

AIR AMERICA, INC.  
PRELIMINARY REPORT OF AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT  
C-123K, 57-6293  
NEAR BAN HONG SA (LS-62), LAOS  
27 DECEMBER 1971

Version  
(Redacted)

18 February 1972

A. SYNOPSIS

On 27 December 1971, Air America, Inc. C-123K, 57-6293 crewed by PIC G. L. Ritter, F/O R. F. Townley, AFS E. J. Weissenback, [REDACTED] disappeared while on a cargo flight to Ban Xieng Lon (LS-69), Laos. No reliable information has been received since of either aircrew or aircraft and it must be presumed both are lost.

B. INVESTIGATION

1.1 History of Flight

Between 0615L<sup>1/</sup> and 0630 on 27 December 1971 the flight crew for C-123K, 57-6293, consisting of PIC G. L. Ritter, F/O. R. F. Townley, AFS E. J. Weissenback, [REDACTED] reported to the Air America, Inc. Flight Operations Section at Udorn RTAFB for briefing. The early briefing was required since 293 needed a Functional Check Flight (FCF) prior to release for operations. The right propeller had been changed on 26 December 1971 and the aircraft required an FCF.

The crew was briefed that they would work out of Peppergrinder (PPG) after the FCF. PPG work primarily consists of loading and dispatching mixed ordnance for up-country sites.

The Senior Operations Specialist, Mr. E. J. Wilson, in the Flight Information Center (FIC/UTH) was able to ascertain that he personally

<sup>1/</sup> All times herein, unless otherwise noted, are local based on the 24-hour clock.

had briefed the aircrew and believes the briefing was actually given to the PIC, Captain Ritter. The briefing was general and covered the normal PPG missions. It included the current tactical situation at 4 to 5 major airfields and some 2 to 3 commonly used Drop Zones (DZs). The situation in the LS-69 area was included since this was a frequent destination for PPG flights. Captain Ritter should have been familiar with the tactical situation near LS-69 since he had flown the same route on 25 December 1971, some two days prior to the mishap. A general briefing was necessitated since the actual destination would not be known until assigned by PPG. The aircrew acknowledged the briefing and was duly signed off on the daily flight schedule (a normal procedure of the PIC briefer).

The aircrew signed for the aircraft/mission and departed to the aircraft. It may be presumed the aircrew reviewed the posted weather, including that of LS-69, prior to departure. Evidently, the ground run was satisfactory and 293 departed T-08 at 0658 for a short FCF, landing at 0722. The aircraft checked normally and the PIC radioed its "OK" condition to the Senior Operations Manager (SOM). He dispatched 293 directly to the PPG. The FCF forms were taken with the aircraft to the PPG - a not infrequent minor discrepancy which probably did not influence the subsequent mishap.

At PPG, the aircraft was loaded with 12,892 pounds of mixed ordnance including 75mm shells, 81mm rounds, 222 caliber small arms ammunition and white phosphorous smoke rounds. This, plus whatever fuel remained from the original 1250 gallon load brought the aircraft close to its maximum allowable weight of 60,000 pounds (see Weight and Balance Section).

1.4 Airfield Information

IS-69 and IS-69A have been combined to one site now called IS-69. It is basically 3,100' x 100' clay/laterite strip with an on-call non-directional beacon. Evidently this beacon was not functioning at 0900 on 27 December 1971. The surrounding terrain, both north and south, is heavily populated with enemy forces.

1.5 Search and Rescue

The Search and Rescue (SAR) effort was conducted out of the VTE station and consisted largely of Air America, Inc. aircraft. A detailed log of search efforts is available at AAM, Inc. VTE if required. For various reasons, the USAF could only offer limited assistance. O-1 and A-1 aircraft did search late the first day but the bulk of their assistance was through radio relay from control aircraft.

With a few breaks due to weather and one false lead from a native claiming to have seen an aircraft, the SAR continued through 5 January 1972. All efforts to find traces of 293 were unsuccessful.

✓ Due to the extreme hostility of the area, several AAM, Inc. aircraft received battle damage while on the SAR. Due to the proximity of the hostile Route 46, the SAR was rather constricted in nature. The final effort consisted of dropping leaflets offering rewards for information and/or the aircrew. The SAR, although late in starting, was as thorough as terrain, the weather and the enemy would permit. Further air search was deemed fruitless after 5 January 1972.

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C. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

2.1 Analysis

Very little of a positive nature can be said of the final flight of 57-6293 since its location is still undetermined. However, from statements of the pilots of other C-123K aircraft, an analysis of weather, the cargo, and the current tactical situation in and around the LS-62/LS-69 area, a reasonable conclusion can be reached.

Based on the computed crosswinds at 8,500 feet, 293's reported altitude, it was likely that 293 was to the right of his desired track enroute out of L-08 and at a higher than normal ground speed. The pilot, Captain Ritter, although supposedly well familiar with the route, was likely flying an inadequate crosswind correction heading in and out of cloud bases. This could have placed him to the right of L-23 and, later, well to the right and beyond LS-62 since no navigational aids were available. A valley, similar to that of LS-62, is present just to the northeast of LS-62 and close to Route 46. An off-track course to the right could have explained Captain Ritter's apparent concern over the weather although both of the other two Captains were flying at the same reported altitude but in relatively good weather conditions. Had Captain Ritter been to the northeast of his reported position at LS-62 and initiated a descending left turn towards LS-69, the enemy reaction over Route 46 would be immediate and violent. Large anti-aircraft guns are only 15 miles north of LS-62. With some 12,892 pounds of ordnance aboard the aircraft, it could well be imagined that no time for radio calls was available. The SAR effort could not be extended into the Route 46 area.

Several other possibilities in the causal areas include maintenance malfunctions, lost, hijack, etc., but all are even more unlikely than enemy action and would probably have precipitated some radio call(s). The likelihood of 293 merely crashing in the weather is a remote possibility if he were well off-track to the right - say with an in-operative heading indicator but, again, some radio calls should have been made. A possibility that 293 blew up from an internal explosion is present but was not considered likely. Flight in and out of clouds while on a visual clearance is an operational requirement and was not, by itself, considered a factor in this mishap.

In summary, although the cause of the disappearance of 293 must be listed as undetermined, the aircraft probably strayed from course and, over exceedingly hostile country, was hit by enemy fire and rapidly destroyed.

## 2.2 Conclusions

### a. Findings

- (1) The crew was properly certificated.
  - (2) The aircraft was generally properly maintained in accordance with Company/Customer procedures and standards.
  - (3) The aircraft was probably correctly loaded and dispatched from PPG.
  - (4) At the time of the flight towards LS-69 the winds were relatively strong and from the southwest.
  - (5) C-12X, 57-6293 became overdue at about 0900 on 27 December 1971.
  - (6) An erroneous report of the aircraft landing at LS-69 misled the Flight Watches into non/late notification of an overdue aircraft.
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