The Quiet One

CIA covert Vietnam War operations described by the authors of the book *Shadow War*; Ken Conboy and James Morrison.

Y 1971, THE elite 34th Squadron of the Republic of China Air Force (RoCAF) had more than a decade of experience at the forefront of clandestine US air operations across Asia. Its involvement reflected a unique symbiosis between Washington and Taipei. The US wanted deniable aircrews for covert projects; Taiwan wanted to harass the People's Republic of China (PRC) from behind an American defensive umbrella. The resultant convergence of interests led to the 34th Squadron's unusual structure and mission; the pilots belonged to the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, but ownership of the aircraft — and ultimate control of their use — was retained by the US Government.

During the early 1960s, the bulk of the squadron's activities centred on the insertion of agent teams into the PRC. By 1964, improved air defences along the mainland led the unit to shift its focus toward *Robin* missions, the codename for patrols along the Chinese coast to collect electronic data on Beijing's radar and anti-aircraft coverage.

In early 1970, the squadron was handed one of its most sensitive assignments to date. Since the mid-1960s, Beijing had been testing its nuclear arsenal in the Lop Nor Desert. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had gone to great lengths to get data on these blasts. In one scheme, it hired a US mountaineering team to place a sensor on the Indian side of the Himalayas. Another time, the Agency flew a scientist from a guerrilla outpost in Laos, north to the Chinese frontier to collect air and water samples.

Still, Lop Nor's remote location left Washington largely in the dark. As a solution, US technicians developed a remote sensor that could be dropped from low-flying aircraft. With a hardened tip, it would bury itself in the desert floor. In theory, a string of these sensors around Lop Nor would provide details not available to those peering into China from afar.

While Washington had its sensors, the problem was getting them to Lop Nor. Given ▶

Above: ***The original Quiet One, a modified Hughes OH-6A funded by the US Army's Air Mobility Research and Development Laboratories and later the CIA.*** (via Authors)

the great distances involved, it was decided to use a C-130 modified with extra fuel tanks. The 34th Squadron would provide the crew. Because the RoCAF had no C-130s in its inventory, a contingent from the squadron, led by the squadron commander, went to the US in early 1970 for conversion training.

Sent to the US Air Force's secret Area 51 testing range in Nevada, the experienced RoCAF pilots quickly took to the new plane. To prepare themselves for the long flight, the crew conducted wide orbits along the Pacific coast by night. Once deemed mission-ready, they headed back for Taiwan.

By that time, formidable air defences along the PRC coast made frontal penetrations suicidal. Seeking entry through the back door, the crew shuttled down to Takhli Royal Thai AFB. Heading north from Thailand, the C-130 was able to steal into China undetected. As planned, the sensors were dropped around Lop Nor and the crew retraced its steps without complications.

While a second C-130 mission was scrubbed — improved spy satellites negated the need for ground sensors — the Lop Nor operation once more underscored the abilities of the squadron. It was these special abilities — plus their deniable status — which made them the logical choice for a new CIA project involving the de Havilland DHC-6 Twin Otter.

At first glance, the DHC-6 looked an unlikely candidate for clandestine operations. Readily available on the commercial market, it was used by small airlines for short hauls with up to 20 passengers. But more than its seat configuration, the CIA liked its impressive short take-off and landing (STOL) capability, enabling the Twin Otter to squeeze into crude jungle airstrips. Moreover, the agency had outfitted one airframe with a Teledyne LORAN C prototype, giving it long-range navigational ability accurate to within 26ft (8m). With covert operations in mind, nine members of the 34th Squadron ventured to Area 51 in early 1971 for three months of DHC-6 conversion training. While the crew was never told, they assumed they were being preened for missions into the PRC.

In May, the contingent returned to Taiwan. Arriving too, was the LORAN-equipped Twin Otter along with a single instructor from the CIA's Air America proprietary airline. After a perfunctory check-out, they flew the plane to southern Laos and landed at a guerrilla base codenamed PS 44 (Pakse Site 44). Located just 16 miles (26km) north of the town of Pakse, PS 44 was isolated in a world all its own. In the words of one senior CIA official:

"The terrain around PS 44 was like a truncated ice cream cone with a single goat trail to the top. The ground consisted of shale with a thin layer of soil. When the rains came, the whole place came into blossom like Arizona."

With the limited security afforded by its geography, the CIA turned PS 44 into perhaps its most sensitive base in Laos. Already home to a contingent of CIA-sponsored Lao commandos, simple living quarters — dubbed 'The Hotel' — were built for the Taiwanese aircrew. In addition, a hangar was constructed for the Twin Otter.

Immediately, the Chinese were put to work. To acclimatise them to their new surroundings, they were initially tasked with flying supply drops during daylight hours. According to the head of the contingent, Chuang-wen Yu:

"We did missions across Laos. Some were up near the North Vietnamese border, where the mountains were beautiful; they reminded me of my home in Guangxi province. None of the missions were too difficult. Compared to mainland penetrations and the *Robin* flights, Laos was easy."

Greater challenges were on the immediate horizon. With the pinpoint accuracy afforded by the LORAN C, the CIA wanted to use the Twin Otter in conjunction with its elite Lao commando force. Initially, these missions were conducted inside the Lao border by Air America crews. On July 25, for instance, a US-piloted DHC-6 was used as an airborne relay link during a dusk raider insert near

Above: *Pilots and senior officers from the RoCAF 34th Squadron pose with Air America instructors during rotary-wing conversion training, May 1971.* (Chuang-wen Yu)

Dien Bien Phu, the infamous valley located just inside the North Vietnamese frontier. As the Twin Otter orbited overhead with a CIA case officer aboard, two Air America choppers approached the border to deposit their commandos. When groundfire damaged one of the helicopters, the Twin Otter turned on all its lights and helped vector the injured craft toward a successful emergency landing at Luang Prabang.

Shortly thereafter, the CIA drew up plans for a more ambitious raider mission into the North Vietnamese panhandle. This time, the commandos would parachute from a Twin Otter with 81mm mortars and improved white phosphorus rounds. Unlike previous strikes, this insertion would be well inside North Vietnam, placing the commandos close to their target, a surface-to-air missile site. Given the need for deniability in the event of a shootdown, the aircrew would be Taiwanese.

After several weeks of training, the raiders were ready. Their case officer, Tom Poole, remembers:

"We did night jumps at Phitsanulok [in Thailand], and more when we got back to Laos. There was lots of money spent in preparation, but the mission never happened. It was aborted at the last minute. No reason was given."

Cancellation of the missile site attack did not spell the end to RoCAF involvement with the Twin Otter. For the remainder of 1971, Taiwanese crews rotated through PS 44 on one-month tours. Then early the following year, a second Twin Otter arrived, this one modified with a sophisticated APQ-115 terrain-following radar taken off an F-111 jet. It was this plane, flying with a Chinese crew, that was slated to participate in the most secret operation of the entire Vietnam War.

With a potential ceasefire only months

Left: *After transition training on an Air America UH-1, six Taiwanese 34th Squadron crewmen were trained on a single ex-Air America S-58T in Nationalist Chinese markings in late 1971.*
Below: *With the Vinh wiretap in mind, the Taiwanese crew practised sling loading a wooden mock-up of* The Quiet One *in the event of an emergency lift from North Vietnam.* (Photos via Authors)

down the road, the CIA in early 1972 was placing strong emphasis on installing wire taps to maintain a steady intelligence feed following the imminent departure of US forces from the IndoChinese battlefield.

Listening in on phone traffic was not new to the Vietnam War. Since 1966, taps into North Vietnamese phone lines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, by both American-led and indigenous reconnaissance teams, had regularly yielded useful tactical information. By 1971, these taps were reaching new levels of sophistication. Using voice-activated devices — part of a technology codenamed *Threshold* — conversations were now directly relayed to orbiting planes or helicopters.

The North Vietnamese no doubt realised their conversations were vulnerable. Sensitive information, therefore, was often passed via other means, such as couriers. North Vietnamese patrols, moreover, frequently examined telephone lines for signs of tampering.

Deep inside their own borders, however, Hanoi's precautions slackened. So when overhead imagery in 1971 pinpointed an elevated multiplex trunk line 15 miles (24km) southeast of Vinh, analysts labelled it an intelligence coup waiting to happen.

Installing a tap that far inside North Vietnam was easier said than done; nothing like it had been attempted before. The target itself was relatively isolated from villages and roads. But any CIA infiltration to the line from Laos would have to bypass ground and air defences that covered the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In addition, all the choppers in the current Air America inventory were deemed too slow and loud — and vulnerable to interception by the four MiG-21 jet fighters stationed at Vinh air base. Something more silent and less visible was needed. Enter *The Quiet One*.

Above: *Senior officers from the RoCAF headquarters and 34th Squadron inspect the advanced avionics on a Hughes 500P shortly after it arrived in Taiwan in late 1971.* (Chuang-wen Yu)

The Quiet One, as it was officially dubbed by its Hughes manufacturers, began life as a Pentagon-funded programme under the US Army's Air Mobility Research and Development Laboratories. The Army's quest was to lower the sound signature produced by a helicopter's whirling blades, often detectable several miles away. "The most effective way to silence a large piece of rotating machinery is to turn it off," said scientists from the Aircraft Division of Hughes Tool Company, the company contracted into the programme in 1970. "Obviously we can't go that far and still have a flying machine, so we did the next best thing and slowed everything down."

To slow their experimental chopper, Hughes began with the base frame from its OH-6A light observation helicopter. Adding one extra main rotor and two extra tail blades, the necessary lift and thrust were maintained at substantially lower revolutions per minute. A muffler was added to stifle the roar of jet engine exhaust, and the entire powerplant was wrapped in a cocoon of sound-blanketing material to absorb stray engine noises. The engine air intake was similarly treated with soundproofing materials, and the airflow was redirected to prevent transmission of the jet engine's characteristic compressor whine. Even the tips of the main rotor blades were reshaped to reduce the severity of tip vortex phenomenon, a kind of whirlwind generated by the blades that is a major contributor to helicopter noise output.

On April 8, 1971, Hughes officially unveiled *The Quiet One* to the public. It truly lived up to its name. During a demonstration to the press, a standard OH-6A passed overhead at 100ft (31m); its rotor noise was detectable when it got to within 1½ miles (2.4km) and could still be heard nearly 1 mile (1.6km) after it passed.

By contrast, *The Quiet One's* noise could not be detected until it was within 912ft (278m) and receded just as quickly. At 500ft (153m) overhead, it could not be heard in a quiet residential neighbourhood. Moreover, even though the pilot was able to reduce engine and rotor levels to as little as 67% of normal in-flight levels, the extra blades allowed for an additional 600lb (272kg) increase in payload lift and 20kts higher airspeed.

The Department of Defense dropped funding for the modified OH-6A after the first prototype was built. But with its obvious potential for clandestine infiltrations, the CIA quietly took over the tab. Beginning with the modifications already on *The Quiet One*, further state-of-the-art changes were made. To add strength, the five main rotor blades were fed into a special titanium hub. Then the powerplant was improved with a better transmission and a special water-alcohol injection system that lowered engine temperature, allowing the chopper to pull more power for take-off. Because of anticipated higher payloads, a lower, reinforced skid was added. Four different optional fibreglass fuel tanks were fitted in the backseat to increase range.

On either side of the helicopter, short struts supported two aerodynamic pods. One housed an Inertial Navigation System (INS), a navigation device using gyros, accelerometers and a computer to track both desired and actual path. A LORAN C, more accurate than the INS, went in the other pod. Wrapped under the cockpit chin was an AN/AAQ-5 forward-looking infra-red (FLIR) system. Hooked to a pair of liquid nitrogen tanks fixed to the belly, supercooled FLIR sensors measured minute differences in temperature by reading electromagnetic radiation emanating off the landscape; this was translated onto two television screens — one for the pilot, the other for the co-pilot — as a clear thermal image. Infra-red spotlights were affixed to the skids and frame to enhance the performance of night vision goggles (NVG) to be worn by the crew.

On April 28, 1971, only three weeks after Hughes had unveiled *The Quiet One*, two pilots were hired by Air America to begin an intensive familiarisation programme with the CIA's new rotary-wing acquisition; a third pilot was later added to the programme. All three had extensive US Army experience as either instructors or in low-level night flying. For the next two months they became proficient with SU-50 night goggles and the FLIR system while flying nap-of-the-earth (NOE) practice flights around Area 51 in Nevada.

In July, the three OH-6A pilots flew to Tainan, Air America's main base of operations on Taiwan. There they met up with a contingent of 12 fixed-wing pilots from the 34th Squadron that had been undergoing rotary-wing training since April. The three Americans were designated as instructors for six of the Taiwanese; the other six ROC students would be coached by two more Air America instructors on the S-58T, a new and enhanced version of the H-34 that sported a pair of turboshaft powerplants.

High in seniority yet short on experience, the six OH-6A students were initially transitioned on the Hughes 500, its civilian counterpart. Three months later, two modified versions (the CIA had built a second prototype) were secretly flown to Tainan. Unofficially dubbed the Hughes 500P, both airframes were used for training through the spring of 1972. By that time, however, the US instructors were voicing major reservations about the ability of the Chinese to operate the sophisticated aircraft. Of additional concern was the fact that the senior liaison officer, Lt Col W H Lu, insisted on flying the Hughes even though he was supposed to only handle administrative duties.

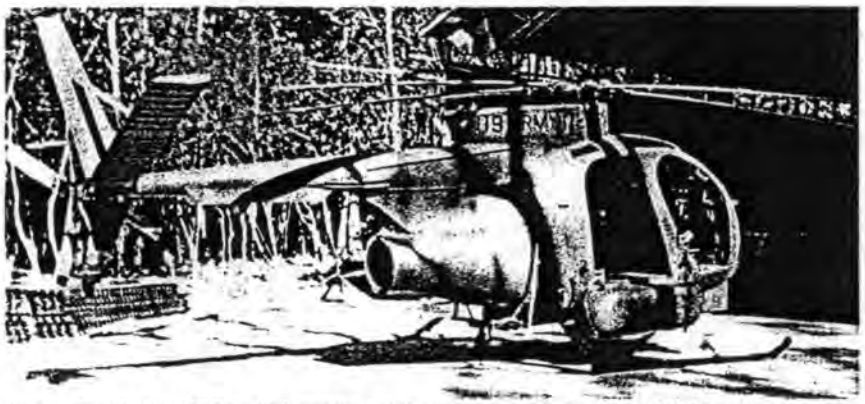
In April 1972, in an attempt to provide cover for the modified choppers that would soon be arriving, two unmodified Hughes 500s were sent to Udorn Royal Thai AFB, assigned to Air America and began flying supply and medical evacuation missions in Laos.

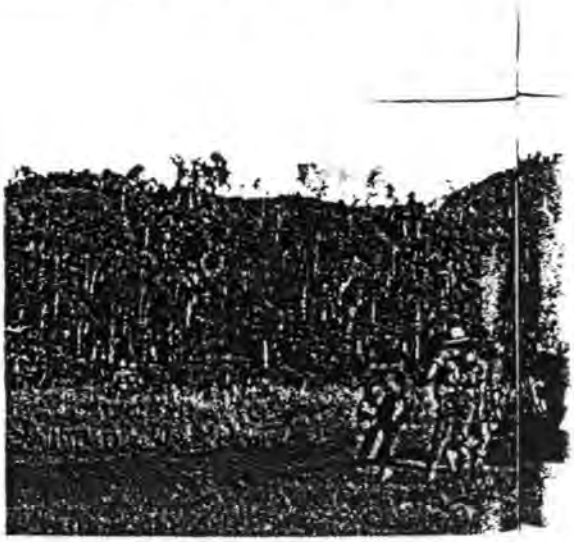
Two months later, the two Hughes 500Ps had their main rotors removed and were loaded into a single Air America C-130 transport. Flown directly to the isolation area at Takhli Royal Thai AFB, they were reassembled and shuttled to PS 44. Already at the site were the Taiwanese crews for the S-58T and the Twin Otter.

Soon after, the Chinese Hughes 500P cadre arrived with orders to prepare for a single mission — infiltrating a Lao commando team near Vinh to plant a tap on the phone lines identified a year earlier. In support, a Twin Otter would act as an airborne relay post, while a pair of S-58T choppers would orbit along the Annamites as a rescue contingency force, in case the Hughes was downed inside North Vietnam. All of the aircraft would be piloted by Taiwanese to afford Washington deniability.

To increase proficiency in night flying, the Hughes 500P pilots began nightly mission profiles along stream beds near PS 44. Within a month, however, pilot error claimed one of the two modified choppers as it landed hard in front of the hangar. While problems with the night-vision goggles were blamed, the accident compounded lingering reservations about the Chinese's ability to handle the aircraft. Given the heavy investment in the programme, the need for success now over-rode concerns for deniability. As a result, the six Chinese were repatriated to Taiwan in early September. Repatriated, too, were the S-58T and Twin Otter crews. With the Chinese gone, two of the original three Air America instructors were informed that they would together fly the modified Hughes to Vinh. On September 28, the two pilots moved back to PS 44. Arriving, too, was James Glerum. Since 1968, Glerum had been deputy chief at the CIA's headquarters in northeastern Thailand that oversaw paramilitary operations in Laos. Scheduled to rotate home, he instead had his tour extended and was sent to PS 44. There, he was named overall manager for the unfolding Vinh operation. As he remembers it:

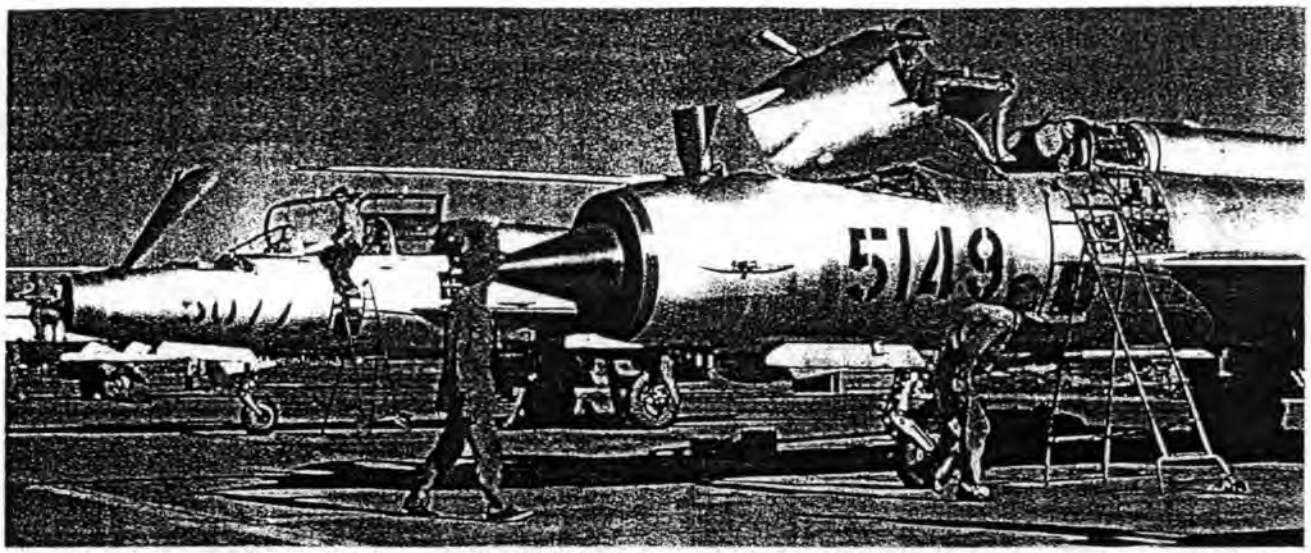
"The group at PS 44 was an entertaining mix of aircrews, technicians, air operations officers and paramilitary specialists. Except for the latter, most had never lived and





Above: ***The Hughes 500P which conducted the mission to Vinh seen at PS 44 in December 1972, with US Army markings and serial number painted over to give cover in the event of being shot down.*** (via Authors)

Right: ***An Air America S-58T in Laos in 1972. Two of Air America's S-58Ts, upgraded H-34s, accompanied the Hughes 500P on the Vinh wiretap mission.*** (Hugh Tovar)



Above: ***North Vietnamese MiG-21*** **Fishbeds** ***were stationed at Vinh Air Base only 15 miles (24km) from the multiplex trunk line tapped by the CIA.*** (Frank Rozendaal)

worked under such primitive conditions and had to make some significant adjustments. Although the site's terrain gave us fair security, there was nothing to the north or east between us and the North Vietnamese Army. After trying for a week to organise a workable defence and evasion plan, I gave up hope and kept an S-58T nightly on the landing zone near our quarters, hoping we could get everyone on board if something unpleasant happened."

With an all-American aviation cast, the Hughes 500P pilots began nightly profiles. A handful of practice flights later, they were pronounced ready to launch the operation. All that remained was the weather. For such a mission, optimal lunar and weather conditions were a quarter moon with slight overcast. This would permit enough moon and starlight for the night goggles without backlighting the chopper's silhouette from the ground. The moon phases could be predicted; the weather, however, could not be forecast with the same degree of accuracy.

As the pilots waited for the right conditions, rehearsals were being held by a pair of Lao commandos selected to place the tap. They were two of the best raiders available; one had been sole survivor of a team ambushed earlier on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Their training initially centred on how they would exit the hovering chopper. First, they practised parachuting from the back of the Hughes, only to find there was insufficient clearance from the tail rotor. Then they tested a mini-Sky Genie (a one-time friction device developed by US smoke jumpers). Both these methods were dropped in favour of a rolled ladder fixed out the back door.

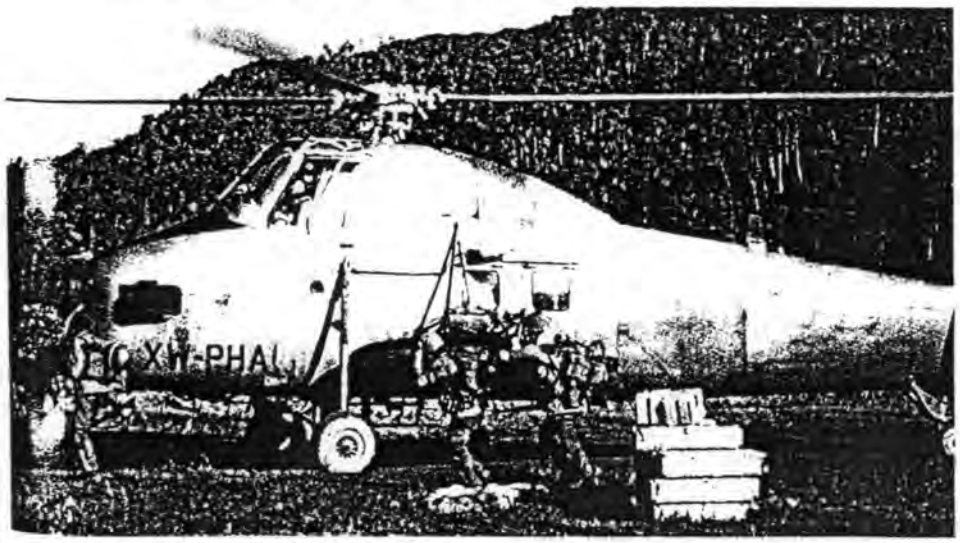
Once the method of exit was selected, the commandos practised descending the ladder, then scaling a mock telephone pole erected along a lotus-framed stream bed northeast of PS 44. Because the Vinh line was in the midst of a forest, the CIA assumed the pole was constructed of local wood. Using a tap hidden inside a glass insulator stolen from downtown Vientiane, the commandos used an industrial stapler to attach it to the top of the pole.

By mid-October, the monsoons in the North Vietnamese panhandle were drawing to a close. There would be a quarter-moon the third week of the month, providing a narrow window of opportunity. Before the mission could be run, however, one last preparation was necessary. Unlike the early taps used on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it would be too dangerous for teams to go back to retrieve tapes. And unlike the *Threshold* taps introduced in 1971, an orbiting aircraft could not be expected to overfly Vinh to record transmissions.

For the North Vietnam tap, therefore, the transmissions in Vinh had to go all the way back to collection facilities at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB. This necessitated placing a pair of relays to boost the tap's signal. One of them, a 'spider relay' that resembled a 6ft 5in (2m), solar-powered, olive flower petal, would be slung under the Hughes 500P during infiltration and deployed on a hill overlooking the tap. A second, larger relay had been carried by an S-58T during the second week of October and deployed during daylight hours atop a peak 45 miles (72km) northeast of Thakhek, a riverside town at the top of the Lao panhandle.

Just when all looked set, 'Murphy's Law' intervened. On the night before the scheduled launch, the lead pole climber was bitten by a scorpion and had an allergic reaction. "Although disappointed," recounted Glerum, "I did enjoy writing the cable to headquarters on that event."

After a quick recovery, the commandos were again ready. On the night of October 21, the weather was co-operating to the fullest: quarter-moon, a sprinkling of stars, a pale wash of clouds. Final clearance was given from Vientiane and the Hughes flew from PS 44 to Thakhek. There it landed in a remote corner of the town's airstrip and waited, as a Twin Otter acting as airborne command post took up an orbit to the east. At midnight, the chopper lifted off and headed toward the Annamites. Five minutes later, the crew returned to Thakhek. The FLIR had malfunctioned, and the mission was scrubbed.



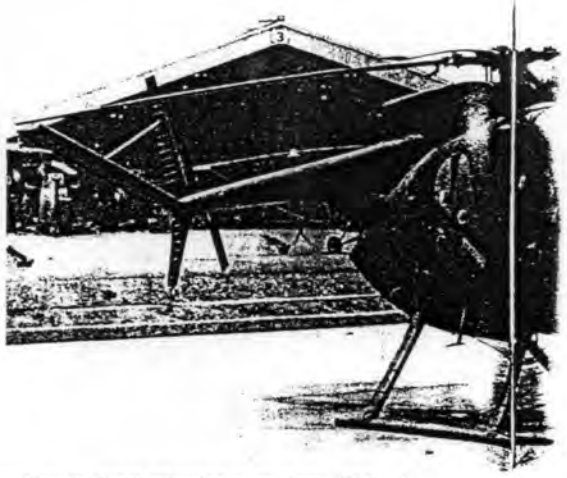
Five days later, the moon and weather allowed for another attempt. Again, the FLIR broke down after take-off from Thakhek. Three weeks later, the temperamental FLIR forced a third abort. Technicians were then called in to give the infra-red system a thorough overhaul; they pronounced it in good working order.

With frustration mounting, the Hughes flew in darkness to Thakhek during the last week of November. The weather was co-operating, and so was the FLIR. Lifting silently from Thakhek, the chopper flew the one-hour trek deep into North Vietnam without incident. But after the LORAN guided it into the target valley, the helicopter met a solid sheet of fog. The night vision goggles useless, the crew had no choice but to abort the mission for a fourth time.

In Paris, meanwhile, US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger arrived on December 4 to attend a critical phase in the peace talks with North Vietnamese leader Le Duc Tho. Their negotiations fast coming to a head, pressure was mounting for the CIA to get the Vinh tap in place so that it might yield advantages during Kissinger's deliberations. While headquarters might have been feeling the pressure, those at PS 44 retained an air of calm. After pouring over high-resolution aerial photography for weeks, the Hughes crew was certain they could get to target and back. Said one of the pilots, "I knew every hill, every stream, every rock on the way to the target." Project manager Glerum, too, held few doubts:

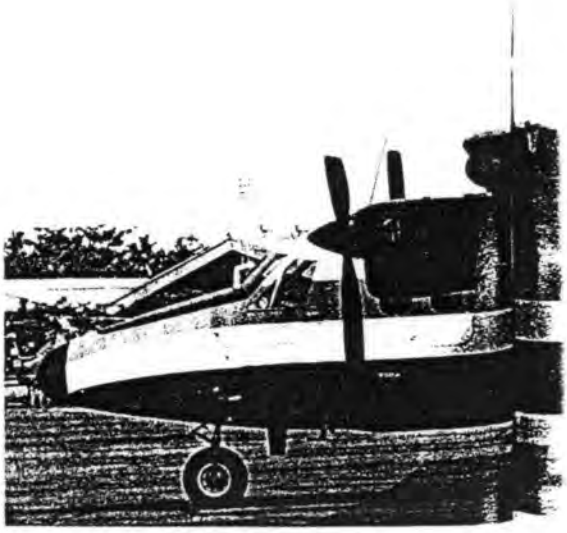
"I have never been more confident of a mission. I sat in the back during a few of the training runs, and I was in awe over their proficiency. It was a good plan, and I thought it would succeed as soon as the weather co-operated. Any request for assistance was honoured immediately, regardless of cost or effort involved."

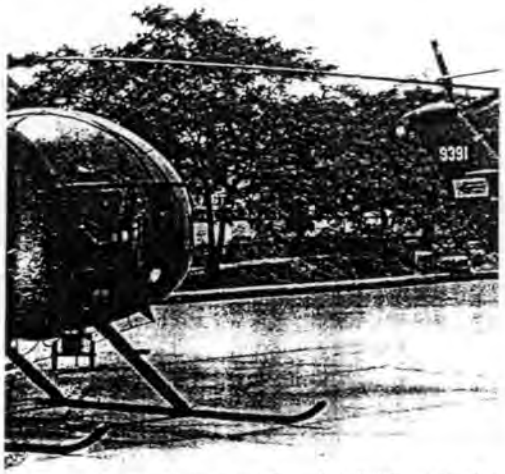
An example of such assistance came on December 6 when the US military conducted an extensive round of bombing to the north and south of Vinh. A few days earlier, the November 1968 bombing restrictions had been temporarily lifted in order to increase pressure on North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris. With the next Hughes infiltration attempt scheduled for later that day, the Pentagon discreetly re-routed some of the strikes to divert attention away from Vinh. A total of 90 sorties were flown by the US Navy, as well as multiple B-52 bombing runs across Quang Binh province.



That night, the weather was good. The Lao commandos, AK-47s strapped across their backs and each carrying a sack with the taps, boarded the rear of the chopper. For the fifth time, the crew flew to Thakhek and refuelled.

After typing the mission co-ordinates into the LORAN keyboard, the Hughes took off at midnight. Heading northeast, it flew at an altitude of 200ft (62m). Thirty miles (48km) outside Thakhek, the terrain levelled out. The crew increased speed and lowered to 100ft (31m) as it overflew known North Vietnamese anti-aircraft positions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. No shots were fired. Ten miles (16km) later, the valley gave way to the foothills of the Annamites. The crew members continued terrain-following but were forced to lower their speed as they climbed the 7,110ft (2,167m) tall range. Out to the right, the pilot peered down on the occasional rice paddy layered up the narrow mountain valleys. The landscape fluoresced pale green in his night goggles.





Left: *One of the two unmodified Hughes 500 choppers assigned to Air America in 1972 to provide cover for the 500P.*
Below: *For comparison, a head-on view of the Hughes 500P at PS 44 showing the aerodynamic pods and chin-mounted FLIR system.*

Peasants were working the fields under the safety of darkness; failing to associate the Hughes 500P's muffled rotor beat with that of a helicopter, none of them stirred as the chopper passed.

Following behind the Hughes, two US-piloted S-58Ts filed through Thakhek and headed for the Annamites. At the crest, they entered long racetrack orbits, preparing to act as rescue aircraft in the event the infiltration chopper was downed.

The Hughes 500P, meanwhile, picked up speed going down the east side of the mountains. Weaving into North Vietnam, the co-pilot studied the LORAN readout and called directions until they were about 1¼ miles (2km) from the target. Then the pilot banked slightly, studying the terrain through his goggles until he made a visual identification of landmarks memorised from the reconnaissance photographs. The co-pilot at that point donned a second pair of goggles as the pilot approached a clearing. The clearing was, in fact, a fresh bomb crater that — given its proximity to a nearby bridge — appeared to be the result of poor aiming; actually, the bomb had been intentionally diverted for the express purpose of clearing a landing zone for that mission.

As the chopper edged into it, the clearing was found to be large enough to accommodate the Hughes without having to use the ladder. Adjusting their assault rifles across their backs, the commandos jumped from the hovering aircraft (all doors had been removed to improve visibility and lower gross weight). In seconds, the chopper was gone and the landing zone was silent.

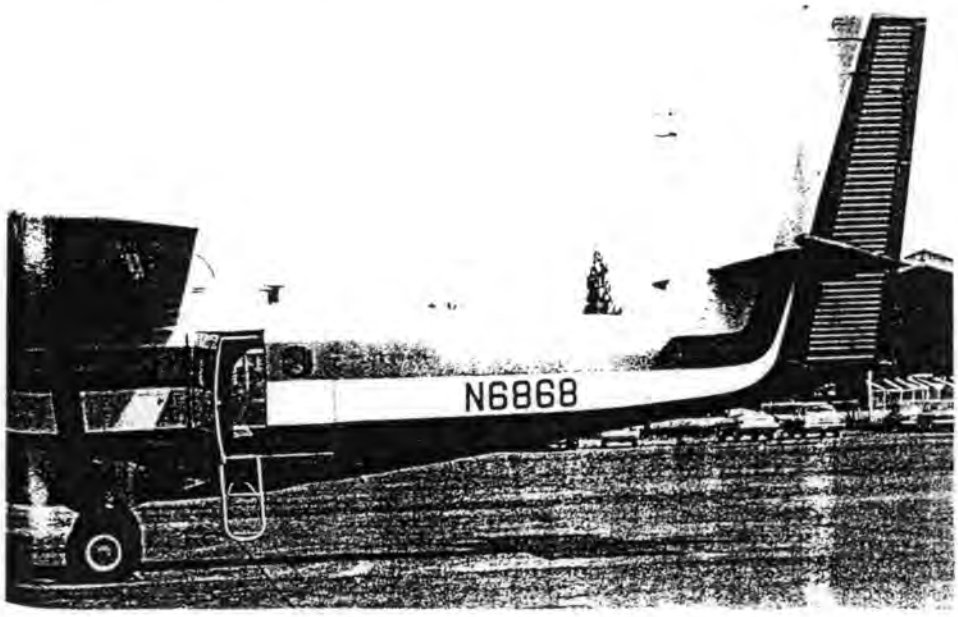
Climbing a 1,115ft (340m) mountain to the west, the crew searched for a suitable spot atop the trees to place their underslung spider relay. Hovering above the foliage, the pilot hit a switch with his left hand. One of three restraining cables holding the relay was cut by a squib charge, unfolding the device like an ironing board. Throwing a second switch, the device opened its solar petals. Orienting the relay toward Nakhon Phanom, the pilot threw the last switch, dropping the relay onto the trees. There it remained suspended, perfectly camouflaged.

That accomplished, the crew moved off the hill and found a dry stream bed nearby. Ordered to wait 20 minutes before returning for the commandos, the pilot settled the aircraft onto the rocks. Inadvertently, a sharp boulder lanced the chopper's underbelly, piercing a liquid nitrogen tank and disabling the vital FLIR for the return journey. Worse, a radar detector fixed on the top of the cockpit (set to scan for radar-controlled guns or marauding MiGs) began screaming; nervous, the pilot turned it off.

For their part, the commandos quickly located the telephone pole. The pole, however, was made of cement — not wood as expected — rendering their stapler useless. Compounding matters, when the two taps were affixed with tape, the commandos accidentally placed both on the same line, an error that would later cause some static as the phone conversations were relayed west. Once the taps were in place, they retraced their steps to the landing zone. Exactly 20 minutes later, the Hughes returned, picked them up without incident, and flew for one hour directly back to Nakhon Phanom. On December 7, the day after the taps were on the line, the North Vietnamese delegation to the Paris talks grew intransigent. Hopelessly deadlocked, President Nixon 11 days later launched *Linebacker II*, a massive increase in the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. After 12 days, the *Linebacker* onslaught forced Hanoi back to the negotiating table with an apparent change of heart.

By that time, Kissinger had a secret ace up his sleeve — the Vinh tap was providing a stream of information from inside the North. Kissinger, for example, knew when his North Vietnamese counterparts were lying about their troop movements into South Vietnam. He also knew their candid reactions to *Linebacker II*. Functioning through the peace negotiations — signed on January 23, 1973 — and Kissinger's subsequent February visit to Hanoi, the tap offered invaluable insights into Hanoi's mindset during the final days of the Vietnam War. AFM

Conboy and Morrison are authors of *Shadow War; The CIA's Secret War in Laos* published by Paladin Press.



Left: *One of two Air America Twin Otters equipped with an APQ-115 terrain-following radar from an F-111, which acted as an airborne command post during the Vinh wiretap.* (Photos via Authors)