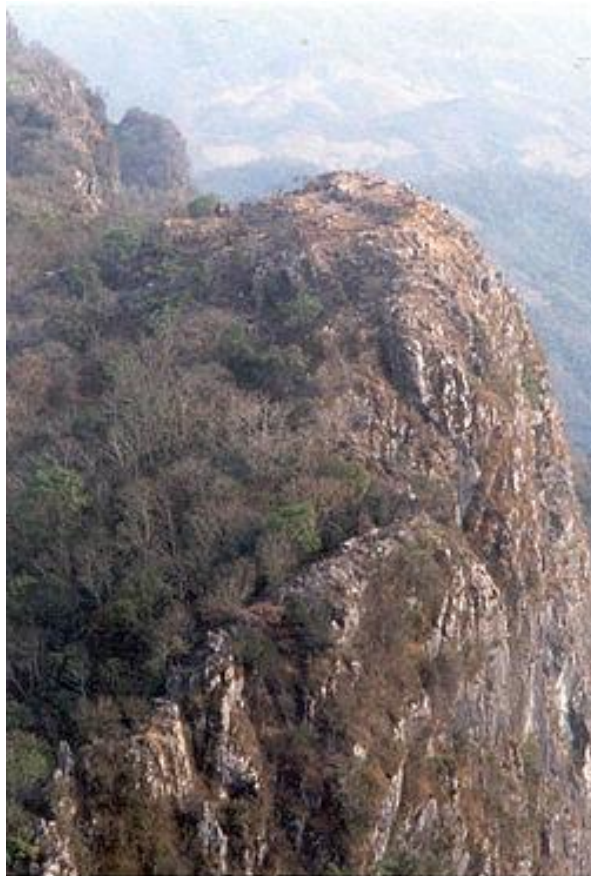


TOP SECRET SITE 85 compiled by Gene Adcock, CMSgt, USAF (CCT) Retired.

Developed from data available on line to include *The Battle of Lima Site 85*, from Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*; the Air Force Magazine article *The Fall of Lima Site 85* and the Air Force Magazine article *Etchberger, Medal of Honor*. A Combat Controller, Sergeant Roger Hoffman was operating at the helipad during the evacuation of Lima Site 85.

10 March 1968 - Phou Pha Thi, Laos - The Battle of Lima Site 85, also called *Battle of Phou Pha Thi*, was fought as part of a military campaign waged during the Vietnam War and Laotian Civil War by the Vietnam People's Army (then known as NVA) and the Pathet Lao, against airmen of the United States Air Force 1st Combat Evaluation Group, elements of the Royal Laos Army and Royal Thai Border Patrol



Police, and the Central Intelligence Agency-led Hmong Clandestine Army. The battle was fought on Phou Pha Thi mountain in Houaphanh Province, Laos, on 10 March 1968, and derives its name from the mountain top where it was fought, or from the designation of a landing strip 700 feet (210 m) in length in the valley below, and was the largest single ground combat loss of United States Air Force members during the Vietnam War.

The U.S. facility atop of Phou Pha Thi, known as Lima Site 85, was the site of a major battle on 10 March 1968. Source Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

During the Vietnam War and the Laotian Civil War, Phou Pha Thi mountain was an important strategic outpost which had served both sides at various stages of the conflict. In 1966, the United States Ambassador to Laos approved a plan by the United States Air Force (USAF) to construct a TACAN site on top of Phou Pha Thi, as at the time they lacked a navigation site with sufficient range to guide U.S. bombers towards their target in North Vietnam. In 1967 the site was upgraded with the air-transportable all-weather AN/TSQ-81 radar bombing control system. This enabled American aircraft to bomb North Vietnam and Laos at night and in all types of weather, an operation code-named *Commando Club*. Despite U.S. efforts to maintain the secrecy of the installation, which included the "*sheep-dipping*" of the airmen involved, U.S. operations at the facility did not escape the attention of the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces.

Towards the end of 1967, North Vietnamese units increased the tempo of their operations around Phou Pha Thi, and by 1968 several attacks were launched against Lima Site 85. In the final assault on 10 March 1968, elements of the VPA 41st Special Forces Battalion attacked the facility, with support from the VPA 766th Regiment and one Pathet Lao battalion. The Hmong and Thai forces that were defending the facility were overwhelmed by the combined North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces

Phou Pha Thi is a remote mountain located in Houaphanh Province, north-eastern Laos. The mountain, which is about 1,700 meters (5,600 ft) high, was located within the Royal Laos Army's Military Region 2, and situated about 24 kilometers (15 mi) from the border of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and

48 kilometers (30 mi) away from Sam Neua, the Pathet Lao capital. For the local Hmong and Yeo tribes that lived in the area, Phou Pha Thi (also Phou Phathi) was a place of religious significance; they believed it was inhabited by spirits who possessed supernatural powers to exercise control over the circumstances in their lives. The United States Air Force (USAF) considered Phou Pha Thi to be an ideal location for installing a radar navigation system to assist U.S. pilots in their bombing campaigns against North Vietnam, and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Laos was considered a neutral country by the International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos signed on 23 July 1962, so the United States military was prohibited from openly conducting operations in the country. For that reason, activities undertaken by the USAF in Laos had to be approved by the U.S. Ambassador to Laos William H. Sullivan. When the plan to install a navigation system on top of Phou Pha Thi Mountain was initially proposed, Sullivan opposed the idea as he suspected that Laotian Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, would not allow his country to be involved in an aerial offensive against North Vietnam. Souvanna did, however, permit the installation on the condition that it must not be manned by U.S. military personnel.



Phou Pha Thi is located in north-eastern Laos, the site of a U.S. TACAN facility known as Lima Site 85.

Map of Laos, Vietnam and Thailand shows relationship of Phou Phathi west of Hanoi. Source Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

In August 1966, the USAF installed a TACAN System, an autonomous radio transmitter that provided pilots with distance and bearing in miles relative to the station, on Phou Pha Thi. Then in 1967 under the codename **Heavy Green**, the facility was upgraded with the TSQ-81, which could direct and control attacking jet fighters and bombers to their targets and provide them with precise bomb release points. It began operating in late November 1967 as Operation Commando Club. To operate the equipment within the limitations imposed by the Laotian Prime Minister, USAF

personnel assigned to work at the installation had to sign paperwork that temporarily released them from

military service, and to work in the guise of civilian technicians from Lockheed Martin — the process is euphemistically called "sheep-dipping". In reality, they operated as members of the USAF Circuit Rider teams from the 1st Mobile Communications Group based at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base who rotated to the site every seven days.

Personnel working at the TACAN site were supplied by weekly flights of the 20th Special Operations Squadron based at Udorn RTAFB in Thailand operating under the codename Operation Pony Express, using Lima Site 85, the airstrip 700 meters (2,300 ft) in length constructed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the valley below. Hmong General Vang Pao, who spearheaded the allied war effort against North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces in Military Region 2, was entrusted with the task of guarding the facility using the Hmong Clandestine Army alongside CIA-funded Thai Border Patrol Police forces. Though a substantial amount of resources were invested to maintain the facility, USAF command doubted Vang Pao's capability to hold the installation, and all equipment had explosives attached so, in the event that the site was overrun, it could be destroyed. By late 1967, Lima Site 85's radar directed 55 per cent of all bombing operations against North Vietnam.^[5]

The radar site was deep in enemy territory. The assumption was that it was impossible for attackers to climb the sheer face of the mountain.

Lima Site 85 and the top secret Air Force radar facility sat atop one of the highest mountains in Laos, 15 miles away from the border with North Vietnam. The site was defended by a force of 1,000 Hmong irregulars in the valley below, but a key element in its security was the mountain itself.

The drop on three sides was nearly vertical, and US officials did not believe the enemy could climb the cliffs. The fourth side of the mountain was fortified.

The assumptions were wrong. On the night of March 10-11, 1968, under cover of a massive artillery and infantry assault on the mountain, a team of North Vietnamese sappers scaled the cliffs, overran the radar site, and killed more than half of the Americans they found there.

For years thereafter, the fate of Lima Site 85 was classified as top secret. When reports finally began to emerge, they were riddled with gaps and inaccuracies. Even now, almost 40 years after the attack, questions and doubts persist about what happened that night on the mountaintop.

The story of Lima Site 85 began with the weather.

With the onset of the northeast monsoon in October, the weather over North Vietnam turned unfavorable for air operations and it did not improve again until April. This was a big problem for ***Rolling Thunder***, the air campaign against North Vietnam from 1965 to 1968.

At the time, the US had two all-weather strike aircraft: the Navy's A-6 and the Air Force's B-52. Only a limited number of A-6s were available, and for reasons of political reluctance in Washington, the B-52s were held to bombing near the Demilitarized Zone. That left it up to F-105s and other tactical aircraft to carry the war to the north, and during the monsoon, they could strike targets around Hanoi for only four or five days a month.

A solution of sorts appeared in 1966 with an adaptation of Strategic Air Command's radar bomb scoring system. This modification, called the MSQ-77, guided aircraft to a precise point in the sky where

ordnance was released. It wasn't pinpoint accuracy, but it was good enough for targets such as airfields and industrial areas.

By 1967, the Air Force had five MSQ-77 radars working in South Vietnam and one in Thailand. However, none of these sites covered the North Vietnamese heartland around Hanoi. That required putting the radar where it would have an unobstructed line of sight to the airspace over Hanoi. Also, the target area had to be within 175 miles of the radar, which was the effective range of the system.

Such a place existed at Phou Pha Thi, a mountain in Laos 160 miles west of Hanoi. The Air Force already had a TACAN navigational beacon in operation on the rim of the mountain at an elevation of 5,580 feet. That was high enough to give the radar a straight shot to Hanoi.

There was also a rough landing strip, Lima Site 85, on the flank of the mountain. It was one of several hundred such Lima sites built all over Laos by the CIA's proprietary airline, Air America, to supply Hmong hill tribesmen fighting the Communist Pathet Lao. By strict definition, the Lima site was the airstrip, but the area around the TACAN was generally referred to as Lima Site 85 as well.

A portable version of the MSQ-77 radar, the TSQ-81, could be broken down into sections and transported to Phou Pha Thi by helicopter.

In Hostile Territory - There were several problems with Lima Site 85 as a location for a radar bombing system.

According to a 1962 Geneva agreement, which the United States had signed, Laos was a neutral country. No foreign troops were supposed to be there. The US promptly withdrew its forces in 1962, but only about 40 of the 7,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos ever went home. Rather than confront the North Vietnamese in Laos openly, the United States chose instead to give covert assistance to the Royal Laotian government.

As the conflict gathered momentum, the CIA and Air America supplied and trained the Hmong hill tribesmen, who were the best fighters in the Laotian Army. The war in Vietnam spilled over into Laos as well. By 1965, US aircraft were flying regular combat missions against targets in Laos. In the north, **Operation Barrel Roll** supported the government troops fighting the Pathet Lao, and in the south, **Operation Steel Tiger** interdicted the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle.

It was a secret war in the sense that the American public was not told about it, although Congress and the news media knew generally what was going on.

Lima Site 85 was situated in the part of Laos where the enemy was strongest. The mountain was 15 miles from the North Vietnamese border and less than 30 miles from the Pathet Lao capital of Sam Neua.

William H. Sullivan, the US ambassador to Laos, was wary of installing a bombing-radar in Laos, and he was adamantly opposed to bringing in US combat troops to defend the site. If there were to be a TSQ-81 system at Phou Pha Thi, the defenders would have to be Hmong, trained and organized by the CIA (which was known in Laos as CAS, or Controlled American Source). For further defense, US air strikes could be used against any forces that threatened the site.

If worse came to worst, air rescue could bring the people out. The assumption was that there would be plenty of time for helicopters to land at the helipad, 300 yards down the ridge from the radar site, and extricate the technicians.

Sheep Dipped - At the urging of the Air Force and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the United States took steps in 1967 to establish a TSQ-81 facility at Phou Pha Thi. Sullivan obtained concurrence—with conditions—from Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister of Laos.

“If the unit were to be installed, Souvanna suggested that it must be done without his knowledge,” Sullivan notified Washington in June. “Technicians servicing the site would have to be civilians or military personnel with civilian documentation.”

In July, Souvanna agreed to the proposal. Sullivan reported, “I assured him that: a) All USAF markings would be removed from equipment, b) Detonators would be affixed to permit immediate destruction in case of imminent danger, [and] c) Personnel would be under civilian cover.”

The Air Force rejected the idea of sending airmen into Laos with fraudulent ID. If they were captured in “shallow cover,” pretending to be civilians, they would have no protection under the Geneva Convention as prisoners of war.

Instead, volunteers would go through a process known in the shadowy world of special operations as “sheep dipping.” They would leave the Air Force, be hired by a legitimate civilian company, and go into Laos as employees. When their mission was over, they would be welcomed back into the Air Force. If they were captured or killed, their families would be covered by company or Air Force benefits.

Lt. Col. Gerald H. Clayton, who had extensive experience with MSQ-77 radars, would head the team. He and Lt. Col. Clarence F. “Bill” Blanton handpicked the airmen who would be asked to volunteer. They had known most of them for years.

The proposition was put to the selected candidates at Barksdale AFB, La., in September 1967. Forty-eight of them—four officers and 44 enlisted members—volunteered for the program, which was named **Heavy Green**. They were separated from the Air Force and employed by Lockheed Aircraft Service Corp., a subsidiary of Lockheed Aircraft Corp. While they were in the program, they would be paid by Lockheed, which also gave each of them a substantial life insurance policy.

Their wives were brought to Washington, briefed, and required to sign security agreements to keep the program secret. SSgt. Herbert A. Kirk’s wife, a German national, could not be granted security clearance and she did not attend.

Additional space was cleared atop Phou Pha Thi to make room for the radar installation, and an Army CH-47 Chinook cargo helicopter brought in the larger pieces of Heavy Green equipment. The expanded TSQ-81/TACAN area reached about 150 feet inward from the southwest rim. Beyond that point, the mountain rose in a tangle of rocky outcroppings and scrub brush to a peak 1.6 miles to the north.

The radar was rigged with explosives so it could be destroyed before the enemy could capture it. Heavy Green took over the TACAN as an additional duty. The radar bombing system went operational on Nov. 1, 1967.

Targeting the North - The Heavy Green team deployed to Udorn Royal Thai Air Base in northern Thailand and set up shop in two Quonset huts in the Air America compound. The sheep-dipped airmen lived in rented housing off base. Around Udorn, they wore uniforms and carried military ID. Ironically, this was a cover role, since they were, in fact, civilians, having separated from the force.

When they flew to Lima Site 85 for two-week rotational tours of duty, they wore civilian clothes and carried their Lockheed ID.

Clayton was commander of Det. 1 of the 1043rd Radar Evaluation Squadron, which had headquarters at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. He also was manager of the Lockheed field service group at Udorn.

The clandestine nature of the site led to fuzzy lines of control and responsibility. The Air Force was the main user of Lima Site 85 services, and the daily tasking for support of bombing missions came from 7th Air Force in Saigon. However, Sullivan was the ultimate authority over US activity in Laos and everybody knew it.

The Geneva agreement prohibited a US military headquarters in Laos. Therefore, under a “Country Team” policy, military affairs were directed by the ambassador. Sullivan was vigorous in the exercise of his authority, and the war in Laos was marked by a power struggle and antagonism between Sullivan and the military. Various arms of the US government had an interest in Project Heavy Green, but none of them was exclusively in charge.

The Pathet Lao were active in the vicinity of Phou Pha Thi and they regularly clashed with the Hmong, who were trying to keep communist forces from using the mountain valleys as a route into central Laos. Concern about the vulnerability of Lima Site 85 was offset by its operational value to the Air Force.

The site was guarded by a force of about 1,000 indigenous troops, mostly Hmong but including some Thais. Of these, 200 were in the immediate vicinity of the radar site with the other 800 on the lower parts of the mountain. Two CIA paramilitary officers were stationed at the CAS area, just south of the helipad. The approaches to the radar site were strewn with mines and concertina wire.

Nobody expected the enemy to get that far. From the bottom of the mountain, rocky slopes extended about halfway up at angles of 45 to 60 degrees. The rest of the way to the top was much steeper, rising in places at 85 to 90 degrees.

In response to an inquiry from 7th Air Force, the office of the air attaché in Vientiane reported that the approaches to the top of Phou Pha Thi were “virtually a vertical climb and those avenues which can be traversed are heavily mined.” Phou Pha Thi could be taken if the enemy concentrated a large force—about four battalions—charged in full strength, and was willing to accept heavy losses, the attaché office said.

The northeast monsoon of 1967-68 was especially severe. For the 18 weeks the Lima Site 85 radar was in operation—that is, from Nov. 1, 1967, to March 10, 1968—the Air Force relied on it for 23 percent of the air strikes in the northern part of North Vietnam. Operations conducted under the direction of Site 85 were called *Commando Club*.

Bombed by Biplanes - The first attempt to destroy the radar site came from the air. About 1 p.m. on Jan. 12, two Russian-built An-2 Colt biplanes made three bombing passes against the summit of the mountain.

The biplanes had a World War I look to them, but they were really not that old. The An-2 first flew as a crop duster in 1947. Cruising speed was below 150 mph, which probably was an advantage in this case because the biplanes were dropping improvised munitions through tubes in the floor.

The “bombs” were converted 120 mm mortar rounds that would arm in the slipstream and detonate on impact. The brunt of the attack fell on the CAS area, where shiny rooftops apparently drew the attention of the An-2 pilots. They did not target the TSQ-81 facilities until the final pass, and the bombs they dropped there all missed. The attack killed two Laotian civilians and two guerrillas, but it did no damage to the radar site.

An Air America Bell 212 helicopter, the civilian version of the Huey, was on the helipad at the time of the attack. The crew leaped aboard and gave chase. The helicopter was faster than the biplanes. As it flew past the An-2s, the flight mechanic blasted them with a submachine gun, firing out the door and hitting both of them. One An-2 crashed and burned, and the other crashed 16 miles to the northwest while trying to clear a ridge. The rudder from one of the biplanes was recovered and taken to the Air America base at Long Tieng for a souvenir.

The security challenges increased. On the evening of Jan. 30, the enemy pounded the southern end of the mountain with a 30-minute mortar attack. It did not amount to much and was written off as a probing attack.

By the middle of February, the enemy was on all sides of the mountain, about seven miles away. On Feb. 18, the Hmong wiped out a small party of North Vietnamese five miles southeast of the site. Among those killed was an officer who carried a notebook with plans for a coming attack on Phou Pha Thi. It said three North Vietnamese battalions and one Pathet Lao battalion would take part. The notebook contained the word “TACAN” in English and it had the exact location.

Lima Site 85 continued to direct bombing in North Vietnam, but, by February, more than half of the Commando Club strikes were flown against the enemy forces surrounding the mountain itself.

In late February, the CIA said that the security of Phou Pha Thi could not be predicted beyond March 10, and Sullivan sent a message to the Air Force warning that the site probably could not be held much longer.

The Air Force did not want to pull out. “Due to the desirability of maintaining air presence over [the North Vietnamese] during present inclement weather period, Site 85 probably would not be evacuated until capture appeared imminent,” 7th Air Force said in a March 5 message to Pacific Air Forces officials. “The fact that complete security could not be assured in the original plan is noted.”

Up to then, the Heavy Green personnel at the mountain had not been armed. In March, the embassy approved the issue of M-16 rifles, although the technicians had not achieved proficiency with them before the big attack came.

On March 11—the TSQ-81’s last day of operation—19 Americans were at Phou Pha Thi. Sixteen of them were Heavy Green personnel. The radar technicians were divided into two shifts, one led by Blanton (a sheep-dipped lieutenant colonel and Clayton’s deputy) and the other by Stanley J. Sliz (a sheep-dipped captain). **Also at the site were a combat controller who had been sent from Vientiane to direct local air strikes** and the two CIA paramilitary officers in their own building near the helipad.

The Sappers Attack

The force that hit Phou Pha Thi on March 10 consisted of between five and seven battalions, amounting to some 3,000 troops. Mortar, artillery, and rocket rounds began falling about 6 p.m. The enemy was firing on the mountain from the north and east.

The barrage stopped at 7:45 p.m., having inflicted some damage on the living quarters, the TACAN antenna, and a defensive gun position. Fighting continued at the lower elevations. Blanton's team took the duty in the TSQ-81 van, while Sliz's team was sent to rest in preparation for duty later. With their quarters vulnerable to shelling, Sliz and his group decided to spend the night on one side of the mountain, where they would be sheltered from the artillery that was firing from the opposite direction.

They took their sleeping bags, weapons, and survival radios with them, descending about 20 feet over the side by means of a makeshift ladder fashioned from a C-130 cargo net. That took them to a small cliff, partially protected by a rocky overhang. The airmen often went there when off duty because it was a change from the tight confines of the radar site. There was nothing below except a straight drop to the valley below.

Through the night, A-26 bombers and F-4 fighters struck the attackers repeatedly, guided by Blanton's radar team. Sullivan considered evacuating the site, but the Air Force held to its position of evacuating only as a last resort if the situation became untenable. At about 9:30 p.m., Sullivan decided that nine of the Americans would be brought out at first light the next morning. That, as Sullivan said later, would be "one day too long."

Before midnight, 33 North Vietnamese sappers climbed the western side of the mountain, a feat that US officials assumed was impossible. The sappers had trained for months, practicing on karst peaks and the faces of rock cliffs. They emerged on the top of the mountain at a point between the radar buildings and a Thai guard post.

The sappers waited in hiding until 3 a.m., then began moving toward the Heavy Green facilities. They bumped unexpectedly into an enemy guard, who threw a grenade. The sappers immediately opened fire on the radar buildings with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher and submachine guns. "The Americans were taken by surprise," the North Vietnamese report said later.

Eventually, the North Vietnamese discovered Sliz's team on a rock-overhang about 20 feet down from the top. The sappers shot down the side of the mountain with automatic weapons and lobbed grenades over the slope.

Several of the Americans on the ledge were killed outright. Sliz and John Daniel were wounded. However, CMSgt. Richard L. Etchberger was unhurt and, because of him, his wounded companions would live to be rescued. Etchberger kept the sappers at bay with his M-16 rifle.

At least eight Americans were still alive on the mountain. Etchberger, Sliz, and Daniel were on the ledge. The TACAN technician, Jack Starling, was by the TACAN, wounded and playing dead. Bill Husband was on top of the mountain, just north of Starling. **The combat controller, Sgt. Roger Huffman, was near the helipad.** The two CIA officers, Howard Freeman and John Spence, were at the CAS area south of the helipad.

Rescue - At 5:15 a.m., Sullivan decided the evacuation of all personnel would begin in two hours, at 7:15 a.m. Incoming fire stopped just before 7 o'clock. Air America and Air Force rescue helicopters were standing by, ready to go in, but they were drawing fire from the summit.

Hard fighting continued on the lower parts of the mountain. The senior CIA officer, Freeman, and 10 Hmong soldiers went to TSQ/TACAN area to determine the situation. Freeman got no response when he called out, but his party exchanged fire with the North Vietnamese attackers. Freeman was shot in the leg and several of the Hmong were killed. A flight of A-1E Skyraiders made a strafing pass over the site to brush back the enemy before the helicopters approached.

First in, at 7:35 a.m., was an Air America Huey from Long Tieng (LS-20A). Spotting the men on the ledge, the pilot pulled close to the cliff and the flight engineer brought the survivors up by cable. Husband ran to join them.

Etchberger helped Daniel and Sliz, who were wounded, board; then he and Husband went up the cable. Etchberger was no sooner inside the helicopter than ground fire came up through the floor, mortally wounding him. He died minutes later. (Etchberger was awarded the Air Force Cross, posthumously. It was presented to his wife, Katherine J. Etchberger, by Gen. John P. McConnell, the Air Force Chief of Staff, in a closed ceremony in the Pentagon Jan. 15, 1969. Present, in addition to the family, were Clayton and almost every senior officer on the Air Staff.

At 8:20 a.m., an Air America helicopter took out Thai and Hmong wounded. Freeman went with them. A USAF Jolly Green Giant brought out more Hmong wounded at 8:46 a.m. At 8:54 a.m., Air America picked up Spence and Huffman. Husband told the rescuers that one more person, Starling, was probably still alive at the site. A Jolly Green Giant went to get him and picked him up at 9:46 a.m.

Of the 19 Americans on the mountain, eight had been brought out. Of the remaining 11, the first count was eight dead and three presumed dead, but that was updated by the Vientiane embassy within 24 hours: "Latest interrogation and discussion with survivors has led to a firm conclusion that three previously carried as missing were indeed seen dead by one or more survivors. Therefore, we are no longer carrying any personnel missing, but consider all of those who were not, repeat not, extracted, to be dead."

In their report, which surfaced years later, the North Vietnamese claimed to have killed 42 men at the site and wounded many others, "primarily Lao and Thai soldiers."

Fall of Site 85 - The Hmong defenders around the site held the trail to the summit as late as 7:30 a.m., but they were badly outnumbered and the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao force was too powerful. Phou Pha Thi soon fell to the enemy. In the furor of the attack, nobody detonated the thermite with which the radar had been rigged.

"Presuming those who were not evacuated on the morning of 11 March were dead, a fairly concentrated air effort was launched on that same day to destroy the technical and personal equipment left behind on Site 85," the embassy in Vientiane reported.

Sullivan met with Souvanna Phouma and told him that Site 85 had not been destroyed but that Air Force napalm strikes were being delivered. "He urged me to destroy as much evidence as we can rapidly," Sullivan said.

A message from the embassy on March 16 said that the next of kin had been notified of the "missing status" of the 11 airmen who were not evacuated. The message said the Air Force wanted to delay for a "reasonable period" or until confirmation of death before officially going from "Missing in Action" to "Killed in Action." That change was made March 25, thereby authorizing insurance payments to the families.

The Heavy Green survivors were restored to membership in the Air Force. The families of the 11 missing men received payments from the Lockheed insurance policy, and, in 1969, all of them except Herbert Kirk were reinstated in the Air Force. Kirk's wife did not have security clearance to be told about the classified project. Apparently, Kirk agreed that, in the event of his death, the government would stay with his cover story and not reinstate him in the Air Force. His family would rely on the Lockheed survivor benefits instead. This arrangement would be later overturned in court.

The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao moved to consolidate their victory. By September, they had more than 20 battalions in the Sam Neua area. Hmong Gen. Vang Pao launched a major operation to retake the mountain in December. His forces did recapture the landing strip, the helipad, and the CIA area, but they were unable to take the mountaintop. They fell back, and Phou Pha Thi was never recaptured.

There was no attempt to install another TSQ-81 in Laos. On March 31, President Johnson announced a partial halt of bombing of North Vietnam and made the bombing halt complete on Nov. 1. There was no longer a need for a radar to guide strikes in the north.

Questions in the Aftermath - The "*Secret War*" in Laos was publicly disclosed in 1970, but the announcement revealed nothing about Lima Site 85 and what had happened there. Up to then, the families had not been told much of the story. In 1970, an Air Force team, which included Clayton, visited the families and gave them more of the details.

One of the widows, Ann Holland, did not believe she was getting the full answers or the straight answers about the fate of her husband, TSgt. Melvin A. Holland. In 1975, she sued the Air Force and Lockheed for negligence. She said the government had not candidly informed her of the facts of his death. The suit lingered in the courts until 1979, when it was dismissed.

According to Timothy N. Castle, author of a deeply researched 1999 book, *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam*, Ann Holland's lawsuit alerted the Kirk family as to what had happened at Lima Site 85. Mrs. Kirk had never been informed of the operation because she had no security clearance. The Kirk family filed a lawsuit of its own. Not until then was Kirk's membership in the Air Force posthumously restored and full military survivor benefits given to his family.

The 11 men not recovered from Phou Pha Thi, including Kirk, were awarded the Bronze Star posthumously in 1984.

The story came out in bits and pieces. Among the earliest public revelations was an official Air Force history of the war, published in 1977. It described the fall of Lima Site 85, but described it as a navigation facility, leaving out any reference to the TSQ-81 bombing mission. In 1978, *Airpower in Three Wars*, written by Gen. William W. Momyer, former commander of 7th Air Force, described the mission and operation of the site in some detail but did not mention its capture.

A 56-page official Air Force history of the loss of the site, written for internal use and classified Top Secret when it was completed in August 1968, was declassified in its entirety in 1988. It adds substantial detail but is marred by a number of factual errors. The history is now available on the Internet.

The North Vietnamese report—titled "*Raid on the TACAN Site Atop Pha-Thi Mountain by a Military Region Sapper Team on 11 March 1968*"—was published in 1996 and obtained and translated by the Department of Defense in 1998.

Castle interviewed dozens of survivors and former officials for his 1999 book. It filled in numerous details and identified mistakes in earlier works.

In recent years, there have been recurring reports that some of the technicians at Lima Site 85 were captured, not killed. A former high-ranking Pathet Lao officer told Castle that prisoners were taken. He, however, had not been present at Phou Pha Thi, and his statement was contradicted by the statements of others, including former enemy soldiers who were there. They said there had been no prisoners. The detailed North Vietnamese account of the attack, published in 1996, did not report any prisoners either.

The Department of Defense credited the statement of the American survivors and other evidence, including study of aerial photos of the site taken on March 11, and held to its assessment and carried the 11 airmen on its rolls as "Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered."

Return to the Mountain - Since 1994, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, headquartered at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, has interviewed witnesses and made trips to Laos and Vietnam, gathering information about the fate of Americans at Phou Pha Thi. Among those interviewed have been villagers who lived near the site and former enemy soldiers who took part in the attack.

Excavations at Phou Pha Thi in December 1994 and January 1995 produced no information about American casualties. In March 2003, however, acting on information from new witnesses, representatives of the command searched the summit, the eastern and western slopes, the western cliffs, and the slopes below.

Two former North Vietnamese commandos who took part in the attack showed the investigators three places where they had thrown bodies over the cliff. The investigators threw mannequins over the edge at those points while a photographer in a helicopter videotaped their fall. That pointed the investigators to a ledge, 540 feet below.

Mountaineer-qualified specialists scaled down cliffs to the ledge, where they discovered human remains, leather boots in four different sizes, five survival vests, and other fragments of material that indicated the presence of at least four Americans. The team worked in hazardous conditions, including strong winds and falling rocks, which constrained the search.

In December 2005, the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office announced the identification of the remains of TSgt. Patrick L. Shannon, one of the 11 airmen at Phou Pha Thi. Further excavation of the ledges is planned, assuming the willingness of the Laotian government to approve access to the site.

Today, commentaries on the fall of Lima Site 85 appear with some regularity in newspapers and military journals, but interpretations differ and the controversy continues.

The losses at Phou Pha Thi seem all the more tragic because, 20 days after the attack, the White House put an end to Rolling Thunder operations above the 20th parallel, of which the Lima Site 85 radar was a part, and the bombing of Hanoi came to a halt. The courage and sacrifice of those who died on the mountaintop stood in counterpoint to the strategic indecision and changing political winds in Washington.

The Americans at Phou Pha Thi on March 11, 1968

- Rescued: Capt. Stanley J. Sliz, SSgt. John Daniel, SSgt. Bill Husband, SSgt. Jack Starling, Sgt. Roger Huffman (USAF Combat Controller), Howard Freeman (CIA), John Spence (CIA).
- Killed during rescue: CMSgt. Richard L. Etchberger.
- Killed in action/body not recovered: Lt. Col. Clarence F. Blanton, MSgt. James H. Calfee, TSgt. Melvin A. Holland, SSgt. Herbert A. Kirk, SSgt. Henry G. Gish, SSgt. Willis R. Hall, SSgt. James W. Davis, SSgt. David S. Price, TSgt. Donald K. Springsteadah, SSgt. Don F. Worley.
- Killed in action/body recovered: TSgt. Patrick L. Shannon

Etchberger awarded Medal of Honor - The 19 Americans on the mountain top in Laos were in grave danger. Most of them were technicians, operating a top secret radar site deep in what was effectively enemy territory, just 15 miles from the North Vietnam border. They were lightly armed, with only 10 M-16 rifles shared among them. The mountain—Phou Pha Thi, which rose almost 6,000 feet above the valley below—was defended by 1,000 Hmong irregulars and US airpower.

The drop on three sides was nearly vertical and the fourth side was fortified. The assumption was that it would be impossible for attackers to climb the sheer face of the mountain. On March 10, 1968, that proposition was about to be tested. A force consisting of between five and seven North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao battalions had the mountain surrounded.

The mountain was not impregnable after all. In the long night that followed, North Vietnamese sappers, covered by mortar, artillery, and rocket fire, scaled the perpendicular cliffs and overran the radar site. Only seven of the Americans got away alive, three of them because of the heroic actions of CMSgt. Richard L. Etchberger, who was himself killed during the last moments of the evacuation.

What happened at Lima Site 85 on Phou Pha Thi was shrouded in official secrecy for decades. It would be 42 years before Etchberger received full and public acknowledgment for saving the lives of his colleagues, but on Sept. 21, 2010, his three sons were presented the Medal of Honor, awarded posthumously to their father, by President Obama at the White House.

On the advice of the CIA, the US ambassador in Vientiane, who was head of the "Country Team" in Laos, had warned that the small contingent on the mountaintop could not hold out and proposed sending helicopters to extricate them. Seventh Air Force in Saigon, which depended on the radar to guide bombers over North Vietnam, disagreed and insisted that the site remain in operation unless "capture appeared imminent."

The radar site on the mountain was a secret because the Americans were not supposed to be there. By the terms of a 1962 Geneva agreement, Laos was neutral. No foreign troops were permitted.

The United States had withdrawn its forces. North Vietnam did not. But by 1968, both countries were again active in Laos, backing different sides in the ongoing civil war.

Etchberger's defense against the North Vietnamese sappers saved his companions, but he was mortally wounded on the rescue helicopter. USAF photo by SMSgt. David Hawkins

Sheep Dipped - The Air Force's Rolling Thunder air campaign against North Vietnam was severely hampered by bad weather, especially during the northeast monsoon between October and April. The Combat Skyspot radar bombing system offered a partial solution. It guided aircraft to a precise point in the sky from which ordnance could be released at predetermined coordinates.

The catch was that the Combat Skyspot radar had to be within 175 miles, line of sight, of the bomb drop point. Phou Pha Thi, one of the tallest mountains in Laos and 160 miles west of Hanoi, fit the bill. The Air Force already had a tactical air navigation system beacon there.



The mountain was known to airmen as Lima Site 85, after a rough landing strip on the southeastern flank, operated by the CIA's proprietary airline, Air America.

The Air Force could not openly deploy airmen to Lima Site 85 and it was unwilling to send them into Laos with fraudulent identities. If captured while pretending to be civilians, they would have no protection as prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. It was decided that they would be—in the vernacular of covert operations—"sheep dipped." They would be discharged from the Air Force, hired by Lockheed Aircraft Service Corp., a subsidiary of Lockheed Aircraft, and go to Laos as employees. When their mission was over, they would be welcomed back into the Air Force.

The project was called Heavy Green. The teams to conduct the operation were drawn from the 1st Combat Evaluation Group, which ran the Strategic Air Command radar bomb scoring system, on which Combat Skyspot was based. Heavy Green would take over the TACAN as well. In September 1967, after listening to the classified briefing and offer, 48 Skyspot-qualified airmen and a dozen TACAN technicians signed the agreement. Their wives were briefed on the program—at least some of it—and sworn to secrecy.

The 44 enlisted Skyspot people and four officers selected all knew each other, having served together for years in SAC. Among them was Etchberger, 35, of Hamburg, Pa. His leadership abilities were evident early on.

Etchberger was president of his senior graduating class at Hamburg High School. He joined the Air Force in 1951 and qualified as a radar operator. During the 1960s, he was based at the 1st Combat Evaluation detachment at Bismarck, N.D., where he helped develop and improve the capabilities of the radar bomb scoring system. One of his officers at Bismarck had been Capt. Stanley J. Sliz, who was also chosen for Heavy Green. In April 1967, Etchberger was promoted to chief master sergeant, USAF's highest enlisted grade.



Etchberger's defense against the North Vietnamese sappers saved his companions, but he was mortally wounded on the rescue helicopter. Air Force Magazine

Eighteen Weeks - The installation team went in first, placing a TSQ-81 radar, a mobile variant of the Combat Skyspot system, and other facilities on the mountaintop in August. Living and working space at the site, which was only 150 feet long, was crowded with the radar, TACAN, operations vans, generator, bunkers, and metal huts.

The Heavy Green operators deployed to Udorn Air Base in northern Thailand in October, setting up shop in the Air America compound, although the airmen—now civilians—lived in rented housing off base. When at Udorn, they wore uniforms and carried military ID as a cover role. For their two-week rotational duty tours to the mountain, they wore civilian clothes and carried Lockheed ID. The boss, Col. Gerald H. Clayton, was manager of the Lockheed field services group at Lockheed.

Heavy Green did not completely cut ties with the Air Force. Clayton was also commander of Det. 1, 1043rd Radar Evaluation Squadron, which had headquarters at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. The site was operational on Nov. 1.

The radar operators were divided into teams, one of them headed by Sliz, with Etchberger as crew chief. John G. Daniel was the board operator and the radar technicians were Donald K. Springsteadah and Henry G. Gish.

Etchberger "was one hell of an NCO," said Daniel, a sheep-dipped staff sergeant. "He knew the equipment. ... He knew how to handle people. ... He knew what to do and how to do it. You were eager to follow the man, to do what he wanted you to do." Sliz described Etchberger as "the consummate professional. He stood up above everybody else." In a letter to a friend back in the United States, Etchberger said, "I hate to be away from home, but I believe in the job. It is the most challenging job I'll ever have in my life."

Lima Site 85 was in northeastern Laos, the stronghold of the Communist Pathet Lao. Part of the security was the mountain itself. At the higher reaches, the sheer face of the cliffs rose at angles of 80 and 90 degrees on the north, south, and west sides. About 1,000 Hmong tribesmen, known as fierce fighters, and some Thai special forces were expected to hold the eastern slope.

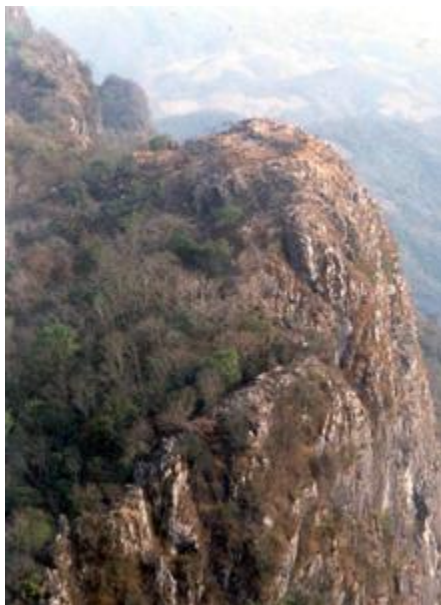
The enemy had long since discovered the site and had made several attempts to dislodge it, including an attack by An-2 Colt biplanes using improvised munitions. US airpower was increasingly used to disperse enemy troops moving into the vicinity. A combat controller had been sent to direct local air strikes.

The US ambassador, William H. Sullivan, was opposed to arming Heavy Green personnel but, about a week before the attack in March, approved giving them a limited number of M-16s. The airmen had no real training with the weapons, only a general familiarization and the opportunity for some informal firing.

By March 10, the radar on Phou Pha Thi had been operational for 18 weeks. That day, a Sunday, mortar, artillery, and rocket rounds began falling on the mountaintop around 6 p.m. The barrage ceased at 7:45 p.m., but the Hmong were engaged in heavy fighting at lower elevations.

About 9 p.m., Ambassador Sullivan decided evacuation would begin the next morning, despite Air Force reluctance to close the site. There were 19 Americans on the mountain: 16 Heavy Green operators and support personnel, a combat controller, and two CIA paramilitary officers.

After the initial shelling, Sliz's team went to get some rest while another team took the duty. Around 8 p.m., Daniel and Springsteadah took their sleeping bags and went down to a ledge on the western slope, which was less exposed to bombardment than their quarters. The ledge was about 20 feet below the top of the mountain. A path led down to it, but beyond that, the mountain dropped sharply for several thousand feet. Sliz, Etchberger, and Gish remained in the vicinity of the vans.



Three sides of Phou Pha Thi were nearly vertical, and the fourth was heavily fortified. The sappers were able to scale the mountain, above. U.S. Air Force Photograph.

During the night, a North Vietnamese sapper team that had trained for months for the mission climbed the western slope, the one unguarded by the Hmong, and reached the summit. The sappers waited in hiding until 3 a.m., then began moving toward the Heavy Green facilities. Detected by a guard, they opened fire.

"As the technicians came running out of the operations structure, they were met with a hail of small-arms weapons fire from close range," a subsequent Air Force report said. Several Americans were killed, including the leader of the radar team on duty.

Awakened by the shooting, Sliz, Etchberger, and Gish made their way down the path and joined Daniel and Springsteadah on the ledge.

Five or six of the enemy began walking down the trail. Etchberger, at the direction of Sliz, opened up on them with his M-16 and they retreated. For reasons unknown, the enemy did not press the attack down the path, but brought the ledge under fire with small arms and grenades from the top of the cliff. Gish was killed in the first burst of fire, and Springsteadah shortly thereafter. Sliz and Daniel were struck by shrapnel and bullets. A rocky overhang, about five feet deep and five feet wide, offered some protection. Two people could squeeze underneath it.

The Americans on the ledge had only three M-16s. Sliz took Gish's rifle when Gish was killed. They had plenty of ammunition, though, having taken along a box of extra clips. They also had signal flares and a survival radio, which were in Sliz's survival vest.

The sappers continued tossing grenades from the top of the cliff. Sliz and Daniel had limited mobility, but were able to knock some of the grenades away. "If I could reach them, I'd pick them up and throw them back on top of the hill," said Daniel. "If I couldn't reach them, I'd take the butt of my rifle and kick them off over the edge of the mountain." When one grenade landed outside their reach, Daniel and Sliz rolled the body of a dead comrade on top of it.

Sliz and Daniel, weakened by loss of blood, were not able to help much with the defense, but the attackers "weren't able to get closer because of Etch firing at them," said Sliz.

"Despite having received little or no combat training, Chief Etchberger single-handedly held off the enemy with an M-16, while simultaneously directing air strikes into the area and calling for air rescue," said the citation to Etchberger's Medal of Honor. "Because of his fierce defense and heroic and selfless actions, he was able to deny the enemy access to his position and save the lives of his remaining crew."

Etchberger Bars the Way - Etchberger kept the sappers at bay until help arrived at daybreak. Two A-1 Skyraiders from Nakhon Phanom Air Base on the Thai border roared over the mountain, strafing the North Vietnamese. That had limited effect, but on the next pass, they dropped cluster bombs, which cleared the area momentarily.

A Huey helicopter from the Air America base at Long Tieng approached, hovered, and dropped a jungle penetrator with rescue slings in which the survivors could ride.

Of the five men who had taken shelter on the ledge, only Etchberger remained untouched by enemy fire. He had repeatedly exposed himself to hostile fire, both while holding the enemy back and as he placed his wounded teammates on the hoist. He sent Daniel up first, then loaded Sliz on the lift when it came back down. The cable, swaying in the wind, banged Sliz against the side of the cliff, but he was still conscious when the helicopter crew pulled him aboard.

At that point, Bill Husband, the generator repairman, came running. He was in bad shape with hip-to-head shrapnel wounds, but Etchberger got him on the lift. As Husband and Etchberger rose up together on the third hoist, the helicopter began taking fire from below.

After they climbed aboard the Huey, one of the rounds punched through the floor of the helicopter and hit Etchberger, who was sitting on the jump seat of the helicopter. He died minutes later.

Between them, the Air America and USAF helicopters brought out seven US survivors and some of the Thai and Hmong wounded. The other 12 Americans were known or presumed to be dead. About 30 of the Hmong and Thai were killed.

Twenty days after the attack, the White House declared a bombing halt north of the 20th parallel, which included the part of North Vietnam into which Lima Site 85 had been directing strikes.



Etchberger was considered "one hell of an NCO" and "the consummate professional" by his crew. U.S. Air Force Photo

Etchberger was nominated for the Medal of Honor by CMSgt. Frank Roura, first sergeant and chief of admin for the 1043rd Radar Evaluation Squadron at Udorn. Numerous accounts blame President Lyndon Johnson for downgrading the award, but the decision was made by Gen. John D. Ryan, the Air Force vice chief of staff, who was the USAF approving authority for top awards. In a letter to *Air Force Magazine* in 2006, retired Col. Ruffin W. Gray, who was Ryan's executive officer in 1968, explained what happened:

"After reading all the supporting documentation, I went into General Ryan's office and told him that as far as I was concerned, this had every element for the Congressional Medal of Honor rather than the Air Force Cross," Gray said. "After reading all the supporting documents, General Ryan said that he agreed. However, we had to consider that the Congressional medal could not be awarded without

national news attention. Due to the sensitivity of Lima Site 85's location, the circumstances surrounding its role, and the subsequent loss, these factors could not be revealed. We could, however, fly the Etchberger family to Washington and in a quiet, appropriate ceremony award the Air Force Cross without national fanfare."

Etchberger's records were supposed to be flagged and reviewed periodically so that when circumstances permitted, "the Air Force Cross could be rescinded and the Congressional medal awarded," Gray said, but "it must have fallen through a crack somewhere along the line."

The Air Force Cross was awarded posthumously to Etchberger in a closed presentation at the Pentagon Jan. 15, 1969. His name did not appear on a public list of Air Force Cross recipients until reported in *Air Force Magazine* in 1998. Catherine Etchberger was sworn to secrecy. She kept the promise, not even telling her sons what had been revealed to her. "We were told that he died in a helicopter crash," said Cory Etchberger, who was nine when his father was killed. "Our mother knew what really happened." Catherine Etchberger, who never remarried, died in 1994.

The Heavy Green personnel were restored to active duty. After US involvement in the war in Laos was revealed in 1970, the families were told more, but not all, of the details of the night on the mountain. The



cover story was maintained for years. The saga of Lima Site 85 emerged in bits and pieces between 1977 and 1995 as information from various documents and reports was declassified. The most extensive account was in 1999 by Timothy N. Castle in his book, *One Day Too Long*.

CMSgt. Richard Etchberger at Udorn Air Base in Thailand, a few months before the firefight at Lima Site 85.

The title came from Ambassador Sullivan's cable of March 11, 1968, to Secretary of State Dean Rusk in which he said, "It appears we may have pushed our luck one day too long in attempting to keep this

facility in operation."

Finally, the Medal of Honor - Retired MSgt. Robert L. Dille had never known Etchberger, but he had served with the 1st Combat Evaluation Group in Bismarck, N.D., the unit from which Etchberger departed to join the Heavy Green program. In 2004, he wrote to Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-N.D.), in whose district Etchberger had served. Daniel, Sliz, and the Heavy Green commander, Clayton, provided supporting information.

Pomeroy got language into the 2009 defense authorization bill to waive the limit on how much time could elapse before the award of a Medal of Honor. The bill, adopted by Congress and signed by President Bush in 2008, authorized and requested the President to award the Medal of Honor to Etchberger.

After a favorable USAF personnel board review, Secretary of the Air Force Michael B. Donley nominated Etchberger for the higher award.

President Obama telephoned Cory Etchberger July 7, 2010, to tell him the Medal of Honor had been approved.

The Medal of Honor was awarded at the White House to Etchberger's three sons: Richard Etchberger of Vernal, Utah, Cory Etchberger of Schwenksville, Pa., and Steve Wilson of Redlands, Calif. Also there was Chief Etchberger's brother, Robert Etchberger, 81, of Summerfield, Fla.

The next day at the Pentagon, Etchberger was inducted into the Hall of Heroes. "Valor has no expiration date," Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, Air Force Chief of Staff, said at the induction. "The discovery of truth, no matter how long it is delayed, sets the record straight."

John Daniel, 71, who now lives in La Junta, Colo., came to Washington for the award ceremonies. The other survivor from the ledge, Stanley Sliz, 78, lives in Huntington Beach, Calif., but was unable to make the trip.

Both Daniel and Sliz still carry shrapnel from Lima Site 85. Both think often of Etchberger.

"He should have a 55-gallon drum full of medals. I wouldn't be alive without him," Daniel said, but "42-plus years too goddamn late. It should have happened 42-plus-years ago."