

***CONVERSATION WITH MIKE
“TUNA” BARKSDALE***

The War Years: Vietnam and Laos

By Elaine Zimmer Davis, May 2012

Today Mike Barksdale, aka “Tuna,” and I are sitting outside his corporate headquarters on a beautiful San Diego day, having lunch and talking about his flying days during the Vietnam War, initially as a Marine Corps helicopter pilot in the Republic of Vietnam, Dec 1966 – July 1968, and later in Laos with Air America, Jan ’71 – Dec 1973. Tuna is like most former military pilots – he enjoys sharing highlights of long ago when flying was wild and “O” Club war stories got better with every drink. Tuna does not look back on those years with blame, horror or misgivings. Quite the contrary: “I wouldn’t change those experiences for anything,” says Tuna, who grins and says: “You had to be hard-charging and young.”

Although admitting to being more mellow these days, it will come as no surprise that Tuna hasn't lost his dry sense of humor -- headquarters is actually Shakespeare Pub & Grille in the Little Italy section of downtown San Diego. I'm sipping a glass of wine and he a beer, and we spend most of our time laughing, not crying about the past. "When I told Janelle [Tuna's wife] that we were coming to Shakespeare's, she thought it was a tacky choice," laughs Tuna, who at 70 is trim and still maintains his Marine Corps weight. Quick to smile, it is difficult to imagine that 2011 was a rough year, health-wise, for Tuna, who still has that youthful, devilish persona, which surfaces when explaining that he and younger brother Jamey, also a Marine Vietnam veteran who flew A-4s, bought a couple of prop planes years ago and started a company servicing the Navy with a slow threat simulation training -- that's when the guys found that Shakespeare's was a perfect place -- then and now -- to conduct corporate business.

Tuna was a Marine Captain by the time he made up his mind to leave the Marine Corps in 1970. It was not easy but logical for a guy whose life increasingly focused on flying more and making a living at it --AAM looked like a perfect solution -- money over medals but still patriotic.

"I knew that the flying opportunities would be slowing down in Vietnam," says Tuna, who decided to call AAM when he heard that they were building up their helicopter fleet. After talking to a representative in D.C. and taking an airline employment test, a call was made to the Operations Officer of his last Marine squadron, and Tuna was hired. In Dec 1971 he landed at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) in Thailand, followed three months later by his former wife, Paula, where they remained for the next three years. They lived among families who were working for the Company-- the name given to the CIA, which Tuna says was basically a joke, because all the guys knew it was a CIA operation, even if most Americans did not; however that was about to change. As Tuna was arriving in Laos, the U.S. was holding Senate Hearings in D.C. exposing the secret war to the folks back home in the states.

AAM's involvement in Laos, a country slightly larger than the state of Minnesota, dated back to the mid 1950s under Civil Air Transport (CAT) which was eventually purchased by AAM. Less than a decade later the Vietnam War escalated, as did the importance of Laos. President John F. Kennedy believed that if Laos fell into communist hands, so would all of Asia. The North Vietnamese increasingly used Laos as a staging ground for training and resupplying its troops, as they moved south, down the Ho Chi Minh trail. Although declared neutral according to the Geneva accords, Laos suffered from an unstable political environment of pro-democratic factions on the one hand and communists on the other.

While the U.S. abided by the Geneva accords, loosely speaking, calling for removal of all military bases from Laos, this did not apply to AAM -- even though the company worked to achieve many of the same goals as our military that flew into

Laos under the cloak of secrecy, dropping its bombs, with help from “The Ravens” -- the airborne Forward Air Controllers (FACs), sheep-dipped from the Air Force, typically flying O-1 Cessna Bird Dogs in areas known to harbor communist Pathet Lao troops and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The Ravens called in the fully-armed fixed wing aircraft from Vietnam, so they could release their bombs where the FACs would mark the target with white phosphorus called Willey Pete in radio jargon, from a rocket or a smoke grenade. After the bombings, the Ravens flew in low to determine the effectiveness of the air strikes. So dangerous was a Raven’s job that their loss rate was 30%.

By 1970, AAM had become the largest airline in the world, composed of a variety of recycled and new aircraft of every imaginable shape and size, flown largely unarmed and unmarked with military designations. As the need for helicopter pilots increased, the slots were filled with experienced pilots like Tuna, who were veteran combat pilots with one or two Vietnam tours under their belts. Most were sent to Udorn RTAFB – AAM’s primary headquarters for supervising the war in Laos – the largest clandestine operation ever undertaken by the CIA.



The three countries – Thailand, Laos and Vietnam were all heavily involved in the war.



L-R: Ron Sabin, Tuna Barksdale, Thatch Sigler – HMM-361

Udon offered a great lifestyle, Tuna says, remembering that motorbikes made getting around easy – even though the motorbikes were in danger of being stolen and returned by Thai Police who charged a “reward” for their return. Also, it was far nicer to live in a house instead of a hootch; however, the “O” Club lifestyle was still the social centerpiece, as it had been in Vietnam – but with guys, some of whom were sheep-dipped (clandestinely recruited from the US military in Vietnam) and working in civilian clothes, instead of military uniforms. In Tuna’s case, the AAM guys did wear a civilian uniform that consisted of a light gray shirt with dark gray pants and a ball-cap, embossed with an AAM insignia. Known for its cast of characters, some company pilots became creative with their uniforms – one had a penchant for wearing Hawaiian shirts, several liked cowboy hats and an old-timer was infamous for flying with shower shoes, but most were clad in gray from head to toe.

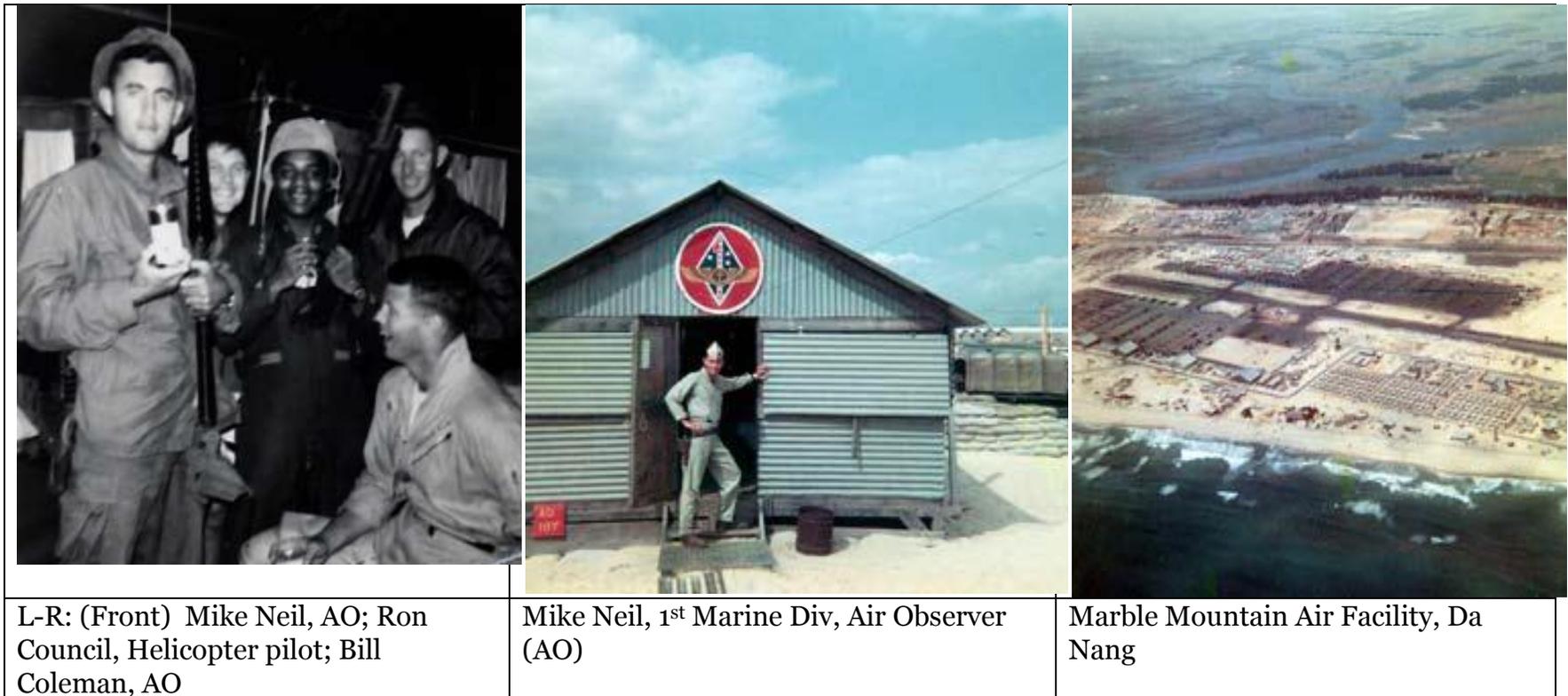
Although home-based in Thailand, Tuna’s missions took him throughout Laos, landing at Lima sites (LS), all of which were numbered airfields, such as Vientiane (LO8), Park Sakse (L 11) Luang Prabang (L54) and Long Tieng (**Alternate L20A**) – the secret city that never appeared on maps and was typically referenced as “Alternate.” Although Alternate ultimately fell into the enemy’s hands along with all of Laos, it was well hidden for years in northern Laos and home to most Ravens, CIA decision makers, Gen Vang Pao and other leadership that ran “Operation Steve Canyon,” which referred to the military’s Raven program in Laos.

AAM pilots, like Tuna, frequently landed at Long Tieng, especially when he was flying Hueys and more involved in military support during his last year and a half in Laos. Tuna remembers transporting Gen Vang Pao, who was the backbone of pro-democracy ground operations in Laos, leading his Hmong tribesman and other indigenous people, highly regarded for their fighting prowess. “He was like everyone else,” says Tuna, of transporting General Vang Pao and his troops, “with no special requirements when he was aboard.”

Tuna usually spent six days at a time in the field, before heading back to Thailand for a break before his next assignment. Because there were so many long-time AAM pilots with seniority, Tuna was low on the seniority list throughout his three years with AAM and always flew as co-pilot, regardless of his 2,000 hours in H-34s and Hueys in Vietnam – the same helicopters he was flying in Laos.

“There was an airline mentality to Air America,” says Tuna, but explaining that the money was good, and the work was not as dangerous as in Vietnam. I am surprised to hear him say that Laos was less dangerous than Vietnam, since that seems incongruous with what I have either read or heard. Tuna sums up the difference this way: “I was in Laos for three years, and my helicopter got hit three times, and I was wounded once.” Since his helicopter flew unarmed, Tuna always felt that “they

had to fly better than the bad guys could shoot.” Then he explains that within one year of flying in Vietnam, his helicopter was hit 10 times, two of his crewmen were wounded, and he sustained a shoulder wound. “Nowhere was safe in Vietnam, because of the firepower, saturation and intensity of the operations. In Laos, everything was spread out, so you could find places to land, unlike in Vietnam.”



However, Laos was not always predictable. Areas of the country changed hands overnight, repetitively. One day a village belonged to the pro-Western forces, primarily consisting of the Hmong guerrillas led by General Vang Pao, and the next day it was in the hands of Communist forces—Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese masters.

Tuna gives me an example of the constant change of power and its effect on the psyche. He recalls transporting a CIA case agent to his home in Luang Prabang (LP). He and the command pilot parked their helicopter across the street from the

agent's home where they bunked for the night, since they did not normally fly at night. Next morning Tuna got up to run and was only a short distance when he noticed several Lao holding AK-47s. "My first thought was that they were the bad guys and that the communists had overrun LP while I was sleeping, says Tuna, who was relieved to learn that they were on his side. When AAM pilots flew, there were usually no wingmen like in Vietnam; however, aircraft would check in every 30 minutes with an "ops normal" call, unlike in Vietnam.

If a pilot learned anything in Laos, it was probably how to fly with little to no navigational aids – often considered the best tools were a good set of eyes, compass and knowledge of local landmarks – maps were not too helpful, because of their lack of accuracy. Nasty weather was always a problem, ranging from relentless monsoon rains that tormented an aircraft like a mini machinegun, to massive seasonal crop burnings that metamorphosed the air into a hazy blue fog, to winds that could whip an aircraft into frenzy and make landings tricky, even for the old-timers who had seen it all. "The monsoon rains were really the most challenging," says Tuna, when I ask which was worse.

For his first few months in Laos, Tuna flew the classic H-34s like the ones he flew in Vietnam, but then he moved into the modified H-34 (Twin Pack) that allowed for transporting heavy external cargo and supplies into higher altitudes with more efficiency. "With external loads, we were able to make a quick release on the ground and leave – it was very efficient, and I often wished we had done it that way in Vietnam."

The helicopters were unarmed, but most pilots carried some type of personal arms with them -- if something was likely to happen, it would occur on the ground, rather than in the air, which is how he sustained a flesh wound while taking off in a Twin Pack. A bullet bounced off the seat pan and bruised his leg. Not wanting his wife to know that he had been hit, Tuna concocted a story, because the wound was minor; and although she was a nurse, it seemed to work. "None of us wanted our wives to worry, because they might want to go home," he says, explaining that many pilots at Udorn brought their families with them, as did some of the people attached to the US Embassy and other positions in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, which was declared neutral territory.

When Tuna was flying Twin Pack and Hueys, much of that work was related to military-type missions in support of the troops in Laos – namely Hmongs, Thais and Lao, along with CIA case officers. However, if any friendly aircraft went down in Laos, "we were there," says Tuna, of everyone's immediate reaction to drop whatever they were doing for search & rescue missions. During his time in Laos, there was only one AAM pilot killed, he said, but Ravens, controlling US bombing missions, did not fare as well.

When the Vietnam War was over, the U.S. pulled out our troops in that country and AAM did likewise in Laos. Pilots like Tuna, who left in '73, came back to the states and moved on with their lives, while many of the Udorn pilots went to Saigon and continued flying.

Even though the flying, money and mission were rewarding, I sense that Tuna always viewed his role in Laos as a job – one that he wanted to do well, but it didn't seem to have the same importance as his time in Vietnam – definitely not because of a need to talk about war stories, but I think more because Marines are bred to take care of their fellow Marines, giving them a higher cause to fight during wartime. This very emotional connection seems typical of helicopters pilots, especially those who flew medevac missions, so I decide to ask Tuna a little about his time in Vietnam with the Marine Corps.



L-R: Front Row: JR Aucella, Mike Neil, Thad Zigler



The Grunts: Air Observer Unit, 1st Marine Div



Huey Gunship in a revetment

I immediately wonder if Tuna always wanted to fly – even as a small boy. After all, I figure that after logging nearly 28,000 hrs in 47 years, he was born to fly. But not so, at least not until he joined the Marine Corps. Right after OCS, Tuna ended up in flight school, Jan '65, where he ultimately learned to fly the Sikorsky H-34. From then on, he developed a passion for flight, officially kicking off his career in war-torn Vietnam – primarily based in squadrons at Marble Mountain, first in HMM-263, flying H-34s (Dec '66-July '67), except soon after his arrival, the squadron was deployed to the USS Okinawa, a Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH) ship that patrolled off shore from the DMZ to the southernmost portion of Vietnam in support of a special Landing Force (LFP).

When that ended he served 6 mo.'s as a FAC with the 1st Battalion/7th Marines (1/7), based at Hill 10 (Jul '67-Dec '67) in “Arizona territory” where he learned what “tip of the spear” really meant, resulting in a lifelong respect for Marine grunts and a renewed appreciation for being a pilot. “When I joined the 1/7, I immediately noticed that none of the grunts had a sense of humor,” says Tuna. “I soon found out why.” During Tuna’s FAC tour, he met 1stLt Mike Neil, who earned a Navy Cross for heroic actions with the 1/7. Mike retired as a Brig Gen, after an impressive career and went on to become a highly respected attorney in San Diego, where he still practices. He and Tuna have remained close friends all these years, and recently returned to Vietnam with a group of buddies to tour former battlegrounds.

With his FAC tour over, Tuna was eager to spend more time flying, so he extended his Vietnam tour for another 6 months. He took a little leave and while waiting to be assigned to a squadron, Tuna moved into Dick Rockford’s hootch, his best friend and first wife’s brother, and immediately asked Dick if he could fly a mission with him. Rockford was scheduled for night medevac duty and suggested that Tuna ask his co-pilot if he could take his place. Tuna laughs, remembering how the guy lit up like a Xmas tree, and said, “No, problem.” Everyone knew that night medevac missions were the most dangerous.

After several “substitutions,” Tuna’s name began appearing on the flight schedule. Everyone thought he was a member of the squadron, and then one day the XO called him into his office and said, ‘Who the hell are you,’ so Tuna tells him, and after hearing his explanation, the XO asks him if he wants to stay. That’s how Tuna became a member of HMM-363 for a month, before joining his official squadron, HMM-361 (Mar '68-May '68). Although only at HMM-361 for a short time, it was just long enough for Tuna to get wounded, 9 May '68, while on a medevac mission to a Special Forces Base in Arizona territory that was under fire from a mortar attack. Hit in the shoulder, Tuna went to G-4 Hospital in Da Nang. “They bandaged it, and wanted me to stay, but I got up and left.” The word that Tuna had been hit circulated quickly, and as he was leaving G-4, in comes Mike Neil and a couple of guys with a few six packs, all of which looked pretty good to Tuna at that moment.

Tuna's last in-country squadron was VMO-2 (May '68 – Aug '68) where he transitioned into Hueys, since the H-34s were being phased out. The squadron was split between VMO-2 and HML-167, where my husband, Ron, was assigned. Tuna was just finishing his Vietnam tour when Ron was arriving to begin his 13 months in country, when they met in the "O" Club bar at Marble Mtn. They did not see each other again until four decades later, when they wound up working for the same company in San Diego. After Tuna finished his stint with Air America, he continued to fly, ultimately moving into the corporate sector, where he just retired after 10 years as a Captain, flying luxurious Gulfstream corporate aircraft for Qualcomm in San Diego. Although Ron works in a different capacity for Qualcomm, he says that the company is well known for attracting and hiring the best pilots available.

Post Script: Tuna and I did not discuss the POW/MIA issue, but I am told that JPAC has a team in Laos, as of this writing, who are continuing to search for our MIAs. Talking to Tuna about Laos has helped me better understand the secret war, and I hope to write more in a future blog about the challenges facing recovery efforts of our MIAs still unaccounted-for in Laos. Many thanks go to Tuna for his patience and an enjoyable afternoon at corporate headquarters.