

AIR AMERICA

UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND

THE RESCUE

Long ago Vietnam photograph surfaces during prep for the Special Collections-CIA Symposium in 2009

By Tom Koch

It was a photograph that came from out of the blue and boy did it have a story to tell.

The image at right was sent to UT Dallas during intense preparations for the remarkable symposium "Air America: Upholding the Airmen's Bond" in 2009.

As the host department of the event McDermott Library Special Collections received critical support from the UT Dallas Development Office and Communications Office for the April 18 presentation. The advance publicity created by the Media Relations Office generated numerous emails from people across the county.

The symposium focused on little-known air rescue missions of U.S. military personnel by Air America during the Vietnam War. Little-known because Air America was



- Photo by Jack Teague (USAF, Retired)

Don Eaton, Bob Davis, Don Boecker and Phil Goddard
Lima Site 36 - Northern Laos - 1965

Photograph came as a surprise 44 years later



a secretly-owned air proprietary of the Central Intelligence Agency that assisted in the clandestine war in Laos. The occasion at UT Dallas was to celebrate the release of 10,000 copies of de-classified CIA documents about Air America that included details of the missions. Much of Air America's rescue work can now be told. The papers will add considerable material to the CCAT/Air America Archive in Special Collections.

Tim Castle, PhD, of the CIA organized two panels of Air America employees who flew the missions and U.S. military personnel who were rescued. Several airmen had not seen their rescuers since the mid-to-late 1960s.

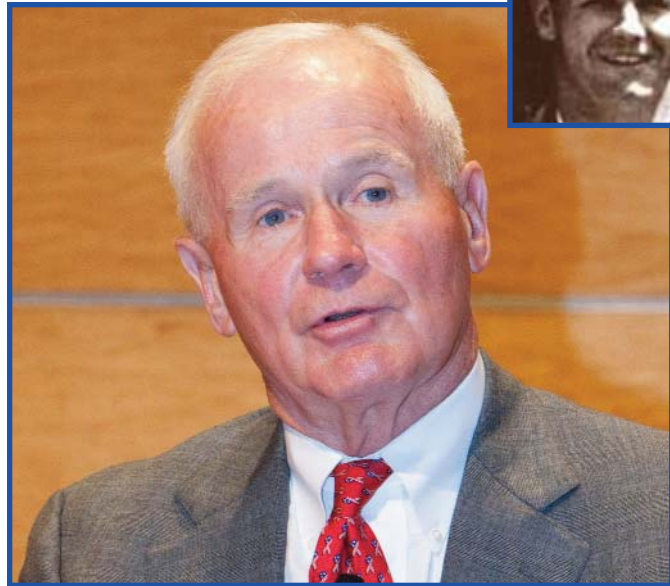
When John O. (Jack) Teague, a former U.S. Air Force combat controller and fighter pilot, saw the news about Don Boecker appearing at UT Dallas, he e-mailed to UT Dallas the image featured on the first page of this report with this description:

"I took this picture in 1965 at LS-36 immediately after the pickup of this Navy (or Marine, as I thought at the time) aircrew by



- UT Dallas Photograph

Air America pilot Sam Jordan - Now and Then



- UT Dallas Photograph

Retired Rear Admiral Don Boecker - Now and Then

Air America pilots pictured. The timing is right: the pilot standing next to Air America H-34 pilot Phil Goddard (left) could be Don Boecker as he said at the time that one of their bombs exploded prematurely and blew off a wing. Phil Goddard is the only one of the four I can positively identify."

The U.S. labeled their bases in Laos as Lima Sites (LS or Landing Sites) and LS-36 was located in northern Laos north of the Plain of Jars (*Plaine des Jarres* or PDJ). One of Castle's panel discussions focused on the rescue of U.S. Navy lieutenants Don Boecker and Don Eaton by Air America pilot Sam Jordan.

In viewing current images of Don Boecker on the internet, the third person in the photo from the left appeared to be him so it was natural to take a copy of the Teague photo to the symposium. Boecker was astonished to discover that the image existed and confirmed it was him and that of his bombardier/navigator Eaton.

"I was totally surprised when Tom showed me the photo and I couldn't remember when it was taken," Boecker said.

Meanwhile, Eaton got news of the symposium and was disappointed he could not attend because of prior commitments. I e-

mailed the photo to him and he shared it with colleagues.

"The photo really surprised me," Eaton said. "I did not know it existed. Don and I know we owe our lives to them all and Sam Jordan in particular. Both Don and I made Admiral which happened for two other A-6 crews."

The pilot that rescued them was neither of the two Air America pilots in the photo as Teague thought. It was Air America's Sam Jordan who served on the UT Dallas symposium panel.

"I dropped them off at LS-36 and immediately took off," Jordan said. In looking at the photo for the first time he added that the shacks behind them featured rabbit-sized rats that were often sold at market as delicacies.

After reuniting with Boecker and Eaton some 24 years later, Jordan said in a story printed in *The Hook* magazine, "I must say both are looking considerably more elegant than they did on our first meeting."

Prelude to the rescue

On July 14, 1965 flight leader Boecker and his bombardier-navigator Eaton did not have a flight scheduled. They were squadron mates in VA-75, the first operational Intruder squadron assigned to Air Wing Seven on board the *USS INDEPENDENCE* (CVA-62). Eaton appealed for a flight anyway and they got it for 5:30 p.m. in

a Grumman A-6A Intruder. Their mission was to bomb a loop in a part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. "I rolled in over the target and pushed the bomb button (PICKLE)," Boecker said. "All five 500-pound



A-6 Intruder

Air America's Sam Jordan recovers downed airmen

bombs released but one prematurely detonated because we were armed with old WW II fuses."

The blast destroyed the starboard engine causing a hydraulic failure followed by a massive fuel leak and fire. The wingman joined up with the crippled plane and radioed, "You're on fire, eject! Eject!"

It was the first A-6 downed in the Vietnam war. Eaton ejected first, followed by Boecker. "He (Eaton) was a small man, 135 pounds," Boecker said. "I was 200 pounds and floated down like a lead balloon. I passed him on the way down and the chute wasn't steerable." The two were separated by wind and landed in a hostile area in Laos near Sam Neua (meaning northern swamp). Eaton went on one side of a hill and Boecker the other. They ended up about two miles apart. Eaton ran east down hills, cliffs and over streams away from pursuers. In the middle of the night under a full moon Boecker climbed through jungle terrain to the top of the mountain avoiding enemy patrols. At dawn he used a mirror to flash his position. Boxed in by the enemy, Boecker saw several air rescue attempts turned back by fire.

Goddard's attempt

Phil Goddard of Air America with Bob Davis as his backup were the first responders to the call for rescue of the downed airmen.

Goddard's helicopter was hit by 13.7 automatic machine gun fire that penetrated the fuel cell and sent fuel from the helicopter. He could not hover and had to keep going forward to keep the fuel out of the exhaust stack. He also believes he took a hit in one of the blades. He returned to base followed by Davis since the missions required two helicopters. Goddard went back out in a USAF CH-3 to direct the military pilot to the location of Boecker and Eaton.

"The earlier rescue attempt took very heavy ground fire," Jordan said. "Admiral Boecker saw his helicopter streaming heavy loss of hydraulic fluid which indicated the loss of one of his control Servos. If you lose both Servos, you lose all control. He had to return to base."

Jordan gets the call

For six years Sam Jordan flew helicopters for the U.S. Marine Corps. In 1961 he answered an advertisement for pilots by an up-start airline called Air America. He didn't know *where* they were flying and *who* owned the company.

During his 14-year stint with Air America he flew into Laos carrying medical equipment and other supplies to refugees in remote mountain villages.

He flew fixed wing planes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail scanning for radio signals from the ground and dropping provisions from the sky. Performing high altitude rescue missions in enemy territory in Huey helicopters was a bit different.

Rescue and cover aircraft came and withdrew over Boecker, including an Air Force Jolly Green Giant, two T-28s, a Caribou



and Skyraiders. That's when Jordan was told to fly his Air America UH-34D into the fray on July 15, 1965.

"Why me?" he wondered.

"Because it's your turn, Sam, and you have a knack of always



Sam Jordan at Hmong village Ban Na Woua Laos, Ban houei Sai Province, Golden Triangle Area, December 1962. (Photo courtesy of Sam Jordan)

coming back," was the answer. He was told to top off with fuel but he ignored that since the target was at 4,300 feet and he knew he could not make a rescue at that altitude on a full tank.

Jordan recovered Eaton comparatively easily from a grass-covered ridge near the Sam Neua highway. Eaton had injured his hands upon ejection and could not grip the horse collar. Jordan hovered low enough for Eaton to dive into an open door.

Boecker was finally spotted and the 100-foot cable was lowered but it caught in the trees. Boecker stretched to hook his arm in the horse collar instead of his body. "I believe the rescue took place around 4,300 feet," Jordan said. "If I had launched with full fuel, I would have been too heavy to hover out of ground effect at that altitude.

"At full power the engine is restricted to five minutes. So after five minutes I reduced power to 2700 r.p.m. to allow me to hover for another 25 minutes. The



Retired Rear Admiral Don Eaton - Now and Then

rescue was hampered by a Filipino flight mechanic who spoke very little English and then took his helmet off for better vision.

"I was left completely in the dark as to Admiral Boecker's location. One big problem was that the rescue hoist was only 100 feet long which made it about five to ten feet short of reaching the jungle floor. Admiral Boecker had to climb up a tree and make a lunge for the hoist which he grasped with only one arm.

"At that point my co-pilot started yelling, 'We got him!' I started to move off but stopped to inquire if he was in the helicopter. The co-pilot said only that he was on his way up. After what seemed like an eternity he was aboard. During the recovery I saw about 25-30 rounds of AK-47 fire but it was about 300 yards range. It is only accurate between 50-75 yards with a wide cone of dispersal. The bullets were all over the place. I called for ground suppression and got several bombs right on the enemy position - a fantastic response."

Sam reflected - "It was not a pretty rescue attempt but it

worked." It worked for Boecker who embraced Eaton once inside the UH-34D. Eaton and Boecker were transported quickly to LS-36 at Na Khang where the photo was made by Teague.

"All I remember is shaking hands with Sam," Boecker said. "I didn't get his name at the time. He just said, 'Get out here.'"

"I will never forget meeting Jack for the first time," Eaton said. "He had this Jungle Jim-like hat and was in civilian clothes. He extended his hand to me and said 'Hi, I'm Jack Teague, United States Air Force' and without thinking I shook hands and almost went to the ground in pain. He looked my hands over, bandaged one and offered us Haig & Haig Five Star (scotch) and Olympia beer."

Goddard, who today lives in Barbados, praised Jordan's performance as only a fellow helicopter pilot can.

"The fact that my aircraft was hit by automatic weapons was known by Sam Jordan and only underscores his valor in the recovery of the two naval aviators in a hostile environment," he said. "The rescue was also conducted at a relatively high density altitude and it took an inordinate amount of skill to extract the two downed aviators."

A Caribou carried the airmen to safety and on to Udorn, Thailand for de-briefing. Boecker keeps the names of his rescuers - Jordan, the pilots of the Spads, A-1 Skywriters and T-28s who strafed the enemy, and the pilot of the Caribou - in his little red book.

Donald V. Boecker went on to a distinguished career in leadership positions in the Navy. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School and tested Naval aircraft, commanded an A-6E Intruder squadron VA-85 aboard the *USS FORRESTAL* (CV-59), served as Executive officer aboard *USS SARATOGA* (CV-60), commanded a Combat Stores Ship *USS CONCORD* (AFS-5) and in 1988, he assumed Command of the Naval Air Test center at the Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Maryland. This was an aviator's dream job, because there was one of every type of Navy and Marine Corps aircraft stationed there and Boecker had an opportunity to fly most of them. During his career, he flew more than 90 models of military aircraft and had more than 800 carrier-arrested landings. In 1991 he became Vice Commander of Naval Air Systems Command in Washington, DC, and served there until his retirement in 1995 after 39 years, 8 months in the U.S. Navy.

He received two Legions of Merit, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal, six Air Medals, two Navy Commendation Medals with Combat V, the Combat Action Ribbon, a Navy Unit Commendation, the Meritorious Unit Com-



mandation, the Navy Expeditionary Medal and several Vietnam decorations. He had two daughters when he went to Vietnam but after he was rescued he ended up with six children and 11 grandchildren.

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Sam Jordan, left, joins the retirement ceremony for RADM Don Boecker in the fall of 1995 at the Washington DC Navy Yard. (Photo courtesy of Sam Jordan)

than 36 years in the Navy. He flew 66 combat missions. He has extensive experience in Naval Aircraft Maintenance and Logistics assignments. He has served as a Squadron maintenance officer and Director of Intermediate Maintenance Activities. He also was the Director of Naval Aviation Depot Maintenance activities and was the Director of Logistics and Fleet Support for Naval and Marine Corps aviation. He was awarded the Navy Distinguished Service Medal, four Legions of Merit, the Purple Heart, five Air Medals, four Navy Commendation Medals (three with Combat V) and the Combat Action Ribbon.

He has a BS in Engineering Science from the Naval Postgraduate School and a masters of science from George Washington University. He is also a graduate of the Industrial College of Armed Forces and the Naval Aviation Safety Officer's School.

The Unknown Man in the Picture

After the symposium the identity of the Air America pilot second from the left remained unknown. A month later, Air America Association members returned to the UT Dallas campus and to the same Conference Center for a rededication of the Memorial Plaque located in Special Collections. Additional names of lost comrades were added next to the Memorial.

While surveying the members to identify the final man in the photo, I was directed to Clarence "Ab" Abadie who was in charge of Air America pilots at that time. He did not hesitate in recognizing Bob Davis to complete the caption that would now label Teague's photo.

And what about Teague?

In a vignette, he describes himself as the "first modern-era Combat Controller to put in a tour in northern Laos." He kept no diary because he was told not to. He didn't wear a uniform because he was told not to. His call sign was "Cherokee" while based at LS-36. He directed air strikes against the enemy near the PDJ from the back seats of L-19s. He later flew 155 combat missions as a fighter pilot.



Jack Teague in 2010

In the book *Classified Secret* by Jan Churchill, Gen. Heine Adersholt is quoted: "Captain John O. 'Jack' Teague was the first man to push the FAC (Forward Air Controllers) program into Laos. He was a non-rated FAC. His dad, Congressman Olin Teague, was a great hero in World War II. I got Jack into pilot training when he got back from Laos – even though he was colorblind. That had never happened before. Jack got to fly combat in Vietnam in F-100s. He flew missions in the Super Sabre, over half of them scrambled from the alert pad. He picked up enough battle damage to win the nickname *Magnet Ass*."

Teague later taught political science in college and in federal and state prisons. A 1959 graduate of Texas A&M, he remains an active supporter of the Aggies.

In 2010, Teague sent an email to the library: "Thank you for contacting the 'players' in this drama, and solving the dilemma. I'm very grateful. I don't know how I missed all this, but that is beside the point. I would have bet my right arm that Goddard made the pickup."



Jack Teague, above with Vang Pao who led the Hmong hill people in Laos during the CIA-backed campaign against communist forces. At right, Capt. Jack Teague (Photo from the Weldon Papers, History of Aviation Collection).



Olin "Tiger" Teague was a distinguished alumnus of Texas A&M who joined the Army and participated in D-Day. He received three Silver Stars, three Bronze Stars, the *Croix de Guerre*, the *Fourragère* and three Purple Hearts putting him near Audie Murphy as one of the most decorated American soldiers of World War II. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1946 to 1978 in the seat for the 6th Congressional District in Texas.

On July 15, 2010 Eaton and Boecker celebrated the 46th anniversary of their rescue and a new lease on life. That is 46 years of distinguished service that might not have been. McDermott Library Special Collections, home of the CAT/Air America Archives and Memorial, salute them and the Air America employees like Jordan who saved them and many others during the "Secret War" those many years ago.



Don Eaton handles the champagne with Gay and Don Boecker as Eaton's wife Beth takes the photo during their rescue day reunion of July 15, 2008.