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## U-10 Operations at Nakhon Phanom

by  
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Thinking I was familiar with the USAF's weapons systems of the time, I was puzzled when my flying assignment to a U-10 came near pilot training graduation time at Webb AFB, Texas, in June, 1968. None of my classmates nor any of the T-38 instructors had even heard of this aircraft. A bit more research soon revealed that the U-10 was a Helio "Super Courier," a unique, high wing, single engine tail dragger with full-span leading-edge slats, four seats, powered by a Lycoming 295 hp engine turning a three-bladed prop. The U-10 provided remarkable STOL (short takeoff & landing) capabilities and was procured by the USAF for special operations missions.

Upon graduation I was soon off to Hurlburt Field/Eglin AFB, Florida for transition training. At first the U-10 looked like a real come-down to a guy who had just finished six months flying the sleek and fast T-38. In reality, I was humbled pretty quickly and felt as if I had to learn to fly all over again. The many contrasts in performance and construction were about as stark as it gets, not the least of which was the U-10's unique main landing gear which featured free-castering wheels, hence ground loops looking for a place to happen. I soon learned to love this remarkable flying machine.

After basic survival school at Fairchild AFB and the "snake school" at Clark AB in the Philippines, I was finally off to my assignment at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base known as



*Helio U-10 "Super Courier" enroute to a leaflet drop over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Its call sign was appropriately "Litterbug". (French)*

"NKP," which was located along the Mekong River in extreme northeast Thailand. NKP was the closest of the six air bases in Thailand to the action over Laos and North Vietnam. Having lived for two years in northeast Thailand as a Peace Corps volunteer in a village near the Cambodian border, I was excited to be returning to somewhat familiar turf. Thai/Lao language skills developed during that earlier stint proved beneficial in this new USAF assignment, particularly during the more unusual missions on which I was often sent.

Upon seeing the 606th Special Operations Squadron's U-10s for the first time, I was surprised to see that they all sported a bare, shiny aluminum finish rather than the camouflaged paint jobs of the other USAF aircraft on the ramp at NKP or the U-10s I'd recently left behind at Hurlburt. I also noted that the 606th birds wore only small aircraft serial numbers on their vertical tails and no other USAF insignia. I guessed these U-10s' almost identical appearance to those flown by Air America was probably more than pure coincidence. Incidentally, the U-10s of the 5th SOS at Nha Trang, South Vietnam, the only other unit in Southeast Asia flying the Helio,

wore camouflage paint.

The mix of backgrounds of the U-10 pilots at NKP was interesting. About half of us were recent UPT (Undergraduate Pilot Training) graduates serving our first flying assignments, and the other half were high-time KC-135 and B-52 senior captains and majors pulled from the Strategic Air Command to serve their one-year remote flying tours in SEA. Those experienced guys were having a ball. They claimed this tour was the most fun they'd ever had flying. Mostly, with all due respect to SAC, those pilots were ecstatic to have "escaped" for a year.

Following a few hours of dual time and an area checkout, I was soon up and running on missions notable for their variety and challenging flying. As evidenced by our "Litterbug" call sign, our principal mission was dropping leaflets over hostile positions, mostly the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, as part of a wider psychological warfare program.

I'll briefly describe the sequence of events of a typical leaflet drop mission. As hard-working maintenance crews prepared our U-10s for safe mechanical flight, others packed thousands of leaflets in boxes about 12-18 inches per side. These were tied with cord with fuses

attached. The fuses were timed to sever the cords at a preset height above ground. When we arrived over the target the "leaflet kicker" armed the fuses and began throwing the boxes out the removed lower half of the left rear cockpit door. These leaflet kickers, who were most often young maintenance troops from our squadron, volunteered for these missions. This brought them some excitement and a sense of being a real part of the action. Not surprisingly, part of their motivation for volunteering was earning combat pay. These guys were real pros, and it was great having them along. We pilots could not have accomplished the leaflet dropping missions without them.

Backing up a little, I want to mention our pre-leaflet drop mission briefings held at the Tactical Unit Operations Center (TUOC). We received our target coordinates and some additional intelligence information to which we paid very close attention. The latter was the last known locations of anti-aircraft gun emplacements along our route of flight. These guns, which ranged from 12.7mm to 57mm, were ca-

pable of hits at higher effective altitudes as their size increased. To some extent we routed ourselves around the big guns, but more often we simply climbed above their reach. This commonly put us at 8,000 to even 10,000 feet above ground level (AGL). You can now see why we needed to use the time delay fuses to prevent the leaflet boxes from opening until they fell to a lower altitude. Otherwise, leaflets would have scattered all over much of Laos and North Vietnam rather than our specific target area.

These leaflet drop missions were usually flown as two-ship formations with a normal duration of just under two hours. For missions over "the Trail" we often sent a pair of two-ships. Given the limited instrumentation in the U-10 we departed NKP only in VFR (visual flight rules) conditions. However, particularly during the monsoon season, we often had to climb above heavy cloud cover enroute to the target areas, which were typically from 40 to 80 miles east to northeast of NKP. To pinpoint our drop points in bad weather we used either TACAN (Tactical Air Navigation) radials and

distances from our onboard navigation equipment or got steering from the helpful USAF controllers watching us from the radar site known as "Viking" at Mukdahan, Thailand. Maybe one reason they were so helpful was that we air delivered their mail several times weekly.

When leaflet drop missions were to areas without reported AAA gun emplacements, our two-ship flight discipline sometimes became a little too relaxed. During one such trip my wingman chose to descend far lower than the "book" 3,500 foot AGL for such areas, and this resulted in more excitement than we really needed that afternoon. He had a too-close call when he took a small arms projectile through the left wing, barely missing the fuel tank. That "act of aggression" called for immediate retaliation, we thought. I'm reluctant to admit this in print now, and I never spoke of it openly at the time, but we instantly converted from psy-ops to "armed reconnaissance" U-10s. My wingman, Capt George Spitz, (who was later killed in an EC-47 over Laos) and I decided to attack the limestone cave from where we thought the lucky shot had come. We popped open the windows next to the pilot's left shoulder, began left orbits of the cave, thrust our M-16s out the windows and "hosed the area!" Each of us fired two magazines of 5.56mm ammunition loaded alternately with ball and tracer rounds. While any damage to the bad guys in and around the cave was doubtful, it was a fine adventure.

An unexpected drama unfolded when after firing those two magazines from the M-16, I realized that my rudder controls were virtually locked up. The empty cartridge cases had deflected off the sloping open window back into the airplane, where they rolled down and under the cockpit floorboard. Fortunately, if handled gingerly,

*A "Leaflet kicker" loading a U-10 with delayed-opening fused boxes of thousands of leaflets (French)*



the U-10 continued to fly well rudderless. Luckily there was almost no crosswind requiring rudder control when landing back at NKP. My main concern by that time was dodging the "official" bullet back at the 606th ramp. I imagined getting a royal butt-chewing from the squadron commander if he found out about the unauthorized "use of force" incident. Thankfully, the ground maintenance crew sensed my panic and got right to the task of taking up the floorboard and picking out the brass cases. The bird was put quickly back in service with all flight controls functional. Word never got back to the commander, and I learned a good lesson.

Beyond leaflet drops, our next most frequent missions were operations into short, rough airstrips where the STOL capabilities of the U-10 really came into their own.

With slats deployed we could fly as slowly as 30 mph in level flight. Take-off roll was just over 300 feet. The landing roll was often less than 250 feet if we employed an aggressive, high angle-of-attack, high-power technique which allowed the wing slats to deploy.

Approach or departure obstacles had to be factored in for safe operation, even though the initial climb angle after take-off was 18 degrees. So, we had to be careful not to land in places where we'd have a tough time getting back out of with passengers or freight added. Our normal cruise speed was 150 knots, and the U-10 had a full-fuel range of 600 miles. These short-field operations included so-called "civic action runs," mail deliveries to remote USAF and US Army units, one-time cargo or passenger transports to outposts throughout the northern half of Thailand, and even week-long temporary duty to locations in Thailand and Laos. Before landing we commonly had to make a couple of low passes over airstrips to run off grazing water buffalo and



*The author (left) and a "Leaflet kicker" about to take off on a mission from NKP. Parachutes, survival vests and M-16s were standard aircrew gear on out-of-country flights. (French)*

the kids tending to them.

A memorable "civic action run" was one on which I flew the 606th commander to a small village in northeast Thailand, not far from NKP. Most of the project had taken place before my arrival in country, with the squadron having collected books for a new library at a small, rural school. This mission was to ferry the colonel so he could formally dedicate the new library. I was selected so he could deliver his message in English, and I could then translate into Thai for him. All went as advertised, but the good colonel was awfully long-winded. The kids and dignitaries got restless, and I quickly ran out of subtle Thai language variations for all the ways the colonel said the same thing. The library was a worthy people-to-people project, but that experience made me reluctant to get involved in any more international translation situations.

Another facet of our psy-ops mission with the U-10 was loud-speaker broadcasts over highly specific target areas, though we flew relatively few of these. The aircraft were only fitted with loudspeakers if and when such missions were assigned. The audio systems were

bulky "blasters" with speakers aimed out the left side of the aircraft, and the messages were normally from prerecorded cassette tapes rather than done in "real time." We had to fly tight left orbits in order to be heard on the ground clearly and flew lights-out at night so as to minimize drawing small arms fire. I recall flying a challenging speaker mission one dark night over a village in central Laos. Due to the absence of a visible horizon in that very remote area, I found it difficult to maintain the proper altitude (500 feet AGL) and the tight orbit at the same time. Using frequent instrument cross-checks I got it done but was very glad to high-tail it back to NKP that moonless night.

Our U-10s at NKP were very much a "bush airline." Beyond the deliveries of people and cargo into improvised airstrips as earlier described, we ran a daily shuttle service to Don Muang Airport in Bangkok. The primary purpose was to pick up reconnaissance film and intelligence related documents at Udorn and Takhli airbases on our way to Bangkok for delivery to Headquarters 7th/13th Air Force. Three passengers could ride, too, and we did a brisk business. We

were "forced" to overnight in the city on these shuttles and even had our own room permanently reserved at the Chao Phya Hotel. After the obligatory night on the town, we headed northeast the following morning to Korat and Udon air bases for more film and document pick-ups before returning upcountry to NKP. Each pilot flew the shuttle a couple of times monthly, which was a welcome break from the combat missions over Laos. These "Bangkok Shuttles" were tough and grueling work, but, as they say, "somebody had to do it." These trips were an opportunity to kick back a little, do a little sight-seeing and have some fun flying. I recall one shuttle during which I flew at roughly 100 feet AGL the entire trip, only popping up to pattern altitude a few miles out as we approached the air bases. We needed this low level training, of course. The extent of such enroute "training" depended on how adventurous and/or appreciative the passengers on board were, too.

I feel quite fortunate to have played a small and unusual flying role in the Bob Hope Christmas

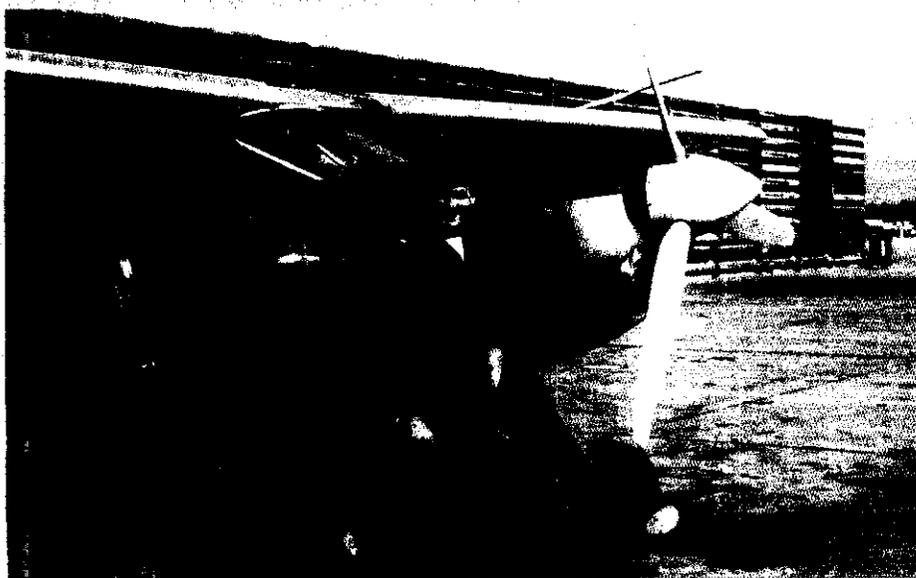
Show when they stopped at NKP just before Christmas in 1968. Someone came up with the clever idea of greeting Bob and his entourage by airborne public address system. A U-10 volunteer pilot was requested, and I jumped at the chance to be that pilot. A cassette tape was found of an old Bing Crosby song, and this was loaded and ready in the U-10's powerful audio system. I was ready to launch at the end of the taxiway as the C-130 carrying Bob and his gang landed. As soon as they touched down I took off and began a tight left orbit over the ramp as the C-130 shut down. As Bob came down the ramp, golf club in hand, I started the tape. He was surprised and amused as he raised his club and waved it at my U-10 circling above. That was a thrilling moment for me to be participating in a unique greeting. A footnote to this is that I landed and parked the U-10 and jogged to the outdoor arena in record time. My squadron mates had saved a seat for me, so I didn't miss any of that glorious Bob Hope Christmas Show.

I can honestly say that not even once was I bored flying the U-10

for a year in Thailand and Laos. We did our best to avoid boredom by devising a few antics to spice up the duty a bit. For example, we normally flew either straight-in or conventional box patterns into the large airbases in Thailand. Of course, the F-4s and F-105s flew overhead patterns, relatively high speed approaches right down the runway heading and then steep turns to downwind leg as speed decreased so as to lower gear and flaps. Drag parachutes were then deployed upon touchdown to slow the jets more rapidly. Well, not to be outdone by the "fast movers" I obtained a very small drag chute — about three feet in diameter. This was rigged to a 25 foot length of parachute cord. I had this folded and ready next to me in the cockpit. Several miles out from Takhli Air Base one fine day I called the tower, gave them my call sign and requested an overhead pattern. I swear I heard them snickering in the background, but they granted the request. I knew in advance which taxiway turn-off was nearest the ramp where I needed to park for a cargo pick-up. So, I bore down on the runway at high cruise speed with landing lights on. I "pitched out" directly over the turn-off I would use and quickly slowed into a spiraling downwind/base/final combination. I set up a high angle-of-attack final which allowed the leading edge slats to deploy and the airspeed to bleed off to about 35 knots. I touched down a couple hundred feet short of the turn-off and threw the makeshift drag chute out the window. By some minor miracle it didn't tangle in the tail of the U-10, and it opened beautifully. I must admit that was a satisfying maneuver, and I guess the tower controllers had something out of the ordinary to share with their buddies at the club that evening.

A one-week TDY into northwest Thailand illustrates the variety of

*The author at Udon RTAB to pick up passengers. Note the full span wing slats. This feature was central to the U-10's remarkable STOL performance (French)*



missions I've noted. My U-10, along with the able assistance of crew chief Sgt Matt Flores, was assigned to the US Consulate in Chiang Mai. Each day we flew the consul general or others into some pretty remote locations with names such as Taek, Mae Sot, Chiang Kam and Ban Houei Sai. One memorable mission on that TDY was to the Golden Triangle area (common borders of Thailand/Burma/Laos). That trip was for a road dedication ceremony near Hin Taek. Our U-10 and an Air America Pilatus "Porter" transported an entourage of American and Thai officials into one of the "wilder" airstrips I'd encountered. While by our STOL standards, the strip was a generous 750 feet in length, it featured a pronounced hump in the middle. Actually, the lower half of the runway was at nearly a 20 degree angle to the upper half. I tried not to let the "sweat" factor show to the dignitaries on board, but it was a tricky touch-down

and take-off at nearly maximum gross weight on that hot day. All in a day's work for the Helio "Super Courier," though. Its capabilities never ceased to amaze me.

I'll conclude by sharing a few facts and figures regarding the U-10s in the Southeast Asia war. As mentioned earlier, only two units operated this unique aircraft. In addition to the 606th SOS in Thailand, they were also flown by the 5th SOS at Nha Trang, South Vietnam. Both units had similar missions, but only the 606th flew routinely over Laos. My understanding is that the 5th SOS flew many more loudspeaker missions. These two units were also surprisingly small. My logbook indicates having flown twelve different aircraft during the one-year tour. We lost none, and I likely flew all the airworthy U-10s in the squadron. A total of twelve USAF U-10s were lost during the period 1962-1969. Eleven of those were lost in South Vietnam and one at Luang Prabang in north-

ern Laos. There were five fatalities resulting from the twelve aircraft losses; no U-10 aircrew members were taken as POWs.

Earlier in this article I mentioned the bare aluminum finish of our U-10s and their striking resemblance to those operated by Air America throughout Laos. This non-USAF look served to fit in well in the short-term TDY assignments some of us had to a certain "non-existent" CIA base in Laos known as Long Chieng, aka Lima Site-20 Alternate or Lima Site 98. Among all the terrific flying experiences logged during my one-year tour, I'd rate my stint at Long Chieng as the highlight, but that's another story for another day.

I'll wrap up this article by saying I'm quite honored to have served in Southeast Asia as a USAF pilot. The flying experience was incredibly interesting and unique. The memories of missions and USAF comrades are vivid and will last forever. ☸

## TDY To The Back Side Of The Moon

by  
Philip French

I want to share with readers of *Friends Journal* an account of my brief TDY (temporary duty) in the so-called "secret war" which took place over a period of nearly fifteen years in the Kingdom of Laos. That chapter in the history of the protracted war in Southeast Asia was very much not in the news of the day. In fact, the unique war in Laos and especially the direct involvement of the United States military, was only dimly known to the outside world.

Now that over thirty years have passed, government documents have been declassified about the war in Laos, and accounts of it are

*Approaching Long Chieng, Laos from the southeast. The tall limestone karst at the north end of the runway (aligned beneath the tie-down ring) got pilots' attention (French)*



widely detailed in books and on the Internet.

In September of 1969, OPERATION ABOUT FACE was in full swing in northeast Laos. That operation, commanded by the legendary Major General Vang Pao, had resulted in a significant rout of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) forces from the Plain of Jars, also known as the Plaine de Jarres or PDJ. Vang Pao's troops, composed mostly of his native Hmong hill tribesmen, had impressively swept the PDJ and captured huge caches of NVA weaponry. After many earlier marginally successful campaigns, and some downright disastrous ones, ABOUT FACE was going well. Spirits among the Hmong and the supporting Americans were high.

The nerve center of the war in northeast Laos was at the small, bustling town of Long Chieng, which was nestled in a remote valley among imposing limestone karst (outcropping) formations all around it. Vang Pao lived there in a large, two-story stone house with several of his wives, their families, and other trusted supporters. The local CIA headquarters was just up the hill, and the USAF forward air controllers known as "the Ravens" were headquartered nearby. Air America had a strong presence, and there was almost non-stop air traffic at Long Chieng airfield, particularly at the height of operations such as ABOUT FACE. The airstrip was designated as Lima Site 98 or Lima Site 20 Alternate, but was commonly referred to as simply "Alternate" by the aircrews.

There was so much going on in that region of Laos at the time that Air America must have had a bit more business than it could reasonably handle in airlifting Lao troops and CIA operatives into the field of operations on and around the PDJ. Consequently, over a period of several months, a U-10 from



*Dropping leaflets from a Helio U-10 "Super Courier" (French)*

my unit at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, the 606th Special Operations Squadron, was assigned to weekly rotations at Long Chieng. Alongside Air America U-10s and Pilatus "Porters," we airlifted troops and supplies to Vang Pao's forces.

However, our USAF U-10s did provide an added mission capability beyond that normally undertaken by Air America. We were very much

*Sgt Dick Saunders is ready to make a drop of special "psywar" packages over Mounng Soui, Laos, during Operation About Face, September, 1969 (French)*



accustomed to the psychological warfare activity of leaflet dropping. Consequently, the CIA, our "client" at Long Chieng, utilized us accordingly. So, my crew chief, Sgt Dick Saunders, and I departed north-northwest from NKP on September 11, crossed the Mekong River east of Vientiane and headed toward Long Chieng and our first visit to "the world's most secret airbase." We were dressed in civilian clothes rather than the standard USAF flight suits, and our U-10 did not carry USAF markings. We finally spotted the valley in which the town of Long Chieng was half hidden, and part of the hard surface runway appeared in the distance. As we descended and set up our approach, we began to get an eye-popping first look at this incredible outpost. The 3,100 foot runway ran almost due north/south, but a huge, forbidding limestone karst jutted up several hundred feet at the north end of the runway. This meant we had to land north and take-off south regardless of the winds. The valley did open up somewhat to the south, so a reasonably sane approach from that direction could be done. C-123s, C-47s, T-28s, the Ravens' O-1s, as well as the more agile Porters and Helios routinely operated

out of Long Chieng.

Dick Saunders and I parked our U-10 near similar birds on the ramp, unloaded our personal gear and headed up the hill to the CIA headquarters. We were met by a fellow who was expecting us and who introduced himself only by his first name. He seemed to know a heck of a lot about us, though. Long Chieng was instantly proving to be quite an intriguing place to be assigned, though out in the middle of nowhere — definitely on the “back side of the moon!” Adjoining the patio outside the CIA offices was a cage holding two Asian bears, of all things. They were quite entertaining, and they thrived on beer.

After hastily stowing our gear in the quarters provided near the CIA offices we got a mission briefing from our “handler.” He explained the progress of OPERATION ABOUT FACE and that the key town of Moung Soui was currently in NVA hands. In addition to transporting personnel we would be tasked with “psywar” drops over contested locations, including Moung Soui. The CIA was determined to lure defectors from the other side and to gain intelligence of benefit to Vang Pao’s forces.

So, we launched our first leaflet drop mission that same afternoon and extended the flight to give ourselves a familiarization with the PDJ and surrounding areas.

The following days were filled

with transport missions into various Lima Sites (small airstrips located throughout Laos). My logbook indicates six round trips between Long Chieng and LS-9, Lat Houang, in one day. We hauled all manner of war related cargo and people, American and Lao, back and forth. One of those sorties involved quickly loading the cargo compartment overly-full with battle weary Hmong soldiers for the trip back to “Alternate.” No passenger briefing. No seat belts. Just stack ‘em in and go.

Earlier I mentioned the psywar side of our mission at Long Chieng. Aware of our leaflet dropping experience over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the CIA folks wanted to add this dimension to the ABOUT FACE initiative. They had a supply of simple but rugged transistor radios which were tuned to receive pro-Lao propaganda broadcasts going over the air. We packed several of these radios along with small bags of rice and “free conduct pass” leaflets in large packages to be dropped over Moung Soui and other crucial locations. Later, after Sgt Saunders and I returned to NKP we still had no idea if any defectors had been won over by those unusual drops.

One morning the CIA people tasked us with trying to pinpoint the location of a troublesome foot-bridge being used by the NVA and Communist Pathet Lao soldiers to

cross a small river. So, here we were, instant reconnaissance experts! After navigating to the general area and much searching, Sgt Saunders and I did finally spot this bridge. I snapped some photos of it with my trusty old Nikon, noted the coordinates, and returned to Long Chieng with the information and film. The CIA operatives were pleased to have this, so Sgt Saunders and I felt as if we’d made a small tangible contribution toward the war effort. I assume that bridge soon received an unfriendly visit from a Raven forward air controller (FAC) directing a Royal Lao Air Force T-28, or USAF A-1, to destroy it.

So, there’s a look at USAF U-10 operations in one of the truly remote battle areas in the Southeast Asia War of the late 1960s. Believe me, the memories are still keen after all these years. The experience was unusual and priceless. ☸

*[Lt Col Philip L. French served six years on active duty. Following that he served nearly twenty years as a reservist in the capacity of admissions liaison officer for the USAF Academy and AFROTC. He graduated from Miami University of Ohio and was a two year Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand prior to attending Officer Training School (OTS). He is retired in Washington Court House, Ohio, and pursues competitive rifle shooting as a serious hobby.]*

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