

The Chinese Road

While the ARVN had unsuccessfully tried to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail, another lesser known communist logistic corridor saw simultaneously a tremendous expansion. Since 1962, China was deploying engineer troops inside Laos to build a new logistical channel to support their local communist allies. The purpose was to link the Chinese Yunnan Province to those of north-western Laos. By 1967, under the protection of Pathet Lao troops, the road was even extended east towards North Vietnam, leading directly to Dien Bien Phu. Through what was now called the "Chinese Road", in fact a network of motorable trails, via which Beijing was able to channel military supplies to Pathet Lao and the Communist Thais. Namely, by the end of 1960s the communist insurrection had spread even into northern and eastern part of Thailand, with some 10 000 armed guerrillas. The RTAF was fully mobilized to support the Royal Thai Army (RTA) COIN operations. Several squadrons of T-6s and T-28s were deployed, occasionally supplemented by some F-86Fs or F-5As. The USAF Air Commando units based in Thailand also participated on this campaign. By 1969, 32 OV-10C Broncos were bought by the RTAF to face the increasing guerrilla threat.

Both Bangkok and Vientiane monitored with apprehension the continuing Chinese advance towards the Mekong River Valley that marked the Thai border. The military cooperation between Thailand and Laos then developed that led to a first joint clearing operation along the common northern border in 1967. In January 1971 the Chinese now approached the town of Pakbang, close to the Mekong River. Both the Thailand and Laos decided to react swiftly and when a Chinese truck convoy was sighted, a flight of B-Team T-28s attacked it, claiming 15 vehicles destroyed. A program of guerrilla-harassing attacks was then drawn, using Laotian tribal units and even some former Kuomintang troops that were stationed in Burma. The air support would be provided by the RTAF, considered superior to the RLAF. The scheme had to be dropped in the aftermath of the failure of Operation Lam Son 719; Washington did not want to jeopardize its secret apertures toward Beijing. At that date, China had some 25 000 troops inside Laos while the Chinese logistical corridor was protected by 400 anti-aircraft guns (6 100mm, 150 85mm and 57mm, the rest being 37mm) and 30 radars. On 5 May 1971, an USAF RF-4C that overflew the area was hit by AA fire. The escorting F-4s bombed the AA batteries in retaliation. Another USAF strike took place against Chinese AA positions on 13 May.

While the Americans tried to court the Chinese for an acceptable agreement in the war in South East Asia, Bangkok did not share the same point of view. The Thais decided to create a buffer zone beyond their border to stop the Chinese advance. They then decided to deploy the Task Force Rathikoun, composed of several UNITY battalions, on the other side of the Mekong River. In the meantime a new sets of rules of engagement were sent to allied airmen operating over the Chinese Road. It was now forbidden to fly within 11 kilometres (7 miles) from each side of it! But if the Americans were willing to observe restraint, that seemed not to be the case of the Chinese. In early December 1971, a civilian Air Laos DC-3 that overflew the zone was shot down. On 27 December, it was the turn on an Air America C-123K. During the rescue attempt, several other Air

American aircraft were damaged including a Volpar that took an 85mm hit but miraculously managed to land back to its base.

The Thais then decided to launch a vast sweeping action along both sides of the border. Operation Phalat involved an RTA Task Force with an infantry regiment and an airborne battalion on the Thai side of the border and the Task Force Rathikoun on the Laotian side. The drive was supported by the RTAF as well as some USAF F-4s and was considered successful, having destroyed several Pathet Lao and Thai Communist bases. The Thai Army Aviation helicopters were also deployed for the first time with American UH-34s.

But the success was short-lived, as the Thai positions were now harassed by the communist forces, in turn counterattacked by RTAF T-28s and AC-47s while the USAF A-1s were also involved. In April 1972, the Thais launched Operation Sourisak Moutry VIII but encountered a heavy resistance. A UNITY unit was encircled, forcing insertion of Thai special forces by helicopters inside of Laos to save the day. The besieged troops were then lifted out by the CH-53s of the USAF 21st SOS supported by the UH-1Ms of the White Horses. Finally, Washington and Beijing reached an agreement on the area after the historic trip of President Nixon to China. The Chinese agreed to stop their advance towards Thailand and to scale down their support to the Thai Communists while the American stopped any offensive actions against the Chinese Road. All the CIA-led Laotian intelligence teams forays inside China were also suspended.

CIA OPERATION IN LAOS (separate article)

Introduction

The war in Laos has often been called a “secret war”. This is certainly a fair description in comparison with media coverage of the neighbouring war in Vietnam but in recent years a number of books and a controversial film have helped to throw some light on this war and the role of US airlines in providing communications and logistical air support to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA’s) forces in Laos. None of these books, with one small exception, have defined the fleet lists of these airlines even though, in terms of aircraft numbers, their fleet sizes were comparable with those of the largest airlines in the world at that time.

The objective of this article is to attempt to compile the fleet lists of the principal airlines responsible for providing this logistical air support in Southeast Asia. First, however, it is necessary to describe the geopolitical context of the war in Laos as this explains the roles of these airlines and the covert nature of their operations. As the space available in Digest does not allow an in-depth description, a comprehensive bibliography is included.

Geography of Laos

Laos is a landlocked country the shape of Italy in the north-central region of mainland Southeast Asia. Six populous neighbours surround it: China to the north, North Vietnam to the northeast, South Vietnam to the southeast, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the

west, and Burma (Myanmar) to the northwest. The total land area of Laos is some 91,400 square miles, or roughly the size of Great Britain. The northern half of the country is covered in dense tropical rain forest, mountains that rise to over 7000 feet and slate-black limestone karsts. In the northeast, the mountains give way to the Plaines des Jarres (PDJ), a diamond-shaped patch of dairy land covered with giant stone burial urns dating back thousands of years.

The southern half of the country runs in a narrow panhandle, which empties onto the Bolovens Plateau. Down the eastern edge of the panhandle are the Annamite Corilleras, a towering mountain range that covers most of the 1323 mile border with Vietnam. On the western edge is the Mekong River, which forms a common border with Thailand, but there are also two Lao provinces on the western side of this big river.

Laos was divided into five Military Regions (MR). MR I was in the northwest, including Luang Prabang and the borders with Burma and China; MR II was in the northeast, including Long Tieng, Sam Neua and Sam Thong; MR III consisted of the central panhandle region, including Savannakhet and much of the Ho Chi Minh trail. MR IV was in the south, including Pakse and the Bolovens Plateau; finally MR V consisted of the neutral zone around Vientiane.

The climate of Laos roughly divides the year in half. Beginning in late May are five months of heavy tropical rains. Five more months, beginning in December, have high temperatures and little rain. A short spring and autumn connect these rainy and dry seasons.

When compared to South Vietnam, Laos was a more dangerous place in which to fly. Apart from enemy ground fire there were other problems to contend with. The maps of Laos during the early days were very inaccurate and pilots had to read the ground, watching for landmarks below them to ensure that they did not get lost. Apart from the monsoon season, Laos also had a man-made season when the villagers set fire to their fields in preparation for the year's planting. The whole country became enveloped in a blue smog that reduced visibility to half a mile or less.

During the Second Indo-China War, approximately three million people populated Laos. Of these, nearly half were lowland Laotians from the Tai linguistic group that migrated from southern China beginning in the 13th century. The vast majority of these lowlanders are peasant farmers and Buddhists.

Living along the mountain slopes are the diverse Lao Theung, which account for up to 30% of the total population. Descended from the Mon-Khmer ethnic group, the darker Lao Theung have historically been discriminated against by the lowland Laotians. The Lao Theung is fragmented into dozens of tribes that speak mutually unintelligible dialects.

On the mountain tops live the Sino-Tibetan hill tribes, comprising 20% of the population. The most important of these tribes are the Hmong (Meo) and the Mien (Yao). The Hmong, in particular, are renowned as among the fiercest warriors in Southeast Asia.

The geography of Laos is well described in *Tragedy in Paradise*, which also describes the USAID public health programme from 1963 to 1974.

War in Laos

Towards the end of World War II, US foreign policy was against the idea of the European powers regaining control of their colonial territories in Southeast Asia after the defeat of Japan. With the start of the Cold War and Korean War, however, it was recognised that the vacuum created by this policy was likely to result in communist domination of these territories, so the American government provided material support to the French government in their war in Indo-China, notably against the communist Viet Minh. Despite this support, which included Civil Air Transport (CAT) crews flying Fairchild C-119C transports on behalf of the French, the French forces were comprehensively defeated in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. This war resulted in the resignation of the French government and the calling of a peace conference in Geneva, which resulted in the signing of a Peace Treaty in July 1954. This treaty defined the Kingdom of Laos as a neutral territory and all foreign forces were required to be withdrawn. An International Control Commission (ICC), comprising observers from India, Poland and Canada, was established under the terms of the Geneva Accords.

The political scene in Laos could generally be divided into three camps: the communists, including Prince Souphanouvong, Kaysone Phomvihane, the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese masters; the pro-Western forces including Prince Boun Oum, Phoui Sananikone, General Phoumi Nosavan and the Hmong guerrillas and militia led by General Vang Pao (VP); and the neutralists, which included Prince Souvanna Phouma, Kong Le, and theoretically the Royal Lao Government (RLG). At various times after peace talks three coalition governments were formed but these rarely lasted very long before fighting broke out between rival generals' forces or there was a coup. Fighting between factions within the royalist forces (FAR) diverted the troops from defending the country from attack by the neutralist (FAN), Pathet Lao (PL) and People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) forces. Officers on the losing side of a coup would often be imprisoned. The history of the war in Laos is summarised in the Chronology.

After the signing of this first Peace Treaty the US military advisors were withdrawn but a Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) was established in the US Embassy in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. It soon became apparent that although all the Western forces had withdrawn the terms of the treaty were not being honoured by North Vietnam in their support of communist Pathet Lao forces. Although direct intervention by US forces was contemplated this was vetoed following the 'Bay of Pigs' debacle in Cuba and from that point on US military support of the Lao neutralist government was covert, administered by the CIA but under the direction of the US Ambassador to Laos.

The CIA's presence in Laos grew steadily from the early 1960s, but it still remained small. The total number of people connected with the war, both in Laos and in Thailand, never exceeded 225. This included some 50 case officers with Hmong, Lao, and Thai units.

Unlike the North Vietnamese, the Lao are peace-loving people and the Royalist and Pathet Lao forces were militarily less than effective. The Americans soon learned to rely on the hilltribes to fight the invading PAVN in much the same way as the French had in Indochina. These forces used guerrilla tactics to oppose the conventional PAVN forces in a mirror image of the Vietcong's war in South Vietnam. Conventional but mercenary forces recruited in Thailand and paid for by the US government supported these Groupement Mobiles (GM). Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) and CIA advisors were appointed to advise the Lao and hilltribe forces in the various MRs in Laos. The indigenous Hmong guerrilla and militia forces were intent on defending their homeland from their traditional enemy, the North Vietnamese, regardless of US policies or the support of the CIA. The use of the hilltribe forces to fight conventional battles, however, led to the decimation of these untrained and poorly equipped forces and it became necessary to use the Thai mercenary forces to fight set-piece battles against the PAVN.

The early years of the war took on a seasonal pattern. During the dry season the PAVN and PL went on the offensive, applying pressure on the Hmong in northern Laos and on RLG forces throughout the country. During the monsoon season the anti-communists took advantage of the mobility provided by Air America and struck deep into enemy-occupied territory. The character of the war began to change in 1968. The North Vietnamese, impatient with the progress of the PL, introduced major new combat forces into Laos and took control of the year's dry season offensive.

The Pathet Lao and PAVN forces would progressively invade the villages occupied by the hilltribe and Lao populations who would then be displaced as refugees. USAID would then try to resettle the displaced village populations in safer areas where they could plant new crops and build a short landing strip or drop zone for the supply of food until new crops could be harvested. The use of the majority of the male population of the Hmong hill tribes to fight the PL and PAVN meant that there were few able-bodied males left in the villages to provide food for the families. Food was supplied by air using the CIA and USAID's contractors: Arizona Helicopters Inc.; Bird & Sons Inc., which later became Continental Air Services Inc. (CASI), and Air America Inc. (AAM), formed out of Civil Air Transport (CAT) following the death of Major General Claire Chennault, of "Flying Tigers" fame. These US airlines used STOL aircraft to get in and out of small landing sites (LS) in remote area, as well as conventional military transports and numerous helicopters to provide air mobility and supply.

The US airlines were generally only required to provide communications and logistical support. US military personnel usually worked as military advisors but one exception was the provision of Forward Air Controllers (FACs), who flew Cessna O-1 Bird Dog, O-2 Super Skymaster and U-17 spotter planes to mark enemy targets for attack by Royal Lao

Air Force (RLAF) T-28 or USAF fighter-bombers based in Thailand or South Vietnam. These FAC pilots were known as “Ravens” after their radio call sign. Most of the Ravens worked out of Long Tieng, but a few were also stationed in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse. US military personnel transferred to Laos were “sheep dipped” out of the services and employed as civilians assigned to USAID Laos.

The principal logistical base for CIA operations in Laos was at Udorn (aka Udon Thani) in northeast Thailand, across the Mekong River from Laos and Vientiane, but the day-to-day campaign was directed from the US Embassy in Vientiane. Advisors to GM in the various MRs would generally return to Vientiane to debrief each evening and return to the field in the morning with new orders and supplies using air transport provided by the CIA’s airlines. The security situation generally did not allow the aircraft or advisors to remain in the field overnight (RON). The headquarters of the USAID Laos operation was in Vientiane with contractors’ aircraft being based at Vientiane’s Wattay airport (Lima 08), which had runway and control facilities provided by USAID. A USAID civilian hospital was built at Sam Thong (LS20), about 5 km from Long Tieng (LS20A), to care for the refugee population in that area, as well as military casualties that could not be treated at Long Tieng.

USAID Laos responsibilities included the development of agriculture, education, public health, and construction projects, in cooperation with the RLG. The CIA was responsible for military aid within the US mission, which also included representatives of the USIS.

The aircraft used by these two airlines were often interchanged, complicating the definition of fleet lists. Aircraft were also “loaned” to the airlines by the US armed forces, devoid of national markings, where overt military support was not politically acceptable. In these circumstances it is difficult to identify which US military aircraft were operated by the US airlines and generally these loans are not recorded in aircraft production lists.

The roles of the US airlines supporting CIA and USAID operations in Laos included: aircraft maintenance and repair; casualty evacuation; communication flights; evacuation and relocation of refugees; insertion, re-supply and extraction of road watch teams and patrols; photo-reconnaissance; psychological warfare; recovery of damaged aircraft; search and rescue; supply of food (“soft rice”) and weapons & ammunition (“hard rice”); surveillance, including signals intelligence and the monitoring of ground sensors; and troop transport.

Communication flights included the regular CASI ‘milk run’ from Bangkok to Udorn and Vientiane using C-47 aircraft. The American mission also had two ‘milk run’ flights each day from Vientiane to Northern and Southern Laos. The aircraft were Air America C-47s or occasionally C-46s. Heading north they landed at Luang Prabang, Sayaboury and Ban Houai Sai. Going south they stopped at Savannakhet, Pakse, and Attopeu. On the return trips they made the same stops. STOL Helio Courier aircraft were used at the smaller landing strips but these were later replaced by Pilatus Porter aircraft, with DHC Caribou STOL transports handling larger loads to the longer strips. C-46 and C-123B transports

were used to drop commodities such as food and ammunition. Helicopters used included the piston Sikorsky H-34 and turbine Bell JetRanger.

There were few roads in the country, and none of them were usable except in the immediate vicinity of the larger towns along the Mekong River. In most areas, roads were non-existent. Where they did exist, lack of maintenance and poor security often precluded their use – particularly in the hinterland, where most of the fighting and displacement of the civil population occurred. A road was eventually built between Vientiane and Long Tieng.

During the periods when there was a moratorium on the Rolling Thunder bombing of North Vietnam, extra resources were available to bomb Laos instead. The second Indochina War left Laos with the dubious distinction of being the most heavily bombed country per capita in the history of warfare.

Strategically the war in Laos was seen as a way of diverting PAVN divisions from the Vietnam War without the commitment of significant US forces. With the withdrawal of US forces from South Vietnam, following the Paris Peace Treaty, signed in January 1973, the neutrality of Laos was reconfirmed and the CIA's support for the Lao government was also withdrawn. Once again, the Pathet Lao was invited to join a coalition government. Although the ICC attempted to monitor the withdrawal of foreign forces from Laos the PAVN continued the occupation of Laos, resulting in "ethnic cleansing" of the Hmong hill tribe populations; survivors still populate refugee camps in Northeast Thailand.

The war in Laos has been described in much greater detail in *War in Laos 1954-1975*, by Kenneth Conboy, *The Ravens*, by Christopher Robbins, and *Covert Ops*, by James E Parker. Details of these and other sources are given in the Bibliography.

The Fall of Saigon

Operation FREQUENT WIND was the evacuation of Saigon as the PAVN advanced towards the city in April 1975. Air America responded to the call and initiated the largest aerial evacuation in history. The unsung heroes of the airlift were the Air America Bell UH-1 crews, who put in sterling work ferrying evacuees from around the city to either the US embassy or the Defense Attaché's Office compound. They were transporting people out to sea to awaiting aircraft carriers, refuelling on the carriers, and returning to a disintegrating Saigon.

In the period from 6 April 1975 to 30 April 1975, a total of 51,888 people were flown out of Saigon. Of these, 45,125 (87%) were flown out by Air America. On 29 and 30 April alone, 7,014 were flown out, with 5,595 (80%) evacuated by Air America. Several helicopters were lost during the evacuation due to enemy fire.

Civil Air Transport Co. Ltd. (CAT)

There is an excellent essay on the formation and history of CAT in Air-Britain's *Curtiss C-46 Commando* monograph (pp. 28 – 30); *Perilous Missions*, by William Leary,

describes these in greater detail. The latter includes an Equipment List for February 1954 that has been taken into account in the preparation of the fleet list at Table 2.

During the Korean War, CAT made more than 100 hazardous over-flights of mainland China, airdropping agents and supplies. These flights included Operation PAPER in support of Li Mi's KMT forces in the Shan provinces of northeast Burma that were used for two unsuccessful invasions of southwest China in an attempt to divert Chinese forces from Korea. Later CAT was used to repatriate these KMT forces and their families to Taiwan after they had become an embarrassment to the governments of Burma and Thailand. Operation BOOKLIFT was CAT's contract with the USAF for the airlift of men and supplies between designated points throughout the Far East.

CAT is significant in this story because it was used to support the French armed forces during the First Indo-Chinese War during 1953 and 1954, when the US Government did not wish to commit US forces overtly. Operation SQUAW began on 6 May 1953 and continued until 16 July, using six USAF C-119 aircraft repainted in French Air Force colours and based at Gia Lam airbase, outside Hanoi. CAT returned to Indochina in 1954 with twelve C-119s and 24 pilots to support the French forces at Dien Bien Phu. Between 13 March and the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the beleaguered French troops under Operation SQUAW II.

CAT operations continued in Indochina after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Between mid-May and mid-August, C-119s dropped supplies to isolated French outposts and delivered loads throughout the country. CAT also supplied twelve C-46s for Operation COGNAC, the evacuation of civilians from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, following the signing of the Geneva Agreement on 21 July 1954. Between 22 August and 4 October they flew 19,808 men, women and children out of North Vietnam.

Tables 1 and 2 only show the aircraft operated by Civil Air Transport Co. Ltd. of Taiwan, most of whose aircraft were registered in Taiwan. This list therefore excludes the XT-registered aircraft that were operated in Mainland China from 1946 and also the aircraft taken over from CATC and CNAC by CATI that had been abandoned in Hong Kong and were then registered in America. CAT provided the basis of Air America's initial fleet.

The United States had been supplying economic and military aid to Laos under an agreement signed in 1950. Following the Geneva Conference of 1954, Washington decided to expand this programme and in January 1955, it established the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Vientiane to administer economic assistance. A PEO was later set up within USOM to handle military aid. CAT soon became involved in USOM's aid programme.

In July 1955, USOM officials learned that a rice failure threatened famine in several provinces in Laos. Because a number of these areas were in remote, mountainous regions, airdrops were the only feasible means to deliver essential supplies of rice and salt. Three CAT C-46s arrived at the railhead at Udorn, in northeast Thailand, on 11 September to

begin the airlift. By the end of the month, CAT had flown more than 200 missions to 25 reception areas, delivering 1,000 tons of emergency food.

CAT's permanent presence in Laos commenced on 1 July 1957 when a C-47 was brought to Vientiane to service a new contract with the US Embassy. Between 1957 and 1959, the unstable political situation in Laos led to growing American presence in the country as the United States increased its support of the FAR. It was this situation in Laos, not Vietnam, which led to the "domino theory" in Southeast Asia. If Laos fell to the communists then the rest of Southeast Asia was expected to follow.

Air America, Inc.

Air America, Inc. was reportedly formed in July 1950 as a 100%-owned subsidiary of the Pacific Corporation and undertook worldwide charter and contract operations primarily in the Far East. Air America operated supply-dropping missions in Laos under contract to the USAID.

Air America was owned by the CIA and played a leading role in logistic air support of the CIA's forces in Laos from 1959 to 1974. When the US wars in Southeast Asia were over, Air America's surviving aircraft were sold and the company was liquidated. Money (\$20 million) raised from the sale of aircraft, e.g. via Omni Aircraft Sales Inc., was returned to the US Treasury.

Christopher Robbins has written a history of Air America in *Air America: the story of the CIA's secret airlines*. This book is not limited to just the history of Air America; its full title is a more accurate description as the book also considers CAT, Bird Air and CASI. It reports that the owners of Air America had very little knowledge of its fleet size or composition. Some excellent pictures of many of Air America's aircraft, plus others with CAT, Bird Air and CASI are included in Terry Love's *Wings of Air America: a photo history*.

During the war, Air America flew throughout South Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia, but their main operations were in Laos. Air America provided air support for American objectives in Laos, mainly through USAID. Their main objective was logistical. They supplied General Vang Pao's 45,000-man army in MR II. Probably the biggest part of Air America's mission was support of refugee supply, movement and resettlement. Because no US military planes were permitted to be based inside Laos, Air America came to play an essential role with its helicopters, transports and STOL aircraft. Air America provided the only Air Rescue Service in the area during the early 1960s.

The formal Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, signed on 23 July 1962, provided for a coalition government and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country by 7 October. The United States pulled out its 666 military advisers and support staff, and Air America stopped dropping weapons to the Hmong. Air America's operations declined sharply in 1963. Restricted to food supply to the Hmong, which averaged 40 tons a month by the summer, the airline laid off people and mothballed aircraft. By May 1963,

the number of UH-34s assigned to Udorn had dropped from 18 to 6. Flight hours, which had averaged 2,000 per month before the Geneva Accords, dropped to 600.

By 1966 Air America had almost 6,000 employees. At its peak in 1970, Air America had the largest airline fleet in the world, in terms of numbers of aircraft owned, although a lot of these aircraft were small or helicopters. Air America operated up to 30,000 flights per month by 1970. By the summer of 1970 the airline had some two dozen twin-engine transports, another two dozen STOL aircraft, and some 30 helicopters dedicated to operations in Laos. During 1970, Air America airdropped or landed over 20,000 tons of foodstuffs (mainly rice) in Laos and helicopter flight time reached more than 4,000 hours a month.

In Vietnam, Air America served about 12,000 passengers monthly. These included USAID people, missionaries, military personnel, correspondents, government officials and nurses. Up to 40 aircraft were based in Vietnam.

Air America men were among the last to leave when Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam collapsed. Many Air America aircraft were shot down and lost. 243 men were killed in action while working with Air America; 100 AAM personnel died in Laos, including 23 crewmembers that died in flight operations. Eleven AAM crewmembers were lost in the three years 1965, 1966 and 1967, of which five were due to enemy action. Between December 1971 and April 1972, six AAM crewmembers died in Laos. In December alone, 24 aircraft were hit by ground fire and three were shot down.

Tables 3 and 4 are an initial attempt to establish Air America's fleet size and composition. The annual World Airline Surveys by Flight International (Table 3) give an indication of fleet composition and size, and Table 4, which has been compiled from numerous sources and production lists, gives the identity of many of these aircraft. Arizona Helicopters, Inc.

Arizona Helicopters, a smaller helicopter contractor, operated in Laos in the early 1970s. For a fleet list please see Table 7. Bird & Sons, Inc. (Bird Air)

Little has been written about Bird Air. It escaped coverage in the annual World Airlines Surveys by Flight International and Ron Davies's excellent books: *The World's Airlines and Airlines of Asia*. The following description is taken from the C-46 monograph:

"Bird and Sons was a proprietary company of the US Central Intelligence Agency, operating a variety of aircraft, mainly light types, in South-East Asia. A number of C-46s were operated on quasi-military operations in 1964 and 1965."

In fact Bird & Sons, Inc, a private airline run by William H Bird, was the aviation division of A Bird and Sons, the San Francisco heavy construction company operating in Vietnam and Laos.

The aviation division of Bird and Sons, Inc., including 22 aircraft and 350 employees, was bought by Continental Airlines for \$4.5 million cash in 1965 and commenced operations as the South-East Asia Division in September, 1965.

Given this transfer of aircraft the fleet lists of Bird & Sons and CASI are combined in Tables 5 and 6. Some aircraft continued to be registered to Bird & Sons Inc. after the take-over.

Continental Air Services, Inc.

Continental Air Services, Inc. (CASI) was formed in April 1965 as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Continental Air Lines Inc. to operate aircraft and ground facilities in support of oil exploration, construction and engineering projects, USAID and other US Government Agencies, e.g. the CIA. In August 1965 the company took over much of the aviation division of Bird and Sons in Laos and Vietnam, with headquarters in Vientiane.

Aircraft were interchanged between the fleets of Air America and CASI, perhaps without any change of ownership, thus adding a further complication to the compiling of fleet lists. Many aircraft owned by Bird & Sons were registered in Laos (on the XW- register) and some of the survivors were later transferred to the US register under CASI ownership many years after the take-over. With the fall of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, operations were terminated and the surviving aircraft were sold, as shown in Table 6.

Outstanding Questions

This article has attempted to compile the fleet lists of the principal US airlines operating in and around Laos during the first and second Indo-Chinese wars (1954-1975). Although these fleet lists are considerably longer than information published in Aviation Letter during 1968, for example, there are still significant gaps when the lists are compared with reported inventories of these airlines. For example, only three of ten Beech Barons operated by CASI have been identified to date.

Readers are encouraged to check their own records and report any additions or corrections to the author or the editor. For example, as copies of the USCAR consulted were published at intervals of four years, further information of interest may be available in intermediate publications, e.g. the civil registrations of Air America's C-123s, operated in about 1966.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Abbreviations

AAA Air America Association

AAM	Air America, Inc.
AB-IX	Air-Britain Information Exchange (web site and mailing list)
AFB	Air Force Base
aka	also known as
AL	Aviation Letter
AMCAR	American Civil Air Registers quarterly review
BOA	Boun Oum Airways
CAB	Civil Aeronautics Board
Canx.	Cancelled
CASI	Continental Air Services, Inc.
CAT	CNRRA Air Transport > Civil Air Transport
CATC	Central Air Transport Corp.
CATI	Civil Air Transport, Inc.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIC	Commission International d'Control (see also ICC)
c/n	construction number
CNAC	China National Aviation Corp.
CNRRA	Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration
DBR	Damaged Beyond Repair
DOD	Department of Defense
FAA	Federal Aviation Agency
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAN	Force Armée Neutraliste (Neutralist Armed Forces)

FAR	Forces Armée du Royaume (Royal Armed Forces)
GM	Groupement Mobile
ICC	International Control Commission
ID	Identity
KMT	Kuomintang (Nationalist Chinese)
LAC	Lockheed Aircraft Corporation
LS	Lima Site (Landing Site in Laos)
MR	Military Region
MSB	Martin S Best (author's files)
NLR	No Longer Registered
OWAD	The Observer's World Aircraft Directory
PA&E	Pacific Architects and Engineers, Inc.
PARU	Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (Thai)
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PDJ	Plaine des Jarres (Plain of Jars)
PEO	Programs Evaluation Office
PL	Pathet Lao
q.v.	quod vide (= which see)
reg.	registration
rgd.	registered
RLAF	Royal Lao Air Force
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RON	Remain Overnight

r/r	re-registered
RTAFB	Royal Thai Air Force Base
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
SEA	Southeast Asia
STOL	Short Take-Off and Landing
TAHS	The Aviation Hobby Shop
TBC	To Be Confirmed
TBD	To Be Determined
TPAPL	Turbo Prop Airliner Production Lists
USAF	United States Air Force
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USCAR	United States Civil Aircraft Register
USMC	United States Marines Corps
USOM	United States Operations Mission (became USAID)
USRQ	United States Register Quarterly
USIS	United States Information Service
USSF	United States Army Special Forces
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VNAF	South Vietnamese Air Force
VP	General Vang Pao
VTB-18	Volpar Turbo Beech 18
WFU	Withdrawn From Use
W/O	Written Off

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Appendix 3: Chronology

- 29/10/46: CNRRA Air Transport (CAT) formed by Claire Lee Chennault and Whiting Willauer
- 03/02/47: CAT commenced non-scheduled operations in China
- 02/03/47: First CAT transport arrives in Shanghai
- July 1947: National Security Act, formation of the US Central Intelligence Agency
- 1948-1949: Communist forces take over mainland China
- 19/07/49: Laos is recognised as an independent state with ties to France
- 10/11/49: Managements of CNAC & CATC defected to the Communists leaving the aircraft guarded in Hong Kong
- 16/12/49: CAT moved its aircraft to Formosa
- 19/12/49: Chennault & Willauer purchase the Nationalist Government shares of CNAC & CATC and registered their fleets to Civil Air Transport,

Inc. (CATI) in USA

- 01/01/50: CATI bought Pan American's 20% share in CNAC
- 1950: Civil Air Transport Co. Ltd. formed in Taiwan to take over the routes of CATI
- 08/05/50: US announced military and economic aid to the pro-French regimes of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia
- 25/06/50: North Korea forces attack South Korean positions south of the 38th parallel
- 10/07/50: American Airdale Corporation (CIA holding company) incorporated
- 1953: Operation SQUAW, CAT's operations in support of French forces in Indochina
- 1953-1954: Operation REPAT, airlift of Nationalist troops from Burma & Thailand to Taiwan
- 1954: Operation SQUAW II, CAT's operations in support of French forces in Indochina, especially during the siege of Dien Bien Phu
- 07/05/54: The remnants of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrender
- July 1954: The Geneva Accords on Indochina are signed [1], partitioning Vietnam and setting up an ICC to supervise compliance with the
Agreements [2]
- 1954: Operation COGNAC, CAT's airlift of refugees from North to South Vietnam
- 31/03/56: Prince Souvanna Phouma becomes prime minister in Laos
- 05/08/56: Souvanna Phouma and the Communist Prince Souphanouvong agree to a coalition government in Laos
- 29/05/57: Communist Pathet Lao attempt to seize power in Laos
- 01/07/57: First CAT aircraft deployed to Vientiane to service a contract with the US Embassy
- 07/10/57: American Airdale Corporation changes its name to Pacific Corporation

- 31/03/59: CIA investment in CAT Inc. transferred to Air America, Inc. (or 26/03/59?)
- Jun-Jul 1959: Communist Pathet Lao forces attempt to gain control over northern Laos
- July 1959: USSF Mobile Training Teams dispatched to Laos (HOTFOOT teams)
- 23/08/59: First two transports of Air America arrived in Vientiane
- Dec 1959: Second USSF contingent, HOTFOOT 2, replaced the first group
- 31/12/59: General Phoumi Nosavan seizes control in Laos
- 09/08/60: Captain Kong Lee staged a successful coup d'état in Vientiane and urged restoration of a neutral Laos under Prince Souvanna Phouma
- 16/12/60: The forces of Phoumi Nosavan captured Vientiane
- 04/01/61: Prince Boun Oum organises a pro-Western government in Laos; North Vietnam and the USSR send aid to the Communist insurgents
- 1961: Air America supplied with ~23 USMC H-34 helicopters by Executive Order
- 16/05/61: A 14-nation Conference on Laos opened in Geneva [1]
- 08/10/61: The Lao factions agree to form a neutral coalition headed by Souvanna Phouma
- May 1962: Phoumi Nosavan's forces are routed, paving the way for a settlement in Laos
- 23/07/62: Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos signed in Geneva
- 07/10/62: All foreign military personnel to be withdrawn from Laos
- April 1965: Continental Airlines forms CASI by taking over the air division of Bird & Sons, Inc.
- Sep 1965: CASI commences operations in SE Asia
- 08/10/69: Souvanna Phouma requests increased American aid to meet heavier Communist pressure in Laos

- 18/12/69: Congress prohibits the use of current DoD appropriations to introduce ground combat troops into Laos or Thailand
- 10/02/70: Souvanna Phouma states that he will take no action against Communist supply activity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail if North Vietnam will
withdraw combat troops from Laos
- 29/12/70: Congress adopts legislation that denies funds for the introduction of ground combat troops into Laos or Thailand
- 27/01/73: The Paris peace accord is signed and the Vietnam War is officially ended
- 21/03/73: Souvanna Phouma and the Communists conclude a cease-fire in Laos
- 29/03/73: The last American troops leave South Vietnam
- 03/06/74: Last Air America aircraft crossed the border from Laos into Thailand.
- 30/06/74: Air America operations at Udorn, Thailand, close down
- April 1975: Clashes occur between Communist insurgents and Laos government troops
- April 1975: Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of refugees from Saigon
- 17/04/75: The fall of Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- 29/04/75: The fall of Saigon, RVN
- 16/05/75: The Pathet Lao seizes Pakse in Laos
- 20/05/75: Savannakhet falls to the Pathet Lao
- June 1975: Pathet Lao troops seize US Embassy property in Vientiane
- 23/08/75: The Pathet Lao consolidates the Communist takeover in Laos
- 03/12/75: The Lao coalition headed by Souvanna Phouma is abolished; Laos becomes a Communist state with Souvanouvong as President
- 30/06/76: Air America finally closed down.

Notes:

[1] The 14 nations that participated in the Geneva Convention were: the US, the Soviet Union, France, Canada, China, India, Great Britain, Poland, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Laos.

[2] The International Control Commission (ICC) was composed of members from India, Canada and Poland.

[3] This Chronology has been compiled using various sources listed in the Bibliography.

Aircraft Listings

Civil Air Transport

Air America

Arizona Helicopters

Bird and Son and Continental Air Services (CASI)

If you have any comments, suggestions, corrections, or additional information regarding the content of this page, please contact Martin Best directly at msbest@loxinfo.co.th

RECORD OF U.S. POWs IN LAOS (third separate article)

Vietnam War era CIA reports state that American POWs captured in Northern Laos are "escorted to prisons in Houa Phan/Sam Nuea/province where they are detained on a semi-permanent basis or transferred to North Vietnam." What follows here are reports of Pathet Lao held POWs in the Laotian theater of operations and does not include the MACV area of operations in Laos. The Pathet Lao held American POWs in numerous locations, including the Pathet Lao Headquarters at Sam Nuea and at more than one location at Ban Nakay. Declassified CIA documents from 1967-1972 show that there were up to 60 or more U.S. POWs held by the Pathet Lao during the Vietnam War who were never released.

Reports entitled "Enemy Prisons in Laos," "Estimated Enemy Prison Facilities in Laos," and "Estimated Enemy Prison Order of Battle in Laos" provide information from sources on communist Pathet Lao POW camps holding prisoners described as Pilots, Caucasian and American. Reports were updated as new intelligence was obtained.

There is also a 1969 Seventh Air Force report "POW Camps Listing for Laos", describing all locations listed that had been validated for inclusion by appropriate authority at the

U.S. Embassy in Vientiane in coordination with the Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC). The JPRC was responsible for the reporting and tracking of all missing and captured Americans under the code name "BRIGHT LIGHT". Another report, the "1972 Fleet Intelligence Center Pacific, Laos Prisoner of War Camp Study", is a compilation of overhead photographic imagery of all known POW Camps in Laos. These two reports incorporated the CIA intelligence products, and were backed up with the original source reports.

**Known and Suspected American POWs Under Pathet Lao Control:
(Listed by year, organization and number of POWs)**

1966 - CIA - 8 American POWs

1967 - CIA - 15 American POWs

1968 - CIA - 13 American POWs

1969 - CIA - 45 American POWs

1969 - USAF - 61 American POWs

1970 - CIA - 28-30 American POWs

1971 - CIA - 24-30 American POWs

1972 NAVY high altitude photography of known and suspected POW Camps in Laos was not released.

CIA POW/MIA reporting decreased after 1969. This was at a time when the military was still losing aircraft and pilots and others, both civilian and military, were being lost on the ground. Many POW camps had been observed for long periods of time, some for years. On March 11, 1968, the communists attacked a U.S. Tactical Air Navigation System (TACAN) and a TSQ 81 RADAR bomb facility at Phu Pha Thi, also known as Lima Site 85, in northern Laos. General Singkapo, the former commander of all Pathet Lao Forces during the war is quoted in an August 21, 1990, interview with Dr. Timothy Castle, author of *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, as saying that about 100 Pathet Lao and more than 200 North Vietnamese attacked Lima Site 85 and that two or three Americans were captured at the site and sent to Vietnam. Also in 1968, reports were received by the CIA in Laos that all American POWs were being sent to Hanoi for a prisoner exchange. Twenty-seven Americans that were held prisoner by the Pathet Lao in four different POW camps were moved to Ban Hang Long, Houa Phan Province, and were supposed to represent all Americans held by the Pathet Lao. CIA POW reporting shown above indicates not all were sent.

On October 11, 1969, overhead photography taken by a Buffalo Hunter reconnaissance drone of Ban Nakay Teu, revealed 20 non-Asians accompanied by Pathet Lao guards near caves at Ban Nakay Teu. CIA analysis of the prisoners determined them to be Caucasian. There had been numerous ground reports identifying these people as Americans both prior to and after the overhead reconnaissance.

In 1971, Secretary of Defense Laird was not satisfied with the limited information he was receiving on the POWs in Laos. He sent General Vessey to Laos to assist in operations there and offer military intelligence assets in the gathering of POW/MIA information. U.S. Ambassador to Laos, G. McMurtrie Godley, refused the offer of military intelligence assistance and informed DOD that all POW reporting requirements could be handled by the embassy.

President Nixon was notified by Henry Kissinger at the White House on March 19, 1973, that "The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane has been told by the Pathet Lao that the U.S. prisoners of war in Laos will be released by the Lao Communists in Laos and not by the Vietnamese in Hanoi."

On March 22, Ambassador Godley cabled the Secretary of State and the White House that "We believe the Laotian Popular Front (LPF) holds throughout Laos more prisoners than are found on the North Vietnamese lists. We do not believe it is reasonable to expect the LPF to be able to produce an accurate total POW list by March 28; the LPF just has not focused on the POW repatriation and accounting problem until very recently and probably cannot collect in the next few days, the information we require." It was realized, based on the number of people known to have been alive on the ground and captured, that additional prisoners should be released from Laos. Admiral Moorer, on President Nixon's authority, ordered a halt to the troop withdrawal because the Pathet Lao had not released any of the expected POW/MIAs. The next day the Four Party Joint Military Commission informed the White House of the North Vietnamese position that the U.S. "must bear full responsibility for any delay in return of POWs."

Ambassador Godley advised the State Department and the White House to get the nine out now and we would get the rest out later, that "a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush." President Nixon reversed his decision and the troop withdrawal was resumed.

The White House memorandum for the President of March 24, 1973, from Henry Kissinger included the statement of the Chief North Vietnamese Delegate that "The question of military personnel captured in Laos can in no way be associated with the Paris Peace Agreement and withdrawal of U.S. troops." This should have been noted as a sign that the North Vietnamese were not going to adhere to their responsibility for all POWs in Southeast Asia as the President and the public had been informed." Although the Pathet Lao had insisted that "prisoners captured in Laos would be returned in Laos," the nine Americans and one Canadian whose names were on the Laos list were released at Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi on 28 March 1973. The head of the Pathet Lao delegation, Lt.Col. Thoong Sing, was present for the release of the POWs. The LPF must have been amazed, if not offended, at the refusal of the United States to seriously negotiate with them.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops was also completed on March 28th. Our military strength was down to 5,300 troops as of March 22nd. The North Vietnamese had left 10 divisions in South Vietnam and had been bringing a continuous flow of troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in violation of the Paris Peace Accords.

Ambassador Godley had never spoken to the Pathet Lao spokesman Sot Petrasy, who also had the rank of Ambassador. He had repeatedly stated the Pathet Lao were not to be believed and were just lackeys of the Vietnamese, a very severe approach to have taken with those who were holding American prisoners.

Ambassador Godley accepted the Pathet Lao statement that all POWs captured in Laos had been released to suit his requirements for the troop withdrawal and POW release under the Paris accords. The quick acceptance of the new Pathet Lao claim was in complete contradiction of the American embassy's stated 10-year position that the Pathet Lao could not be believed and would make political statements to suit their needs.

Major General Richard V. Secord, who in 1967-68 was "Chief of Air" for the CIA Station in Laos, was called to testify before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs in 1992. He recalled that CIA and other prison camp reports were not considered in Ambassador Godley's attempts to inquire of American POWs in Laos. The tracking by the CIA of Americans believed held captive in Laos was an ongoing task at the Embassy. The fact that Americans were being held was widely known; the problem was where were they being held, as the prisoners were moved frequently. This created some problems as prisoners who were known by name at a particular location would now become unknowns and make it almost impossible to identify specific individuals at each of the prison sites.

General Secord expressed his personal view that Americans had been left behind in Laos. He further testified, with respect to the POW's, that the CIA had been tracking as carefully as they could all the intelligence information available on POW's in Laos, especially after it became clear that there was going to be a Paris Peace Agreement.

Secord was confident that there was a considerable number of U.S. POW's in Laos during and after the war. For instance, there was the case of David Hrdlicka and two other POWs that were known to be held by the Pathet Lao. General Secord had personal knowledge of these men because he was involved in an abortive attempt to rescue these guys back in late '66 or '67. He knew that they existed and were alive because of an agent the CIA had inside the prison camp. "We knew their names, we knew where they were." It must be noted that none of these POWs have ever been heard from since the Paris Accords.

However, it is known with a reasonable level of certainty, that in addition to these guys there were more of our people still held in Laos after the exchange of prisoners. In spite

of the known captivity of POWs such as Hrdlicka, Shelton, Debruin and the POW camp reporting of 20 to 60 captive Americans, it was the lack of positive identification of POWs at specific prison sites that was the deciding factor to accept the 10 POWs from Laos held in Hanoi and proceed with the prisoner exchange and troop withdrawal.

David Hrdlicka (shown in photo at time of capture), a F-105 pilot shot down on May 18, 1965, had made public statements that were published in Pathet Lao newspapers and broadcast on Pathet Lao radio. Charles Shelton was downed on April 29, 1965. These two men were known to be held together in a cave southeast of Sam Nuea. In the CIA's attempted rescue of the men at Sam Nuea, one of them actually made it to a recovery area before being recaptured. In another attempt, Eugene Debruin and Duane Martin escaped with Dieter Dengler but were separated from Dengler and their fate remains unknown.

The war had been fought to decide who would rule in Laos. A U.S. decision, after the signing of the Lao cease fire, to "not complicate" Lao negotiations with the U.S. POW issue proved wrong. Since March 1971, "The United States Government has scrupulously refrained from introducing complicating issues such as American POWs" into the Lao internal talks. The U.S. requested in 1972 that Souvana Phouma inquire about our POWs, but the Royal Lao Government was seen as lackeys of the United States "interventionists."

Admiral Moorer informed the chief delegate of the FPJMC in Saigon on March 23rd that "we intend to pursue the question of other U.S. personnel captured or missing in Laos following the release of the men on the 1 February List." Unfortunately, the LPF were not members of the Commission for the recovery of American MIAs as were North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Viet Cong.

The captives held by the Pathet Lao in Laos were left without further efforts for their release because Congress had cut off funding for further action in Southeast Asia. There was no way to enforce our demands and the communists knew it. Congress was not informed of the captive Americans from the secret war who were thought to have been sent to fight in Vietnam.

President Nixon on March 29, 1973, stated on national television that "All of our POWs are on their way home." On April 12, deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Roger Shields announced that "DOD had no specific knowledge indicating that any U.S. personnel were still alive in and held prisoner in Southeast Asia." These two announcements signaled the end of the release of POWs under the Paris Peace Accords.

On May 18, Admiral Zumwalt, the Chief of Naval Operations, informed Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the Laotians' inability to reach political agreements "has effectively arrested any movement toward an environment in which the status of Americans missing in action in Laos can be resolved. I am informed that the Central Intelligence Agency is pursuing a 'highest priority effort' directed at specifically determining what has happened to US MIAs in Laos. In View of the direct and personnel interest the Services have in this matter, I recommend that the JCS receive

a briefing from the CIA on their effort in this area so that we may be confident this important humanitarian issue is receiving appropriate attention."

Lt. Gen. Deane, Jr., USA Acting Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency advised Admiral Moorer at the time that the CIA collection effort in Laos is carried out by CIA assets, and within the organizational structure, of the CIA station in Laos. DIA is collaborating closely where appropriate with CIA in regard to the current situation in Laos. A summary of the present POW/MIA situation in Laos as held in DIA files is as follows:

* At present there are approximately 350 U.S. military and civilians listed as missing in action in Laos. Of this total, approximately 215 were lost under such circumstances that the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) probably has information regarding their fate.

* Previous LPF mention of U.S. POWs detained in Laos includes a statement on 3 October 1967, by the Pathet Lao Radio, that between 17 May and 16 September 1967, the Pathet Lao had 'captured about a dozen U.S. pilots.

Furthermore, on 2 February 1971, LPF spokesman Sot Petrasy commented that "Quelques Dixaines." ("Some Tens") of prisoners were being held by the Pathet Lao. The LPF has provided no accounting for U.S. personnel in its custody." The DIA was the lead POW/MIA agency and recommended that the JCS not be briefed on the covert CIA activities. The briefing never occurred. On Wednesday May 23, 1973, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho agreed that, while not stating acceptance on the U.S. statement that Article 8 (b) [POW/MIAs] applied to all of Indochina, Le Duc Tho would not contradict him publicly either. In return, the U.S. would not hold Vietnam to this because Vietnam had to cooperate with their Lao friends. This side-agreement has complicated negotiations in Laos to this very day.

Then a June 9th White House memorandum from the situation room informed Henry Kissinger that "The Pathet Lao chief representative in Vientiane told our Embassy officer that further information on two acknowledged POWs (Hrdlicka and Debruin) must await the formation of a new coalition government in Laos."

In June 1973, a White House message from Henry Kissinger to the American Embassy Charge d'Affairs John Gunther Dean stated "Le Duc Tho complained to me last week that you had mentioned US-DRV understanding regarding U.S. prisoners captured in Laos in

your talk with Phoumi Vongvichit. We obviously cannot afford to give Hanoi this sort of grounds on which to abort their understanding with us."

The evidence that Americans were held in Laos was known at the time; however, it just wasn't considered in negotiations. The National Security Council, Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) headed by Henry Kissinger, received POW information from the CIA, the State Department and the DOD, who were all members of the WSAG. But the U.S. government had a time table to keep for withdrawal of American fighting forces from Southeast Asia by March 28th under the Paris Peace Accords and the recovery of the reported Americans was put off for possible later efforts that never materialized.

The accepted loss of captured members of the U.S. armed forces and civilians by members of the U.S. government is almost beyond comprehension, but it did happen. The 27 American prisoners and other American POWs reportedly sent to North Vietnam seem also to have disappeared. They were not among the POWs on the February 1, 1973 Laos list who were never returned. Those who were returned had been captured from 1965 through 1972 and most were moved to North Vietnam at different times; the rest were withheld.

There were unusual situations in the 1968-69 time frame that could have a bearing on the POWs' fate. A possible prisoner exchange may have been in process and these men never put into the known Vietnamese prison system. That year, Richard Nixon became president and Ho Chi Minh died. The POWs could have been executed. However, they could also have been sent to the U.S.S.R. for third-country internment and/or technical exploitation.

There are reports of prisoners being transferred to other communist countries throughout the war period. One source of such reports was Jerry Mooney, a former Air Force/NSA analyst who tracked POWs moved through Vietnam and Laos and sent to Russia. The NSA had tracked POWs in Laos throughout the war and until 1975 when U.S. intelligence assets were pulled out. Former Czech General Jan Sejna, who defected from communist Czechoslovakia, and now works for DIA has firsthand knowledge that close to 100 Americans in good physical condition were transferred from Vietnam to Russia via Czechoslovakia. He monitored the program that processed them and observed their arrival and temporary confinement there.

Post-1973 declassified documentation includes live-sighting reports and satellite imagery of pilot distress signals. Though most live-sighting cases of American POWs in Laos have been debunked, some cannot be dismissed even though the information was often dated and the follow-up slow, requiring cooperation from Laotian officials. Satellite imagery, from 1973 through the present, of Laos reveals pilot distress signals of the form our servicemen were trained to display to signal their location and situation. Some identification codes do correlate to missing Americans.

