
85. Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 119–20. For comments regarding the Essex air cover controversy see Haas, *Apollo's Warriors*, 159–60.
86. Leary and LeSchack, *Operation Coldfeet*, 119.
87. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 190–91.
88. Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 136.
89. FRUS, 1961–1963, Vol. X, Cuba, Document 233, “Memorandum No. 3 From the Cuba Study Group to President Kennedy,” 13 June 1961.
90. Warner, “The CIA's Internal Probe of the Bay of Pigs Affair.” See also Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 127.
91. Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 103. Kennedy is also reported to have said he wanted to break the Agency “into a thousand pieces.” Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 265.
92. *Ibid*, 258. Dulles arrived back in Washington near midnight on 17 April.
93. On 1 March 1962 Bissell and his family were feted at White House where President Kennedy presented him with the National Security Medal. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 203.
94. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 191.
95. *Ibid*, 196.
96. Thomas W. Zeiler, *Dean Rusk: Defending the American Mission Abroad* (Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 69.
97. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 198–99.
98. Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 33.
99. FRUS, 1961–1963, Vol. X, Cuba, Document 163, “Memorandum From the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to President Kennedy,” 21 April 1961.
100. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 41–61.
101. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 69.
102. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 125–27.
103. William E. Colby Lost Victory (Chicago, 1989) 197–98; William E. Colby, *Honorable Men. My Life in the CIA* (New York, 1978, 186.
104. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 529.





