

THE SECRET WAR



The building was odd-looking, heavily guarded, surrounded by a ten foot fence and concertina wire, with a plethora of antennas poking skyward from its flat roof like metal porcupine quills. A Top Secret clearance got you through the front gate; but higher security clearances dictated what you did, who you worked for, and your contribution to the clandestine war in Laos. A couple of well-worn paths zig-zagged through the jungle to the front gate, although what remained of the 'jungle' had been cleared and manicured. A single dirt road provided right of entry from the hustle and bustle of an Air Commando airbase conducting a

modern war with WWII vintage fighters and fighter-bombers. A second dirt road led to the base perimeter.

The secretive building was called The Project. Albeit, it carried several designations depending on mission requirements, time of activity, and an apparent irresistible urge by the powers that be to code and re-code secret operations: Practice Nine, Illinois City, Dye Marker, Muscle Shoals, Igloo White, Task Force Alpha, Commando Hunt, McNamara's Ears, and a few unmentionable. If the changes were meant to confuse the enemy, it must have worked, because it confused us.

The sole purpose of The Project was interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the supply route used by the North Vietnamese to infiltrate men and equipment into South Vietnam. "Trail" is a



misleading designation. Our massive interdiction campaign did little to stop the North Vietnamese from constantly improving the trails, paths, roads (some two lanes wide), truck parks, POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricant) dumps, aid

stations, even a fuel pipeline discovered after the war. Their continued success is easy to explain: We were bombing dirt. Modern warfare has yet to discover a way to make dirt disappear. Bomb craters were refilled by the time our aircraft returned to base. True, we hit fuel dumps, trucks, tanks, supply

depots, ammo dumps; but the material 'things' were simply replaced by an ingenious network of 'trail support.' We, the military, knew how to stop the infiltration, but our orders came from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and the inhabitants of that building were conducting a war using a slide ruler.



The base was NKP, Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, my home for 18 months before serving another year in Saigon, Vietnam. NKP, affectionately nicknamed 'Naked Fanny', was just across the Mekong River from Thakhek, Laos and a Secret War that didn't exist. Less than 50 miles from the North Vietnamese border, a war raged unhindered by the Communists, yet 'restricted' and 'limited' in scope by America and her allies. American pilots,

rescue crews aboard choppers, commandos, Air America (CIA), and excursions by American soldiers stationed in Vietnam into Laos, caused the deaths of thousands of fine young men. With the aid of aerial reconnaissance and a wide variety of electronic sensors, these valiant souls fought the good fight, yet for years their next-of-kin were unaware as to 'where' they had perished. The reports read KIA or MIA in Southeast Asia or Vietnam; not Laos.

I receive POW/MIA updates on a regular basis from POW/MIA advocate Susan Stephens, Region 2 Coordinator, the National League of POW/MIA Families. Her update of June 14, 2019 is the incentive for this story. It hit too close to home. It's not unusual for me to identify with these reports, yet lately the tragedy of The Secret War has rekindled my frustration and attached anger of participating in the 'no-win' war that didn't exist. And the boys keep coming home.

Roy Abner Knight, Jr. was an excellent student, finishing high school at the age of sixteen in 1947. Yet, Roy was unable to secure a scholarship to Texas A&M, so he worked for a year until receiving unenthusiastic permission from his parent to enlist in the US Air Force. Completing basic training, young enlistee Roy Knight was trained as a clerk, a job he performed long enough to obtain the rank of Staff Sergeant. In February of 1953, Roy received acceptance into OCS (Officer Candidate School) and graduated as a 2nd Lt. on September 11, 1953.

As a personnel officer, Roy served in Japan and South Korea. In April of 1958, he earned his pilot's wings and flew the legend of the Korean War, an F-86 Sabre. After serving in Germany and France, Roy attended flight instructor's school then taught his fellow airmen the tricks of the pilot's trade. Obtaining the rank of Major, Roy attended the University of Omaha and earned a bachelor's degree. In February of 1967, Major Roy Knight was sent to Southeast Asia as an A-1E Skyraider pilot with the 602nd Fighter Squadron at Udorn Royal Thai AFB, Thailand. The father of three was going to war.



On March 18, 1967, his bomb laden A-1E filled with smoke after takeoff. Roy jettisoned his fuel tanks but due to the populated area below, retained his bomb load and returned to base with the knowledge that a crash landing with a full ordnance load meant certain death. He landed safely, thus avoiding a tragedy on

the base and among the local population.

On April 2, 1967, Roy flew into a heavily defended area in Laos on a search and rescue mission for a downed pilot. Flying and working from altitudes below two hundred feet while dodging heavy anti-aircraft fire, he continued attempts to make visual contact with the pilot until darkness and a loss of radio contact

made further attempts pointless. His tenacity and fearlessness earned him a Silver Star.

Roy earned the Distinguished Flying Cross on May 14, 1967 by leading four A-1E Skyraiders and two HH-3C helicopters on a rescue mission for another downed pilot. Poor visibility, dense anti-aircraft fire, and mountainous terrain could not stop Roy Knight. He located the pilot and directed the helicopters into the area for rescue.

A recipient of seven Air Medals before taking off for a bombing mission on May 19, 1967, Major Roy Knight led his flight against one of the most heavily defended targets in war-torn Laos. His Skyraider received a fatal hit as Roy pressed his attack, dropped his bomb load, yet crashed into the target area and lost his life in a war that didn't exist.

Almost 52 years later on February 28, 2019, Major Roy Knight's remains were recovered and positively identified by June, 2019. Roy was finally coming home from The Secret War. Roy's son, Bryan, saved several airmen during the terrorist attack on the Kobar Towers in Saudi Arabia on June 25, 1996. Captain Bryan Knight received the Air Force Commendation Medal with Valor Device.

Flight records indicate Major Knight made several stopovers at NKP. Did he visit the Project? Did we acknowledge each other in a hallway? Possibly, but so did a lot of airmen who lost their lives in a war that didn't exist.

Air America. The moniker conjures up images of a commercial airline with spic and span pilots and aircraft. In truth, it was a covert airlines operated by the CIA in Laos with a hodgepodge of pilots flying 727 jets to small Cessna's. Since we were 'not at war' in Laos, the CIA hoodwinked Congress into believing funds generated through AID dollars were for humanitarian efforts. 'Soft rice' drops did include rice, blankets, medicine, chickens, goats, whatever was needed; with 'hard rice' drops of ammo, grenades, bombs, and other arms to support the indigenous Hmong tribesmen fighting the communist forces. Air America became the largest clandestine operation in CIA's history.



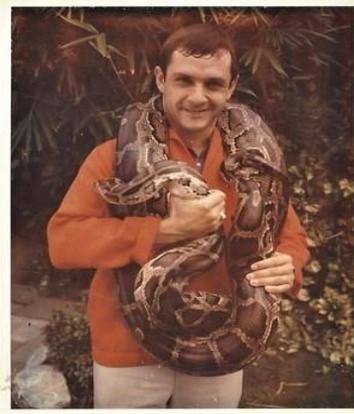
One obsolete aircraft became a mainstay in the Southeast Asia tactical airlift system, the **Fairchild twin-engine C-123 Provider**. In the early morning of December 27, 1971, the pilot, Captain George Ritter; co-pilot, Captain Roy F. Townley; the loadmaster (called a 'kicker') Edward Weissenback, and a Lao native named Khamphanh Saysongkham, departed Vientiane, Laos in a C-123

and flew to Udorn AFB, Thailand. At Udorn, the C-123 Provider was loaded with needed supplies for Royal Lao Army troops at the village of Ban Xieng Lom in Laos. After takeoff from Udorn, the last radio transmission from the C-123 was 11 minutes out from Ban Xieng Lom. A SAR (search and rescue) mission was mounted which lasted several days with no trace of the aircraft or crew.

US Intelligence intercepted a radio transmission by the Pathet Lao (Laotian Communists) in August of 1972 which alleged an American aircraft was shot down in late December and all of its crew captured. Another source also claimed to have seen the crash and stated three American and a Lao civilian had survived to be taken prisoners.

The same source claimed a POW camp set up inside a cave had one cell for Americans and a second cell for Lao and Thai POWs. In August of 1973, a Pathet Lao general defected with personal knowledge of American POWs. He identified photos of Edward Weissenback and Roy Townley; he had no knowledge of George Ritter or the Lao national.

Over 600 Americans disappeared in Laos; many known to have been alive on the ground. Enemy forces in Laos acknowledged holding “tens of tens” of Americans, but these POWs were not negotiated for at the end of American involvement in Southeast Asia by direct negotiations or through the Paris Peace Accords since Laos was not a party to the Peace Accords, in the war that didn't exist.



In October of 1997, a joint American/Lao team interviewed an eyewitness to the C-123 crash and led the team to the crash site. Aircraft pieces were discovered. In 2017 and 2018, teams evacuated the crash site and recovered personal effects plus human remains. Through mitochondrial DNA tests and dental records, **Ritter, Townley, and Weissenback**, were accounted for.

Now the fog of war clouds the issue. If remains were found at the crash site, then the 'eyewitness' reports of the three 'live' crewmembers were intentional misinformation, faulty reports, and/or these men, and so many others, are being used by our former adversaries for political 'leverage' in trade agreements and future negotiations.

American remains turned over by the Vietnamese have shown signs of 'storage', that is, American remains were 'saved' for a day when their skeletons, teeth, or various body parts could be 'used' in negotiations. Brave men, airmen, soldiers, and sailors, have been reduced to bargaining chips in the war that was, yet the war that didn't exist.

Laos, especially, is playing the powers that be, mainly Vietnam, Russia, and to a much lesser degree, China, for primary security partners and economic aid. The peoples of Southeast Asia have a healthy mistrust for the Chinese, a well-deserved mistrust. As the American involvement in Southeast Asia ground to a halt, an invasion into Cambodia by Vietnamese forces sparked a border war between Vietnam and China in 1979. Vietnamese forces had invaded Cambodia to rid the country of the vile and mass-murdering regime of the Khmer Rouge, an ideological and sociopolitical killing machine backed by the Chinese. A border war erupted between China and Vietnam that caused deaths by the thousands on both sides. Few western governments cared, much less accurately reported on what became known as the Third Indochina War.

So, the political beat goes on, with North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, even on remote Pacific Islands where our WWII boys are still being found and finally returned home. As for me, The Secret War, my 18 month stint in a war that didn't exist, stays with me even after over 50 years of readjustment. Men I knew, fathers and husbands and brothers and uncles and boyfriends, were called upon to fight a Secret War, a war that didn't exist, yet they never faltered. I'm positive it never occurred to these valiant warriors that they would be abandoned by the country they so proudly served.

It is up to us, the veterans who fought The Secret War, to honor and remember our fallen brothers, for if not us, then who?

“Dying for freedom isn’t the worst that could happen.....being forgotten is.”

- Attributed to several sources -



THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL TODAY IS A TOURIST DESTINATION, EXPECIALLY FOR ADVENTUROUS HIKING AND MOTORBIKING.