The following was written by USAF SSgt. Erwin E. Davis. He was stationed in Udorn, Thailand and worked on Project Water Pump with Air America in 1967.

Laos: The Secret War

Most military veterans of the Vietnam War returned home without any realization of the war in South Vietnam affecting places other than South Vietnam.

Certainly, after the 1970s rolled around and uninformed military personnel were making occasional insertions into Cambodia and Laos, those Vets returned with first-hand knowledge of the existence of a war outside of Vietnam. But, for the most part, the average vet left Southeast Asia content to believe that his war was basically isolated to South Vietnam.

The real clincher to this story is that those same vets who were never aware (or very much aware) of the warfare activity inside of Laos and Cambodia until the 1970s, were also unaware that actions taken in the secret war inside of Laos may have indeed resulted in preserving their very lives—as the basic objective of the secret war inside Laos was to syphon off and eliminate as much enemy equipment and manpower as possible before it had the opportunity to reach South Vietnam and be used against our military and allied personnel operating there.

This is a brief introduction to the secret war in Laos.

American Intelligence in the early 1960s was interested in two basic problems related to Laos: ONE, a need to continue its cross-border clandestine operations into Mainland China from the Luang Namtha province-area of northern Laos, and TWO, to eliminate and syphon off war materials being secretly sent through Laos by the communist North Vietnamese in route to South Vietnam, where these war materials were earmarked for use against American military forces and allied personnel assigned to operations located inside of South Vietnam.

The first problem was to insert manpower, but international agreements prohibited the introduction of uniformed military personnel into Laos... And besides, any insertion of American military personnel would signal the Soviets, Chinese, and North Vietnamese to introduce their own military personnel in full-force. The result would be a full-scale war inside of Laos that would have escalated the Vietnam War outside the boundaries of Vietnam, with certain unfavorable political repercussions at home in America, and adverse responses from the international community.

Even though the Chinese and North Vietnamese were maintaining a secret super highway through Laos to transport military hardwire and troops to South Vietnam, it would be better to let the communists think their secret was still a secret, and attack this problem without any public or international attention. So, several covers were created: small innocent business enterprises that would afford employees of those businesses to enter Laos with little outside concern into their presence or activities.

One such enterprise was known as Air America—an innocent-looking American company that hauled air freight anywhere in the world and had a motto saying they would haul anything anyplace!

Not until the early 1970s was Air America exposed by some newspaper reporter as being owned and operated by the Central Intelligence Agency, and had grown to become the biggest commercial airliner in the world!
Needless to say, the civilian airline companies soon started clamoring about CIA competition in airfreight and passenger hauling. And elected officials in Washington demanded to know why no one had told them of the existence of such a huge CIA operation, or that in fact, our tax dollars were being funneled secretly to fight a secret war inside of a small nation named Laos!

But that was the early 1970s. Let’s go back to the secret years of the 1960s.

To accomplish mission demands, manpower would be inserted with the cover of being employees of various airlines, such as the larger Air America—which, in fact, was operating as a full-scale airline with regular civilian employees who were themselves unaware of the airline’s other functions, or that it was a CIA cover-employer. So, the cover was well-established.

As additional manpower was needed, and the ranks of ‘the good old boys’ used in other previous international mercenary operations dried up, the United States Air Force was entered into the picture under “Project Water Pump.”

Basically, what this consisted of was that selected personnel assigned to the secret war support missions had their military files removed from the Air Force personnel files, and their active time supporting the Laotian operations were simply void in their military files after their assignments were completed and their files were replaced.

Later, actual military orders were cut to assign personnel to Air America. Yet, the Laotian operations remained secret, even within the rank and file of the United States Air Force—except for those with the “need-to-know.”

These selected and volunteer military personnel were issued a civilian clothing allowance of $100.00, as nothing military could be worn. Their cover was ‘civilian employees’ with various job titles that meant nothing at all regarding their actual role. So, if your job title happened to be “Air Traffic Controller,” and someone else’s “Embassy Gardener,” you both could be working side-by-side in some far off place such as Luang Prabang, Laos, where no traffic control tower or embassy may even exist. There, you might be loading bombs onto Royal Laotian Air Force planes, or kicking bombs mounted onto wooden pallets from the rear of some unmarked cargo aircraft equipped with rollers on the floor to allow the bomb-laden pallets to slide out the cargo door, setting them on their way toward the enemy on the ground below.

The normal duty days up-country in Laos were seven days a week and often started before dawn and lasted well into the night. But, the job also had its fringe benefits, such as the pay. For example, a two-stripe airman then, in 1965, made less than $130.00 a month in the Air Force, but his cover-job now with Air America, paid him around $1,800.00 a month (or approximately one year’s wage, per month), offering him a higher pay-scale than even the United States Air Force pilots, who were bringing in around $10,000 a year (or slightly over $800 a month).

On the other hand, the job had its risks as well. Since you were officially not in Laos, if you were shot down, you couldn’t call on the Air Force as you could have, if you were shot down in South Vietnam or some other place that the military was officially at. Personnel going into Laos were required to sign a statement agreeing that if captured by the enemy while inside Laos, the Air Force and their own nation would simply say that they were not, and were never, American citizens—in short, saying that they never existed—and disclaim all knowledge of who they were or might have been. These personnel became known as “Spooks”—officially non-existent.

To further facilitate this cover, your military identification and all personnel papers were handed over before flying into Laos. If you needed any identification papers, you would be issued some—but not with your name or national origin. It

---

1 The term “up-country” referred to Laos when Erwin E. Davis was writing. However, for many military and Air America veterans, the term “up-country” was used to refer to Vietnam, or other locations located north of their home base.
could be a British passport, but none the less, you did have some kind of identification papers if ever asked for them...

This benefit was of interest to many of the volunteers, as the Soviet KGB reportedly maintained an open-offer with communist elements inside Laos of several hundred dollars-worth of gold in payment for any LIVE American inside of Laos who were engaged in any role supporting the Laotian military in combat, or otherwise engaged in combat roles inside Laos.

Up until the late 60s, the primary combat aircraft used by the Royal Lao Air Force was the T-28 fighter bomber, a prop driven aircraft that was used for several roles, including Forward Air Control (FAC) missions (designed to locate enemy locations), bombing and general assault missions against enemy targets, photo reconnaissance missions, transporting urgently-needed medicines, and what was referred to as ‘tactical flying’ (in which a flight, of usually four T-28s, would fly slowly over an area known to be occupied with enemy forces—and then, when the enemy fired on their aircraft, the entire flight would launch an immediate assault against the enemy positions).
Undoubtedly, the number of Royal Lao Air Force T-28s would be depleted due to being shot down, battle damage, or from crash landings. It was said the Geneva accords of 1954 prevented the replacement of such aircraft, as such replacement would, in effect, be inserting combat aircraft into Laos—and at the time of the signing of the 1954 accords, reportedly, Laos had less than 30 T-28s on hand.

Well naturally, the Laotian Air Force could not maintain an effective combat role with their remaining aircraft. So, at the Air America facility in Udorn, Thailand, T-28 aircraft would be flown in (from the manufacturing factory located in Columbus, Ohio, after just being modified into the T-28D model with combat-readiness) inside of cargo aircraft: the fuselage in one section, and then the two wings beside the fuselage in crates. These aircraft, reportedly, were marked “SPARE PARTS.” As spare parts, they inherently had no attention-factor. And in the Air America facility, prior to these “spare parts” being assembled back into an operational aircraft, test flown and then inserted into Laos, the entire aircraft would be gone over by the civilian employees, removing all serial numbers, so that the aircraft was “sterilized.” This sterilization process would prohibit any aircraft being shot down, captured, and analyzed by the enemy from being identified as to its origin, date of manufacture or date of recent modification add-on. This process of continually inserting new T-28 aircraft inside of Laos eventually created a problem of having too many T-28 aircraft positioned inside of Laos. This, however, was side-stepped by using the same tail number on several different aircraft, and then locating these aircraft with the same tail numbers at separate bases all over Laos, with the surplus flown nightly back to Udorn to be maintained there.

The Udorn-based birds were code named “Victor Birds”, ‘Victor’ being the code name for the capital city of Laos, Vientiane. So, these Victor birds would be flown to Vientiane, Laos daily and use Wattay airfield at Vientiane as their staging-area for the daily missions to be flown. Then, they were flown back to Udorn at night for maintenance and initial ordnance-loading for the first mission the following day.

Reportedly, this internationally illegal activity of providing an out-of-country base for Laotian combat aircraft was safeguarded by the removal of metal placards bearing the three-headed elephant (national symbol of Laos) from the T-28s upon landing, thus leaving the parked “Victor birds” without any national origin identification.

2 To many military and Air America veterans, “Victor” refers to either the country of Vietnam or the Viet Cong (communist troops of South Vietnam and Cambodia). The term “Victor Charlie” or “VC” referred to the Viet Cong.
Also, if such T-28 aircraft usage was deemed necessary for an urgent mission to be flown, say, into South Vietnam by an American pilot, a placard bearing the U.S. insignia could be inserted... Or, if a clandestine mission was to be flown into Cambodia, no insignia at all would be used, thus affording the “Victor birds” a three-war-role function: ONE, the official war in Vietnam, TWO and THREE, the secret wars inside of Cambodia and Laos. However, their primary role was that of support to the Royal Lao Air Force.

The “Victor birds” were flown by paid Thai pilots, recruited under special high-level arrangements with the Royal Thai Air Force. This arrangement kept available the pilot-strength so urgently needed to maintain an effective combat role for the Royal Lao Air Force.

The T-28s could carry up to 4,000 pounds of ordnance and their excellent maneuverability and slow operating speeds made them perfect for jungle-based target elimination. Two 50-caliber machine guns were carried—one under each wing at the inboard station.

Their 1,450-horsepower engine that developed a top speed of around 400 miles per hour, and a range of 500 miles when fully loaded with ordnance, also gave them the power to get in and get out of dangerous target zones quickly—and carry enough ordnance and fire-power to eliminate most target demands.
Unique individuals are present in every war, and Laos was certainly no exception. One of the most unique individuals was a Thai pilot nicknamed “Killer” (as regardless of mission assignment, he seemed to always save an ordnance item or a few rounds of ammunition, and then on his way back to base, he would kill the boredom by taking target practice at water buffalos, an isolated rice paddy shelter house or whatever he so desired).

One of the experimental ordnance loads developed by Killer was to have ground-troops band together—with metal strapping material—three napalm canisters with a 250-pound white phosphorous bomb in the center, holding the entire mess onto a single bomb shackle.

This super-napalm bomb developed by Killer was said to burn down an entire forest in a matter of seconds, and bring absolute delight to a smiling Killer’s face... But, the problem with this unauthorized weapon was that the whole mess only cleared the runway by a couple of inches. So, naturally, any attempt to land while carrying such a load would be disastrous! (Killer later retired from the secret war in Laos to become a flight instructor at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand.)

Another innovative invention was the “Daisy Cutter” bomb.

General-purpose bombs fall with such speeds that they actually become partly buried in the ground at the time of explosion. This results in a huge crater and an eye-popping concussion that radiates from the point of explosion. But, the Pathet Lao (communist forces in Laos) were taught from their Viet Cong cousins—who were long familiar with surviving bombing attacks—to lay face down with their mouths and eyes wide open, while holding their ears with their hands. The fragments destroyed everything from about waist high and up, leaving a safe zone along the ground-level, and the means to effectively survive even the concussion-factor of the bomb. Well, as you might expect, the idea of bombing and bombing and bombing and re-bombing an area, only to have the same people staring at you in the face each time, got to be old fast. So, someone came up with an idea that they nicknamed the Daisy Cutter bomb.

To counter this survivability option, the Laotian Army would be recruited to arc weld used 50-caliber machine gun barrels (or metal pipes) to the nose fuse well plug of a bomb, and only arm this bomb with a tail fuse. Then, this nose fuse well plug would be screwed back into the bomb with approximately a four-foot extension—with a machine gun barrel or pipe protruding from the bomb nose.
This Daisy Cutter system allowed the bomb to strike the ground by the end of the machine gun barrel or protruding pipe, and this impact jolt would detonate the bomb far above ground level. The resulting fragmentation effect achieved a greater radius of destruction, plus would eliminate any personnel hiding even in a shallow ditch line in the area, hence its nickname, Daisy Cutter.

These Daisy Cutters were also excellent for manufacturing instant heliports. If you needed a landing zone (LZ) for a helicopter in dense jungle, where there was no possible way to land, you just had to call in an air strike. One Daisy Cutter and—POOF!—an immediate circle, large enough for your helicopter to land, appeared. Everything cleared: brush, weeds, and even grass. There was nothing but bare earth to land on.

This page, by far, does not even paint a fair picture of the many facets of operations that were involved in the secret war in Laos. But, it does give the reader some glimpse into that war that was possibly never before available to the reader. And, as I mentioned in the beginning, it does give you an introduction into the secret war in Laos.

I apologize for any inaccurate information in this article. As for my knowledge, it is completely factual.

All text and photographs within this article are property of the family of Erwin E. Davis.

Please do not copy or otherwise distribute copies of this article or any segments or photographs thereof without written permission from the widow or children of Erwin E. Davis. Thank you.

To contact the family of Erwin E. Davis:
edavis3625@aol.com

For more about the secret war in Laos, Udorn RTAFB, or Southeast Asia:
http://www.preservingourhistory.com