

MEMORANDUM

TO : GML

DATE: 12 October 1964

FROM : ASZVTE

REF. NO.: GML-64-147W

SUBJECT : A Short History of the Flight Information Center

In order to get a proper perspective on the tempest surrounding the Flight Information Center, it might serve to briefly summarize the activities of the FIC from its shaky beginnings to its present questionable state.

On September 5, 1963, C-46 B-150 deliberately or accidentally flew over a hostile area and was shot down. The pilot and co-pilot are presumed dead; five other crew members have been prisoners of the Pathet Lao for over a year.

This incident caused much soul searching on the part of both Company and Customer officials and it was decided that some action should be taken to ensure that aircraft operating in Laos would not fly over known hostile areas if it could be at all avoided.

After much discussion it was decided that a pilot briefing facility was required. It was envisioned that this briefing facility would have all the latest intelligence information at its disposal, would know the location of all the hostile areas in Laos and, therefore, would be able to brief pilots on how to reach their destinations without becoming exposed to enemy ground fire.

This briefing center seemed to be the answer to an Ambassador's dream. One could picture a center staffed with intent, eager young men crammed full of facts and figures on all the enemy held areas, the location of all anti-aircraft guns, etc., etc. They envisioned the pilots at detailed briefings soaking up this knowledge which would save them from being shot down and going out on their flights fully protected from any possible enemy action. The briefing center, one could figure, was the complete answer to the B-150 type incident. Have a briefing center and there would be no further aircraft shot down in Laos.

Accordingly the 342 Contract was amended to include three intelligence types to be known as Operations Specialists to be hired by the Company immediately. Two of these men arrived on the scene shortly after the first of December; were given the best facility then available in the Operations Quonset hut. While all concerned knew about the primary purpose of the Flight Information Center, little was known about what the day-to-day activities of the Center might entail. After some discussion it was felt that the Operations Specialists would report to the ATOG Manager administratively but that they would for the most part define their jobs and responsibilities as they went along. With this view in mind, the Operations Specialists were told "go to it fellows, brief the pilots, and don't let anyone get shot down."

While high Government and Company officials desired this briefing center there were other Customer types working on the scene who did not feel that the Center would serve their purposes. Mr. Frank Daly, then COR on the 342 Contract, was evidently one of these. If the Director of USAID and the Ambassador wanted a briefing center, fine; it did not suit Mr. Daly's purposes and he ignored it as much as he possibly could. It had been his practice in the past to give private briefings to pilots prior to their going up country and he continued this practice long after the inception of the FIC.

The Operations Specialists were thus put in a deplorable situation. They were charged with fully briefing all flight crews on the hazardous situations in Laos and yet they had no information on these hazardous conditions. Mr. Daly was the prime source for this information and he almost completely ignored the Center's activities.

By Company regulation pilots would go to the FIC to be briefed and the Operations Specialists would oblige to the best of their ability, but their information, it was apparent to all, was very scanty and what was available was out of date. Upon completion of the Company required briefing at the FIC, the pilot would go over to the RCP office or meet Frank Daly on the ramp and receive a second briefing which would give them the information on the conditions in the area which should have been given by the FIC.

This method, of course, defeated the whole purpose of the FIC. The pilots knew the Operations Specialists did not know anything, the Operations Specialists knew they did not know anything, Company officials knew they did not know anything, and the whole concept of the FIC was placed in grave jeopardy.

(Much of the attitudes of the Operations Specialists today can be traced back to the frustrations of the dark days of Frank Daly.)

In spite of these handicaps, the Operations Specialists were not satisfied with just drawing a salary and pretending to brief pilots. They are both intelligent, conscientious men who came here to do a job they were sent here to do, and tried their best to do it under very difficult circumstances. They chipped and pushed and shoved and begged and borrowed and by and by little bits of information became available to them. Different sources opened up their files as they became better known. Pilots got more confidence in their ability and became aware of the real concern FIC had for their safety while they were in the air and would, in their debriefings, divulge information they had picked up in their flights - a new gun here, truck convey seen here, etc. As the months went by the situation got better.

In the Spring of 1964, Mr. Earle Jones replaced Mr. Frank Daly at Vientiane. After a brief familiarization period, Mr. Jones "bought" the idea of the Flight Information Center and he "bought" the idea that there should be one Air America source for all flight information and that this one source should be the FIC. He stopped private pilot briefings/debriefings and began to funnel all the information that he felt necessary for proper flight safety to the Operations Specialists. They responded to this in a good manner and worked hard to put this information into the proper form so it could be readily disseminated to the flight crews. Pilots took notice, realized that they were getting thorough briefings and began to cooperate fully.

Other aircraft have been shot down since the arrival of Mr. Jones. Each time, however, the cause was discovered to be that the area wherein the aircraft was operating had been carried by FIC as "friendly" but was known by other Customer sources to be "unfriendly."

The Operations Specialists felt the loss of these aircraft deeply and even felt that they were somewhat responsible that these aircraft had been sent to hostile areas and that FIC were carrying these areas as friendly. Because of this, the Operations Specialists continued to push for more and more information and therein lies the problem in the FIC (and others) intelligence activities. The more information an agency has, the more information it needs to validate and clarify the information it has. Everything, all information, then has some relation to the data which one is trying to gather. Little or small, every piece, every bit, serves to increase and/or confirm the information it already has. The pitfall here, of course, is that one can lose sight of the primary goal, and primary type of information the intelligence unit is trying to collect.

During May 1964, a T-28 group was based at Wattay Airport and some U. S. Air Force types were assigned to direct them in their flight missions. These people arrived on the scene with absolutely nothing except some airplanes, some 100 pound bombs, and a desire to hit the enemy where it would do the most damage. They had no idea of the country, they had no idea of flying in Laos, they had no idea of the current military situation, and they turned to Air America for help.

After consulting with the Customer, Roy Stitt, Station Manager of Air America, gave the Operations Specialists the green light and told them to assist the T-28 (AOC) unit in any way they could. The Operations Specialists responded with a will. They helped brief the pilots, they helped brief the intelligence people assigned, they helped establish their own maps, plotted positions for them, corrected wrong data and established a good rapport between this unit and Air America.

T-28s flying bombing missions in Laos, pilots killing Communists, pilots working to stop the enemy advance was more thrilling than briefing Air America pilots who were doing nothing more exciting than flying rice back and forth in Laos. By and by more and more of the Operations Specialists' time was spent helping the AOC boys in their problem; and, therefore, less and less time was given to the primary tasks of briefing Air America and Bird and Sons crews on where and how to safely drop rice.

No blame should be assigned to the Operations Specialists for this. They had received permission to assist the AOC unit in every manner possible and they so assisted. For months they had been operating pretty much on their own, reporting administratively to the ATOG Manager, but reporting for direction and guidance to actually themselves and what they felt was their prime mission and duty. With no Company guidance and with a feeling that they were a part of something big, they naturally joined the war and let the rice dropping sort of trickle along on its own.

As time went on, the Operations Specialists became involved not only in helping the AOC operations, putting up maps, briefing the AOC officers, they also found

that their information supplied by Earle Jones and Air America pilots was more current than that received through AOC intelligence sources. They found they were getting this information faster than AOC and sometimes this information was very vital to AOC activities. The Operations Specialists could give information to AOC of a truck convoy proceeding down Route 7 eight or ten hours before this information would come in from Air Attache offices. Little by little FIC began to pick targets for these people saying that the target AOC had chosen didn't look good but another one over here did; there is a new anti-aircraft position in this area or a pilot just came in and reported a troop concentration such and such a place, you might hit these. Before anyone knew it, the Operations Specialists were actively assisting the T-28 program by helping assign targets.

The danger of this is, of course, apparent. Knowing a lot, but not knowing the entire picture, the Operations Specialists might assign a target to the T-28 pilots that was scheduled to be overrun by friendly forces prior to the T-28 strike or a target that politically should not be attacked. The results of such assistance could well be disastrous.

Another problem presented itself in that the T-28 pilots though eager did not know the country very well. What would be more natural then for FIC to say that Air America has a C-46 coming back from a rice drop about 1500L, if your T-28s happen to be in the area this C-46 could sort of point the way to your target. (This happened on one occasion at least that we know about and FIC was told by the Operations Manager never to do this again in no uncertain terms.)

On or about 1 September, Navy Lt. Klausman escaped from Pathet Lao captivity and was flown to Udorn for debriefing and further transportation to the States. The Operations Specialists were vitally interested in hearing first hand about Klausmann's experiences. Air America had been intimately involved in his rescue attempts and the Operations Specialists were concerned with the success of these attempts and with any other information he could give us which would make Air America pilots' flight safer in Laos.

Prior to this time Earle Jones had arranged for Bill Solin to go to Udorn and receive intelligence briefings from various sources there. Company policy had not prevented these trips and Bill Solin had gone to Udorn several times as necessary. On the day of the Klausmann debriefing, Bill Solin felt that he would like to sit in on this and asked Mr. Jones' representative if he could go to Udorn. This representative did not want Air America FIC personnel in Udorn at this debriefing but did not tell Bill Solin this in so many words. He said instead that he didn't feel it would do much good to go to Udorn that day and that Bill should go another day. He did not, however, expressly forbid a trip to Udorn.

Bill Solin made a valuation on his own and decided he wanted to go and went. A briefing of the Klausmann incident was taking place in Udorn at this time. Bill Solin discovered this and walked into the briefing uninvited. He took one look, realized he was not welcome at this session, and beat a hasty retreat; but, the damage had been done.

Mr. Jones, upon learning of this incident, felt that Bill Solin had deliberately gone to Udorn in violation of his request in this matter and without a doubt this appearance of Bill Solin in Udorn caused Mr. Jones no little personal embarrassment.

On or about 9 September, a flight of T-28 aircraft was diverted from its previously briefed target to another target; a Bird and Sons aircraft rendezvoused with these T-28s, led them into this other target and marked the enemy position with smoke. The T-28s expended on target with excellent results and then returned to their Vientiane base. During their debriefing in AOC they mentioned this diversion from their assigned target to the target pointed out by the Bird and Sons aircraft.

This debriefing information reached the Air Attache in Laos who assumed that the diversion was laid on by Earle Jones' group operating out of Udorn. In order to avoid this type of incident in the future or to provide better control, the Air Attache brought this matter up to Earle Jones' boss in Vientiane only to find out that the Udorn group had not sanctioned or had any control over this strike diversion, whatsoever. Further investigation of this incident seemed to indicate a conspiracy between some members of AOC and the FIC whereby Air America and Bird and Sons aircraft were being utilized to guide the T-28 flights to targets in Laos.

The Operations Specialists were confronted with this charge, but they denied it in spite of all the evidence that was against them. (To my knowledge, they have never actually seen the complete dossier that Mr. Jones has on file.)

Needless to say, this type of activity created quite a stir in all Customer circles; the AOC unit drew some fire and the Operations Specialists were put in a position where their jobs were in jeopardy.

After due reflection and consultation with the Customer sources, General Manager - Laos assigned the Assistant Station Manager to ride herd on the activities of the FIC until such time as the Senior Operations Specialist arrived on the scene (who is expected sometime in October). The Operations Specialists were given defined duties and responsibilities, their travel privilege was sharply curtailed, their link with the AOC group was reduced, and Mr. T. C. Walker acted as a buffer between the Operations Specialists and the Customer types.

Unfortunately, the Operations Specialists did not let these past incidents die a natural death. They took their grievances to the pilot group and others who would listen and described the woes that had befallen them and their position as the unloved and unwashed Operations Specialists. They told to anyone who would listen that Mr. Jones and his group were out to get them, that they had suffered unfairly, and that they were not guilty.

Naturally, this information got back to Mr. Jones, too, and he was understandably upset at the reactivation of what everyone had hoped was a past issue.

Fuel to this fire was added by the close personal link established between the Operations Specialists and some of the younger members of the AOC group. This link went so far as to include the formation of a Vientiane "Jockey Club" which

had as its main interest horses but which was primarily concerned with drinking and carousing as young studs are wont to do. This, too, got back to Mr. Jones who suspected that the AOC personnel had championed the cause of FIC against Mr. Jones' organization.

On 27 September, another small item added fuel to the fire when an AOC representative was ordered to proceed to Saigon to brief various military units on SAR procedures in Laos. This AOC representative attempted to have one of the Operations Specialists accompany him to Saigon to give this briefing. Rather than go through established channels this individual attempted to promote the person of Mr. Solin as the Air America representative to attend this meeting.

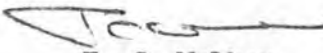
Air America had not received an official invitation to attend this meeting; however, when this matter was brought to the attention of the Assistant Station Manager, he contacted the Air Attache office and allowed as how Air America would be willing to send someone to this meeting provided we were invited and that the representative would in all probability be Vientiane Operations Manager, Mr. Larry Joseph.

When this information came back to the AOC individual he reacted with the strange attitude in that he felt that Bill Solin should attend this meeting not Larry Joseph and that if Bill Solin did not attend he did not want anyone from Air America to attend.

In view of this and in view of the non-official status of this invitation, Air America did not send anyone to participate in the meeting, but the incident again showered unwelcome attention to the Operations Specialists and their activities in Laos.

This about summarizes the situation to date. Hopefully, no more incidents will occur to further stir the muck until the Senior Operations Specialist arrives on the scene. I have taken steps to promulgate a listing of the duties and responsibilities of the Operations Specialists and the FIC; I have taken steps to put the contacts between AOC and FIC within their defined limits; and I have cautioned the Operations Specialists themselves on their future conduct in Laos.

I thoroughly hope we have heard the last of this problem and can build a better FIC in the months to come.


T. C. Walker