

## "IT WAS RUGGED IN LAOS"

I served in 209 squadron RAF; we were based at RAF Seletar in Singapore. One fine day in January 1960 we (four aircraft fitters) were called in to see warrant officer "Butch" Peacock and told to prepare ourselves for a detachment to a "secret" destination.. Well it took all of half an hour, (via the airman's "grapevine") I know a bloke in SHQ etc., to find out that this "secret" destination was in fact Laos. Our passports were taken and stamped with visas by the French Embassy in Singapore our "jabs" checked, we were issued with the dreaded "jungle greens", we got the spares and tools together and at the appointed hour the RNZAF Bristol Freighter arrived. We clambered aboard and were off!! After a seemingly long and boring flight (the Bristol Freighter was a slow aircraft with a fixed undercarriage) we arrived at our first refuelling stop a place quixotically called "Kaw Phuket" (yes that's exactly what we thought). After refuelling with jerry cans it was onwards and upwards to the second refuelling stop.....Bangkok !! Now that was a bit tastier.! On arrival we were told by the British Embassy officials who greeted us that we would overnight here "But stay in the hotel (Yes billeted in the best hotel, (The Grand Hotel) "because the locals are a bit stirred up at the moment". Of course we took no notice of that, before we left for a tour of Bangkok we looked at the price of beer in the hotel menu, complained to the official who worked miracles, and promptly got a massive increase on our already quite generous allowance! The next morning we returned to Bangkok Airport (our kite was guarded by the Thai Army, we didn't have to do that ourselves) the flight to Vientiane (the commercial capital of Laos) was uneventful; the RNZAF had thoughtfully provided I.P. (Important Persons) lunch boxes, which we duly consumed during the flight. Upon our arrival we had several beers at the Airport Lounge and were "issued" with a Land Rover Whoopee! Weaving our way to our hotel (yes again the best in town Hotel Imperial!) We found it really quite comfortable. The routine for the days ahead went something like this: - morning, shower dress in civvies (uniform not allowed), breakfast in hotel restaurant, get in gharrie to drive to Airport to service and prepare our aircraft (one Prestwick Aviation Pioneer), see off pilot and "Secret Squirrel" (British Embassy Military Attaché, then off for a few beers to our newly discovered "crew room" (The White Lotus Massage Parlour). When we first arrived there a Buddhist Ceremony to bless the opening of the establishment was taking place....with free beer and grub, so we just had to stay! The girls were so nice, Ah, memories, memories, I should point out that we felt it our duty to attend this wonderful place on an almost daily basis in order to teach the girls the English Language. I am sure dear reader that you understand that our motives were of the highest order...

Our officers did not approve of this situation, but as we were often accompanied by a R.A.A.F Wing Commander and his sidekick an ex Portsmouth Pomm there was not much that they could do.

When there was no flying some times we were invited to parties with the other English speaking communities. We always thought that the Brit Attaché was a bit weird; we suspect that he got cheap gin through the "diplomatic bags"... This was proved sufficiently by our standards when we went to a party at his home, I think it was for some "official" reason The Queens Birthday, Battle of Trafalgar, Guy Fawkes Night or something like that...gin flowed like water...The Laotian gardener poured and served the drinks, as he didn't speak anything other than Laotian everybody got lager glasses of gin. I have never been so pissed in my life !! We had a very full social diary,, I mean work hardly played a part in it! We went on trips out in our Landrover to see the countryside; the hotel kindly supplying packed lunches but no beer, which we of course thought most unfair!

Laos at this time was a major opium centre in Asia...The airfield at Vientiane had dozens of transport aircraft, most of them unpainted with very tiny registration numbers (in order to prevent identification) In fact the "Royal Laotian Air force's" top general was allegedly in on the act, using Dakotas and Curtiss Commandos to do the dirty work.....We made a trip to Luang Prabang where the local farmers were selling Christmas Pudding sized cakes of opium for £5. each. I should have filled my kitbag up and made a fortune (just kidding!) The reason for this gruelling detachment was to "suss out" the airfields and other places of military interest, because the Pathet Lao (Communists) were making inroads into this unfortunate country...It was expected that S.E.A.T.O. troops would get involved.

The "secret squirrel" had apparently persuaded our pilot to "have a peep over the Laos/China border because, after one flight our aircraft returned with a hole the size of a rifle bullet through it's starboard roundel!..We were assured

that "the pilot got drunk and had inadvertently fired his service revolver through the wing (he didn't have a service revolver!) But we of course believed the official version! As it happened the politicians decided that Laos was "one war too far" no SEATO and nothing happened.

Laos is a beautiful country with rolling hills topped with burning poppy fields (to fertilise the earth) the locals used a more natural method just outside our bedroom windows, in fact a Canadian bloke kept a catapult and a line of little stones to try and deter the "fertilisers". The local people were super, they would greet you by clasping their hands together and saying "Bo Pen Yang" Saffron robed monks would accept plates of food from the kneeling villagers without saying "thank you" (it was an honour to feed a monk) The sight and sounds of that fascinating country will remain with me until the day I die..... I wonder what it is like now? Yes, that was one hell of a rugged detachment.. I only wish that I was forty years younger and that I could go again!

### [Martin Shelvey](#)



Waiting for RNZAF Freighter by Seletar Control Tower Jan 1960.jpg