

OUR HERITAGE

REMEMBERING VIETNAM 2: EARLY DAYS IN LAOS AND VIETNAM

DR. GARY E. WEIR, CHIEF HISTORIAN

On the 50th anniversary of the first direct American military involvement Vietnam, the Department of Defense has called upon our country to remember with respect and gratitude those who served in Southeast Asia. This series of six articles—of which this is the second—will illuminate the significant role played in Southeast Asia by people in the tradecraft communities that now comprise NGA.

At the behest of President John F. Kennedy, in the spring of 1961 the U.S. Air Force sought to continue the Eisenhower administration's assistance to Royal Laotian forces against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. As a pilot qualified in both the RF-101C reconnaissance aircraft and the RT-33 reconnaissance aircraft, Fred Muesegaes of the 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron found himself speaking with his commanding officer about a highly classified activity called Project Field Goal. As it turned out, Muesegaes seemed the logical choice. Of the four pilots in the 45th TRS so qualified, he alone had yet to marry. He doubted that the project had anything to do with friendly territory.

Along with Robert Caudry of the 15th TRS, Muesegaes went through a series of intelligence and political briefings on Laos and the current military conditions in the country. In the process, he and

Caudry successfully challenged suggestions to sanitize the operation by removing any American markings from them or the aircraft. They did not care to become part of the CIA's complement of operational aircraft in Southeast Asia, Air America. They also found the briefings on local culture given by a missionary expelled from the target region a bit unsettling; they had no plans to visit the local villages.

While the briefings occurred at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, Field Goal would take place from Udorn Royal Thai Air Base because of its proximity to Laos. The RT-33 in question would carry a 12-inch nose-mounted oblique camera, six-inch right and left oblique cameras, with one six-inch vertical. The support team, along with Muesegaes, flew to Udorn from Clark in a C-130 transport aircraft, while Caudry flew the RT-33. Destined to become one of the busiest air bases in the Southeast Asia conflict, in early 1961 Udorn had a 7,500-foot runway, a large shed and a Marine air base battalion living in tents.

Support at the air base proved minimal, and takeoff usually took place in a cloud of dust. For their part, Muesegaes and Caudry accomplished their flights into Laos by dead reckoning. They did not have nearly enough map coverage for their



intended targets, and the RT-33 had to find holes in the cloud cover to descend. Only when they came down through the clouds did they have an opportunity to determine their location. On the return leg, the air base beacon had only a 25-mile range, and upon touchdown the RT-33 had to slow rather rapidly due to the lack of an arresting gear and the presence of a large ditch at the end of the runway.

Upon landing they took the film with them to an H-34 helicopter for the trip to Vientiane, the Laotian capitol, for the first-phase review. During Field Goal the pilots themselves assisted the photo interpreters within the first phase. They would bring the film, work on the interpretation for as long as it took, and then find their way back to Udorn on any flight available. The H-34 was dedicated to the film, not to them. In one case they hoped for a return ride on the H-34, but had to wait. To their consternation, the pilot shut the aircraft down. However, when the Marine aviator climbed out of the cockpit, they saw the makeshift tourniquet and realized he had completed the flight to Vientiane after having received a bullet in his leg from ground fire.

On his first mission out of Udorn, Caudry himself took some anti-aircraft fire. He flew north to Dien Bien Phu and over the Plaine des Jarres at 20,000 feet, taking images with his vertical camera before

proceeding down Highway 13 to the intersection with Highway 7 employing the oblique cameras. At that point he observed the source of small caliber anti-aircraft fire near Vang Vieng: quad 50-caliber machine guns mounted on Dodge trucks firing way off the mark. The weapons probably came as spoils from the Pathet Lao victory over the Laotian government at the Plaine des Jarres on Jan. 1, 1961. Unfortunately, the anti-aircraft fire intensified over time and improved greatly. To make matters worse, in 1961 the Army believed it spotted the first MiG aircraft to take to the skies in that area.

In these early years, critical reconnaissance focused on roads, communication links and the movement of the enemy. Routes leading from China and Vietnam into Laos proved especially important because of the absence of detailed local maps, which the Army Map Service began to address.

Field Goal provided the United States and the Laotian government with a great deal of valuable intelligence data and some excellent first-and second-phase interpretation. As the 1960s progressed, the work became more intense, the stakes higher, and the photography and interpretation even more professional. **P**



RT-33 reconnaissance aircraft

Lockheed Martin photo

