

## *Air America*

### Episode 4

(5 Part Serial)

©Joe Hennessy

As I sat in the office on the morning of December 8<sup>th</sup> 1966, word came through one of the Sikorskys, Hotel 22 had crashed up country, very far up country. "Joe you go up there ... get some pictures of the aircraft," said Dick Ford as he handed me a camera. "You can get a ride with Tom Richardson up to (L) uang (P) rabang. And I'll have chopper pick you up and take you on up to the crash site." With camera in hand I got a lift out to Tom Richardson's DC3, and when it was loaded we headed North. A couple hours later we landed in LP.

I was picked up in a jeep and shot across the ramp to a waiting Sikorsky UH34 whose callsign was Hotel 21. Aboard I saw Marius Burke was riding shotgun and without formality, we cranked and headed further North. Some hours later we came into land on the top of a hill. The wreckage of Hotel 22 was at the bottom of this. I made my way down the very steep incline and took all the pictures I could of what was left of the airplane. Fortunately the crew got out without injury. Finished I made my way back up the hill and met Marius. "It will be getting dark soon. so we'd better be getting out of here .." he said.

Anything in the air after darkness in Laos was fair game not that they wouldn't have a crack at you during the daylight, but I am sure crews felt that in the daylight they could at least see where they were going. The crew got aboard, I got in moved up the airplane and sat on the floor. There were two other passengers. One was the kicker from Hotel 22 and the other was a mechanic.

I sat there, heard the crew going through the preflight, listened as the engine fired up, felt a slight vibration as the rotors were engaged and for a couple of moments we sat there, burning and turning. Then the chopper lifted off the ground and started to back quickly off the pad. In a matter of seconds I felt the airplane sinking. "We've lost ground effect..." The kicker shouted and as he did the Captain pushed the nose down to gain forward speed and turn, but the aircraft continued forward and sinking. "We're going in," the kicker shouted as he jumped through the opened door, seconds before we crashed into the side of the hill, I grabbed the stay above me, and held on as the fuselage continued to tumble and bounce its way down the hill. Anything that wasn't tied down was flying around, as the cabin bounced off the side of the hill on its way down. I got a blow of a tool box in the ribs but I still held on until the wreckage finally came to rest at the bottom of the hill.

Fortunately for us the aircraft did not burst into flames. I started to crawl back inside the wreckage, and on coming to an opening, Marius Burke and Tom Pitkin helped drag me from the shambled wreck. Shattered rotors mingled with tangled, twisted wreckage, as it lay strewn all over the bottom of the hill.

Slowly we made our way back up the hill, and when at last back there I got on the emergency radio and called "Mayday" a couple of times in the hope that someone might hear me, but no luck. We dared not continue using the radio or light a fire lest the PL's home in on our position. They no doubt had more artillery than we had, so we certainly were no match for them. The emergency equipment was broken out. The tent was set up, cans that looked like their sell by date had expired years before Dunnes had thrown them out were broken out. Frankly I couldn't say what the stuff tasted like I just ate what I got. After darkness our position allowed us to overlook the jungle, and occasionally flashes of gunfire could be seen in the darkness. The Captain organized sentry duty. We got into the tent kept close together to keep warm, and as I lay there for what seemed like hours got a gentle tug on the shoulder as it was my turn to play soldier. The man I relived uncocked the M16 before handing it to me. I immediately recocked it, nervously sat, not

knowing what to expect but I do know had anything, anything whatsoever in front of me moved I would have pulled that trigger.

All were awake at dawn on the following morning. We waited and we waited and eventually about ten am we saw a chopper far in the distance sweeping back and forth, looking for us, in a line parallel to our position. Marius fired a flare, but they did not see it. When the aircraft turned to sweep back he fired another one. All waited and hoped he would see it. Suddenly the chopper turned and started to head in our direction a cheer went up from the couple of us that was there, thrilled that he now knew our location. The lumbering big nosed Sikorsky H34 would by no means qualify, if there were such a thing as a helicopter beauty competition, but to us on that particular day she looked like Marilyn Monroe. "My name is Burrows, I'm from Enniskillen, I'm Church of Ireland, but whipped into see you when I heard you were Irish," said the visitor as he stood over my bed some weeks later in the Bangkok Christian Hospital. Small in stature, he smiled and every day from then on he came to see me. "Look at this..." he quipped many visits later as he held up the newspaper they called the Bangkok Post. "**IRISH GUN BOAT FIRES ON RUSSIAN TRAWLER**" read the headline. On reading the story I went on to find out that some Russian trawler had been caught fishing inside the twelve-mile limit in Irish waters. When the Russian Captain saw this Irish frigate approaching, he cut his nets and started to run for the high seas. He had no intention of waiting around for a boarding party. However the Captain on the Irish frigate fired a couple of shots across the Russian's bow, and that quickly put a stop to his gallop. Had the Russian known they fired the last two shells they had, he sure as hell would not have waited for the boarding party.