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PROJECT CHECO REPORT

THE DEFENSE of
ATTOPEU

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MUONG SOU

16 MAY 1966

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HQ PACAF

Tactical Evaluation Center

Prepared by: Captain Melvin F. Porter

S.E. Asia Team

Project CHECO

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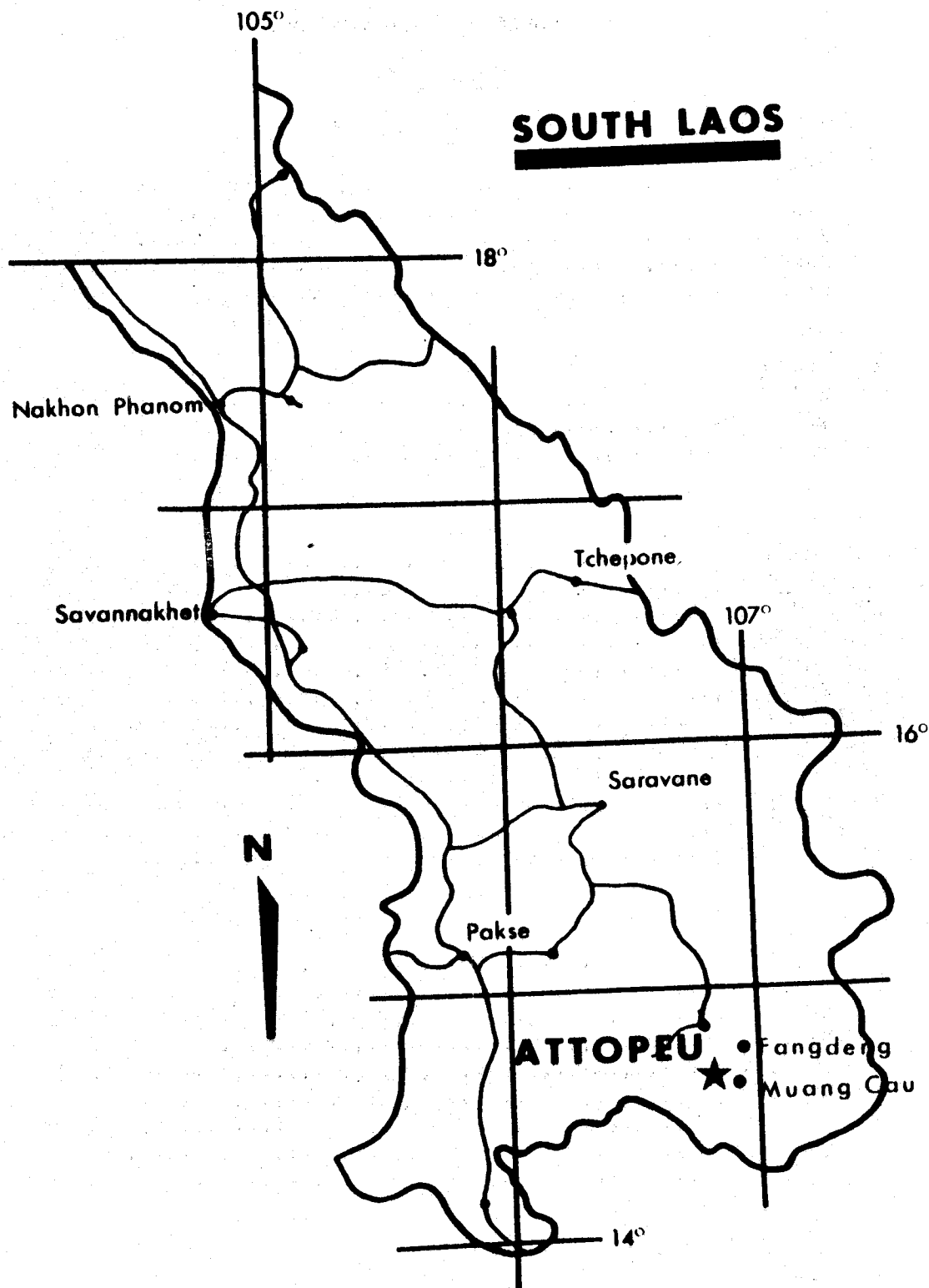
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THE DEFENSE OF ATTOPEU

The use of the AC-47 for the night defense of isolated hamlets and forts has become a common practice throughout the South Vietnam area. It has been credited with the major role in recent engagements at Plei Me ^{1/} and A Chau ^{2/}. In these circumstances, however, the defended areas were under ground attack and conventional flares were used to attain and strike enemy forces. On 4 March 1966, an AC-47 pioneered a new concept in night air support at Attapeu, Laos.

Utilizing a recent development for improving night vision, the Starlight Scope, the AC-47, "Spooky 41", was able to engage and immobilize a large Communist force without the use of flares or other types of illumination. This action stopped the Communist take-over of the airstrip and city of Attapeu and enabled Laotian forces to retake positions on the original defense line.

Three Laotian Force Armee Royale (FAR) had all but given up the task of stemming the Communist advance on this strategic city. On 3 March 1966, General Thao Ma, the Commander of the Royal Laotian Air Force, was greatly concerned with the overall Attapeu situation. This concern was evidenced in a conversation ^{3/} with the Assistant U. S. Air Attache, Captain John Ryan, at Savannakhet, following Ma's return from Pakse where he had talked with General Phasouk, Commander of the IV Military Region. The towns of Muong Cau and Fangdeng, east of Attapeu, were partially destroyed and firmly in Communist hands. The enemy soldiers were well dug in, showed little fear of air strikes, and appeared to be well

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seasoned veterans, according to Ma. These troops were reported to push the villagers ahead of them when attacking or when being attacked - and if the villagers refused, they were shot anyway. All prisoners were killed, frequently beheaded or disemboweled. Ma estimated that 200 FAR soldiers had been killed, and another 100 wounded since the hand-to-hand encounters had begun a few days before. Most of the friendlies killed in action were from Group Mobile 16, and included two majors, both assistant battalion commanders. The FAR troops were reported to be badly demoralized.

General Ma was convinced that Attoupeu would fall if the enemy made an attempt to take it. ^{4/} He felt that air power was the only hope, and then only if he could get plenty of USAF assistance. The Communists had told the villagers that they were not afraid of the Laotian T-28's; that to them these were a "small air show" and that they had had hundreds of modern jet planes over their heads in South Vietnam. These reports had further demoralized the FAR forces, but Ma was convinced they would not be able to stand against a determined advance.

According to the villagers, the enemy, on the other hand, treated the operation almost as a lark. They were usually inactive at night, except for dancing the "lanvong" and engaging in other camp entertainment. They had on occasion even fired flares from 81 mm mortars, apparently in celebration. The Communists were obviously confident of victory.

It was on this note that General Ma requested Air Force assistance for the 4th of March. Day air strikes were not the problem. These

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were available, either as pre-planned missions using RLAF T-28's, or as diverted USAF jet strikes when primary targets in other parts of the theater were weathered in. It was at night that the Viet Minh attack could be expected to take place, and it was at night that constant air coverage was least available.

Colonel James R. Carter, Director of Operations for 2d Air Division/Thailand, and Colonel James P. Hagerstrom, Director of TACC there, decided that the answer might be found in the AC-47. The aircraft would go to Savannakhet for a briefing by General Ma, and then proceed down to Attapeu for airborne alert over the beleaguered area. Colonel Carter, recognizing the sensitivity involved in landing American aircraft in Laos, ordered the AC-47's and crews "sanitized" - all USAF markings removed from the airplanes, and the crews wore clothing which would indicate no service connection or rank. As it turned out, this was a particularly fortuitous move. When the first AC-47 landed at Savannakhet, the Russian Air Attache was touring the airfield and taking pictures. With its Miniguns hidden under canvas covers, the sanitized Gooney Bird attracted no attention. Colonel Hagerstrom had earlier in the day dispatched two OLF's from Nakhon Phanom to Attapeu to assist Captain Roy C. Dalton there in controlling day strikes. These Ol's were flown by Captain Ben H. Witterman and Captain Gary E. Cool.

In selection of crews for the AC-47's, Colonel Hagerstrom had stipulated that Major George W. Jensen, a former F-86 pilot in Korea, would be the aircraft commander of the first airplane, on the basis of Jensen's experience in gunnery and sighting, and also because Colonel

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Hagerstrom had an idea he wanted tested under the guidance of an experienced pilot. ^{5/} Late in January, Colonel Hagerstrom had heard of an instrument called the "Starlight Scope", a light-intensifying four-power scope used primarily by ground forces during night operations in Vietnam, and had acquired one for testing in the Laotian area. It had been tried by Forward Air Controllers flying OLE's in South Vietnam with unfavorable results because of the instability of the aircraft and the cramped working quarters. Colonel Hagerstrom wanted to give it a more thorough evaluation and determined that it would work best in the AC-47. Major Jensen's crew had used it on a road recce over the jungle region east of Nakhon Phanom and indicated it showed promise. The more open territory around Attapeu, with its rice paddies and fields afforded another, possibly lucrative, area in which to try the Starscope. Colonel Hagerstrom made certain that it was aboard the first AC-47, Spooky 41, when Major Jensen departed for Savannakhet.

Spooky 41 took off from Udorn at 1520H on the 4th of March and landed at Savannakhet at 1705H where they were met by General Ma and his staff, along with Captain Ryan, the Assistant Air Attache. Ma personally briefed Major Jensen and his navigator, 1st Lt George W. Thompson, on the situation at Attapeu. The threat was a real one. The latest reports estimated the enemy strength was at six Viet Minh battalions opposing the three Laotian battalions. ^{6/} In action only a few days before, Group Mobile 16 had lost nearly the equivalent of two companies to the battle-wise and heavily armed Communists. Ma firmly believed the enemy intended to seize and hold Attapeu in order to secure

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the Xe Kong and Xe Kaman (Xe River) and the area to the south for the purpose of expanding the infiltration routes from Cambodia. The General assigned two RLAF officers, Captain Pho Kit and Warrant Officer Siro (called phonetically by Major Jensen and his crew "Papa Kilo" and "Sierra Romeo" respectively during the flight) to ride along in the AC-47 to observe and act as coordinators during the mission. The aircraft left Savannakhet at 1740H with frequencies to contact the USAF FAC at Attapeu. ^{7/}

Major Jensen had intended only to contact the forces there by radio and then begin his airborne alert posture; but, upon arriving at 1850H, he found radio communications unsatisfactory and decided to land. Because of the tactical situation and the closeness of the enemy and friendly forces, he was hesitant to expend any ordnance without a more detailed briefing by the people directly involved. ^{8/} Darkness had fallen but he landed the aircraft on the 37 foot-wide dirt strip with the aid of flares on each side of the approach end and the lights of a jeep at the far end of the runway.

The crew was met by Captain Dalton and other Americans, and by Colonel Ly, Laotian regional field commander. After a jeep ride to the command post, they sat down to a detailed and up-to-the-minute briefing by several of the Laotian Army officers. Major Jensen said later: ^{9/}

"...They outlined the exact positions of the friendly forces, the exact front as they knew it, of the Viet Cong - and they called them Viet Cong. They said they'd come in from Vietnam, that they'd been badly beat up over there, that they'd come back into Laos to reorganize,

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re-equip and retrain, that they'd gathered quite a few new troops. I'm not sure how they'd enlisted them, but they had a lot of new recruits that they were training. Apparently, it was a tri-pronged effort - they were giving them field training under combat conditions without having the Air Force beat them up too much... They also had another objective - they were in there to secure the area at Attapeu, to use the tributaries of the Mekong to take supplies down through Cambodia to Southern Laos and the Delta area as an alternate supply route down into South Vietnam. So it seemed like a very critical situation. They told us they (the enemy forces) had upwards of 3600 men there, with only 1600 friendlies defending Attapeu. It was apparent to me that the Laos Army personnel were quite nervous about the situation and not too happy."

During the briefing, the Laotian officers pointed out several sites where they suspected heavy concentrations of the enemy and listed five specific areas that they wanted the AC-47 to strike. Major Jensen established firm radio frequencies for all his radios with Captain Dalton, and, further, explained to the Americans there, and to the Laotians, what tactics he would use, the orbiting procedures, and generally what they could expect.

Captain Witterman and Captain Cool, the Forward Air Controllers sent down to support the daylight operations at Attapeu, had arrived at 0925H that morning and had spent the day in visual reconnaissance and controlling the area. Neither had seen evidence of the enemy troops. ^{10/} Captain Witterman stated:

"...We flew over it at a moderately high altitude of about 1500 feet, and didn't see anything, so we just progressively started getting down lower and lower and didn't see a trace of anything there. This was around the outskirts of it and everything else. Nothing. We were under the impression that they'd all pulled out, but we had the aircraft coming in, so we decided to work over the most likely areas of refuge...well, we poured

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everything in there, and I never saw a trace of anything and never received any ground fire, so I kind of thought this was more of the - uh - Vietnamese (sic) intelligence, you know, two battalions out there and they never seem to show up."

Spooky 41 was airborne at 2005H and within five minutes was over the target area after two orbits of the field to gain altitude. The first target struck was the main road between Attoupeu and Muong Cau, a sizeable town about ten kilometers east, that was already occupied by the Viet Minh. None of the crew could make any damage assessment after this first strike. But then, in Major Jensen's words: ^{11/}

"...While we were orbiting, after hitting the road, the navigator, who was in the rear at the main cargo door, sitting there - he was tied in by rope - spotted between 150 and 200 VC, or what we found out to be VC, in the rice paddies between the two known areas of the friendlies and the unfriendlies. Kind of in a no-mans land. ...he was using the Starscope. We did not drop flares, there was a good moon out. There was a minimum of haze at that time and the Starscope really worked to full advantage. He saw these personnel moving on the ground. I called back and asked if they by chance had an operation out there that was utilizing these people and if they were friendlies. They came back and said that they had no operation, that these people were fair game - so we hit them!"

The navigator, 1st Lt Thompson, was quite surprised to see the movement of the people on the ground through the Starscope. He had spotted trucks before, and it was quite easy, with the Starscope, to make out the difference between tree lines and open field, roads, houses, and hamlets; but, he had never observed individual people moving. It was apparent that the enemy felt secure under the cover of darkness, and were openly moving toward the Attoupeu airstrip at the time they were seen. With no flares dropped, to give them warning,

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they had no fear of being seen and had left the tree lines to march across the open paddies.

The element of surprise could have been even greater. After only 1500 rounds from the 7.62 Miniguns, both of Spooky 41's guns jammed. This was after approximately a two and one half second burst. During the period that TSgt Lonsie R. Colston and SSgt William L. Madison, the gunners, were working feverishly to clear the malfunctions, the Viet Minh disappeared back into the trees. After the guns were repaired, Major Jensen fired another 3000 rounds into the wooded area in hope that the enemy troops had not been able to get under substantial cover.

Following several subsequent gun malfunctions, the navigator located another group of Viet Minh with the Starscope. The aircraft was actually in orbit with the armament men repairing the guns, when 1st Lt Thompson spotted approximately 100 men crossing an open field and going into a building. Major Jensen was getting ready to roll in for a firing run when Captain "Papa Kilo" stopped him with the words, "Don't shoot! That is a pagoda." A favorite Viet Cong evasion tactic is to take sanctuary in a pagoda, knowing that the chances are good they will not be fired upon. In this case, Major Jensen radioed back to the command post to explain the situation to Colonel Ly and to request permission to expend upon it if the Laotians themselves felt it was justified. ^{12/}

The Viet Cong and the Viet Minh rely upon the innate compassion of Americans and the natural hesitancy of sincerely religious Buddhists to fire upon or otherwise desecrate such a shrine. They, themselves, however, have no such compunctions, as witnessed by their massacre of

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23 civilian workers sleeping in a pagoda on 12 December 1965 in IV Corps, RVN. The workers, men, women, and children had been hired by a contractor to dig a canal for the Dinh Tuong Agriculture Office. They were asleep in a pagoda, 12 kilometers north of the city of My Tho, when a group of Viet Cong entered at 0100H and sprayed the unarmed civilians with submachine gun fire. Twenty-three were killed, including ^{13/} women and children, and eight wounded.

While waiting for clearance, Spooky 41 returned to the original road target, the main artery between Muong Cao and Attopeu. While they could spot no movement, they fire along the side of the road and created a large secondary explosion with billowing white smoke that continued for several minutes. ^{14/} At this point, they observed the only ground fire of the evening, but took no hits.

The pagoda was well within the area occupied by the Viet Minh. Direction to fire upon it came from the command post, and Major Jensen immediately stopped firing at the road and returned to put 3000 rounds into the pagoda and the surrounding fields. None of Major Jensen's crew observed any movement in the area. Major Jensen felt that all the Viet Minh seen entering the pagoda, remained, thinking it would provide sanctuary for them.

Following this attack, Spooky 41 cruised back to the area into which the first troops sighted had retreated. Four flares were dropped for psychological effect while the guns were being repaired following another malfunction. The aircraft then went to the eastern end of Attopeu to two pre-briefed targets, a dry creek bed and a road. In

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VIET MINH KBA Attopeu, Laos

Photo taken by Capt. Ben H. Witterman

5 Mar 1966 from O1 F at 50 ft AGL

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firing at these targets, Spooky 41 created another large secondary explosion, this one with a bright flash and, again, with white billowing smoke. ^{15/}

During this period the aircraft developed electrical problems. Major Jensen chose to continue to fly the mission despite the partial electrical failure, because he felt that the effectiveness of the weapons system warranted staying on target as long as he had an operable aircraft, and as long as they could keep the guns firing. Finally, after nursing the Miniguns through 13,500 rounds, and with Spooky 43 on the way to relieve him, Major Jensen turned off target at 2215H ^{16/} and returned to Nakhon Phanom. Spooky 43 stayed on target for the remainder of the night, dropping flares in the absence of a Starscope, and firing into likely areas. The aircraft received no ground fire and its crew observed no ground movement.

At first light on the morning of 5 March, Captain Witterman, lacking any solid confirmation of enemy killed from the Spooky aircraft, admitted, ^{17/} "...This was like most missions, we figured they were shooting at shadows again." Captain Cool and Dalton took off in an OLF at 0730H for a visual recce of the area, and in Captain Witterman's words: ^{18/}

"...and by God, they look in a rice paddy and there's a bunch of bodies laying there. Men in uniform - rather non-descript uniforms - but they were there. So they came back, and I had my camera - they just hadn't taken a camera along - so, Captain Cool and I went up, and we went around and we found the original 26 bodies, and then by God, we found another 26 bodies, all laying out in a relatively open area, in a paddy. Uh...these paddies are kind of divided up by small shallow canals, and of course in the dry season they were all dried up

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VIET MINH KBA Attopeu, Laos

Photo taken by Capt. Ben H. Witterman

5 Mar 1966 from O1 F at 50 ft AGL

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so they were just like ditches, and these people were strung out in the ditches, and that's where they apparently had been spotted...and about a half dozen were right in the open in the paddies, sprawled out, and in several places you could see spots where obviously a body had been laying, and bled a lot, and then they pulled it away..."

Captain Witterman photographed the enemy troops from extremely low altitudes to establish a permanent record of the effectiveness of the weapons system. He flew to the pagoda in an effort to determine if there had been a corresponding KBA in that area, but although the roof of the pagoda had been perforated by the minigun bullets, no confirmation of enemy dead was possible. Altogether, Captain Cool and Witterman spent 45 minutes flying around the area at "sitting duck" altitudes without drawing enemy ground fire, something they felt would have been patently impossible prior to the AC-47 operation.

Reaction to the results of the mission was immediate. Captain Dalton called the Assistant Air Attache, Captain Ryan, at Savannakhet to relay the information about Spooky 41's outstanding job, who sent the message on to AIRA Vientiane and to 2d Air Division Thai. ^{19/}

General Ma was highly please after RLAF and FAR personnel, and the USAF FAC at the scene, all reported excellent results. Captain Dalton, however, tempered the report with the information that the friendly units were "still somewhat demoralized" as a result of their costly encounter with the enemy during the last part of the week. ^{20/} He agreed that they needed continuing air support. Captain Ryan, the ^{21/} Assistant Air Attache, sent another message to Vientiane:

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"...USAF FAC at Attapeu used the words 'delirious with job' in describing the ground troops' reaction to the performance of Spooky Birds near Attapeu last night. They requested Major Jensen and his crew of Spooky 41 be sent back for a repeat performance tonight, using the same time and procedures. They feel one aircraft can provide all the support required for tonight. General Ma, however, says hold off on sending aircraft until further notice. He will be in Attapeu today and will evaluate the requirements for tonight and advise."

Major Jensen, his crew, and Captain Witterman were asked by Colonel Carter to come up to Udorn for a complete taped debriefing in order to glean as many "lessons learned" as possible and to contribute to the historical record. Major General Charles R. Bond, Deputy Commander 2d Air Division/13th Air Force Thai, sent a congratulatory message to the commander of the 4th Air Commando Squadron at Tan Son Nhut. ^{22/}

"...For Commander from General Bond. Outstanding air-manship, personal bravery, and hard work of your AC-47 crews (Spooky 41 and 43) no doubt saved Attapeu from probable capture night of 4 Mar 66 and dealt a devastating blow to attacking enemy battalions. A review of the action indicates a minimum of 100 killed by air and actual number was probably over 250 with many more wounded. My personal congratulations on a most effective display of tactical air power..."

From being a "lost cause" on 4 March, the situation at Attapeu improved following the AC-47 strikes, until on 11 March the Air Attache at Vientiane sent the following message to Lt General Joseph H. Moore, Commander of the 2d Air Division: ^{23/}

"Information received that Muong Cao and Fangdeng, villages east of Attapeu, were reoccupied by elements of FAR 10 Mar 1966. This re-establishes FAR lines to their former position."

Commenting on the operation, Colonel Hagerstrom said: ^{24/}

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"...This (Attopeu) was a classic example (of the response of air support to a ground situation when the only alternative was the massive injections of ground troops). I think the odds were something like eight to two, four to one, some such odds, and it would have required a massive injection of ground troops to save this day - unless air was available and on the spot - and air was available. In this case, I think conservatively - there were 200 VC killed - very conservatively - and broke the back of the VC, and the odds were completely against the friendly Laotians. Without air, there's no doubt about it, the Laotians would have been overrun and the place occupied. The real evaluation of this - in terms of enemy versus the friendly - was that here we have conservatively 800 enemy troops being opposed by a 30-year-old airplane with seven men and three machine guns, and they literally decimated the capability of these 800 people...with no losses to themselves at all. Seven against 800. Pretty good odds, with good results.

I think the whole essence of the U. S. operation is not to fight a war of attrition - infantryman versus infantryman but to let air power destroy the enemy once the ground has identified them and has put his finger on them; always keeping contact, but with a long enough arm so that we can give close air support and destroy the enemy...but always using air power to deliver the mail."

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THE DEFENSE OF ATTOPEU

Footnotes

(References as noted provided in copies to AFCHO and in DOPEC file copy)

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- 2/ (S) Project CHECO Report, "The Fall of A Chau", 18 Apr 66.
- 3/ (S) Msg, AAIRA Savannakhet to 2d Air Div/13th Air Force Thai A00173, 031315Z Mar 66 (Doc 1).
- 4/ Ibid.
- 5/ (S) Interview by Captain Melvin F. Porter with Colonel James P. Hagerstrom, Director TACC, 2d Air Div Thai, 17 Mar 66 (Doc 2).
- 6/ (S) Msg, AAIRA Savannakhet to AIRA Vientiane, A00178, 050315Z Mar 66 (Doc 3).
- 7/ (S) Msg, AAIRA, Savannakhet to 2TACC Udorn Thai, A00175, 041100Z Mar 66 (Doc 4).
- 8/ (S) Extract After Action Taped Debrief by Major George W. Jensen, 5 Mar 66 (Doc 5).
- 9/ (S) Ibid.
- 10/ (S) Extract After Action Taped Debrief by Captain Ben H. Witterman, 5 Mar 66 (Doc 6).
- 11/ (S) Extract After Action Taped Debrief by Major George W. Jensen, 5 Mar 66 (Doc 5).
- 12/ Ibid.
- 13/ (C) USMACV SITREP 43623, 131000Z Dec 65.
- 14/ (S) Extract After Action Taped Debrief by Major George W. Jensen, 5 Mar 66 (Doc 5).
- 15/ Ibid.
- 16/ Ibid.
- 17/ (S) Extract After Action Taped Debrief by Captain Ben W. Witterman, 5 Mar 66 (Doc 6).

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24/ (S)

Interview by Captain Melvin F. Porter with Colonel James P. Hagerstrom, Director TACC, 2d Air Div Thai, 17 Mar 66 (Doc 2).

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