

The War in Laos: The Fall of Lima Site 85 in March 1968

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Published in an unclassified edition of Studies in Intelligence in 1995, this article is one of the earliest public accounts given of Lima Site 85 and the successful North Vietnamese attack against it on 10 and 11 March 1968. The most definitive account, based on extensive interviews and documentation, appeared five years later in a book by former CIA and Intelligence Community historian Timothy Castle, One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam (Columbia University Press). This article is part of a forthcoming compendium of Studies articles related to the conflict in Southeast Asia that will be published in support of Defense Department efforts to mark the passage of 50 years since that conflict took place. —Editor

By 1965, US policy in Laos had evolved into a strategy of war against the Communist Pathet Lao (PL) to regain control of the remote and mountainous northern provinces, particularly Louang Phrabang, which included the strategic Plain of Jars, and the Communist stronghold of Samneua, where Phou Phathi, the Sacred Mountain, was located. Because of restrictions placed on military presence and operations in Laos by increasingly irrelevant international agreements, this war became the nearly exclusive responsibility of CIA.

Samneua was central to the strategy because it was the principal gateway between Laos and North Vietnam: the North Vietnamese used the region to infiltrate troops and supplies into Laos, and the United States used the area to conduct surveillance and support operations against North Vietnam. In August 1966, to support the escalating air war against the North, a Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) station was first constructed on the mountain above Lima Site (for landing site) 85.

The remote mountain in northeastern Laos known as Phou Phathi to the Laotians and “the Rock” to the Americans who served there is a dramatic 5,600-foot ridgeline that is just flat enough on top to support a few buildings built into the rock of the mountain and a small clearing that was used as a helicopter landing site. Located 100 miles south of Dien Bien Phu, 160 miles west of Hanoi, and just 25 miles from the PL capital of Samneua, Phou Phathi was a place of great religious significance to the local Hmong and Yao tribesmen. They believed the forbidding mountaintop was inhabited by great *phi*, or spirits, who exercised supernatural control over the lives and circumstances of the Hmong people. US Ambassador to Laos William Sullivan, however, believed the mountain was a poor

choice for the location of secret Air Force navigational equipment because it was too close to Samneua and the PL.

A Sensitive Facility

Nevertheless, because of the geography of the area and the need for a site that would be within radio and radar range of North Vietnam—a difficult problem in the exceptionally rugged terrain of the Laos–North Vietnam border area, the Air Force in 1966 installed a TACAN transmitter on Phou Phathi. A TACAN station is a nearly autonomous radio transmitter that provides military aircraft with a bearing and distance in miles relative to the station location. To support operation of the station on Phou Phathi, the Air Force rotated several technicians to and from the Rock for maintenance and resupply of the transmitter and its associated generator. The Rock was supplied weekly by a secret Air Commando unit, codenamed PONY EXPRESS and based at Udorn Airbase in Thailand, via the 700-foot Lima Site (L.S.) 85 strip in the valley below.

In 1967 the facility was upgraded with a bombing-control radar to improve the control and accuracy of the bombing campaign in North Vietnam. This upgrade brought in more Air Force personnel, “sheep-dipped” to look like civilians, and (allegedly) genuine civilian technicians from Lockheed Aircraft. In reality, the men on Phou Phathi were all Air Force CIRCUIT RIDER teams from the 1st Mobile Communications Group in Udorn who rotated to the site every 24 hours. The PL and North Vietnamese watched developments at Phou Phathi with interest.

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The CIA and Hmong Gen. Vang Pao, the joint commanders of the war against the PL in Military Region (MR) II, which included the provinces of Samneua and Xiangkhoang, realized the ultimately untenable position of these Americans on Phou Phathi and arranged for the mountain to be guarded by 300 Thai mercenaries reinforced by local Hmong troops led by CIA paramilitary officers.

In 1967 the military situation in MR II was starting to deteriorate under pressure from the PL, the North Vietnamese, and the Chinese, who were building a series of roads in northern Laos, delivering aid to the PL, and generally adding a wild card factor to the balance of power in the area. The Chinese had concerns about the intentions and loyalties of the Tai and Hmong peoples of northern Laos and southern Yunnan Province, and they apparently believed an active presence was the best policy to maintain control. Phou Phathi continued to receive more equipment and manpower, and it attracted increasing PL attention.

The Opium Factor

In addition to the American military and intelligence interest and Hmong religious beliefs surrounding Phou Phathi, there was another factor affecting the strategic value of the Rock: opium. Phou Phathi was in the center of a major Hmong poppy-growing region, making it a major financial interest. Opium poppies were and are the major cash crop of the highland tribes of Laos. Vang Pao, based at Longtiang, is suspected to have used the proceeds from opium production to help finance the war. There has been much controversy about possible CIA involvement in drug trafficking in Laos, but considerable research has not turned up any evidence of an Agency connection.

The Campaign

L.S. 85 was one of the most critical bases for the Hmong guerrilla army for some time before the US Air Force took interest in the site as a desirable location for a navigational aid. The airstrip and the helipad on top of the mountain resupplied a small command post, used

by the Hmong officers and CIA paramilitary advisers, which in turn controlled harassing operations against the PL and North Vietnamese.

The mountain had been captured briefly by the PL in 1959, using Hmong guides who had defected. These guides were necessary because only the local tribesmen who had spent a lifetime in the immediate area were able to navigate the difficult terrain and sheer rock cliffs of the Phou Phathi ridgeline. The loyalist Hmong had not forgotten this incident, and they had vowed to prevent its reoccurrence. History, however, remained against them.

In the fall of 1967, CIA detected substantial activity associated with road construction along Route 19 leading to Nam Bac from Dien Bien Phu and along Route 6 which lead to Phou Phathi. Because the North Vietnamese totally depended on road transportation for heavy units, these developments were considered ominous. By November up to 19 North Vietnamese battalions were observed in the Samneua area, confirming the worst fears of the Embassy and 7th Air Force in South Vietnam that a substantial offensive, most likely against Phou Phathi, was in the offing.

Because of their dependence on roads and overland travel, the North Vietnamese and PL only began offensives during the dry season, which in Laos normally begins in mid-October and lasts through early June. The US Air Force had begun upgrading the TACAN site on Phou Phathi in June 1967 with a TSQ-81 COMBAT SKYSPOT radar bomb scoring and impact system. The TSQ-81, a modified air-mobile version of a SAC range-instrumentation radar, would significantly increase bombing capabilities in poor weather conditions (October through April in North Vietnam) in areas of North Vietnam and Laos. It became operational in early November 1967, almost exactly coincidental with the end of the rainy season in Laos.

The Communist offensive began in December, initially with small-scale skirmishes. But by 15 December Hmong reconnaissance patrols and CIA lookouts detected several battalions moving against Nam Bac, a crucial stronghold of the Royal Lao Army, and toward

Phou Phathi. Two PL companies took Phou Den Din, only 12 kilometers east of Site 85, on the 16th, although the Hmong recovered the position later in the day. The attacks focused serious attention on the security of Site 85 and the enemy's determination to take the mountain.

The Air Force and CIA directed numerous airstrikes of F-4, F-105, and A-1 fighter-bombers from Thailand and Vietnam, many using the new radar at Site 85, against the massed columns of enemy appearing to encircle the site. The strikes were increased, even using Air Commando A-26 Invaders to attack at night, in an attempt to turn the twin advances on Routes 19 and 6. This air campaign peaked at 45 sorties on 3 January 1968, but it succeeded only in weakening the North Vietnamese and PL. The battle around Nam Bac intensified in early January, and on the 14th the base was taken by four NVA battalions. There were no survivors, and a massive amount of material and documents were captured.

The operations of the TSQ-81, nicknamed COMMANDO CLUB, were beginning to have real effect, with 23 percent of total strikes over North Vietnam in January coming under control of Site 85's radar. Even in poor weather, the COMMANDO CLUB system was able to direct bombing accurately throughout the Hanoi-Haiphong complex as well as in the immediate area of Phou Phathi for its own defense. This capability seems to have given the Air Force and Ambassador Sullivan an exaggerated sense of the defensibility of the site using air power. Although CIA and Air Force analysts had warned of the vulnerability of the site and the Ambassador himself had serious reservations about its advisability, the strategy in early January called for its operation up to the last minute, with close air support to keeping attackers from reaching the summit until the technicians could be evacuated by helicopter. And, as so often is the case in warfare, the one contingency not considered proved fatal.

The situation at Site 85 in early January was pessimistic. The Air Force technicians on the site continued to be rotated from Udorn in teams of 12, but the COMMANDO CLUB nickname was becoming more apt by the day. Because of their sheep-dipped status as ostensible civilian employees of Lockheed Aerospace, the

CIRCUIT RIDERS of the 1st Mobile Communications Group were prohibited from carrying small arms. According to Air Force accounts, this regulation was actually obeyed almost to the last days of the site. Radar vans and antennas had no identification and were rigged with explosives for demolition. Fearing sympathetic detonation of their own charges by artillery falling in the areas, however, the technicians dismantled the explosives and threw them over the cliff.

Because of the political sensitivity of the facility, no other US military personnel were permitted in the area to defend the site, so defense of Phou Phathi depended on the two CIA paramilitary officers in the area and the approximately 1,000 Hmong they advised. This situation was not reassuring; the enemy in the area knew of Americans on the mountain, knew who they were, and knew what they were doing. A notebook taken from an NVA officer killed in February described the site in detail and referred to the "TACAN" in English.

First Attacks

Two-hundred Hmong guarded the ridgeline, and the other 800 were in the valley below. They were fierce and courageous fighters who were strongly motivated to defend the mountain. Although the Hmong were effective at guerrilla-style hit-and-run actions, they were ill prepared to conduct a static defense against overwhelming odds. The Air Force and the US Embassy in Vientiane knew this, but they accepted the odds based on the confidence that the CIRCUIT RIDERS could be evacuated in the last minute by helicopters of the US Air Force and of Air America (CIA's proprietary airline) supported by fighter bombers. Ambassador Sullivan had sole authority for ordering the evacuation, a circumstance that was to prove costly.

In the first week of January, the enemy continued to shell and probe other sites in the vicinity of Phou Phathi to clear the roads leading from Samneua to positions surrounding the mountain. On 10 January the Hmong engaged and dispersed a five-man PL patrol at the base of the ridge.

On 12 January, CIA lookouts reported a four-plane formation heading in the direction of Site 85. Two aircraft split off, but the other two continued to Phou Phathi, where they bombed, strafed, and fired rockets at the ridgeline. Several local Hmong were killed. The CIA officers and the local Air Force forward air controller (FAC) fired on the slow-moving Antonov-2 Colt biplanes and called in an Air America helicopter in the area to assist. The helicopter, a Bell 212, the civilian version of the Huey, proved faster than the Colts. The Air America pilot flew alongside the Soviet-made biplanes and fired a submachinegun at them through the door. Both aircraft were shot down, and the rudder from one was taken to Longtiang, an Air America base, as a souvenir.

The Embassy believed the air attack was an attempt to eliminate the radar without resorting to a costly ground attack. It also considered, rightly, that the attack was highly unusual and was unlikely to be repeated. The North Vietnamese did not have the air assets to squander.

After the air attack, ground activity abruptly increased. On 19 January an informant at Samneua reported that a five-battalion group of NVA and PL had moved west and divided into two groups. Three battalions with a 105-mm howitzer moved into position to attack Phou Den Din, a key position in control of the Phou Phathi area. The other two battalions moved southeast of the mountain in an encircling maneuver. The American and Hmong forces at the Site 85 command post, a ramshackle structure next to the helicopter landing area, recognized another major assault in the making. They realized that, if the enemy were willing to accept heavy losses, the ridgeline could not be held.

Defensive Vulnerabilities

At this point, the Air Force personnel manning the radar at the summit were still unarmed and dependent upon orders from the Ambassador to evacuate in the event of a major attack. The officers who were in charge of the detachment that continued to rotate in and out of the site had no authority to defend their troops or to order a retreat if the ridge was overrun. Communications with Vientiane were maintained from the command post at the helipad, a 20-minute walk down the

ridge from the radar vans on the peak. The Air Force personnel realized their predicament, but they continued to direct large numbers of airstrikes daily both in Vietnam and Laos. They also began looking for an escape route.

On 25 January the site conducted an autonomous self-defense exercise that apparently consisted of diverting fighters to suspected enemy positions around Phou Phathi. This exercise seems to have indicated that the plan for COMMANDO CLUB self-defense using close air support was unlikely to succeed. This test also angered the 7th Air Force because it violated procedures and caused embarrassment. The CIRCUIT RIDERS and CIA officers, however, felt that they were risking more than embarrassment. After the exercise, the Air Force technicians developed a plan to descend down the sheer rock face of Phou Phathi on ropes if the major attack came.

After the fall of Phou Den Din on 22 January, the North Vietnamese temporarily halted offensive operations to regroup and resupply. The COMMANDO CLUB radar operators continued to direct airstrikes on weakened enemy positions, and FACs from Longtiang directed other available missions and Royal Laotian Air Force aircraft to every potential enemy target in range of Site 85. The enemy apparently was delaying the next offensive until more artillery could be brought up.

A Lull

On 30 January enemy troops detonated some of the defensive mines planted on the approaches of the American compound and brought the ridgeline under mortar fire. A friendly patrol sent to investigate did not meet serious resistance, and the commander of the COMMANDO CLUB reported that only a minor testing of the defenses had taken place and no further action was required.

Following the skirmish on 30 January, the North Vietnamese settled into a containment perimeter approximately 12 kilometers in diameter around Phou Phathi. Engagements between the Hmong and the North

Vietnamese became infrequent, but those few encounters that did occur involved enemy formations of at least company strength. Through 14 February airstrikes in defense of the COMMANDO CLUB were scarce and a sense of confidence infected the US Embassy in Vientiane and the 7th Air Force in Vietnam regarding the safety of Site 85.

Casual Attitude

During this period, there was ample intelligence indicating that the enemy was gradually encircling Phou Phathi and massing for a major attack. This information, however, did not materially affect US strategy toward the operation or defense of the site. The PL were not hiding their intentions: numerous informers and spies reported the enemy planned to take Site 85 in late February. CIA reported in an estimate on 25 February that it was extremely unlikely that the site could be held beyond 10 March. Still, no significant changes were made to the strategy for defense of Phou Phathi, and Vientiane retained control of the evacuation plan.

This casual approach probably was the result of the constant air communications with the site and the continuing practice of rotating men out of it every day or every other day. The planners in the Embassy evidently believed that, in the event that the COMMANDO CLUB radar bunkers were seriously threatened, the team would be airlifted out and not replaced. They may not have realized that the situation could deteriorate rapidly or that a communications breakdown could leave the COMMANDO CLUB team stranded.

In any case, responsibility for the fate of Site 85 was maintained at the Embassy and 7th Air Force level. The local commander was never given the authority to order an evacuation or to supervise his own defense.

In late February, CIA and the Air Force FACs knew the ridgeline was in peril, but they believed it could be defended for the present. On 18 February an NVA officer was killed in an ambush. His captured notebook confirmed a major assault on the summit was planned, gave the strength of the attacking force, and described the timing for the attack.

The Air Force and the Embassy responded by ordering more airstrikes near the mountain, believing that bombing could deter or dissuade the enemy. Bombing, however, was ineffective against troops in deep jungle.

On 21 February the Ambassador authorized the Local Area Defense Commander (alternately the senior CIA officer or the FAC) to use the TSQ radar to direct any and all strikes within 12 kilometers of the summit. Starting on the 20th and continuing until the fall of Site 85 on 11 March (and beyond, as the Air Force tried to destroy the captured radar system), the area was saturated with airstrikes of increasing intensity. Between the 20th and 29th, 242 sorties hit within 30 kilometers of Phou Phathi.

By 26 February, Ambassador Sullivan was pessimistic about the site's survival. Citing a CIA report that predicted the site's fall by 10 March, the Ambassador wrote to the Air Force Chief of Staff,

... in the final analysis, it seems doubtful that the site can be held in the face of consistent enemy determination. Therefore, we are in touch with USAF authorities on evacuation and destruction plans. We are fairly certain these can be carried out in an orderly fashion.

Why, then, was this not done?

Evacuation Planning

At the end of February, the airstrikes had caused the enemy to pull back temporarily to regroup, and the evacuation plans were completed. Three Air Force HH-1 "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters and two Air America Bell 212 Huey helicopters with a combined capacity of 155 people were to be used. The plan also called for the evacuation of the Hmong guerrillas defending the immediate area of the summit. To provide immediate response in case of surprise attack, the two Air America choppers were to remain on alert at nearby Lima Site 98. The Air Force aircraft were to fly from Thailand. The wild card in the plan was weather.

Low ceilings and visibility, common in northern Laos in March, could keep any aircraft from landing on the tiny mountaintop clearing.

In early March the Air Force reinforced the TSQ facility with five more technicians from Udorn to provide for 24-hour operation of the radar in the site's own defense. At this point, the CIRCUIT RIDERS also began to arm themselves with rifles, grenades, and other light weapons. A series of slings or ropes were lowered down the front face of the mountain to allow the technicians to lower themselves down the sheer rock face and hide in the crags of the 1,400-foot cliff. There was no place to go from this position, but it also was difficult to reach or attack. The senior CIA adviser's comment later was, "The technique of personnel hanging over the cliff by straps was not discussed as a serious escape or evasion plan."

Closing In

By 9 March the enemy had the mountain surrounded, skirmishes were almost constant at the lower elevations, and the authority to evacuate still depended on the order from Ambassador Sullivan, who in turn depended on the radio link at the CIA command bunker near the helipad. The rules for airstrikes in the area had been gradually liberalized until the radar operators at the site could do nearly anything they liked except communicate directly with the attack aircraft. There were now four full battalions of the NVA 766th Regiment, including one PL battalion, within striking range of the COM-MANDO CLUB.

Shortly after 1800 on 10 March an artillery barrage commenced against the summit. The 105-mm howitzer being used by the Hmong received a direct hit, and the living quarters for the TSQ personnel were also damaged. The technicians sought shelter in a bunker just outside immediately after notifying Udorn that they were under attack and were abandoning the radio in the TSQ building. The attack had begun near nightfall because the enemy knew the Americans would not bomb so close to friendly troops at night.

The Hmong, possibly reinforced by a battalion of the Thai Army operating clandestinely as "mercenaries," were dug in on the southeast face of Phou Phathi. They believed they were in a good position to repel a frontal assault. The Communists, however, believed they were strong enough to try it.

Commencing the attack with three battalions, the NVA fought up the southeast slope of the mountain. On the north side, 20 heavily armed local Hmong who had defected to the PL began to scale the cliff with the intention of surprising the Americans in their undefended rear. (This strategy was identical to the successful attack on Phou Phathi in 1959, even including the use of Hmong sappers.)

The Air Force at Udorn began urgently preparing night airstrikes, which required flare ships and specially configured night-attack A-26 Invaders from the 506th Special Operations Wing. Evacuation of the personnel still was not contemplated.

At 1945 the artillery barrage ceased, and the Air Force technicians returned to the TSQ facility. The aircraft flying to the site's defense were diverted to other targets. There was only minor damage to the TACAN antenna and no casualties. Some of the F-4s and A-26s continued to Site 85 and hit targets in the area until 0320 on 11 March. At 2020 on 10 March, the Ambassador considered the situation critical enough to permit direct TSQ control of airstrikes on the lower slope of the mountain. The approaching enemy was alleged to be using flashlights, while the Hmong sappers were at this point scaling the northeast face.

Deferring a Decision

An entry in the 7th Air Force log indicates that at 2115 the Ambassador was considering evacuating personnel from Site 85 at first light. The deputy commander of 7/13 Air Force contacted the Embassy in Vientiane and indicated that evacuation should be commenced only as a last resort if the situation became untenable. These

interactions indicate that the Ambassador, the 7th Air Force, and the men at the site did not believe as late as 2100 that the situation had become perilous. The danger appeared manageable, and the security of the ridgeline was believed intact. All concerned had good intelligence about the disposition and intentions of the enemy, so there must have been inordinate faith in the remoteness and defensibility of the mountain. When the shelling resumed at 2121, the Ambassador, still in close communication with the site, ordered that nine of the 16 CIRCUIT RIDER technicians be evacuated at 0815 the next morning.

Sapper Attack

The situation remained comparatively stable until 0300 on 11 March. One five-man TSQ crew had continued to operate the equipment while another had descended the slings to sleep in a grotto on the northwest face. At this point, the Hmong sappers reached the summit. They infiltrated silently past its defenders, seemed familiar with the site, and began methodically destroying the buildings with grenades.

Hearing the noise of the battle, the TSQ technicians ran out the front door of the operations building into small-arms fire. Three were killed instantly, including the TSQ commander, while the rest scrambled over the side of the cliff. The invaders then began throwing grenades toward the grotto where the off-duty crew had been sleeping, waking them and killing two.

The CIA commander at the helipad, described as a former Green Beret named Huey Marlow, observed an explosion that destroyed the TACAN antenna. He began advancing on the summit, armed with an automatic shotgun and several grenades and accompanied by a few Hmong. After engaging in hand-to-hand combat between the helipad and the TSQ compound, Marlow reached the summit only to encounter an emplaced machinegun position. He killed the crew and rescued the FAC who had been hiding behind one of the TSQ buildings.

The technicians who had gone over the cliff were hanging in slings among the rocks below, still under fire from the mysterious attackers. Their return fire forced the enemy to pull back momentarily from the

precipice. Marlow and his Hmong, with the FAC from Vientiane, who were still under fire from the opposite direction, fought their way back to the helipad. Marlow was later awarded the Intelligence Cross.

Evacuation Attempt

At the Embassy in Vientiane, the Ambassador lost touch with the situation after 0300, and radio contact was not re-established at the helipad until about 0500. He then ordered full evacuation at 0715, an hour ahead of schedule. The Air America helicopters were standing by and immediately tried to reach the site, as incoming fire had apparently ceased just before 0700. Approaching the summit, however, they drew fire from the sappers.

Marlow, observing this, estimated that the TSQ area was in enemy hands and called in A-1E Sandys on the facility. This strike forced at least one enemy soldier to flee over the cliff where the surviving Air Force technicians were hiding. There was then a furious firefight on the side of the cliff, and the soldier was killed.

Following the airstrike by the Sandys, the Air America helicopters were able to approach the ridgeline and evacuate some of the Americans. The Air Force combat SAR Jolly Green Giants did not join in the rescue, perhaps because of their inability to land on the tiny clearing. The Air America Hueys went in repeatedly and extracted the two CIA officers, the FAC, and five of the technicians who had hidden in the craggy rocks on the cliff face. One technician was hit during the extraction, and he died on the way to Udorn.

Return flights were able to recover or account for eight of the 11 Americans killed on Phou Phathi, as well as some wounded Hmong defenders. The other three, who were among those who scrambled over the side of the cliff after abandoning the TSQ, were believed blown off the cliff by the constant artillery and mortar fire and airstrikes. Later in the morning a counterattack was contemplated at Udorn, but this plan was temporarily set aside in favor of continued search and rescue.

Destroying the Site

By midday hopes of recovering the missing Americans were discarded and attention turned to destroying the radar to prevent it from falling into the hands of the North Vietnamese, along with the documentation and operational information that was left in the COMMANDO CLUB operations building. The North Vietnamese evidently did not realize what they had captured, or, if they did, did not care. No effort to remove or exploit the TSQ was detected in the hours immediately following capture of the site. The Air Force, however, was not going to give the enemy a chance to think about it. Beginning in late morning on 11 March, air-strikes were directed against the summit every day for a week to obliterate all traces of the COMMANDO CLUB on Phou Phathi. Between the 12th and 18th, 95 sorties were directed to destroy the radar; and on the 19th, two A-1 Sandys leveled every building on the ridge. This aerial barrage had the collateral effect of probably obliterating the remains of any Americans who were left on the mountain.

Postmortem

After the situation became clearer in the days following the battle, Ambassador Sullivan and 7th Air Force ordered a postmortem on the fiasco. The Ambassador recorded his comments in a PERSONAL FOR message to General Momyer at Tan Son Nhut:

... In hindsight, it seems to me we should have pulled all technicians out morning of 10 March even if this means losing the last few hours of the installation's capabilities.

What concerns me most is not the defensive action, but the disruption of the preplanned evacuation procedure. It is still not clear why technical personnel went over cliff to narrow ledge rather than down trail to chopper pad. CAS [euphemism for CIA] personnel subsequently went up same trail to installation, so we know trail was traversable, even under artillery fire. It is also not clear to me how small Vietnamese suicide squad got to the installation site, although it seems they must have scaled the cliff. . . .

Why did the COMMANDO CLUB technicians go over the cliff? That action seems to have caused most of the casualties.

The answer probably lies in the training of the Air Force personnel. The sheep-dipped technicians, unarmed and posing as civilians, were not really combatants, yet they were in a position where close combat was almost inevitable. As is often the case in war, things did not go according to Plan A and the COMMANDO CLUB did not have a Plan B. The Air Force did not train the CIRCUIT RIDERS to fight as infantry to defend themselves. This was the real tragedy of Phou Phathi. If the technicians had organized their own defense, with armed sentries manning a defensive perimeter around their facility, possibly even incorporating the Hmong guerrilla troops in their effort, their chances of survival would have been much greater. The tactic of climbing over the side of the mountain, rather than maintaining a defensible position, was not militarily sound. The CIA advisers and the Ambassador apparently realized this.

Epilogue

The loss of Site 85 was not really an intelligence failure because accurate information about the nature of the situation was available from the start. But it was a failure of command and control and leadership because the local forces did not have full authority for their own defense and depended almost wholly on local irregular troops led by CIA advisers. Nonetheless, the Hmong and the CIA nearly saved the COMMANDO CLUB; they probably would have if it had not been for the amazing feat of the sappers scaling the northeast face.

The fall of Phou Phathi was the beginning of a major enemy offensive in Laos that was to exact a heavy toll on Vang Pao's Hmong army. In fact, it was the beginning of the end for the non-Communist forces in Laos. The Hmong suffered severe casualties in the last months of 1968, and PL advances were inexorable.

By September the North Vietnamese and PL had over 20 battalions in the Samneua area—the largest concentration of forces in Southeast Asia at the time. The

US Air Force continued to strike hard at these forces. Although there were fearsome losses among the enemy units, the Vietnamese and Lao Communists accepted the losses with no change in strategy.

Vang Pao continued to insist on retaking Phou Phathi, even though the Embassy in Vientiane did not believe this was necessary or wise. At one point, Ambassador Sullivan told Vang Pao he would not provide air support for an offensive against the Sacred Mountain in the wet season, so Vang Pao said he would walk there by

himself. The Ambassador relented, and the offensive went forward, but it ended in deadlock near Muong Son in late July.

Finally, with heavy support from CIA and Air Force resources, the Hmong reached the base on Phou Phathi. On 18 July a few Hmong commandos managed to reach the destroyed helipad and TSQ facility, but they were unable to hold the ridgeline. The 148th NVA Regiment sent Vang Pao's troops reeling, while taking heavy casualties. Phou Phathi was never recaptured.



Afterword

The unnamed technician noted as having been wounded and dying en route to Udorn was Air Force Chief Master Sergeant Richard L. Etchberger. He was wounded after having just brought aboard three other airmen trying to escape the North Vietnamese assault. As his story came to light over the following decades, momentum built to award him the Medal of Honor, which President Obama did on 10 September 2010 in the White House. (See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/09/21/awarding-chief-etchberger-medal-honor> and Karen Parrish, "Medal of Honor Recipient Joins Hall of Heroes" in DOD News (American Forces Press Service) at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=60970>)

Readers wishing to study declassified material related to the conflict of 50 years ago, may visit the Freedom of Information Act Reading Room at www.cia.gov. The site features several related collections, including the four book-length histories of CIA activity in Vietnam and Laos written by CIA contract historian Thomas Ahern between 1998 and 2005; a collection of national intelligence estimates and estimative products written on Vietnam before and during the war; and document releases on Air America and its predecessor, Civil Air Transport.

