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**USAF ENLISTED WEATHER OBSERVER CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAOTIAN WEATHER NET  
DURING THE CONFLICT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

**A Research Paper for the Enlisted Heritage Hall  
Gunter AFB, Alabama**

**SMSgt Gordon H. Fesenger**

Enlisted Air Force members have played a highly visible role in every major contingency since the Berlin airlift. The war in Southeast Asia (SEA) was no exception. The majority of the enlisted force worked at what could be considered traditional Air Force jobs: maintaining aircraft, loading munitions, performing search and rescue service, providing airfield security, observing the weather, etc. However, there were a very limited number of Air Weather Service (AWS) enlisted weather observers assigned to Detachment 15, 30th Weather Squadron (later redesignated 10th Weather Squadron) at Udon, Thailand who provided anything but traditional weather support. These observers were originally known as the Combat Weather Team (CWT) and later as the Special Warfare Weather Team (SWWT). This select group of enlisted weather observers was involved in the development and maintenance of a clandestine network of weather observation sites in the region.

As the war in SEA expanded, so did the need for accurate weather information. The number of unilateral air operations the USAF was flying in Laos was increasing at a tremendous rate and the small number of sites reporting weather observations was a concern. (10:7) In July 1965, only five observation sites existed in Laos. (5:7) Mission planners and directors needed weather observations because they provided significant data to support close air support and photo reconnaissance missions. The lack of observations negatively affected special air warfare operations. An unacceptable number of missions aborted in the target area because of adverse weather. (9:2) In addition, because of its position upwind from North Vietnam, observations from Laos were considered a military necessity during the southwest monsoon season. (5:7)

In an effort to overcome the problems caused by the lack of observations, the US Ambassador and Air Attaché to Laos, together with the manager of Air America (a contract air carrier) from Udon, approved a plan to develop a Laotian forward weather net on 20 January 1965. (9:1) The plan called for the establishment of weather observation sites located at Air America, Thai military, and Laotian military and paramilitary locations that had radio communications. According to the plan, "The net must exist in both Thailand and Laos to provide adequate weather coverage for counterinsurgency weather support." (9:1)

Captain Keith Grimes, Staff Weather Officer to the Special Air Warfare Center, traveled to SEA in June 1965 to try to obtain permission to enter Laos and develop a network of weather observing stations. (3:5) In July 1965, Captain Grimes successfully obtained permission from the US Air Attaché in Laos to proceed with the overall plan. Together with the Air Attaché, Captain Grimes developed a detailed plan to establish the Laotian Weather Network (LWN). Because the 30th Weather Squadron was responsible for weather support to all forces in SEA, the development of the network fell under its supervision and control. (3:5)

The plan to develop the LWN consisted of three phases. In the first phase of the plan, CWT personnel were to train Air America employees to take and report weather observations. The goal was to increase the number of weather observation sites contracted to Air America from five to eight and expand their reporting hours from 10 to 24 hours per day. During the second phase of the plan, the CWT was to train Laotians at 15 sites in Northern Laos to take and report weather observations. CWT observers would also train Laotians at three of these to determine upper level winds by taking pilot balloon (PIBAL) observations. The third phase called for the introduction of CWT observers into secure Laotian observation sites and to expand the network into the country's panhandle. (5:7-8) Once the high-level negotiations and planning were completed, enlisted observers from the CWT played an integral role in each phase of the plan.

The part played by the CWT observers was unlike that of any other weather personnel in SEA. Because of the restrictions on US military personnel in Laos at the time the plan was being executed, CWT observers had to travel in country as civilians. The US Ambassador to Laos had to approve the entry of each individual into the country. (9:1) They received no diplomatic immunity or official recognition of their presence in Laos. (6:1)

The weather observers assigned to the CWT were well qualified to do the job. In addition to their normal weather training, the vast majority of these observers were trained in special air warfare operations and were also parachutist qualified. (8:6) By June of 1966, the government had authorized five weather personnel from Det 15's CWT in Laos at any one time. Two of these

individuals were responsible for full time support of the Air America net, the other three for the development of the clandestine net.

On 1 February 1966, SSgt Maurice Kunkel began a two-week weather training class for 10 Air America communicators. (6:6) This began the first phase of the plan, to increase the number of Air America observation sites. By the end of June 1966, Det 15 personnel had trained 35 Air America employees at Udorn, Vientiane (Laos), and the various observing sites in Laos. (8:3) The training of Air America employees continued throughout the war.

In addition to training Air America personnel to take weather observations, Det 15 personnel were responsible for installing the weather equipment used at the sites. SSgt Kunkel and MSgt Melvin Plisch traveled extensively in Laos installing equipment at Pakse, Luang Prabang, Muong Phalane, and Attapeu. In order to establish the planned PIBAL observation sites, SSgt Kunkel and A1C Andrew Wilder traveled to Luang Prabang with the PIBAL equipment. They transmitted the first PIBAL observation on 12 May 1966. A1C Wilder stayed on site an additional two weeks to train indigenous personnel to take the PIBAL observations themselves. (7:2)

The development of the clandestine net, called for in the second and third phase of the plan, did not prove an easy task. At the time the AWS personnel at Udorn were developing the planned LWN, the political situation in Laos was in chaos. A series of coups and counter-coups erupted as factions within the country vied for power delayed the initial insertion of the observing team into Laos. (9:1) Not only was the political situation chaotic, the military situation in Laos was very unstable.

The clandestine weather network was centered in Long Tieng, the headquarters for General Vang Pao. General Vang Pao commanded hilltop forces that were scattered throughout north central Laos. Each hilltop or landing strip was subject to attack by either the Pathet Lao (Laotian communist) or Viet Minh (North Vietnamese communist) forces. The commander of Det 15 reported, "It is a well-known fact that most locations in Laos can be over taken by the Viet Minh or Pathet Lao forces at any time they desire, or are willing to suffer the necessary losses." (6:2)

It was in this environment that CWT personnel traveled to develop the LWN. Their ability to successfully develop the LWN was based primarily on the personal reputations they earned with the Laotians. According to Maj George Pickett, the commander of Det 15:

The working arrangements which permit AWS personnel in a region where an extremely limited number of military are permitted have been developed through intimate and very personal contacts with individuals operating in Laos. Capt Grimes, MSgt Watson [Thomas], Lt Wong [Ronald], and SSgt Kunkel have personal contact with General Vang Pao. They work with the site ground forces commanders, and with some select Southeast Asian special indigenous forces. These relations are built on personal recognition and are an essential frame work to any further accomplishments. Capt Grimes originally established the necessary rapport by serving on some 166 forward air control strikes as strike controller. This kind of assistance to ground troops draws their support to our interests. MSgt Watson has been active in the same activity, and has served as an intelligence collector for the Air Operations Center at Vientiane during his field trips. The mission is a difficult, dangerous but rewarding one, which has opened many doors to our personnel."

(6:2)

Despite the difficulties, six locations on the clandestine weather net began reporting observations in December 1965. The number of observations received from these sites ranged from 388 at Long Tieng to one from Ban Pha Thuong. The Pathet Lao overran Ban Pha Thuong soon after it became operational. The loss of sites to the enemy would continue to be a problem. The enemy overran two other locations in February 1966. (6:3-4) Although the exact number of locations lost over the next several years is unknown, it can be assumed the losses continued. For example, the enemy overran a total of 12 observing locations between 1 January and 30 June 1968. At the same time, Det 15 personnel were establishing new locations. During the period mentioned above, the SWWT developed 15 new locations. Once again, "The close friendship and

the excellent rapport between the SWWT members and the indigenous observers proved to be the key to net development." (4:34)

Enemy activity was not the only problem hampering development of the LWN. Reliable communications, essential to the timely reporting of weather observations, proved troublesome. In January 1966, MSgt Watson worked to install a weather teletype between Vientiane and Udorn. CWT personnel worked a radio problem at Moung Soui that prevented the reporting of observations to Long Tieng. Communications problems made the collection of observations and their relay to Udorn difficult. Long Tieng experienced radio problems. (6:5) Despite the growing pains, training continued and work was ongoing to expand the LWN into the panhandle region.

In the early days of 1966, Det 15 received permission to expand into the Laotian panhandle in the area controlled by General La and General Ma, Chief of the Royal Laotian Air Force. The first operational location in the region, B. Houei Kong, reported its first observation 27 Feb 1966. (6:5) While installing equipment in the panhandle region, SSgt Kunkel met the senior man in charge of the road watch teams working out of Pakse who requested weather training for his teams. Unfortunately, Det 15 did not have sufficient personnel to provide training at the time. (7:1)

However, the road watch teams were to become an important part of the LWN. By the end of June 1966, Det 15 had trained 20 members of the road watch teams working in South Central Laos out of Savannakhet. (8:2) Sometime between 1 July and 31 December 1966, Det 15 received permission to establish additional observation sites along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other infiltration routes in the Laotian panhandle. (1:95) Although the road watch teams became inactive for weather observing purposes between November 1966 and March 1967, five teams were reporting by the end of June 1967. (2:113) The SWWT observers continued to train road watch teams to take weather observations. The SWWT trained 20 new road watch team members in the first half of 1968. (4:36)

In May 1967, five fixed locations that reported observations during daylight hours were established in the southern Laotian panhandle. (2:114) These five sites proved problematic due to

communications problems, illiteracy of prospective observers, and enemy activity. The SWWT worked continuously in this area to firmly establish five reliable daylight observing locations.

(4:36)

Sgt David Linscheid trained members of the Laotian Army in the central panhandle to supplement the road watch teams in the area. The observations available from these two stations were credited as being a key factor in improved relations between the Laotian Army and the Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF). In order to make the training of the indigenous observing force easier, Sgt Linscheid devised a Lao-English training manual. Sgt Linscheid also taught a basic meteorology course to RLAF pilots in Savannakhet during this time. (4:36)

As was mentioned earlier, the members of the CWT/SWWT who worked to develop the LWN faced a number of problems. Perhaps the most significant was the threat posed by enemy activity in the areas the teams were working. A number of times, enemy activity had a direct affect on CWT/SWWT activity.

On 16 Dec 1965, A1C Wilder was working at Ban Pha Thuong when the Pathet Lao overran the site. He escaped into the jungle and 36 hours later the Air Attaché recovered him after a full scale rescue effort. (6:3) In February 1966, MSgt Watson was on site at Na Khang when it came under heavy mortar attack by the Viet Minh. He was able to salvage the basic observing equipment as well as the theodolite from the PIBAL equipment. (6:5) In the beginning of January 1968, SSgt James Collins went to Nam Bac to provide additional training to the observers there. SSgt Collins remained at Nam Bac until he completed the training despite heavy mortar fire. Soon after he left, Nam Bac fell to the enemy. (4:35) The work SSgt Domingo Sanchez Jr. did to make Ban Houe Sane a surface and upper air (PIBAL) reporting station was abandoned when the site was overrun by forces advancing to Khe Sanh. (4:36)

Enemy activity was not the only thing threatening the health of CWT/SWWT members. As many people who fought in SEA discovered, the jungle can be a very unhealthy environment. In May of 1966, SSgt Kunkel was stricken by Dengue Fever while training observers at Luang Prabang and required evacuation to Vientiane. He then spent a lengthy recovery at Udom.

During the same period, MSgt Watson was laid up for 10 days with a fungal infection. (7:2) While such illnesses may not have been serious, they did stretch the limited resources available to work in Laos thin.

Their unique position as some of the few US military members in Laos also gave rise to some interesting situations. In an 18 May 1966 letter from Det 15's commander, Maj Pickett mentioned two interesting examples. During a trip to Moung Phalane, the locals asked SSgt Kunkel to tell the Air Force to stop bombing them. Evidently, some early air strikes had no forward air control to guide them to the correct target. The villagers kept a 750 pound bomb under their flagpole as a reminder that US jets had bombed them and they broke for cover whenever jets passed overhead. On another trip to Luang Prabang, the Chinese observer employed by Air America advised SSgt Kunkel and A1C Wilder not to go into town. Evidently, there were Red Chinese there at the time. (7:3)

It is obvious that the members of the CWT/SWWT worked in difficult conditions to develop the LWN. Not only were they at risk personally, they risked the embarrassment of the US government if their activities were discovered. The question that begs to be answered is whether or not it was worth the effort. Evidently, the LWN was at least partially successful.

Maj Pickett's 20 June 1966 letter to the US Air Attaché highlighted the early effectiveness of the LWN. According to Maj Pickett, "From 1 Dec 65 through early June 66, reports from the clandestine net increased from 700 a month to over 900 a month, providing invaluable support to USAF/RLAF mission planning and execution within Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam. These reports have provided a much needed weather gap-filler to the Southeast Asia Forecast Center at Saigon, enabling 7th AF commanders to make knowledgeable weather decisions on target and mission weather and significantly reducing the requirements for pre-strike Weather Reconnaissance missions." (8:2)

Early morning observations from Na Khang were used to support "Jolly Green" rescue operations in the area. (2:113) Meanwhile, the Air America stations were recognized for the high quality of their observations. (2:115) By January 1968, the number of observation sites had

increased from the original five to 21 and the number of observations being received per month was over 5570. (4:34)

Some factors offset these successes to a certain degree. As previously mentioned, communication problems occasionally slowed the timely reporting of observations. Delays in receipt of observations are significant due to the changeable nature of the weather. Also, the constant loss of observing sites to the enemy forced members of the CWT/SWWT to continually train new observers and establish new sites.

The enlisted weather observers of the CWT/SWWT worked hard to overcome the inherent difficulties of their mission. Because of the political situation of the time, they had to work without the support structure most of us take for granted, even when deployed to a war zone. Through their personnel efforts, these observers developed a strong working relationship of respect with the Laotian people. This relationship allowed them to effectively train indigenous personnel to take weather observations and develop the LWN. They carried out their mission under the constant threat of enemy action and did so in a professional manner. They dramatically increased the number of weather observations from Laos, valuable pieces of intelligence information. In their own unique way, these enlisted men faithfully served their country in SEA.

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