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PROJECT CHECO REPORT

**THE DEFENSE of
LIMA SITE 36**

*

25 MAY 1966

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**HQ PACAF
Tactical Evaluation Center**

**Prepared by: Captain Melvin F. Porter
S.E. Asia Team
Project CHECO**

DOPEC-66- 03504

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE MAY 1966		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Defense of Lima Site 36				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT SAR	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 32	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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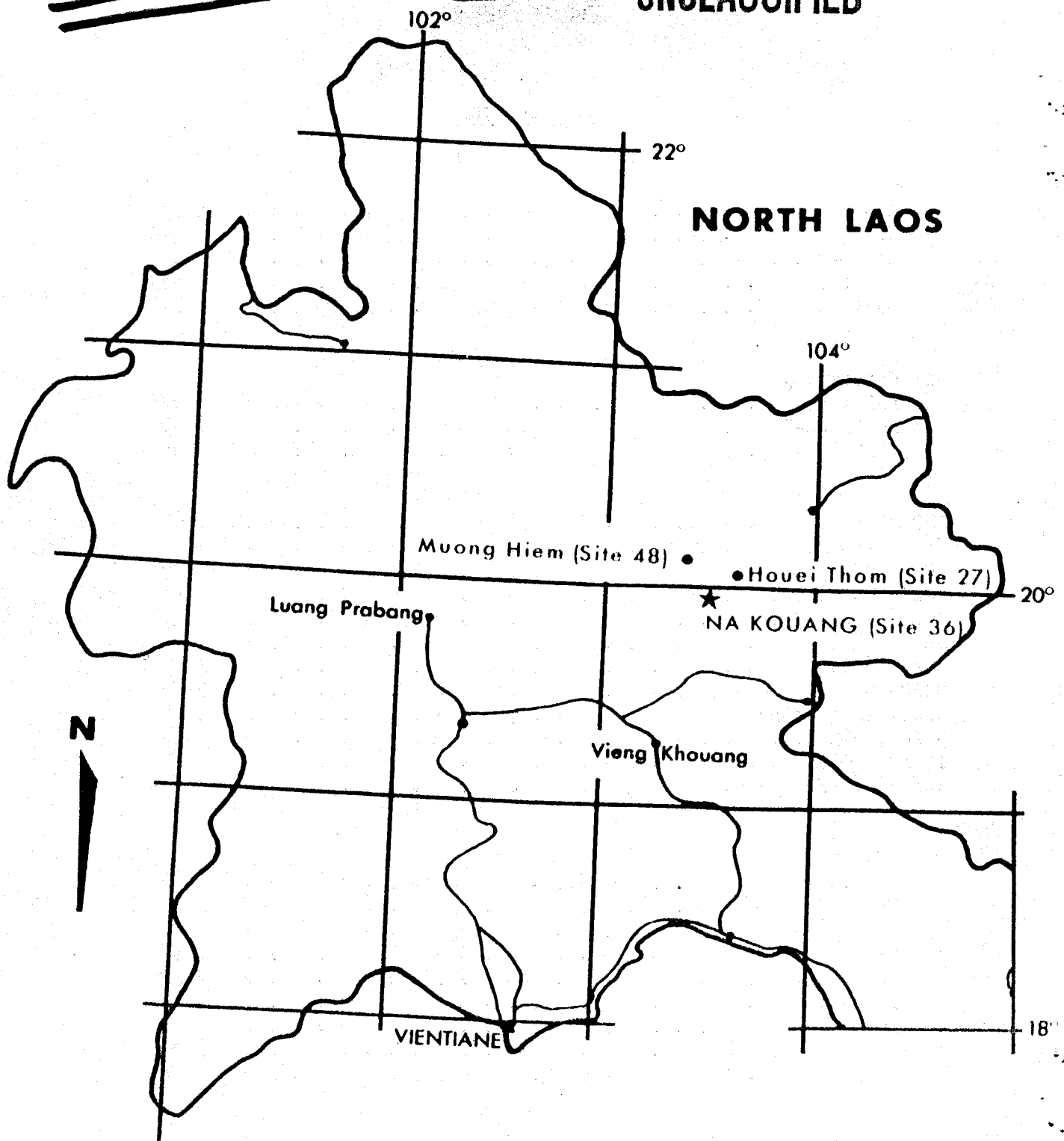
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THE DEFENSE OF LIMA SITE 36

In a long-planned effort to establish control over Route 6 in North-eastern Laos, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) directed a coordinated series of attacks against thr  Sites in Sam Neua, Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang Provinces, approximately 75 kilometers southwest of the city of Sam Neua. Lima Site 27 had been overrun during the night of 12 February 1966, ^{1/} and a full-scale assault was launched against Lima Site 36 in the early morning hours of 17 February. The ensuing days witnessed the overrunning of the site, the first use of napalm in Laos, some examples of individual courage and leadership, and the picture of an enemy so shattered by tactical air strikes that he was unable to occupy the territory he had "won".

Preparations for the attack had begun months before in North Vietnam. On 15 January, the 5th Battalion of the 168th NVA Regiment departed Phu Yen, North Vietnam, for Laos, according to the testimony given by a North Vietnamese private captured during the battle at Lima Site 36. ^{2/} The attack began with the overrunning of an outpost about one mile south of Na Khang at 2330 hours the night of 16 February. ^{3/} The enemy force, estimated at between 600 and 1000 men, continued moving rapidly and in the early morning hours began shelling the vicinity of the airstrip with mortars. ^{4/} Although the troops at the airstrip opened fire with 105 and 75MM howitzers, and repulsed the enemy's initial attack, the Communists continued to hold high ground to the southeast. Spooky 61 responded to Site 36's call for assistance and managed to work despite poor communications


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[REDACTED]

with the ground. The AC-47 dropped flares over the runway and then flew four miles south to fire in the vicinity of the overrun outpost, and continued this procedure until departure. The friendlies on the ground reported good hits on the enemy. One Force Armee Royale (FAR) element reported itself surrounded and under heavy attack but continued to hold throughout the night and was still in contact with the command post at daybreak.

Forward Air Controller, Captain Ramon Horinek, at Site 36, took off during a lull in the fighting on the morning of 17 ^{Feb} ~~April~~ and flew east to direct fighter strikes at the previously captured Site 27. Upon his take-off, Horinek's airplane sustained three hits from small arms fire, but his feeling was that these were merely from small patrol harassment. He returned to find that the strip was under full mortar attack and that he had no radio contact with the ground. The friendly forces managed to mark targets for him with 75MM smoke shells, so that Captain Horinek could direct a jet strike to relieve pressure on the runway. As the small arms and automatic weapons fire dwindled following the jet strikes, the Forward Air Controller had his [] pilot land on the mortar-pocked strip. The aircraft picked up two more hits during the landing, but Captain Horinek felt that the presence of a Forward Air Controller on the ground was an absolute necessity and that the risk must be taken. ^{5/}

As soon as the airplane landed, Captain Horinek ran to the nearby friendly trenches and set up his PRC-41 radio equipment. With a

T-28 acting as airborne Forward Air Controller "Eagle", Horinek

"AN F-4C from UDDORW (Imperial 8) 2 bomb damage
destroyed aircraft which carried 2 gun pod and
10 mm and 20 mm [REDACTED] CONFIDENTIAL
[REDACTED] - (502 Letter dated 6 AUG 66 from PACAF to PACAF
[REDACTED])

spent the day directing strikes. Among the first was a flight of three F-105s, put on target at 0910 hours. Flying through .30 and .50 caliber machine gun fire, the F-105s dropped fifteen 750 pound general purpose bombs in three bomb runs, then strafed with 20MM cannons. When they pulled off target at 0930 hours, they had destroyed three enemy positions, two .30 caliber machine guns, and two heavy mortars along with several enemy troops estimated killed. 6/

A flight of four F-105s, Whiplash Alpha, was scrambled from Korat for close air support to suppress mortar fire. Eagle Forward Air Controller, directed them against troop emplacements and mortar positions south of the runway, and in the fifteen minutes between 1040 hours and 1055 hours, Whiplash flight expended twelve 750 pound general purpose bombs, eight pods of 2.75 inch rockets and 1700 rounds of 20MM cannon into the target area. When the flight departed, the mortar fire had ceased; however, during the strike, Whiplash noted that 25 buildings in the village adjacent to the north end of the runway were burning, and several exploded and caught on fire from enemy mortar rounds. 7/

General Vang Pao, the Commander of all Meo tribesmen in Laos. Vang Pao planned to hold Site 36 for at least a few days but was making plans for a course of action in the event that Na Khang was lost. Vang Pao believed that if Site 36 were lost, then Site 48 would also fall within a few days. 8/

the American Ambassador had said napalm would be considered for use in Laos only to prevent the loss of a major

[REDACTED]

friendly position. [REDACTED] indicated that these conditions presently prevailed, and requested napalm strikes in support of Site 36. He felt that since the enemy was concentrated in known positions, napalm should have a devastating and decisive effect, and could possibly save Na Khang and Site 48. He stressed that incendiary would be dropped only under the control of experienced Forward Air Controllers, and he believed there would be no chance of hitting friendly troops. ^{9/}

The ambassador had directed that all Americans pull out from Site 36 by nightfall. At 1730 hours, the Americans at the site boarded a helicopter and moved to Site 48 Alternate at Muong Hiem where they spent the night.]

A concentrated attack was launched against Site 36 at 0430 hours on 18 February 1966, when the enemy from the east side of the runway penetrated to within 25 yards of friendly forces. ^{10/} Daylight found the enemy in this area exposed to close air support strikes. Locust One Flight, four F-105s from Korat, was on target from 0755 hours until 0830 hours, expending twelve 750 pound general purpose bombs and eight pods of LAU-3 rockets in the trees off the south and southwest ends of the runway. This flight put 3000 rounds of 20MM cannon fire immediately south of the runway in support of an attempt by Eagle Forward Air Controller to land. Visibility in the target area grew progressively worse as dust and smoke rose from the strikes, and intense black smoke emanated from the mortared buildings north of the runway. ^{11/}

At Site 48A, Captain Horinek loaded his equipment aboard a Helicourier (U-10, Short Take-Off and Landing liaison aircraft), intending to land at

1943

The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country. It is a very interesting and informative study of the country's development. The author has done a great deal of research and has gathered a wealth of material. The report is well written and is a valuable contribution to the study of the country's development.

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1943

[REDACTED]

Site 36, but found the mortar holes on the runway too numerous and too large for the Helicourier to attempt the landing. He returned to Site 48A where a helicopter transferred him to the hill north of Site 36 runway, the Command Post of the defending FAR troops. Colonel Pahn, Commander of the FAR forces, showed Horinek two North Vietnamese soldiers that had made it up to the top trenches before being killed. The determination of the NVA forces to take the site at any cost was graphically shown later during the interrogation of the North Vietnamese prisoner. His squad was told to ignore casualties within its ranks and push forward to its objective. This prisoner saw most of the members of his squad die around him just before his capture. 12/

Eagle Forward Air Controller was directing strikes to the south and southwest of the strip at this time. Captain Horinek, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] felt that the area along the north end of the strip should be reconnoitered, but the Laotians appeared reluctant to leave the security of their trenches on the hill. Only after the [REDACTED] Americans, led by the Forward Air Controller, went down the hill and across the runway, 13/ did Colonel Pahn's men follow. In Captain Horinek's words:

"I went walking to the left where there was some dirt and trees pushed aside by the bulldozer when they made the runway...There was this hole underneath this log where the water had drained underneath it. I was about - oh, I'd say - about three foot from this hold, and as I went walking up, this Viet Minh popped his head up. He had a rifle in his hand and it startled me for a minute. My gun was pointing to the left, and he was on my right... finally he swung his gun around and started shooting. I ducked, and when he swung his gun around he hit the dirt bank...and the two shots were right over my

1944

1944

[REDACTED]

head. I ducked down, and by that time I swung my gun around and let him have a whole clip. There was a lot of dust in the hole itself and I presumed I got him. After a little while I went down around the big pile, down around the right side and in behind. It was a kind of a little bank. I was going to go take a look underneath the log, and when I took a look, there were two of them alive. There was still some movement in there, so I let them have another burst with the AR-15 in the area. I stepped back and took another look - and it looked like there was still one alive. Then it occurred to me, 'Well, why don't we take a prisoner - we need them pretty bad?' So I told everyone else to stand back...I went walking up to the log, above the man who was underneath it. Just as I got up to the log he let a whole burst with his clip...I think he thought I was coming up through the grass. Anyway, he (had) emptied his clip, and...it appeared he didn't have any because he didn't even draw his gun in or anything. So I stepped down where he could see me, and started motioning for him to come out from underneath the log. I finally got him out from underneath...(and) after he got his hands above his head, I told somebody to come down and search him while I kept cover on him. So the Laotian soldiers came down, searched him, and we carted him off."

This prisoner, Private Neuyen Van Lonh, was the only enemy soldier captured during the action.

Soon after this incident, General Vang Pao flew in by helicopter and landed on the strip. He congratulated Captain Horinek on the capture of the North Vietnamese soldier, and was discussing the situation with him when the enemy - apparently recognizing the helicopter and its important passenger - mounted a full attack against the position. General Vang Pao was wounded in the chest and upper arm, and the helicopter sustained five hits during the hurried take-off. [Vang Pao was evacuated to Korat] where his condition was later pronounced good. ^{14/}

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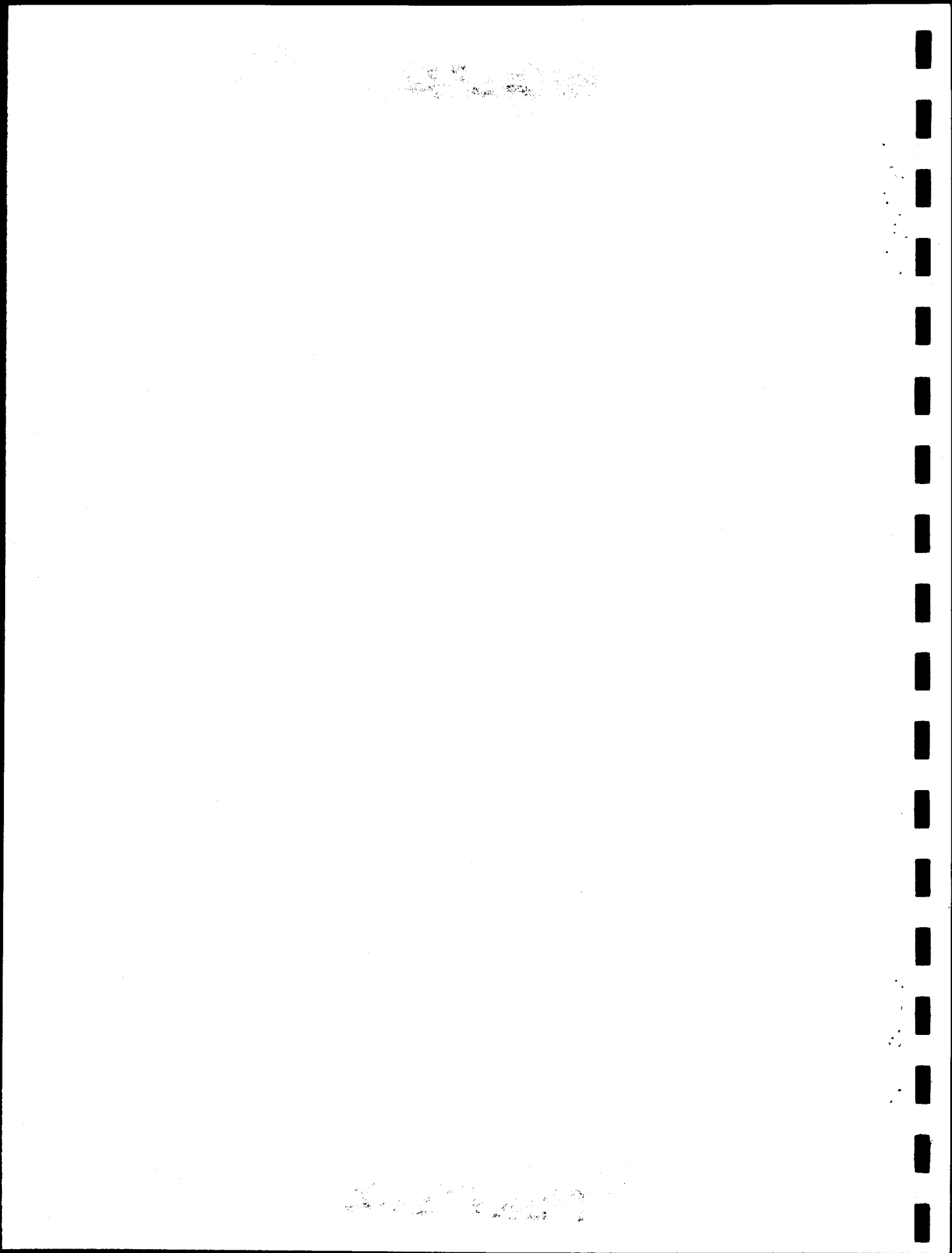




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MAIN ATTACK

FINAL DEFENSE POSITION



[REDACTED]

Napalm strikes at Site 36 were authorized for the first time in Laos, in a message transmitted by the Air Attache in Vientiane to the Deputy Commander of 2d Air Division/13th Air Force Thailand at Udorn. First flight to strike using incendiary was Kaiser Flight, four F-105s from the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing at Takhli, Thailand. The airborne Forward Air Controller, Puppy Love 15, put them in on target in two elements after first marking the enemy locations with smoke rockets, and verbally briefing them on the proximity of friendly troops. The fighters dropped 16 BLU-1B napalm cans on the Communists in the trees 200 meters southwest of the runway at Site 36. The first element was delayed in low altitude orbit while the Forward Air Controller directed the preceding flight and, having reached minimum fuel, were forced to depart the area immediately following their napalm drop. They reported medium intensity small arms fire from the enemy during their run, and observed buildings burning in the friendly areas. The entire site appeared surrounded by enemy troops, with heavy dust, smoke, and debris covering the entire target area. The second element began its strike at 1545 hours on the enemy troops on the northwest end of the runway, to cover the evacuation of [Captain Horinek and the FAR troops.] The Forward Air Controller authorized the strafing of the POL area after the napalm drops, and Kaiser 3 and 4 continued to strafe until they reached minimum fuel. They reported that the enemy was extremely aggressive despite the heavy air attack, and estimated that enemy losses must have been heavy. ^{15/}

Packard 1 through 5, four F-105s and one RF-4C, followed Kaiser flight and were directed to destroy all buildings and POL at the site, to keep

[REDACTED]

war materials from the enemy hands. They began their runs at 1610 hours after [Captain Horinek] informed Puppy Love 15 (FAC) that all friendlies were out of the area, destroying 75 percent of the buildings and damaging the rest. Packard Four destroyed a howitzer that had been taken from the FAR forces and was being used against them. ^{16/}

Imperial Flight included an RF-4C from Udorn (Imperial Five) a bomb damage assessment aircraft. The flight cleaned up after Kaiser and Packard flighters, destroying the remainder of two villages, including at least 50 buildings, the POL and ammunition area. Imperial Five, flying in trail and in side chase, observed several secondary explosions in the ammunition area and fuel dump, and created secondary explosions with his own strafing runs. ^{17/}

The initial fire in the friendly ammunition area was started when a white phosphorus round fired by a Laotian soldier set a field of grass afire, and the wind blew the flames up the hill and into piled of howitzer and mortar shells. [Captain Horinek's] radio equipment had been left nearby during his recon down across the runway. Seeing that the field was about to be overrun, and that the airborne Forward Air Controller and strike pilots needed communications from the ground, Horinek crawled up the slope to retrieve the equipment. His large single side-band radio had been destroyed by an explosion in an adjacent ammunition pit, but the PRC-41 portable set appeared serviceable. He carried it down to the rice paddies alongside the runway, where: ^{18/}

"...we were pretty well pinned down - bullets zinging all around - and it looked like they were advancing a

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[REDACTED]

little bit. In other words, we had a couple of them in the foxholes there, and you could see a couple of them coming out of the trees and taking potshots at us. So I told [Don [REDACTED]] attempting to evacuate a wounded Laotian soldier)...to go ahead and get back, and I was going to have some air strikes in here, and that it's kind of cover him as they pulled out. So the soldiers and Don started to pull out with the wounded men, and I threw out a can of red smoke to mark our position, and FAC the jet strike in the area.

When Don and the soldiers started pulling back, the Viet Minh were definitely on the move toward us but the air strikes put them back in the trees and sort of put them in hiding there. I told the airborne Forward Air Controller to put an airstrike right ahead of the red smoke, to cover me as I went through and that I was moving out of the area. So I sprayed the area with my rifle, got my radio and took off...I got to the first line of trenches and started FAC-ing some air strikes, napalm strikes - I believe it was the first strike there, in the same area that I'd just left."

[Captain Horinek] continued to call air strikes in on his heels as he retreated to the evacuation point. Along with [REDACTED]

a few wounded soldiers, he was the last to be helicoptered off the hill, as the NVA troops overrun it. The following day all FAR and Meo forces were withdrawn from Lima Site 36 area, and the site was left to the Communists. On the 19th, Whiplash Bravo came in to drop napalm and complete the destruction of any remaining war materials that had not been evacuated. In all, over the three day period, these strikes destroyed an estimated 75 percent of the POL, 90 percent of the ammunition stores, the military fortifications in the area, all the airfield support buildings, 85 percent of an evacuated refugee camp, two 105MM howitzers and one 75MM recoilless rifle. ^{19/} Little was left for the enemy to exploit.

2023

[REDACTED]

A total of 165 close air support sorties were flown against the NVA forces attacking Site 36, ^{20/} by aircrews from the 421st, 469th, 335th, 357th, 354th, 433rd, and 497th Tactical Fighter Squadrons, while night strike support was given by AC-47s of the 1st Air Commando Wing. ^{21/}

^{22/}
The captain said in his report:

"...Their refugees reported to them as they were passing through the 36 area...that the Vietnamese men were laying around like dead tree stumps. They estimated that there were about 1000 dead. Another refugee said that one column...took six hours to pass his position - they were too deep - everyone carrying either dead, or wounded."

While the refugee reports of large numbers of enemy casualties remained unconfirmed, the estimates appear to be bolstered by the fact that, although all Meo forces were withdrawn from Lima Site 36 by 19 February and the site effectively ceded to the enemy at that time, the Communists did not attempt to occupy it until the 21st of February.

The friendly losses were light, due in part to General Vang Pao's essentially guerilla philosophy - never attempt to hold ground against a superior enemy force. The Meo tribesmen did not attempt to set up a last ditch defense of Site 36, but served effectively as a force to fix the enemy so that tactical air power could strike the massed NVA troops. Captain Horinek made a confirmed body count of 70 enemy killed in action in the small rice paddy area alone. KBA estimates by the airborne Forward Air Controller, refugee reports, and strike pilots' reports tend to confirm that, although the Communists had won the field, they may have lost the battle.

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THE DEFENSE OF LIMA SITE 36

Footnotes

(References as noted provided in one cy to AFCHO and in DOPEC file copy.)

- 1/ (S) Extract of Taped Interview by Captain Ramon Horinek, FAC at LS 36, 21 Feb 66 (Doc 1).
- 2/ (C) _____
- 3/ (S) Telecon, 2AD/13AF Thailand, #00814, dtd 18 Feb 66 (Doc 3).
- 4/ (S) _____
(Doc 4).
- 5/ (S) Extract of Taped Interview by Captain Horinek, FAC at LS 36, 21 Feb 66 (Doc 1).
- 6/ (S) Telecon, 355TFW to Dep Comdr 2AD/13AF Thailand, OPREP-4 #0400, 17/0435Z Feb 66 (Doc 5).
- 7/ (S) Telecon, 6234TFW to Dep Comdr 2AD/13AF Thailand, OPREP-4 #221, 17/0435Z Feb 66 (Doc 6).
- 8/ (S) _____
(Doc 4).
- 9/ Ibid.
- 10/ (S) Msg, Dep Comdr 2AD/13AF Thailand to Comdr 2AD, no cite #, 18 Feb 66 (Doc 7).
- 11/ (S) Telecon, From 6234TFW, Korat, to Dep Comdr 2AD/13AF Thailand, OPREP-4 #233, 18/0515Z Feb 66 (Doc 8).
- 12/ (C) _____
- 13/ (S) Extract of Taped Interview by Captain Horinek, FAC at LS 36, 21 Feb 66 (Doc 1).
- 14/ Ibid.
- 15/ (S) OPREP-4, From 355TFW to 2AD TACC-IDI, 18/1600Z Feb 66 (Doc 10).
- 16/ (S) OPREP-4, From 355TFW, Takhli to Dep Comdr 2AD/13AF Thailand, DOI 0426, 18/1145Z Feb 66 (Doc 11).

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- 17/ (S) OPREP-4, From 355TFW, Takhli to Dep Comdr 2AD/13AF Thailand, DOI 0428, 18/1205Z Feb 66 (Doc 12).
- 18/ (S) Extract of Taped Interview by Captain Horinek, FAC at LS 36, 21 Feb 66 (Doc 1).
- 19/ (S) Msg, Dep Comdr 2AD/13AF Thailand to Comdr 2AD, no cite#, 18 Feb 66 (Doc 7).
- 20/ (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to JCSS, AIRA 00485, 12/0919Z Mar 66 (Doc 14).
- 21/ (S) 2AD Extract Weekly Air Intelligence Summary, Vol II, Nr. 8, 25 Feb 66 (Doc 13).
- 22/ (S) Extract of Taped Interview by Captain Horinek, FAC at LS 36, 21 Feb 66 (Doc 1).

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