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Nakhon Phanom During The Secret War 1962-1975

21st SOS Over The Fence



Mission Inside Laos



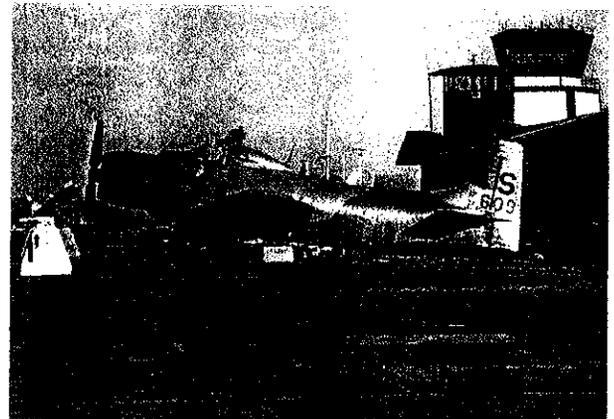


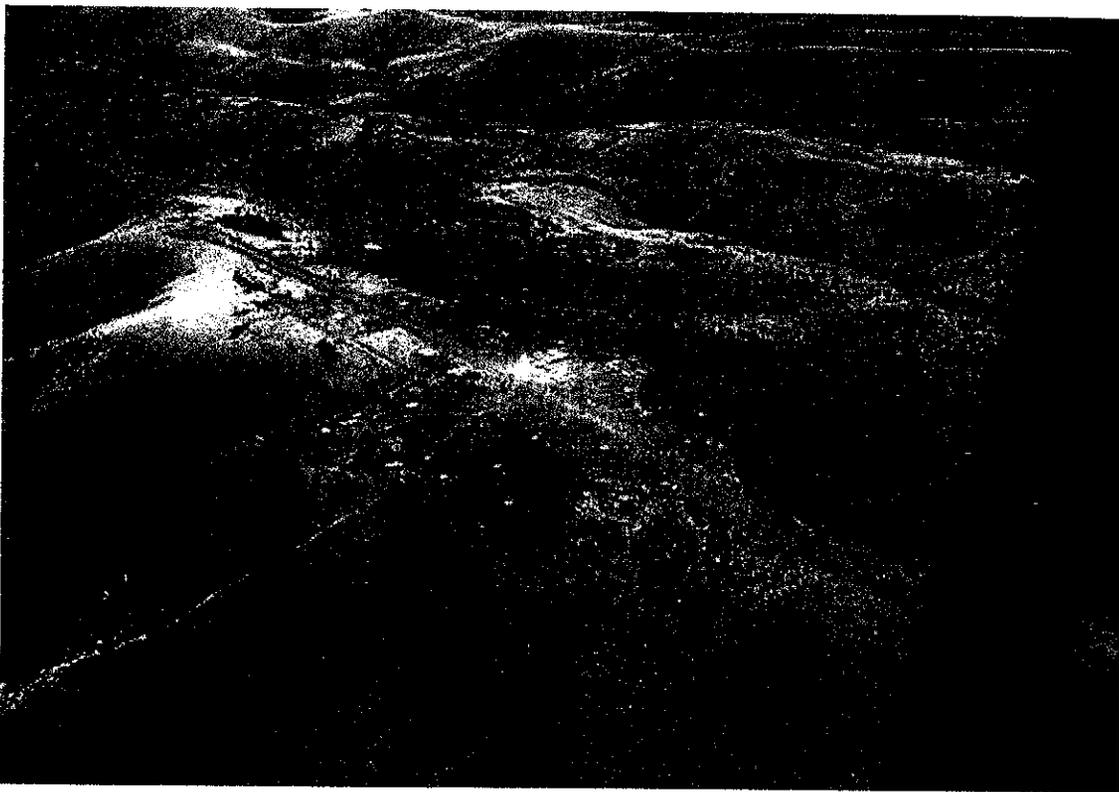
Lima Site 20A - Long Tieng, Laos, 1969. 21st SOS CH-3E has just landed on runway. Lao T-28s and Air America aircraft are on the ramp at right.



Bob Arnau, 21st SOS, next to 22nd SOS A-1H, #TS609 "The Bad News" shot down on the Plain De Jars, Laos

"The Bad News", A-1H #TS609 at Nakhon Phanom after recovery and repair.





Lima site on Bolovens Plateau.

After infil, the team immediately departed the LZ to evade any NVA troops who had heard the helicopters. In theory, the team was to be picked up at another predetermined LZ a few days later. However, "normal ex-fils" were rarely made.

Large numbers of NVA troops defended the areas of Laos along the Trail. In gathering the intelligence that they had come for, the teams would soon encounter the NVA. Nearly all extractions were emergency ex-fils with the teams being under fire. The Special Forces men that served with MACSOG were as brave as they come!

The emergency ex-fils were something else! Usually the team would have been in a running firefight throughout the night and we launched ASAP in the morning. Flying to their location, you would listen to the Nail FAC with Heavy Hook rider directing air strikes around the team. It sometimes sounded like the entire air strike capability in SEA was being used to keep the NVA off the team. This raised the "pucker factor" several notches enroute.

On arrival at the location, the Nail would lead us into the team's approximate position and the team would pop smoke ---predetermined color so the NVA couldn't lure us into a trap. Rarely, was the team able to get to a clear spot during the emergency ex-fils so the jungle penetrator had to be used. Fortunately, we had the CH-3E's with the door mounted hoist motor and not the cabin hoist "jury rigged" with pulleys found on the older models. As you hovered near the smoke, the FE, had to spot the team through the trees, then "talk you" to a position over them and guide the penetrator down through the trees. An important job made more interesting for the FE by having to continuously lean out of the door of a helicopter that people are shooting at!

While hovering in the treetops, it seemed like it took that cable at least a half-hour to

make one trip down and back up and it usually took three cycles to get the six men with their equipment. (If it seemed that long from the air, it must have seemed a helluva lot longer to the guys on the ground!! Again, I can't praise the guts of those SOG team members enough!)



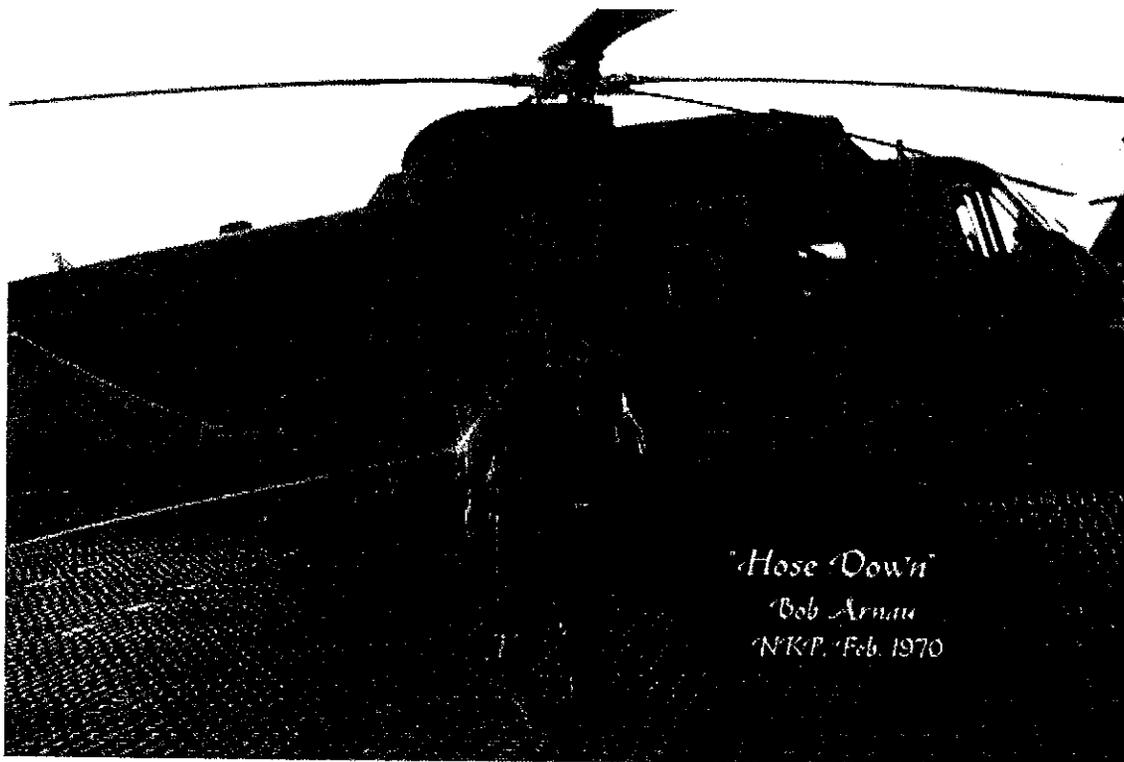
Thai troops at Long Tieng after evacuation from Moung Soui.

On one emergency ex-fil, the team had been in a running battle and was on a steep karst ridgeline when we got to them. The ridge was so narrow and steep that the only way I could get them was by putting the nose gear of the CH-3 on the ridge with the main gear out in space. In essence, I was hovering with the nose gear on the ridge. The real problem was that it was turbulent as hell and the helicopter was bucking like a mule.

I still have a very vivid image in my memory of the team coming out of the high elephant grass into the area where the grass was flattened by the downwash. Two of the team members were dragging the body of a teammate. The helicopter was pitching so badly, they had a tough time getting the body on board. As I recall, of that six-man team, one was killed and two wounded.

In the summer of '69, we had a big turnover of people and lost most of our crewmembers with Prairie Fire experience from the previous dry season. By October, we were down to only four qualified "low / lead" aircraft commanders. Then on October 6th, one of those, Phil Conran, was shotdown and wounded in the ensuing ground battle when we lost two helicopters in a "trap" on a 7/13 AF-DOSA mission on the Bolivens Plateau in Laos. That left three of us (low / leads) making it a very interesting October and November!

In summary, "Prairie Fire" was a Special Forces mission in which we (21st SOS - "Knives) played a small but important part. I am very proud that our squadron did not lose a team that we inserted during my tenure. (Primarily due to the teams' warrior skills but our guys always "hacked" the emergency exfils!)



Bob Arnau's "hosedown" (last combat mission") Feb 1970.

Bob was the pilot who delivered Santa Claus via Jolly Green to the children at Thare Orphanage during "Operation Thare" in December 1969. Less than one hundred Americans were present on that day. What a wonderful experience when we located each other after so many years! Bob is a fellow charter member of the Thailand Laos Cambodia Brotherhood and has graciously provided the text and pictures for the 21st SOS pages. Thank You Bob - Welcome Home Brother!!

Jim Henthorn's 21 SOS Web Site