
Thai Forward Air Guides in the Covert War in Laos

Paul T. Carter

The overall history of Thai engagement in the conflict is murky, and the wisdom of its engagement still uncertain, but the importance of the forward air guides to the prosecution of the anticommunist undercover war in Laos is unmistakable.

During the Second Indochina War (known to most Americans as the Vietnam War), the Kingdom of Thailand suffered from an externally-supported communist insurgency. Communist People's Republic of China (PRC) and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV-North Vietnam) targeted four countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam for communist expansion. The communist insurgencies in these countries were "all of one kind; a common origin, a common approach, a common goal."¹ When the war ended in 1975, only one of these Southeast Asian countries—Thailand—had repelled the aggression and retained its system of governance and way of life.

Given the scant record of governments defeating insurgencies since World War II, this was a notable achievement, particularly since two Buddhist, monarchical countries on Thailand's borders—Laos and Cambodia—fell to communism, as did the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). A 2013 study on counterinsurgency conducted for the US Office of the Secretary of Defense found that more than half of all insurgencies during the period under study were successful: since World War II, 31 of 59 global insurgencies were victori-

ous against the host nations in which they arose.²

Thailand, with significant US financial, technical, and military support, employed an array of strategies to defeat internal insurgency and oppose external aggression. These strategies included massive investment in rural economic development in support of security; an increase in internal kinetic (military and police) actions;³ and the deployment of combat troops to Laos to confront Viet Minh and communist Pathet Lao forces. The Thai government, like the US government, engaged in rapprochement with China, which eventually ceased its support of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). The final blow to the increasingly weakened CPT was a Sino-Vietnam split that caused a splinter in the CPT, together with the Vietnamese expulsion of pro-CPT members from sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia and Thai amnesty for the insurgents. The communist insurgency ended in 1984.^{b,3}

One feature of the engagement of Thai nationals in Laos from the late 1960s to 1974 emerges as worthy of focused attention: in the largest paramilitary operation CIA has ever undertaken, a group of young, CIA-employed, English-speaking men played

a. King Rama IX was a forceful opponent of communism and rallied the population to confront communism.

b. The Thai still have an ethnic, religious-based insurgency on their southern Malay border.

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Key players in the US-led surrogate war in Laos meeting in 1965 at the airfield in Long Tien, the center of CIA operations in the country. Shown from left to right are Hmong irregular force leader Vang Pao; Bill Lair; an unidentified officer—possibly the aircraft’s pilot—William Colby, chief of the Far East Division of CIA’s Directorate of Plans (now Operations); and CIA Vientiane Station Chief Douglas Blaufarb. Colby would become CIA director in 1973.⁴

Bill Lair was the CIA officer who essentially created the Laos irregular-war effort in 1960 and led it into 1968. He had originally come to Thailand in 1951 and with the Thai improved the capability of the Thai Border Patrol Police. From that unit emerged the PARU. Lair left for the US Army War College in 1968. He would return to Bangkok for another CIA assignment, staying until retirement in 1977.⁵



a unique role. This group—the Thai forward air guides, or FAGs, were key players in the war in Laos.⁶ The overall history of Thai engagement in the conflict is murky, and the wisdom of its engagement still uncertain, but the importance of the forward air guides to the prosecution of the anti-communist undercover war in Laos is unmistakable.⁷

Background of Thai Engagement

Following the communist Viet Minh victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Thailand adopted a “forward strategy” in Laos to confront increasing communist aggression from its historical enemy, the Vietnamese. Siam (Thailand)^a at one time had almost complete suzerainty over most of territorial Laos, previously composed of several small kingdoms with overlapping frontiers

that paid tribute to the Vietnamese and Siamese.

With a fragmented Laos, the Siamese and Vietnamese from the early 1800s asserted themselves territorially, and it had been a bloody, violent affair, with battles reaching south into Siam.

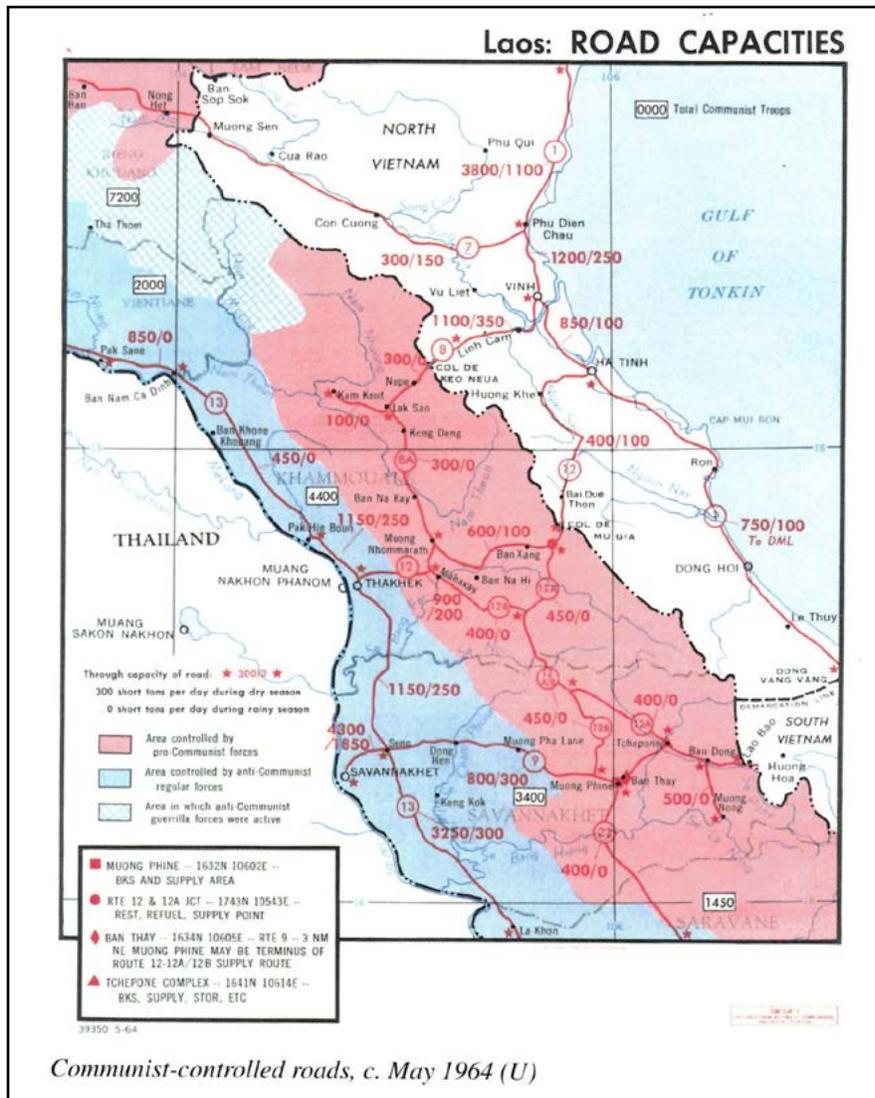
In 1953, communist Viet Minh forces invaded Laos, nearly capturing Luang Prabang, the royal capital. This aggression clearly demonstrated Vietnamese regional expansionist intent. One Thai veteran of the war in Laos remembered witnessing, as a seven-year-old, the Vietnamese communists’ capture of Dien Bien Phu, an event that alarmed him, his parents, grandparents, and many Thai.⁸

The events of 1953, especially the establishment of the T'ai Autonomous Area in Yunnan (China) ... the Vietminh's invasion of Laos, together with the

signing of the Korean armistice, heightened the Thai leaders' fear that the communists had now turned their attention towards Southeast Asia, and that the aggression against Thailand was imminent.⁹

The Viet Minh began a systematic expansion in Laos after 1954. In the early 1960s, it had conducted an offensive in southeast Laos, capturing the key village of Tchepone, critical terrain necessary to facilitate use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail logistical complex that supplied communist forces in South Vietnam. Viet Minh forces were also marching toward Thakhek, Laos, across the Mekong River from Nakon Phanom, Thailand, the site of a Royal Thai Air Force base (RTAFB) hosting a large US Air Force (USAF) presence in Udon (also seen commonly as Udon Thani until 1976). Thakhek had a large Vietnamese community and, as the terminus

a. Siam became Thailand in 1939 and has remained so except for a brief period during 1946–48.



Map is from Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2007), xxiii. (A declassified version of the book is available at <https://cia.gov/library/readingroom/> under historical collections, Vietnam.)

of roads leading from two passes (Keo Neua and Mu Gia) over the Annamite Mountains separating Laos from Vietnam, was the Viet Minh's gateway into the Mekong Valley. Thai

Field Marshal Prime Minister Sarit deployed two Thai artillery batteries to Thakhek—the first-ever Thai artillery deployment to Laos—to stop the advance.¹⁰ By the late 1960s, Viet

Minh (at this point, more accurately, the People's Army of Vietnam, or PAVN) and Pathet Lao forces controlled approximately one-half of Laos, including the Ho Chi Minh Trail area. (See map above.)

By 1970, the United States had begun its drawdown from Southeast Asia, which alarmed the Thai because they were now more vulnerable to Vietnamese invasion from Laos.

To protect Thailand, the United States and Thailand secretly created the UNITY Program, an initiative to train and mobilize a large Thai force to fight in Laos, financed by the United States. UNITY led to the deployment of up to 16,000 Thai soldiers in Laos by 1972, the largest military expeditionary force the Thai had committed in modern times. Thai battalions were composed of 30 regular Thai Army officer cadre, 23 Thai Army radio operators, and 497 Thai volunteers (550 total). The secret war in Laos presented challenges in tactical and operational decision making, communications, and coordination and deconfliction of military actions. US adherence to the 1962 Geneva Accords ruled out the presence of US Department of Defense (DoD) personnel on the ground to carry out these functions, with an exception—a few USAF personnel in civilian clothes with embassy identification cards.^{a, 11}

The war's commander was a civilian, the US ambassador to Laos, and, in effect, ground commanders were CIA paramilitary officers from

a. A Senate briefing in 1971 on the state of the war in Laos offered an accounting of an extraordinary number of US Army attache personnel (127) stationed in Laos at the time. Army attachés wore their uniforms, but “Air Force personnel in the Air Operations Centers do not wear uniforms [unlike Army attachés]. They are called ‘Mister’ and say they are with the AID Mission if asked.

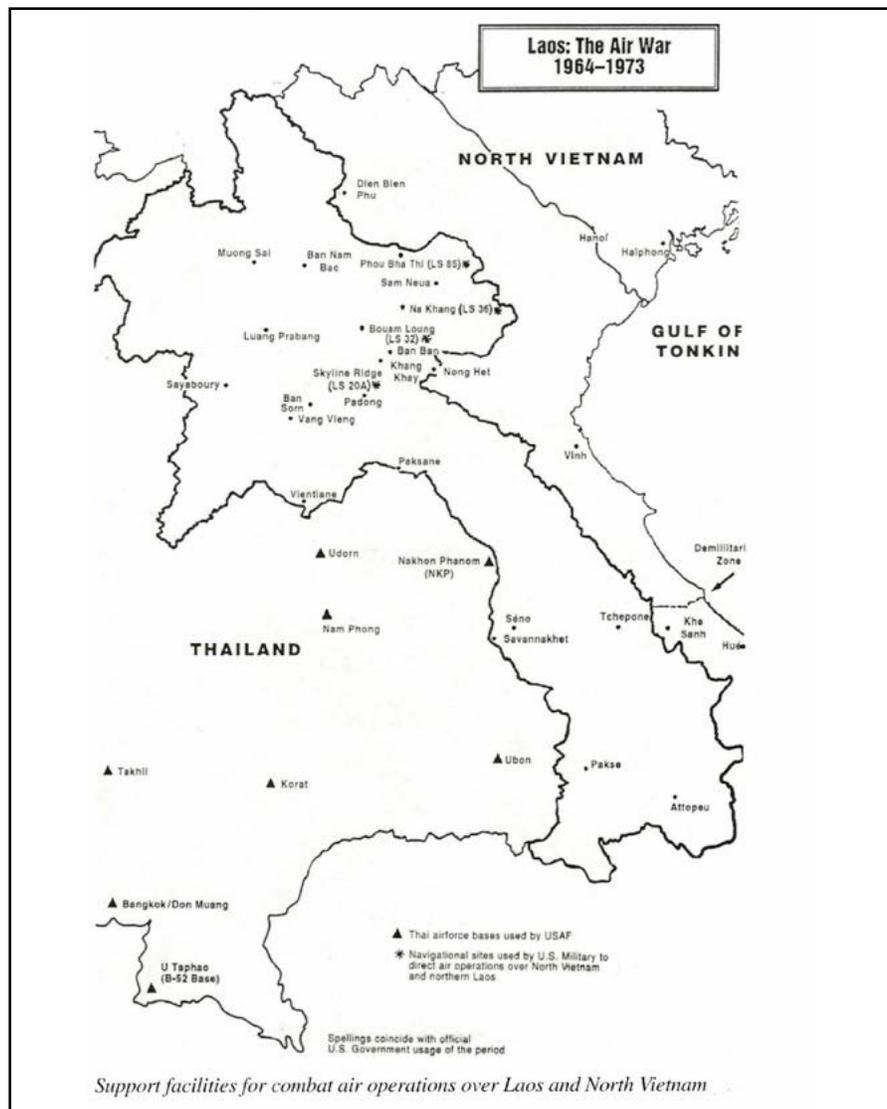
the Special Activities Division.^a The allied ground combat troops were Thai, Royal Lao, Hmong, and other minority forces. The Air Force component was also Thai, Royal Lao, and Hmong, along with USAF assets based outside of Laos. Aerial forward air controllers (FACs) were Thai, Royal Lao, and USAF Ravens, Air Force pilots who volunteered for this then highly secretive mission.¹²

Origins of the Thai Forward Air Guides

By late 1970, numerous allied and enemy troops were on the ground, and the battle tempo had increased, making the battlefield in Laos increasingly dangerous. In April 1971, a US pilot mistakenly dropped ordnance on a group of Thai troops, killing 16, including two Thai commanders. Clearly, more FACs were needed on the battlefield to coordinate airstrikes. In response, CIA institutionalized the concept of forward air guides, ground-based controllers given a unique, if uncomfortable, acronym—FAGs—to differentiate them from airborne FACs. Commenting on the program, Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, an Air Force officer detailed to CIA in the late 1960s in Laos, stated, “The FAGs—and the designa-

tion FAG was not liked—were used on the ground. This arrangement was contrary to the dogma that you had to be a fighter pilot [to be a forward air controller]. You didn’t [really] need to be a fighter pilot to be a FAC. Maybe this made better FACs, because they weren’t aspiring to become chief of staff. The job takes knowledge of airmanship, even if a man is not a pilot.”¹³

CIA began recruiting over 100 military-aged, English-speaking males in Thailand, sending them to a 10- to 14-day combat controller (CCT, essentially FAC) class taught by USAF CCTs at Udon Thani RTAFB. After graduation, the new guides would serve on the Laos battlefield as CIA contract employees.



Sketch map of lima sites: Map is from Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2007), xxv. (A declassified version of the book is available at <https://cia.gov/library/readingroom/> under Historical Collections, Vietnam.)

a. The war in Laos is sometimes grudgingly called “The Ambassador’s War” because the US ambassador to Laos (there were several over the years) was in charge of the conflict. This stems from President John F. Kennedy’s 29 May 1961 memo to all ambassadors elevating them to the status of the most senior US executive authority in a country, specifying that agencies outside the State Department would abide by the ambassadors’ decisions. As Laos was not officially a war zone, there was no DoD jurisdiction and therefore no military commander.

The FAGs played a role in modern warfare so unique and anomalous it had never been seen before the war and has not been seen since. These individuals were given “validation authority” to clear US aircraft to strike targets, perhaps the only time in the history of US warfare that non-US civilians were granted such authority. An FAG’s primary duty in Laos was to assist US and allied forces to identify and attack targets, and then to conduct battle damage assessments (BDA) of the effects of the strikes. Because FAGs had developed the skill to coordinate aircraft strikes, they were also called upon to help Thai artillery batteries home in on enemy targets.

FAGs performed secondary roles as CIA liaison with Thai ground forces, and CIA paramilitary officers typically shared with them indications, warning, and other intelligence to inform Thai units. Other duties FAGs performed for CIA and the Thai battalions included coordination of US medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) and logistical aircraft services.

Though the 1971 accidental bombing was the catalyst that led to institutionalizing the Thai FAG program, CIA and USAF personnel in Laos had begun to recognize the need for a ground-based forward air control capability as early as 1965. The absence of US troops due to Geneva agreement constraints meant the allies would have to assume duties US ground forces typically would have executed, including target observation and aircraft coordination. Thai pilots had begun flying strike missions in



Jack Teague, center, at LS-36 with Lao and Thai guides, ca. 1965, at a time before the decision was made to have Air Force personnel wear civilian clothing. Assigned to LS-36 were five other Air Force personnel, two of whom are pictured here as well. (Source: J. Teague)

Laos in 1964 against communist Pathet Lao and PAVN targets. Thai Air Force personnel also began acting as airborne FACs for Thai strike aircraft, and as “back-seaters” in US T-28 attack aircraft.¹⁴

US airstrikes at the time could only be coordinated by US personnel, albeit with Thai back-seaters. To remedy the shortfall and add precision to airstrikes, in June 1965 the US military inserted two USAF CCTs into airstrip LS-36 (Nha Khang, Laos).^a They wore civilian clothes and carried US embassy identification. One of them, Jack Teague, pictured above, and an air commando paramedic had Thai assistants, who at the time communicated with the Thai and Lao T-28 aircraft attack pilots, but not with US aircraft. Two CIA paramilitary officers at LS-36 also worked with the new USAF CCTs.^{b, 15}

According to a former CIA paramilitary officer operating at LS-36 in 1966, he and another CIA

paramilitary officer thought to send English-speaking Hmong road-watch teams to northern Laos to report enemy activity directly to US A-26 Nimrod attack aircraft.¹⁶ These Hmong, dispersed along roads and trained to spot vehicles, porters, troops, and camouflaged truck parks were specifically looking for trucks attempting to infiltrate from North Vietnam under the cover of darkness. They would contact US pilots upon spotting potential targets.

Confirmed destruction of enemy targets showed this approach worked well. As US pilots gained confidence in local ground spotters, CIA paramilitary officers and USAF CCTs decided to expand the concept. According to the former paramilitary officer, CIA decided to place a job advertisement in Bangkok’s English-language newspapers promising good pay, travel, and adventure in somewhat vague terms. Two Thai men were recruited as a result of this effort; these initial recruits became known

a. LS is short for Lima Site, the designation of fixed installations with US personnel.

b. Teague has described himself as the “first modern-era CCT to put in a tour in northern Laos.” In Jan Churchill’s book *Classified Secret*, Air Force Gen. Heine Aderholt called Teague the “first man to push the FAC program into Laos.”

The mission was a success, providing validation that locally recruited and trained air guides could perform CCT duties.

as RED HAT and BLUE BOY, the first Thai forward air guides to work with US aircraft in Laos.¹⁷ RED HAT, having been on a road-watch team previously, possessed some military experience.

RED HAT's first mission began at 1800 hours on 18 October 1966 in northern Laos. It involved two US A-1E Skyraider attack aircraft and a World War II vintage B-26. RED HAT was embedded with a Hmong ground team. "The commo arrangement was crude and unsophisticated. It was simple and quickly cobbled together with materials on hand and did not require outside support," according to the paramilitary officer. Inbound aircraft personnel contacted the CIA paramilitary officers, who then contacted the ground team to see whether they had targets. They then relayed the information to the aircraft and directed the aircraft to contact RED HAT when they arrived over the target area.

Because of the distances involved, CIA paramilitary officers were unable to monitor FAG-to-aircraft radio transmissions, but they were able to hear all US aircraft transmissions to RED HAT. The mission was a success, providing validation that locally recruited and trained air guides could perform CCT duties. Thomas Ahern places validation somewhat earlier and attributes the event to TALL MAN, mentioned below and on facing page.

USAF M.Sgt. Charlie Jones, a CCT in Laos, who in 1966 had trained FAGs, may have trained RED HAT and BLUE BOY.^a

Honestly, nobody believed the guys I taught learned more than basic stuff about how airplanes bring bombs and guns. However, I trained selected guys, whom Air America helicopters airlifted into remote areas close to Sam Neua. They were equipped with PRC-47s and some VHF radios (Bayside 990s) and HT-1s (radios). Two of these [men] were especially effective. One was a Hmong called TALL MAN. The other was a Thai called RED HAT. Another was (a Thai), BLUE BOY.¹⁸ (See facing page.)

In 1966 and 1967, another Thai FAG came to serve at LS-36—Somchai Tunkulsawasdi, callsign PYTHON. Somchai remained with the program, took another callsign, SMALL MAN, and served as a forward air guide until the program ended.¹⁹

RED HAT's last known mission in Laos took place on Valentine's Day 1973.²⁰ He settled in Udon Thani after the war and died as a civilian some years later. BLUE BOY lost his life at LS-36 on the night of 1 March 1969 during a sustained PAVN attack. US aircraft lost radio contact with him, and it remains unclear how he died: Some speculate he was attempting to escape from the attacking PAVN;

others claim he was killed by counterattacking US aircraft or PAVN artillery; finally, others claim he was captured and tortured to death. "We had civilians come out of the area who claimed they saw BLUE BOY being tortured by the North Vietnamese. He never was reported in any prisoner of war lists, so presumably he was killed or died during the attack," according to Ernest Kuhn, a former Peace Corps officer in Thailand who had joined USAID in 1965.^{b, 21}

Recruiting

After the April 1971 fratricide, CIA again used advertisements in Bangkok English-language newspapers to recruit a new generation of forward air guides. (See facing page.) These advertisements directed interested personnel to the Amarin Hotel in Bangkok to be interviewed by one Thai and one American. Most former FAGs said the interviews were fairly easy—the main requirement was, as before, the ability to speak English. If selected, individuals would receive word by telegram within a month, notifying them to report to Thai Border Police headquarters in Bangkok. From there, they were ultimately shipped to Udon Thani RTAFB.

Many FAGs came from other sources, as well. In the late 1960s, the US presence in Thailand was large enough that DoD, State Department, and others employed local English-speaking Thai as interpreters, clerks, document translators, secretaries, and a host of other positions. With the launching of the UNITY

a. Jones would prepare a FAC information pamphlet, which, he said, the Thai translated into Lao and other local languages.

b. Also killed was Thai Somsak Arkaraporn, interpreter at LS-36. One PARU soldier was captured and repatriated after the war, per Ray Roddy. The only USAID battle fatality in the war was Don Sjostrom, who lost his life during an PAVN attack on LS-36 in January 1967.

The Recruitment Approach and One Result

The push for recruitment in 1971 led to the below advertisement in the *Bangkok Post* in November.

Male Thai/English interpreter translators needed for field work in Thailand. Preference given to Thai military veterans. Must be at least 20 years old, no criminal record and in good physical condition. Salary begins at 2,400 baht per month and up depending on language ability. Other living and travel allowances are included.

Please ask at Reception Desk, Amarin Hotel between 0800 and 1700, 11 November through 13 November for room number for interview appointment.

A Typical Recruit (Callsign SPACE)

Chalermchai Thamvethin's background is a fairly typical example of a forward air guide. Chalermchai graduated from Bangkok College and taught French and English in high school for five years. His first US Army job was in Korat, where he worked for 3 to 4 years as an interpreter/translator for the US Army 9th Logistical Command. He was 25 or 26 years old when he was first hired by the Army. By word-of-mouth, he heard about "Bill Lair's office," got an interview at Air America at Udon Thani RTAFB, and went to work as an interpreter/translator for the JLD at a Thai Army training camp. From there he was recruited to be an FAG, graduating the course in May 1972.²²

Tallman and Red Hat: As Told in Undercover Armies

Everything depended on the availability of an English-speaker, and a very brave one, for the North Vietnamese would quickly infer the presence of a forward observer even if they failed to intercept his transmissions. As it happened, Long Tieng had a Hmong intelligence assistant named Moua Chong, who had somewhere—no one knew how—acquired real competence in the English language, and Vang Pao sent him to Na Khang. There, given the call sign Tallman, he learned from the CIA advisers how to direct airstrikes and operate the single-sideband radio that he would take into the field.

When Tallman left, it was not as a singleton agent. For one thing, each of two voice radios (one a spare) weighed 20 pounds. Then there was the truck battery to power them, slung between two porters, plus a separate secure radio system, the old RS-1 with its hand-cranked generator. Adding porters to carry rations and taking into account the need for guides and security, the mission required 20 men. Tallman was not the team leader, though his English and his new technical skills made him its indispensable member. His status may also have provoked envy among his teammates and thus contributed to the internal conflicts that eventually led to disaster.

Tallman's first mission, scheduled to last a month, sent him into North Vietnamese-held territory east of Route 6, in the inverted "vee" formed by the road and the border. Arriving at the target area, he found friendly villagers who offered order-of-battle information. They were willing also to sell food, which reduced air supply requirements to an occasional drop by a Porter. With a secure bivouac established, Tallman was to use the hours of darkness to work himself and his equipment-bearers close to the road. From his observation point, he would give precise directions to the A-26 "Nimrod" pilots already orbiting above, waiting to be called.

At the Na Khang command post, [name redacted] and [name redacted] relayed to [name redacted] an encrypted message from Tallman giving a date for his first foray toward the road. On the appointed night, they listened, first anxiously, then with delight when they heard the lead pilot respond to Tallman's first transmission. The pilot acknowledged Tallman's instruction to drop flares at a given point on the road, after which all hell broke loose when the light revealed a major convoy. The A-26s tore into them, and the glare of secondary explosions dimmed the flickering light of the flares.

It all made for an auspicious, indeed spectacular, beginning, and Tallman directed more such strikes during the months of his service. But he was killed in mysterious circumstances: squabbling had apparently turned to violence, and it looked as if his own men had murdered him. There was no immediate replacement, and [name redacted] scrambled to find someone with the courage, brains, and language skills needed to fill his shoes. Desperate for results, it placed an anodyne, "see the world" ad in Bangkok newspapers, and this attracted a bored taxi driver looking for excitement. Against all the odds, the new forward observer, named Red Hat after his trademark baseball cap, not only performed with distinction but went on to survive the war and return to Thailand.²³

Interestingly, typical soldier skills such as weapons qualification or medical training were not part of the curricula.

program in 1970, the United States—and specifically CIA—needed a larger, more rapid infusion of Thai men to translate for US Army 46th Special Forces (SF) company soldiers, who were training Thai volunteer soldiers and their units at Thai military camps for deployment to Laos. Thai translators did not work for the DoD, but rather for the CIA’s cover organization in Thailand, the 4802 Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD), which was created in 1962.²⁴

Several forward air guides had served as translators at the training camps, and, after some months working and earning trust, their JLD bosses approached them and told them to report to the Air America office at Udon Thani RTAFB to be interviewed. If they met the requirements, these candidates were also offered jobs as forward air guides. While Thai translators typically made 2,400 baht per month (about \$115 at the time), FAGs typically were paid 10,000 (about \$480 at the time)—a hefty pay increase. All FAGs knew before they were hired that the job required deployment to Laos.

Although it is difficult to obtain background information on these men, the alumni organization of the Thai soldiers who fought in Laos, the Unknown Warriors Association 333 (UWA 333), records that 45 of them were civilians with no military experience; 13 were prior Thai military; one possibly served with Thai Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit and several others, like SMALL MAN, had gone through PARU training, but not served as such; and 17 were civilians working for the US military or JLD in some other capacity.²⁵

Training

USAF CCT instructors for the FAG course came from the 1st Detachment, 56th Special Operations Wing, located at the Air America facility, Udon Thani RTAFB. The mission was “to train and qualify students in close air support tactics, techniques, and procedures.”²⁶

Interestingly, typical soldier skills such as weapons qualification or medical training were not part of the curricula. Several FAGs who had been translators at Thai military training camps said they had learned basic soldiering skills by translating the training from English to Thai for the Thai soldiers. The training consisted of classroom lectures, practical exercises on sand tables, map reading and compass use, air-attack tactics and control measures, communications with various type of aircraft, performing BDA, some basic field subjects, and providing appropriate information for air attack. Trainees

also learned to identify airplanes and helicopters and their battle capabilities and capacities. Each student also made two helicopter flights, two T-28 sorties, and an AC-47 flight to see how terrain looked from the air.

Each FAG was given a unique callsign, e.g., SPOTLIGHT, RACE CAR, IRON CITY. The names were assigned according to how well the guide could pronounce his call sign during training, because clear communication and identification were of paramount importance on the battlefield.

After classroom training, instructors conducted a live-fire training exercise at the T-28 aircraft bombing range located 20 to 30 miles southwest of Udon Thani RTAFB. The exercise required each guide to direct a US aircraft onto a designated target. A day at the range typically lasted 6 to 8 hours—enough time for the students to practice numerous calls for airstrikes.²⁷ “We allowed each student to control one aircraft through a half-dozen passes, with bombs and



FAG live bombing training with shirtless USAF CCT instructor evaluating his students, ca. 1971. Source: US Air Force Det. 1, 56th SOW, Alumni Association

guns. At the same time, other students were nearby, watching and learning from the ongoing action.”²⁸ FAGs had to successfully complete the mission in five minutes, which meant they had (1) identified the target; (2) made contact with the aircraft; and (3) directed the pilot to successfully put live ordnance on the target.²⁹ Upon successful completion of training, the guides were given USAF certificates of graduation.

Operations in Laos

Upon arrival in Laos, the preparedness of FAGs were again validated by USAF CCTs to ensure they could execute their missions and “then and only then would they be able to work with US aircraft in combat operations.”³⁰ Their callsigns were then registered theater-wide with the US Air Force.

In Laos, FAGs were attached to a deploying Thai battalion; in theater they often rotated among battalions. There the new guides were typically placed under the tutelage of an experienced FAG. Many of the

In combat, FAGs executed multiple, complex tasks simultaneously.

early guides, however, did not have sufficient tutelage because of the lack of senior FAGs in country. Later, on-the-job training under a senior FAG usually lasted one week.³¹

By this point, FAGs were officially fully employed contract employees of the 4802 JLD (those who had been translators at the Thai military training camps had been JLD employees, as well);³² however, their employment was secret. The only document proving the FAG-JLD relationship was a \$100,000 life insurance policy, with named beneficiaries.³³ This insurance also paid in the event of any severe injury that would prevent future employment.³⁴ There were no set employment lengths or other binding requirements, and while a few FAGs quit and returned from battle in Laos fairly quickly, others stayed for years.

In combat, FAGs executed multiple, complex tasks simultaneously. For example, in March 1972 when the PAVN was pressing attacks against the Thai, Hmong, and Royal

Lao near the Hmong/Thai and CIA headquarters at Long Tieng, Laos, FAGs coordinated with US helicopters to land and evacuate Thai dead and wounded. At the same time, they synchronized airstrikes in efforts to keep the enemy from firing on the vulnerable helicopters. In addition, they coordinated with the Thai battalion for combat operations and MEDEVAC locations. Such maneuvers would be difficult even in normal conditions, but facing enemy artillery and mounting ground attacks made the maneuvers particularly perilous.³⁵

The rainy season in early 1972 was a particularly perilous time for FAGs as the PAVN engaged in fierce combat with Thai and Lao military formations to penetrate farther south than ever. One book that documents US activities through USAF radio transmissions shows just how engaged the FAGs were in these actions. From January through March 1972, 24 FAGs participated in 122 combat actions in which they contacted US reconnaissance or attack aircraft for support. These actions included enemy attacks on friendly troops in the field, efforts to overrun friendly positions, enemy artillery fire, and enemy ground and air penetrations.³⁶

For airstrikes, FAGs normally only talked directly to Thai T-28 attack aircraft or the slow-moving USAF C-130 Spectre gunship; they rarely talked to the high performance “fast-mover” jets, such as the F-4 Phantom, and never to B-52s. An exception might occur if a Thai unit was under enemy fire at night, and the high-performance strike aircraft could communicate directly with the



(l to r) BATTLESHIP, USAF CCT Herbert McGhee, WILD BILL, WAR EAGLE, ca. 1972. Source: USAF instructor Bill Fitzgerald.

The Paris Peace Accords ended direct US military involvement in the Second Indochina War in early 1973, but the Thai remained in Laos until May 1974

FAG for fires without airborne FAC involvement. It was a very dynamic process.

After an airstrike, a key FAG task was to perform a BDA. Often, initial strikes would miss their targets, and the guides would have to determine if additional strikes were necessary. If they were, they would adjust their targeting instructions.

Occasionally FAGs accompanied reconnaissance or other ground units to provide air attack capability on their missions. This usually meant moving on foot with an infantry platoon or company from a base camp out into a forward area, where encounters with enemy forces often resulted in heavy combat and casualties—and the need for airborne counterstrikes and MEDEVAC help.³⁷

Attachment to a Thai battalion afforded the guides a unique relationship with Thai units: they were able to observe problems units were experiencing and to identify equipment and personnel needs. A key FAG duty was crafting situation reports twice daily—between 0600 and 0700, and then again between 1800 and 1900—for CIA and Thai headquarters.³⁸ These reports contained ammunition expenditures and requirements, transportation requests, equipment status and needs, medical requirements, personnel status, weather information, and any other factors that bore on the Thai battalions' ability to fight. Additional duties involved coordinating CIA proprietary aircraft (Air America, Continental Air, et al.), other aircraft logistics, and MEDEVAC. All areas

involving air coordination were in the FAGs' area of responsibility, and most CIA paramilitary officers would choose one of the guides to serve as operations assistant and to accompany him on the battlefield.³⁹

The Paris Peace Accords ended direct US military involvement in the Second Indochina War in early 1973, but the Thai remained in Laos until May 1974, and the United States funded the effort. Burdens on the Thai FAGs increased with the US pullout (and though at least two CIA paramilitary officers remained at Long Tieng, they were prohibited from going forward into the field).⁴⁰ Although the United States was finished with the war, Thai and Royal Lao units continued combat with PAVN and Pathet Lao for the next year.

Benefits to Intelligence and Operations

FAG contributions to the war effort and CIA operations were significant, particularly in the longest battle and least publicized allied victory of the Second Indochina War—the Battle for Skyline Ridge in the Long Tieng area, the most lopsided allied victory of the war. The PAVN had opened the assault against Thai, Hmong, and Royal Lao defenders in December 1971—with CIA paramilitary officers on the ground. The battle raged for over 100 days, often with savage hand-to-hand fighting, before the badly outnumbered allies forced an unlikely PAVN retreat.^{41,42} The guides performed superbly during this time, directing airstrikes, coordinating logistical drops, and supporting MEDEVAC; several lost their lives in the battle.

On the day of the PAVN attack, SPOTLIGHT reported that his “CIA boss radioed me,” warning there was a “100-percent chance” the PAVN would hit their position with infantry



SPOTLIGHT (r) with battalion command group, BC-608, ca. 1972, Laos. Source: FAG SPOTLIGHT.

and tanks at 1700 hours.⁴³ SPOT-LIGHT and other guides disseminated this battlefield intelligence to the Thai battalions. FAGs were effective communicators with—and messengers to—the Thai units, largely owing to the sound professional reputation they had built; Thai commanders listened to them and sought their advice and counsel.

FAGs also served as a linguistic and cultural bridge for the allied forces: trilingual (they spoke Thai, English, and Lao) and deeply familiar with the region's common ethnic roots and traditions, they put their advanced military skills into the service of the American and allied forces and were respected for these traits and abilities. It was not unusual for guides working on the front line with Thai battalions to take meals with the battalion commander, his deputy, or members of his primary staff, which demonstrates the position Thai officers afforded them.⁴⁴ One CIA paramilitary officer recalls,

*Relations in our little community of FAGs and were surprisingly good. The FAGs were well paid and well treated by both the [CIA] paramilitary officers and the Thai officers, and they [Thai officers] knew that the FAGs were a critical part of the operation.*⁴⁵

But there was another reason behind Thai battalion commanders' respect for the guides and preferential treatment: FAGs were the crucial point-of-access to powerful US air capability and assured that optimal access to US reconnaissance and

After the war, with the Americans gone, the guides no longer had jobs, and what they had done was a secret they could not talk about.

fighter aircraft, MEDEVAC support, and air logistical resupply would continue.

Using FAGs as trusted communications conduits, CIA was likewise able to effectively communicate operational directives and battlefield information to Thai forces.^a CIA drew heavily upon the guides to understand what was occurring in the Thai units:

*The FAGs were also the eyes and ears for the (CIA paramilitary officers), as they were with the battalion commander 24/7. In most cases, the FAG was leaned on heavily by the battalion commanders. Because of their constant presence with the units and their language facility the FAGs were absolutely critical to us keeping a finger on the pulse of what was going on . . . in the field.*⁴⁶

Epilogue: Postwar Predicament

After the war, with the Americans gone, the guides no longer had jobs, and what they had done was a secret they could not talk about. US Naval Academy historian Dr. Richard Ruth who has studied the Thai experience wrote, "Time in Laos for them—strange, deeply personal, and indescribable to outsiders—was akin to a dream for many veterans. It was borne heavily by the FAGs in the postwar years but was impossible to relate to anyone outside a small circle of comrades."⁴⁷ The guides were

essentially left out in the cold and forgotten.

Conversely, the war benefited Thai active duty professional officers. With their professional combat experience, many went on to become high-ranking general officers.

Thai historian and author, Dr. Satayut Osornprasop, best describes their predicament, speaking about the Thai volunteers who fought in Laos:

They risked their lives fighting in one of the bloodiest and most brutal wars in Southeast Asia in order to obstruct the communist encroachment and infiltration into Thailand. They received so little in return. As the Thai government has always treated its covert operations in Laos with strict confidentiality, very few people in Thailand were aware of the fact that their compatriots were fighting in Laos. In addition, as the Thai government has never formally acknowledged these missions as an "official" expedition, these Thai "expeditionary forces" returned home without an appropriate commendation ceremony. Moreover, all Thai personnel who went to Laos were instructed by the government that their operations in Laos were state secrets, and that they had to "keep their mouths shut." They were under strict orders not to tell even their close friends and families how proud they were to

a. Certainly, CIA paramilitary officers communicated effectively with Thai commanders, but multiple demands upon them and their mobility required FAGs for communication.

*serve the Thai national interests in Laos.*⁴⁸

This was the predicament for FAGs who survived the war—but not all did.

Nearly 10 percent of 123 guides died in combat; the PAVN captured another, Suban Boonyarit (known as CROWBAR), and held him captive for more than four years.

But the lack of recognition has not stopped the forward air guides, a hearty group, from banding together:

they formed an informal fraternity, started a newsletter, and began to meet and record their history. Some of the regular Thai military officers who had fought with the FAGs in Laos joined their group, as they too had no one with whom to share their experiences. Collectively they formed the UWA 333 for Laos war veterans and associates, a group of which I am proud to say I am a lifetime member.

FAGs continued to fight for recognition, and in 1976 Thai Prime Minister Seni Pramoj awarded them

a medal for their efforts. This came with a minimum of lifetime health care benefits to be used at veterans' hospitals, and little else.

The Thai military then granted them office space at Don Muang RTAFB in Bangkok, housing their alumni office. The UWA 333 association also holds an annual convention at the air force base. Today, a memorial, paid for largely by retired Royal Thai Army Officers, is being constructed for the UWA 333 in north Bangkok on military property.



The author: Paul T. Carter served in the US Defense Intelligence Agency. He is now working toward a PhD at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

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