

It Takes Five to Tango - Wiren
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Not much has been said or written about the Tango Program. Perhaps because it is not a well-known subject, and relatively few pilots were involved. The Tango Program was an offshoot of project 404 implemented by now retired General Harry (Heine) Aderholt. It consisted of a group air commandos from Hurlburt AFB Florida that were assigned to Udorn Thailand for the purpose training the locals Thai, Lao, and Meo to fly the T-28 code named (Water Pump).

Early in may of 1964 I was instructed to go see the station manager. I immediately wondered what I had done wrong this time but, when I found out that four other of my cohorts were likewise summoned, I was somewhat relieved. With the station manager was a customer type (CIA). We were ushered into the office, and it was immediately evident that this was a closed-door meeting.

We were asked in the most strictest of confidence whether we would be interested in flying the T-28 (Trojan) for interdiction of roads, air to ground combat and SAR. To the man, we eagerly accepted the offer. It was our chance to retaliate after being shot at for several years in unarmed aircraft.

The reason for our selection was that we all (Rick Byrne, Ed Eckholdt, Joe Hazen, Tom Jenny and myself, John Wiren, (and later Don Romes) had prior experience in the T-28 and close air support training. With the exception of Eckholdt, we were all Marines. Ed was Air Force, but had flown the F-5 1.

On acceptance, we were asked to resign from Air America, Inc. our personal records were sanitized in the event we were shot down and captured. We would then be classified as mercenaries for the Royal Laotian Air force to protect the U. S. government from violating the Geneva Accord Agreement.

The rationale for this program was that there was evidence of a big enemy build-up massing to come down highway 47 from North Vietnam to gain as much territory as possible before the monsoon season. The road needed to be cut and the bridges destroyed to halt the advance, but the Laotians just did not have the experience at that time to do the job.

Because of the urgency of the situation our training commenced shortly after our agreement. We went to Udorn for several days of intense recurrent training with the air commandos, several of whom (Joe Potter & Bill MacShane) later joined Air America. We now had been formed into what was called the "A" Team (A for American) long before Mr. Tand, George Peppard.

Because of the time lapse and compressed activities, the chronological order of the following events became jumbled and hazy but after conferring with the participants, a consensus and time line has been established.

On our first mission, we departed Udorn at "zero dark thirty" to Vientiane. Air Force personnel had been placed there ostensibly as civilian technicians to the Lao government. Point in fact, they were really ordnance specialists there to load and hook us up. We were now armed and ready for action, and off we went on our first mission to destroy a bridge on hwy. N7 east of the PDJ and Ban Ban. We were carrying 500 lb. bombs, rockets, and 50-cal. ammo. We made our dive runs from east to west targeting the bridge. We didn't get the

bridge, but we must have seared the hell out of it. We did, however, crater the road. Tom Jenny didn't get a release on his bomb so he had to make an additional run. By now we woke up the bad guys, and the AA was flying thick and heavy.

Later the same day we returned to the same area and caught a truck convoy of 10 coming down the road from Vietnam. I believe Joe Hazen got the first one and I got the last one, trapping the rest in between. From then on, it was a turkey shoot. General Vang Pao later expressed his complete elation for the fact that he was now getting aerial support.

The very next morning at the crack of dawn, we launch again for an assault mission on the PDJ. I think it was primarily a psychological effort against the enemy to let them know we were around, and had the capability to hit them at home base. As we came around the west edge of the PDJ, a voice came up on our radio frequency and said "go get cm guys". I never knew for sure who said that, but suspect it could have been Pop Buell or Tony Poe. As we skirted the north side of the PDJ we slipped down a pass at very low level letting us out on the plain itself it was a complete surprise attack for targets of opportunity. Tom Jenny selected an armored vehicle and got into a shoot-out with it. As a result he sustained 8 holes across the leading edge of his wings. Joe Hazen and Rick Byrne went after a flat bed truck with 55gal. drums of fuel. Joe took a bullet hole in his canopy less than a foot behind his head and his voice went up at least one octave. I never got to discuss this business with Ed Eckholdt, as he passed away before I had the chance. I spotted a jitney bus chock-full of the enemy hanging on as it traveled east down the dusty road. took aim at it and pulled the trigger, but was so low and close that the bullets converged beyond them (300 yards). My pass was from north to south and I quickly turned out to the left to come around for another go at them. As I started my run again, I noticed that soldiers were running up a hill right next to me taking the tarps off the AA. By now the jitney was going full out and the driver was intent on keeping watch on me. His eyes were as large as the proverbial saucers accompanied with a look of terror on his face. The road forked and in the middle was an abandoned derelict Russian tank. The driver was so intent on me that he plowed full speed into the tank making human Frisbees out of the occupants. Scratch one jitney bus! My adrenaline must have been pumping 200% since I continued to make passes even after I had expended all ammo.

Some years later I had the occasion to have a drink with Dick Crafts who was then a pilot with Eastern Airlines out of New York. We reminisced about Air America days, and he asked me if I recalled that day on the PDJ. He revealed that he was with a customer type in a chopper back up on a hill to the northwest, watching the whole event, standing by for pick-up in the event we got shot down. He said he had never seen so many tracer bullets flying that were directed at us, as we did our thing. Knowing that between each tracer there were several other projectiles. He said he would probably have faked a bad magneto check should one of us go down.

We returned to Vientiane and for some unknown reason, General Ma, commander of the Laotian air force wanted us to leave the aircraft there instead of going on to Udorn. Joe Hazen said to tell the general to go get his own holes. After landing back at Udorn later that evening it was found by the maintenance crew that all five of our aircraft had taken hits.

Over the next several years we were involved in many more missions, all of them different, all of them exciting; e.g., rescuing Billy Zeitler from his downed Hotel 19, plucking a downed military pilot out of North Vietnam. As the US Military became more involved in Laos our mission was reduced to mostly SAR. New pilots came into the Tango Program as some of the original group were transferred north to Japan or elsewhere.

All said and done, we were very fortunate in not losing any pilots and only two aircraft. I was just a bit player in the scheme of things but was pleased and honored to be part of this group. We sure had one hell of a run.