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PROJECT

Contemporary
Historical
Evaluation of
Combat
Operations
REPORT

SECOND DEFENSE OF

LIMA SITE 36

28 April 1967

HQ PACAF

**Directorate, Tactical Evaluation
CHECO Division**

Prepared by: Capt. Melvin F. Porter

S.E. Asia Team

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FOREWORD

The CHECO Special Report entitled "Defense of Lima Site 36" (published 25 May 1966) outlined the air efforts to deny this small but strategic post to the enemy. Although unsuccessful in preventing the enemy's overrunning Site 36, the close air support efforts permitted withdrawal of our troops and destruction of materiel prior to occupation by the communists.

This attack of 17-19 February 1966, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy and "left little for them to exploit." Subsequent reports tended to confirm that "although the communists had won the field, they may have lost the battle."

The following report "Second Defense of Lima Site 36" ends on a more satisfactory note with the successful defense of the outpost, infliction of heavy losses, and defeat of the attacking Communist forces.

Both reports illustrate classic examples of the application of close air support in a hostile environment.

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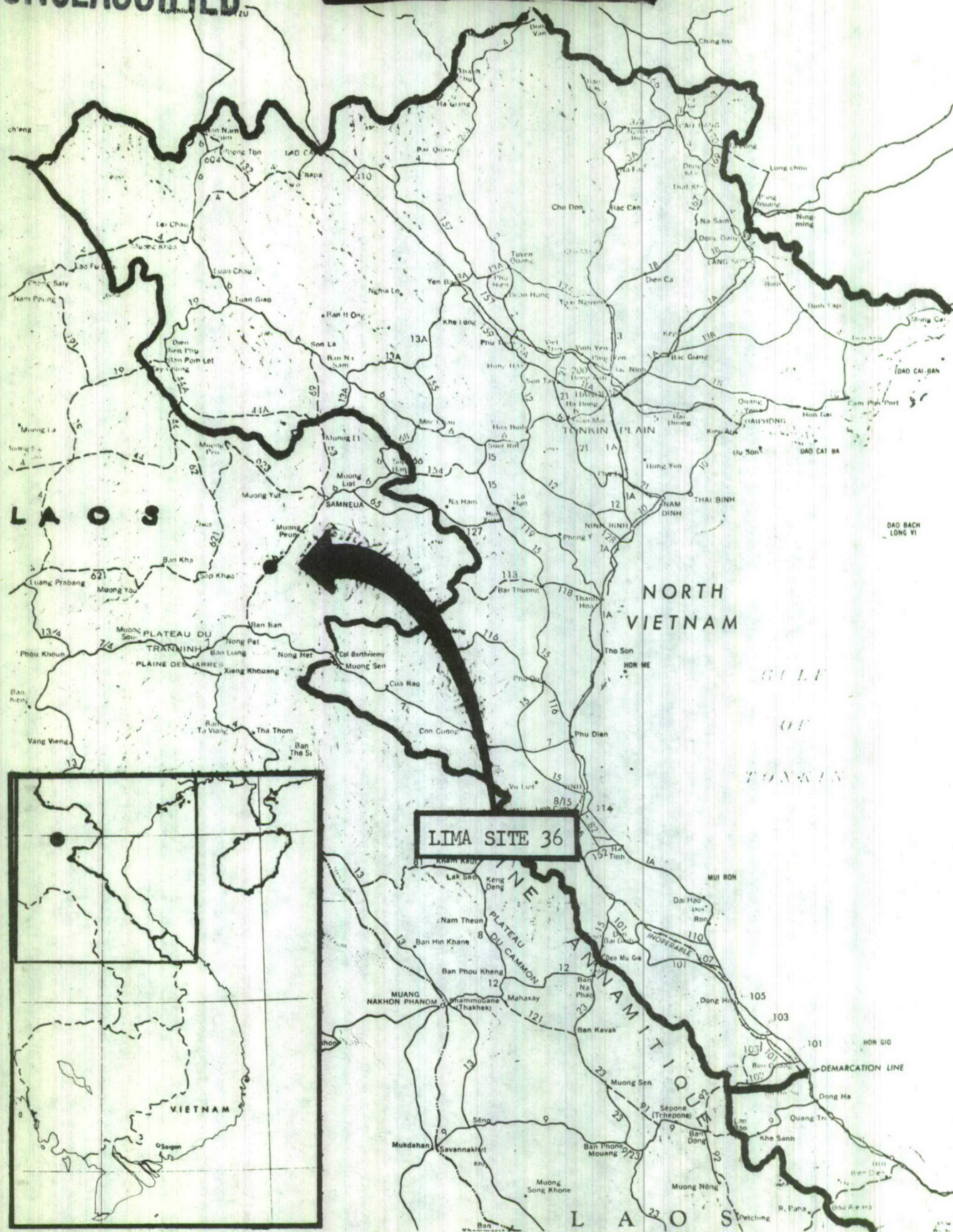


Fig. 1

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SECOND DEFENSE OF LIMA SITE 36

"...No question about Lima 36's importance to the enemy. It is a keystone in the control of Route 6 and is subject to attack any time they want to assert control over the entire route. Also, apparently, they had some emotional involvement with Site 36--probably because they tried not only to re-take it, but to annihilate the defenders. When they took it a year ago it was at a prohibitive cost, and then (Gen.) Vang Pao took it away from them last May. They really wanted a decisive win in this one, and they thought they had it, and then the fighters came in and took it away from them." 1/

--Colonel John E. Bridge, U.S. Air Force

Lima Site 36 (LS-36), a staging site for JOLLY GREEN Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in Northeastern Laos, and an aerial resupply point for friendly guerrillas, had been hotly contested for more than a year. Because of its proximity to the strategic Plaine des Jarres, its domination of Route 6, and its value to government air operations, Site 36 continued to be a focal point for harassment and terrorist activities by Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces.

North Vietnamese troops had overrun the site on 17-18 February 1966, but had been so mauled by air strikes that they were unable to occupy it until several days later. 2/ The leader of the Meo tribesmen, Gen. Vang Pao, and his guerrilla forces, were able, however, to recover the camp from the communists on 25 May 1966. They have held it since that time. 3/

In late December 1966 and early January 1967, the North Vietnamese troop buildup in the Sam Neua area (VH 0157) had been observed as a potential threat to Lima Site 36 (UH 4113), Lima Site 52 (VH 0581), and Lima Site 85

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(UH 6860). ^{4/} Of the three, the enemy chose Site 36 for their first major attack of 1967 in that area, as they had in February 1966.

Regarding their planning, Colonel Bridge said: ^{5/}

"...They reversed their usual procedure on this attack. Normally their assaults come during the hours of darkness; however, this time they infiltrated into position during the night and began their attack just about day-break. For several weeks Site 36 had been covered by a very low overcast during the day, and probably the enemy figured that no tactical air could get in to give support."

At 0600H, on 6 January 1967, the Communist force had encircled Lima Site 36, and were in attacking positions from the northwest, south and southwest. The uniformed enemy troops, estimated later at 600 to 800, had attempted to infiltrate into a position to attack the main command post (CP) area without contacting any of the Meo Auto-Defense de Choc (ADC) patrols or outposts. This failed, however, when an enemy element became engaged in a firefight with one of the outposts, ^{6/} triggering a concentrated mortar barrage from the north.

Within minutes the major assault began, with the CP coming under attack from automatic weapons and small arms from three sides, covering all major withdrawal routes for the ADC forces. ^{7/} At that time, the weather was exactly as the communists had hoped it would be--a solid overcast, a ceiling of 200 to 500 feet, with many of the surrounding peaks speared in the clouds. ^{8/}

From the south, the enemy rapidly closed to within 100 yards of the

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compound and, by 0630H, other elements had broken into the northern portion of the entrenchments which made up the final line of defense for the command post.

Of the two American advisors among the 500 defenders at LS-36, one was killed attempting to make his way to the radio shack. The other, barricaded there, was able by 0650H to request air support. ^{9/} All in all, the situation at the site appeared increasingly grim.

First to respond to the call for immediate air support was Venom flight, composed of four F-105s diverted from armed reconnaissance in the Steel Tiger area of the Laotian panhandle. ^{10/} Venom flight arrived over Site 36, along with Hartford, another F-105, at 0730H. They established radio contact with the command post and were advised of the situation facing the defenders. Both flights made attempts to get down through the multilayered undercast but were unsuccessful.

Flying Venom Lead, Lt. Col. Eugene O. Conley,* commander of the 354th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Takhli, Thailand, finally managed to find a small hole some distance from the site, where he snaked his way between the peaks toward the camp.

At continuing risk to himself, Colonel Conley buzzed the battle scene.

*Lt. Col. Eugene O. Conley was recommended for the Air Force Cross for his gallant efforts at Lima Site 36 on 6 January 1967. He was killed when his aircraft exploded and crashed on 21 January 1967, after being struck by a suspected SA-2 missile, 30 miles NNW of Hanoi. (355 CBPO-PA 05293 Jan 67)

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Because of low overcast--200 feet on his arrival--he could not line up to deliver his ordnance, but made repeated passes directly over heads of enemy and friendly forces alike. ^{11/} Even though unable to strike, appearance of the aircraft lifted morale of ADC troops and unquestionably had a deterring ^{12/} effect on the enemy, until Venom Lead was forced to rejoin his flight.

Dragonfly 21 and 22, A-1E aircraft from the 602d Fighter Squadron Commando (FSC), at Udorn, Thailand, had just finished a bridge strike in the Laotian panhandle, when they received word of the Lima Site 36 attack. Dogpatch control (RC-47 airborne command post) diverted the flight from the Steel Tiger area to the site, where they arrived at 0745H.

Major Robert E. Turner, who was within one "counter" mission of finishing his tour in Southeast Asia, led the flight, and was faced with the same overcast problem of Venom Lead. He contacted the American on the ground for a briefing of the situation.

Another A-1E pilot with the 602d FSC, Captain John C. Roberts, recalled Major Turner's description of the radio briefing: ^{13/}

"...he said the American at the site was very excited; his contemporary at the site had already been killed. The enemy force had already overrun about three quarters of the compound, were inside the compound and firing at him. He was in a building, but he still had his radio and he had a shotgun there--he figured it was a last ditch effort to keep them out of the building. He was asking for any kind of help available."

Capt. John D. Haney, Major Roberts' wingman in Dragonfly 22, said of the situation: ^{14/}

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"...the American on the ground sounded to me as if he really didn't think either of us would get in there. We got in the general area of the outpost, and the TACAN at Lima Site 85, 30 miles northeast was a little weak. Major Turner was able to get an intermittent lock-on with his birddog--ADF--on the radio beacon at the fort. He left me on top, about 8,000 feet. Weather was solid on down to the 200-foot ceiling they'd given us at the camp.

"He left me on top in a holding pattern so that he would know where to find me, and penetrated on down. The tops of the mountains there, within about five miles of the camp, go on up to about 56-5,900 feet. He made this general circling approach with a vague idea where he was and managed to break out at 5,500 feet, well below the surrounding terrain but just over the outpost."

Major Turner could see that the situation was as the controller had told him. The enemy were on both sides of the runway, on the north slope of the hill where the compound was situated, in the POL storage area, and in the trees encircling the west side of the field. When he asked where to strike, he was told that anything outside the compound itself and its ^{15/}ridgeline would be "fair game."

Major Turner knew, also, that the ceiling precluded strikes by jet fighters and that he would have to wait until A-1Es arrived from Udorn or Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, for relief. His job included not only delivering his ordnance effectively, but "buying time."

He made several passes, firing rockets singly out of the LAU-32 pods and firing short bursts from his 20-millimeter (mm) cannon to conserve his ^{16/}ammunition. Slowly he began to work the enemy down from the hill and across the runway. His gunnery pattern, restricted by ceiling and terrain,

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LIMA SITE 36

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Fig. 2

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was so low that often he had to pull up, off his run, and into the clouds themselves to avoid trees and hilltops. The ground controller described his work as "tremendous."

On one occasion, when asked if he could get some enemy troops among the POL barrels without burning the gasoline, he strafed with 20-mm fire, on his next run, up to and around the barrels, and then resumed strafing the other side. Later, five enemy bodies were counted in the POL area, with only two barrels dented by glancing rounds. ^{17/}

Major Turner eventually "fired out" his ammunition, climbed on top of the weather to locate his wingman, and with Captain Haney in trail, led the way back to the camp. Captain Haney said: ^{18/}

"...the clear area--up to this 200-foot ceiling--was about a mile by a mile and a half. It was just a constant turn really, and after I had been through what turned out to be our gunnery pattern, I just couldn't believe that he had been working down in there.

"He stayed down in there to divide their fire, and probably kept me from getting hit a lot more than I did. I fired out in about nine passes and was hit twice. Major Turner was down there for, altogether, probably 25 passes."

Dragonfly 21 and 22 were, in actuality, over the target for the crucial one hour and five minutes that made the difference between saving and losing the camp during the initial assault. In that time, both aircraft received battle damage from heavy and accurate ground fire--luckily not serious enough to force them to break off their attacks.

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These two A-1Es expended 1,600 rounds of 20-mm cannon fire, four 100-pound white phosphorous bombs, 42 high-explosive 2.75-inch rockets and eight ^{19/} 2.75-inch rockets with white phosphorous heads.

By the time the relief A-1Es began to arrive, their attacks drove most of the enemy troops back from the compound and runway and into the treelines some hundreds of yards away. In their firing passes, Major Turner and Captain Haney made strikes on enemy troops within 50 yards of the Meo ADC defenders. This allowed the friendly forces to counterattack and restore ^{20/} the defensive perimeter in the command post area.

Butterfly 44, an airborne Forward Air Controller (FAC), had arrived before Dragonfly 21 and 22 finished. He began to direct the incoming flights through clearing weather. As the ceiling started to break, Firefly 11 and 12, two A-1Es, came in on the tail of the departing Dragonfly flight to work over the drainage ditches and treelines near the runway.

Firefly expended six LAU-32 pods of 2.75-inch rockets, four MK-47 white phosphorous bombs, 1,200 rounds of 20-mm and 300 rounds of 6.62-mm fire ^{21/} from M-3 minigun pods, and four WP rockets in 30 minutes on the target. They, in turn, were followed throughout the day by overlapping flights of F-105s (the weather cleared completely by noon), A-1Es, F-104s, and Laotian T-28s.

The American aircraft delivered more than 62 MK-47 bombs, 27 CBU-14s, four BLU-23 incendiary cans, and expended 61 LAU-32 pods (seven rockets each) of high explosive armor piercing rockets, 28 "Willie Peter" rockets,

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10,300 rounds of 7.62-mm machinegun fire, and 14,000 rounds of 20-mm fire. ^{22/}

The fight was still not over, although the immediate threat had subsided. Continued air support and the Meo defenders had driven the Communist assault forces away from the perimeter and allowed the slightly damaged airstrip to be reopened. Confirmed enemy body count in the close-in defenses had risen to more than 40 (mostly attributed to the work of Major Turner and Captain Haney), but the North Vietnamese remained in force around the camp. Sniper fire prevented effective patrol action by Gen. Vang Pao's ^{23/} tribesmen.

The general arrived during the day to take over command of this ground situation. Although he suspected that more than 100 had been killed, with the attacking force badly hurt and dispersed, there was no safe way for him to send patrols into the woods to get a better body-count or ascertain the full situation. ^{24/}

Butterfly 44, whose perspective of the day's action was better perhaps than most, felt that the site would be held if the enemy did not regroup and attack during the night, and if the weather remained good on the morning of 7 January 1967. ^{25/}

Lt. Gen. William W. Momyer, commander, Seventh Air Force, considered security of Lima Site 36 throughout the night of sufficient importance that he directed the Lamplighter (C-130 Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center), diverted from its normal Steel Tiger orbit into the Barrel Roll area to cover the camp more effectively. The Nimrod A-26s of the 606th Air

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Commando Squadron at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, were also advised that they might have to perform night close air support of the Lima Site 36 defenders. ^{26/}

The night passed uneventfully, however, and the morning dawned clear enough to begin working the surrounding area. Blue Boy, the English speaking Meo FAG (Forward Air Guide) on the ground, brought in Dragonfly 21 and 22; Sandy 1, 2, 3, and 4; and Firefly 11 and 12, from 0645H through 0920H, to blanket the nearby woods and other likely places for troop concealment. ^{27/} An enemy 82-mm mortar opened at UH 434180 but it was quickly knocked out by the Sandy flight. ^{28/}

Perhaps the most significant event of the day occurred later in the afternoon. A search for enemy bodies, after the previous day's strikes, yielded ingress routes carefully drawn on a detailed map of the area.

Gen. Vang Pao, in studying this map, concluded that the North Vietnamese (and some suspected Chinese communists), were unfamiliar with the territory and had been guided on their infiltration. If this were true, and one or more of the guides had been killed, then many of the enemy might try to retrace their steps in an effort to withdraw and regroup. Accordingly, the General directed an observer to fly in the FAC airplane, to comb and recomb suspected lines of exfiltration, with the objective of locating sizable groups of the enemy force. ^{29/}

Soon after midday, a group that had apparently gotten lost was found in a canyon-like, heavily-jungled swale not far from one of the infiltration lines. Butterfly called for a strike and when Firefly 15 and 16 (diverted

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from a fragged target before takeoff at Udorn, Thailand) responded at 1430H, he explained the reason. He had located a large element of the Communist force that was "carrying at least 100 wounded or dead." ^{30/} Capt. John Roberts, leader of the A-1E flight said: ^{31/}

"...We arrived on scene--the weather was pretty good--talked to the local FAC, Butterfly 44, and he marked an area, a kind of box canyon a little bit less than a kilometer from the actual compound of Lima 36. We had CBU, napalm, 'Willie Pete' (MK-47 Plasticized White Phosphorous bombs), 20-millimeter, and also we had two SUU-11 miniguns on our stubs. So, we really raked his area over--this is ideal weaponry for troops on the ground. It was a heavily wooded area, but we left it completely blazing and really weren't sure whether we'd done much or not. But later on that afternoon I spoke to one of our sources here, and he said that he got a report back that it had been quite a lucrative strike."

Although none of the flight was hit during the strike, they drew heavy fire, probably from automatic rifles, which substantiated the estimate of a sizable group under the jungle canopy. Butterfly 44 was "elated" with the "devastating effect of this attack on the enemy element." ^{32/}

During their 35 minutes on target, Firefly expended 12 CBU-25s, eight MD-47s, two BLU-23s and two LAU-32 pods, plus 1,600 rounds of 20-mm cannon fire and 4,500 rounds of 7.62-mm ammunition, all in the relatively confined area of the canyon. ^{33/}

Prompt, determined action by the A-1E and F-105 pilots in saving Lima Site 36 and its defenders from almost certain destruction brought official praise from the Air Attache in the U.S. Embassy at Vientiane, Laos: ^{34/}

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"...We would like to express our appreciation for the quick reaction on the request for emergency air support in defense of L.S. 36.

"The determination displayed by the pilots of the Dragonfly, Firefly, Hartford, Venom* and Sandy flights deserves special mention. In spite of the adverse weather and rugged terrain, these pilots provided the immediate close air support needed against concentrated small arms opposition.

"Continued response to such urgent requests should allow us to thwart the enemy's intentions in this area and, hopefully, maintain the security of L.S. 36 and 85."

In addition to Lt. Col. Eugene O. Conley having been recommended for the Air Force Cross, preparations were being made to request a similar award for Major Robert E. Turner, and the Silver Star for Capt. John D. Haney, for their efforts during the morning of 6 January 1967.

Distinguished Flying Cross citations were being prepared for certain pilots in other Dragonfly, Firefly, and Sandy aircraft, who had participated in the successful defense of Lima Site 36. These were:

Lt. Col. William F. Cunningham, 602d FSC commander
Lt. Col. James F. Dinwiddie
Maj. Lemuel D. Horton
Maj. John S. Hamilton
Maj. Sandy A. Zevin
Maj. William E. Day
Capt. George G. Anderson
Capt. Randal B. Webb, Jr.
Capt. John C. Roberts
Capt. Robert L. Russell
1st Lt. Steven D. Henning

*Through an oversight, Venom flight was omitted from the official message. The AIRA's praise was intended to include specifically the F-105 pilot in Venom Lead who made the first low altitude penetration into the site.

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Unquestionably, the selfless actions of these men in response to this emergency turned the enemy's hopes for an "annihilation" into a decisive and critical victory for the friendly forces. Comparative casualty figures showed that the Meo ADC defenders had eight killed (plus one American KIA) and 24 wounded, of which nine required medical evacuation. An official body-count indicated 43 enemy--nearly all on the site itself--had been killed in action (KIA). Subsequent agent reports, however, showed an estimated ^{35/}250 KIA.

Because of its location deep within enemy-controlled territory, the continued security of Lima Site 36 (along with LS-85) remained questionable. If North Vietnam made a determined effort and committed sufficient forces, almost any of these remote sites could fall.

The U.S. Air Attache (USAIRA) in Vientiane, Laos, felt that daily interdiction, armed reconnaissance, and close air support in the Barrel Roll area were essential; that without this support little or no guarantee could be given to holding any of these exposed positions. In regard to Lima Site ^{36/}36, he said:

"...We feel that the enemy will continue to pressure Site 36 but as long as we can count on prompt and sustained close air support, when needed, we can hang on to or at least be able to conduct an orderly withdrawal...."

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FOOTNOTES

(Documents as noted provided in one copy to AFCHO and in DTEC file copy.)

1. (S) Interview with Col. John E. Bridge, Director of Intelligence, 7/13AF, Udorn, Thailand, by Capt. Melvin F. Porter, Project CHECO SEA, 11-12 Feb 67. (Hereafter cited as Interview with Colonel Bridge.)
2. (S) Project CHECO Special Report, "The Defense of LIMA SITE 36," 25 May 66.
3. (S) Msg, JANAF Attache, Laos to RUEKDA/DIA, subj: Joint Operational Summary--Laos 1-67, 070432Z Jan 67, Doc. 1.
4. (S) Ibid; (S) Msg, OUSAIRA, Vientiane, Laos to RUMSAL, 051033 Jan 67, Doc. 2.
5. (S) Interview with Colonel Bridge.
6. (C) Field Operational Rpt, Vientiane, Laos, FOV 9993, 13 Jan 67, Doc. 3; (C) Msg, 325 TFW to 7/13AF, 160835Z Jan 67, Doc. 4.
7. (C) Ibid.
8. (C) Ibid.
9. (C) Ibid.
10. (C) Msg, DCR 7/13AF Udorn, Thailand to 355th TFW 060510Z Jan 67, Doc. 5.
11. (C) Field Operational Rpt, Vientiane, Laos, FOV 9993, 13 Jan 67, Doc. 3.
12. (C) Ibid.
13. (S) Interview with Capt. John C. Roberts, 602d FSC, Udorn, Thailand, 14 Feb 67. (Hereafter cited as Interview with Captain Roberts.) Doc. 6.
14. (S) Interview with Capt. John D. Haney, 602d FSC, Udorn, Thailand, 15 Feb 67. (Hereafter cited as Interview with Capt. Haney.) Doc. 7.
15. (S) Ibid.
16. (S) Interview with Capt. Roberts, Doc. 6.
17. (S) Interview with Capt. Haney, Doc. 7.

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18. (S) Ibid.
19. (C) Msg, 432d TRW to AIG 913, OP-4, FASTEL 00131, 060345Z Jan 67, Doc. 8.
20. (C) Field Operational Rpt, Vientiane, Laos, FOV 9993, 13 Jan 67, Doc. 3.
21. (C) Msg, 432d TRW to AIG 913, OP-4, FASTEL 00131, 060345Z Jan 67, Doc. 8.
22. (C) Ibid; (S) Msg, DCDR 7AF/13AF Udorn, Thailand to 7AF, TSAB, RVN, 060930Z Jan 67, Doc. 9.
23. (S) Msg, JANAF Attache, Laos to RUEKDA/DIA, Joint Operational Summary-- Laos 1-67, 070432Z Jan 67, Doc. 1.
24. (S) Msg, DCR 7AF to 7AFTSNAB, subj: FRESH BREEZE SITREP Nr 295, 7 Jan 67, Doc. 10.
25. (S) Daily Operations Rpt (FAC) Butterfly 44, 6 Jan 67, Doc. 11.
26. (S) Msg, DCR 7AF/13AF Udorn, Thailand to 7AF, TSAB, RVN, 060930Z Jan 67, Doc. 9.
27. (C) Msg, 432d TRW to AIG 913, OP-4, FASTEL 00131, 060345Z Jan 67, Doc. 8.
28. (S) Msg, 7/13AF Udorn, Thailand to 7AF TSAB, RVN, subj: FRESH BREEZE SITREP Nr 296, 8 Jan 67, Doc. 12.
29. (S) Interview with Colonel Bridge.
30. (S) Msg, 7/13AF Udorn, Thailand to 7AF TSAB, RVN, subj: FRESH BREEZE SITREP Nr 296, 8 Jan 67, Doc. 12.
31. (S) Interview with Captain Roberts, Doc. 6.
32. (S) Msg, 7/13AF Udorn, Thailand to 7AF TSAB, RVN, subj: FRESH BREEZE SITREP No 296, 8 Jan 67, Doc. 12.
33. (C) Msg, 432d TRW to AIG 913, OP-4, FASTEL 00131, 060345Z Jan 67, Doc. 8.
34. (S) Msg, AIRA to Cdr 7AF, AIRA EMB 00063, 110950Z Jan 67, Doc. 13.
35. (C) Field Operational Rpt, Vientiane, Laos, FOV 9993, 13 Jan 67, Doc. 3; (S) Interview with Capt Haney, Doc. 7.
36. (S) Msg, USAIRA, Vientiane, Laos to DCR 7/13AF, Udorn, Thailand, subj: Site 36/85 Security, AIRA 00047, 100100 Jan 67, Doc. 14.

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