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Dave Kouba (with Jack Knotts), May 12-14, 1975

Concordia University, Saint Paul

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Dave Kouba (with Jack Knotts on May 14)

May 12-14, 1975
Transcribed by Paul Hillmer
Edited by Dave Kouba

All time markings indicate where a new section of recording begins.
Text marked in yellow is deemed unclear. All areas marked (*** ) indicate comments that were indecipherable.

Dave Kouba

For the record, May 12, 1975. [Papers shuffling] This is for the panic of Vientiane. Went to work at 7:30. Downing was there. He had just been evacuated from Pakse by the Air Force that launched out of Tango Zero Eight on 30 minutes’ notice by Rex Wilson’s radio in Pakse. Rex had smashed all the crypto equipment and asked Downing to assist him in burning some files on employees that were involved in pay-offs of sorts that would be immediately [Pauses] taken care of upon a discovery of files of this sort. All came out except Zimmerman. Barney Chessen had already been up here in Vientiane previously, because of the broadcasting over the local radio station naming Barney Chessen as being associated with all the big wheel rich Laos down there and making it hard for the lower echelon group of people. Downing tried to get Zimmerman to go, but he calmly sat behind his desk, as they say, smoking his pipe, and did not go on the evacuation flight to Udorn. Three Filipinos plus all of the Americans did go. They came right away, and they were directed not to wait over 30 minutes. Downing had two suitcases and one box. Everything else was left behind at Pakse. It remains to be seen if he gets that out or not, along with everybody else.

(2:20) Terry Peterson was at the airport also at a quarter of eight, waiting to go to Luang Prabang in a Beechcraft to take new crypto gear up there to install, because two days previously there had been a message sent out by— it had to be Ambassador Chapman—to destroy everything—equipment plus the files. And Foster’s assistant, whoever he is, did so immediately. And three hours later they called back from Vientiane and said, ‘Disregard that.’ And then he said, ‘Sorry old fellow, but we’ve already done it.’ So this is about a $10,000 piece of gear that we’ve taken back up there to re-install. I evacuated the Lao-American Association after I dropped off the people at Zing Nun, because we were expecting demonstrations there at the school, and it’s full of people.

(3:32) Terry Peterson also said that as soon as all of this mess started, that three-quarters of a million dollars worth of their satellite gear that they had just put in Vientiane had already been removed back to Udorn. And this is similar to the type of gear that they left behind in Saigon, I guess. So they got it out.
The APO was a fiasco today. Jerry Campbell got there at seven o’clock, and he was number six on the list. He finished at about ten o’clock. There was—when I went there at 12:30, after I finished my flight from Luang Prabang, there was—they were working on number 24, and there was 42 numbers in all. I went to take some pictures of all the people in the parking lot. By this time everybody had retreated to the shade trees over in the ACA, and I did go into the ACA and have a chat with Eric Nissen. And he said, ‘Oh, never mind. All is well.’ He’s been reassured by the Ambassador and everybody that ‘ops normal and don’t panic’ like all the other Americans are at this time, including myself, ‘cause I don’t have my personal things out yet. Chapman’s going to give a speech in the movie room at five o’clock. I didn’t get to the speech because I was called out on a flight later on to take [Pauses] What’s his name?

Pat McEwen to Long Cheng to talk to Jerry Daniels. We got back at 6:30. I also have another 6:30 take-off to take Pat McEwen back to Long Cheng. He had already been back to Long Cheng once today, and they tried to get Stan. I couldn’t find him, so Isiac took him about twelve o’clock—or ten o’clock. I was there for 45 minutes to talk to the three Meo cooks. They said that VP will be relieved tomorrow by one of his assistants, a two-star general. The people that are evacuating Long Cheng are going to Site 353, and likewise from 272. They all expect a communist take-over. Many tears, and they all expect to die rather than work under communism. The Joe Hammer did not get launched out of Vientiane for his tour in Luang Prabang today until about ten o’clock because of meetings with Ramsey and USAID. Koenne was called out on a nine o’clock flight to Tango Zero Eight. Four out of five of the friendly PL—or friendly ministers have resigned, so in other words, there’s 11 out of 12 now that are PL. It’s 10:45 at night now. Larry Joseph just left here giving me the news that I had my 6:30 flight. The C-46s that launched for [Pauses] to try to do the spook deal to shuttle goods out of Long Cheng to Udorn turned out to be a fiasco. They were called into a briefing at Udorn. Two crews—Stan Pelzynski took Larry Joseph down there yesterday for a briefing. They were all called into the briefing room and Larry Joseph said, ‘No, this is only for the C-46 crews,’ so Stan didn’t go in. Moberg was standing there beside him and had a big chuckle and laugh, you know, because he knew it was about, and he told Stan. Anyway, it was all about this code stuff and clearances and all this to take out of Vientiane and go to Long Cheng and pick up people and go to Udorn. Strouse gave me the word tonight that consequently two crews and two airplanes are persona non grata in Laos now because of this. Al Rich took off, and he came back some time later with another engine out. Strouse continued on, hauled out 46 people to Udorn. Came back in, landed, somebody came up to him and said, ‘You’ve already been in Long Cheng hauling out people and it’s already in the Bangkok Post.’ A little bit of double-checking, why it revealed this was not true, but the Lao already knew about it. So it had been told when they take off tomorrow morning, ‘If you crash with both engines out, you’d better make sure you’re on the Thai side of the border. So that’s the end of four pilots for Continental. Rich and— or Rainville and another co-pilot were the other two. So one trip of shuttling out of Alternate did it up.

Weird Neal came out this morning as we’re all conversing on the ramp talking very seriously, and he says, ‘Well, here we are, guys, you know?’, and between him and Terry Peterson, why they really put on a good liar’s contest.

Went to the stereo shop this morning at 7:30, tried to drop off my machine to get it changed back to 60 cycle [Yawns] so I could send it back. He was closed, of course. I caught him at 11 o’clock, [Pauses] and he said he’d send his wife across the river and he’d stay, because he had too
much gear in the shop to sell. The kip dropped from 2600 to 2000. The reason it did, because they
definitely stopped all Vietnamese, all Indians, all [Pauses] Cambodians, and all [Pauses. Ripping
sound.] somebody else—four nationalities—from crossing the river—period. LaVonne has run into
trouble, and looks like she may have a lot of difficulty getting out. As for Phoxay, we'll wait and see.
She still thinks she can make it.

(11:03) When it comes to VP, why Terry Peterson says, ‘Well, only God knows that, because one
message you read that he sends to Udorn says, ‘I'll never leave my people.’ The next message you
read is, ‘Well, I'd better go to Tango Zero Eight.’ So there you are. What is VP really going to do?

(11:27) In Vietnam, Gene Rainville tells me that he saw one fellow talk to one fellow, along with
four other strangers appointed, probably by the embassy, spooks, burn ten million dollars worth of
green in Vietnam before they left: six million dollars for the embassy, and four million dollars for
the DAO. All four participated, all strangers, burned ten million dollars. Are you shitting me?

(12:11) Les Strouse says that the Lao pilot and Mircea took the C-46 to Bangkok on a scheduled
cargo run. Said they broke down for maintenance in Bangkok, sent telegrams up to their wives, said
‘Evacuate across the river.’ So Neal is trying to get permission from Panhia to trust him to go to
Bangkok and try and bring the C-46 back. We’ll wait and see how this turns out. Eldon Walker was
denied permission to go in the DZ club now and participate. Very good crowd tonight. All went
down to Café Rene and ate. I can get ready for my 6:30 take-off tomorrow for Long Cheng with
Pat McEwen. Tune in tomorrow for another change. The headlines tonight say, ‘Everybody cool it
in Laos. All Americans, don’t panic.’ Until I get my household effects out, I’m gonna be very
uneasy. After I do, then I can sit back and laugh—and everybody else.

(13:37) One more thing: Les Strouse told me last night what a sad affair it was taking Pop Buell
with him on the last Porter ferry flight from Vientiane to Bangkok. Took off at seven o’clock.
Larry Joseph, Bill Leonard, a couple of others went out to shake his hand. He had three suitcases—
small ones (said that’s all he owned). He was just about to break down in tears, I guess. Really—
really didn’t want to go, but he knew he had to. He'd been told by somebody it’d be better if he left
town. All the way to Bangkok just sat there, stared straight ahead, and Les said he didn’t dare say
anything to him, ‘cause he knew he’d break down if he did. So Pop Buell left Laos for good on this
day, Monday the—or no, that was last Saturday when he took him to Bangkok. (14:51)

Dave Kouba

(14:53) Next day, Tuesday, May 13, 1975. Departed Vientiane at 6:40 with Pat McEwen to go to
Long Cheng to talk to Hog. I’ve never seen so many people on the ramp around Gate One as I did
today. I took 15 shots, climbed up on the back of the barrels there, the barricade, took several
sweeps—it should turn out real well. Beautiful morning. You could see the big rectangular karst
down there by Site 14 in the background. Everybody wants out, of course. On the way back Pat
McEwen asked me about the weather for C-46s and 130s, and I told him it was beautiful. We’ll see
if they get any 130s up there. One Lao DC-3, Lao Air Force DC-3 took a load out while I was shut
down there on the ground. A bad sign is when old Hog puts two cases of Oly[mpia beer] on the
airplane to bring back to Vientiane, plus four more boxes of his personal effects. [He] also brought
four or five other locals that worked for him. Two little Meo cooks were still up there, and they
were asking me if USAID’s gonna come back today. I said I didn’t know. I said, ‘I’ll see you this afternoon,’ which I probably will. We’re almost all out of food up there now, but they’re still open. Hanging right in there. The vehicles of all these colonels that live up there were all parked on that ramp this morning, all full of household effects. Everything they own. All looking for that ride out. They didn’t mob the DC-3. They did gather around it quite a bit, though, but it was pretty orderly. VP’s Baron took off at the same—just before I did. I don’t know who was in it. VP is still there. McEwen and Jerry went down to talk to him for about ten minutes. But the situation looks like today or tomorrow might be the last time that we are going into Long Cheng. Very, very sad.

(17:40) Stan’s flight in 1-5-6 to 2-7-2, regularly scheduled flight was cancelled. It never did launch. No choppers went up there, either. So [Pauses] yesterday might have been the last day for any aircraft to go to 272. I flew over it coming back and didn’t see a soul around.

(18:15) It’s now seven minutes past four on May 13, same day. I just got a call from Gene Isiac. I’m on a six o’clock take-off tomorrow, overhead Long Cheng, land and pick up Jerry Daniels and take him to Udorn—plus whoever else wants to go. They are [Pauses] fighting now at Ban Soun—came up the road, going right through it, so they’ll be headed to Long Cheng. I hope they aren’t up there by the time I get up there tomorrow morning.

(19:00) They had me scheduled on a 1-5-6, which is not a tanker, so I had ‘em change it, ‘cause I might have to orbit overhead for a while, or else the weather might be bad. There’s going to be a mob on the ground, too, when they find out that they went through 272 already. And they can make Long Cheng by tomorrow morning. Nothing’s being done about any other evacuation at Long Cheng, so it looks like she’s all over.

(19:30) I mailed ten more packages at the APO. Got all my important stuff out now—the tapes to John Lear, plus the album, elephants, and the last of the important things out. I’m up to package number 33. So I’ll—hopefully I’ll get some more out tomorrow. I’ll be going to Udorn and I can mail that registered package—that is if I get Hog out, and everybody else in one piece—and myself.

(20:14) Later, nine o’clock the same night. After another briefing with Isiac and Larry Joseph and also Jim Koenne, it seems as though five airplanes are shuttling out of Long Cheng tonight into Udorn or Namphong dam, I’m not sure. The Continental’s two C-46s, two Royal Air Lao C-47s, and one Air Force-type C-47. They evidently have lights up there, landing and taking off, and there’s a solid overcast tonight, so it should be nice and dark up there. I’m sure Rich enjoys this—Rainville, too. They’re supposed to continue up until 11 o’clock tonight. I wish them luck. Evidently there was a turn-about face on the security part of flying from Long Cheng to Udorn, and they’ve got to clear it again to do it. They say that I’m going to have some company up there tomorrow with me at 6:45 for my pick-up. Air Force-types, I assume—or maybe it’s BR-46s. I’ll have to wait and see.

(21:45) The takeover of 272 took place this afternoon very fast. It was a hundred PL, I guess, and they didn’t necessarily come in tanks—vehicles of some kind. And there was a little bit of rifle fire, but not very much. And they were talking to the telephone operator at 272 and he kept telling Vientiane, ‘They are here. They’re here now, and they’re looting the warehouse.’ And that’s about all I gathered.
Stan got in from Udorn at eight o’clock. He had taken McEwen down there after he departed Long Cheng, and then back to Vientiane. I’m the only one on a scheduled flight tomorrow. Everybody else is stand-by.

May 14 – Dave Kouba and Jack Knotts on the runway at Long Cheng


JK: Well, it’s a crying shame.

DK: You hold the tape recorder.

JK: PK. We’ve got a C-130 here on final, landing lights just came on. Dave’s going to—got his telephoto on his Nikon and he’s going to get a shot of it coming in. This could be the last bird coming in. We’ve had two C-46s this morning, plus this 130 was in here bright and early. Now he’s back. We—

DK: We got here at what? Six thirty, Jack?

JK: About 6:30, Dave. [Sound of 130’s engines becomes prominent] We’ve timed the 130. He took one hour and 20 minutes to make the trip. We’re not sure [Voice on a radio, perhaps Matt Hoff, is audible. Seems to say “Jerry, do you want us to stop at the ramp again?”] if he’s going to Udorn or Namphong.

Voice on radio [Jerry Daniels?): Negative. Pull up like you did on your first trip yesterday. (***) short, (***) there’s big crowd]

[Roar of C-130’s engines]

More radio voices, though hard to distinguish.

JD: (***)?

MH: (***) right up at the end now.

JD: (***) little bit short now.

MH: (***) Roger has to take a look, and then we’ll be back in an hour and 38 minutes, hour and 40 minutes, or we’ll be taking (***) to 25, or we’re going to be close when we get back (***)

JD: OK, copy that.

JK: There you heard Matt talking to Hog, saying it would take him an hour 25 to an hour 35 to come back. It’s really a mess—mob scene up on the main ramp. There’s estimate—I don’t know, five, six, seven thousand up people there, all streaming toward the 130. Trucks, jeeps, and walking, carrying all their personal possessions. The back doors have now come open, and the mob is
surging up around the aircraft. Mat Hoff is pilot, and he gave us a big thumbs up as he came by. He's doing a real great job.

DK: He said he was going to come back in an hour and a half. Is that right?

JK: Said he was going to come back in an hour and a half, Dave. [Sound of vehicle passing by] And I hope by that time we'll have our CR together.

DK: Yeah, I hope we're out of here.

JK: And get the—get out of here, too.

DK: We're standing by for the two VIPs to bring out, huh Jack?

JK: Yes, we—

DK: Are you my cover, or am I your cover? [Laughs]

JK: Well, I was your cover coming up, and—I don't know, it's switching back and forth there.

[Sounds of airplane engines]

JK: Looks like they're not going to fly the T-28s out, huh? Is there four of them sitting up there, or three?

DK: They got 'em spaced out on the main ramp, but it really looks like they're going to leave them.

JK: Yep.

DK: Got to go easy on the film here, Jack.

(25:50) DK: They can't hardly mob that airplane, Jack. I think we ought to try and get out between this flight and the next one, huh?

JK: Well—

DK: He'll—maybe he can land after VP already goes.

JK: Yeah. I think our—

DK: and get another load.

JK: —our plan is good to try and get our birds cranked up while there is a big bird in here so we won't get mobbed. They all left the chopper now.

DK: Yeah. Porter's vacant.
JK: Dave’s got his Porter parked here on what we call the commercial ramp and I’ve got the
chopper parked over right next to the tower across the runway.

DK: The tower is not working, of course, today. They moved through 272 yesterday about two
o’clock. Is that right?

JK: Yes, and I guess there was some fighting there. There was—everyone bugged out of 272.

DK: About a hundred people—a hundred PL, and they didn’t necessarily come in tanks. [Sound of
radio static] And they—the radio operator stayed right there and told Vientiane that ‘They’re here
looting the warehouse.’

[Distorted voice of Matt Hoff, unintelligible]

JK: The weather this morning was not real great, sort of typical Xieng Khouang area weather for
this time of year. We’ve got maybe a 4,000-foot ceiling, ragged clouds, but it’s fairly decent.

[Distorted auto horn sounds over plane noise.]

(27:22) JK: OK, the aircraft is filled now, but the people won’t leave the rear of it. Matt has revved
up the engines and pulled ahead a little bit, and the blast has sort of discouraged some of them.
They’re starting to move away a little bit.

(27:45) DK: Hey Matt, you got Moon with you?

MH: [On radio] – Say again?

DK: You got Moon with you?

MH: Say again?

DK: Kicker Moon. Do you have Kicker Moon on board?

MH: Negative. He got off.

DK: OK.

DK: Going home already. Shit, I figured—there, he’s closing the door. Crank up that—yeah.

JK: All right. The doors have finally closed, and the C-130 is slowly taxiing forward right near the
end of the runway and starting to turning around to line up.

(28:31) [Sound of C-130 engines very loud]

JK: All right, he’s moving down the runway, and here we go.

(28:38) [Sound of C-130 taking off, burst of air audible]

JK: That’s really beautiful, all that prop wash going off the front, huh?
May 14 – Dave Kouba and Jack Knotts having their last meal (breakfast) at Long Cheng

DK: It didn’t light up, though, with the start over there. It lit up good now, though.

JK: Yeah.

(28:57)

DK: There goes the 130. I hope we’re out of here by the next time he comes back.

JK: Yeah, in fact let’s set our watches and sort of work on it. [Pause] You had your case inside, didn’t you?

---

DK: One last meal at Long Cheng.

JK: Hey, not too bad!

DK: Fred just served us some Spam and eggs. The bug-out plan is in process. Should be executed within the next 45 minutes.

[Sound of a door slamming]

DK: Have eight people going out.

JK: Freddy asked me about—you take his picture so he’d get it in the paper.

DK: Oh.

JK: In the Bangkok Post. [Chuckles] He says maybe he’d get his picture in the Bangkok Post.

DK: He wants me to take it now, does he?

JK: Yeah, out in front.

DK: OK. [Sound of drinking, glass being placed on table or counter] VP is edgy. He’s ready. Old Hog, I’ve never seen that guy get excited yet. Have you?

JK: No, not really.

[Sounds of eating, utensils scraping on plates]
DK: He assured me that there wouldn’t be any shooting or anything from the friendlies. But you never can tell if they see him driving up that road.

JK: And they’ve already planned their passenger load.

DK: Yeah.

JK: They’re going to have four on you and four on me, and then when you switch you’ll have eight.

DK: No, he’s going to take one bodyguard with him.

JK: He’s going to take…?

DK: Mm-Hmm.

JK: I already asked him. We can’t land at 113, and you’ll head straight at Udorn with me.

[Pause as they continue to eat]

JK: Well, I worked it out on the fuel. Probably make it, but if we can’t, why we’ll transfer from your—

(31:00)

DK: Easy. At Udorn.


DK: Now you included your stop at 113 in there and everything?

JK: If I stop there I don’t; have to go.

DK: Oh, OK. Damn. I ain’t too smart today, am I?

JK: Well, they got us up before breakfast.

DK: [Chuckles] They’re leading us up here with the idea that old Hog and VP are gonna be the only two here.

JK: Yeah!

DK: And we land, and my god, there’s seven thousand.

JK: And I got out to Wattay this morning and looked at that storm out there.

DK: Mm-Hmm.

JK: You see that thunderstorm?
DK: Yeah.

JK: Holy smokes!

DK: I thought, ‘What’s this shit?’

JK: Well, Freddy…

Freddy: Yes, Sir?

JK: That was perfect.

DK: Very good, Fred.

Freddy: Thank you.

JK: Yeah. I think we'll fire the other cook and just let you cook.

Freddy: Yeah!

JK: [Laughs]

(32:16) JK: Very good breakfast. Come on outside and I'll take your picture.

Freddy: OK! [Sound of door opening and then closing.]

DK: I wonder if Jerry knows when the next airplane’s coming—or if there is one.

JK: I don’t think there’s any rush for 20 minutes or so.

DK: Well…

JK: The C-130 will be back at 10, or maybe a little after if he has to re-fuel.

DK: He’ll have to re-fuel this time. We don’t want to wait that late.

JK: Hell, I don’t—especially.

DK: But if there’s not another airplane in between now and then, what [Pauses] We’ll have to go out by ourselves. We don’t want to do that, though.

JK: Well, the one C-46 sounded bad—the right engine.

DK: You're not going to see them back here until—that 130 has a better chance of getting back here before they do.

JK: Really?
DK: Yes. So the only thing we can hope for now is one of them C-47s.

JK: And I think that’s doubtful.

DK: Well, let’s go and ask Jerry and—

JK: Yeah.

DK: —see if that C-47’s going to come tonight. We’d better—

JK: Yeah, let’s hang right with him now, so when—

DK: Yeah, (***)

JK: We don’t have to go looking for one another.

DK: Yeah. [Sound of movement]

JK: I’m not used to carting this thing around with me, believe me. [Sounds of footsteps, door squeaks, engine of passing vehicle is audible.]

DK: Well, the ridge cleared up again. [Engine noises] That was the best breakfast I had in ages. [Vehicle noises] [To Knotts:] You stand up here.

JK: Yeah.

DK: Up on top. [Sounds of vehicle engine, someone climbing steps or a ladder] Right up here. [To Freddie:] You go up there, too. I want your picture. You, too. Up there. [More sounds of climbing, engines]

JK: Send it to (***)

(34:36)

DK: That’s a handy little thing, isn’t it?

JK: Yeah.

DK: Well here we are in the Hog’s office. VP has just left, and I won’t—the plan has been changed a little bit, hasn’t it, Jack?

JK: Yeah. I’m going to take him right now—pick him up at the dam behind the King’s house at the little water hole—

DK: He’s going to drive up there.

JK: He’s going to drive up there. I’m going to land there, and pick him up, and move him to another spot across the river.
DK: Close to 337, isn’t it?
JK: Around there somewhere.
DK: Mm-Hmm.
JK: And then he will—
DK: Wait there.
JK: Wait there. I come back here and land, and wait to take Jerry out, ’cause he cannot leave.
DK: He can’t. And we’re gonna have to wait for the 130 to come back here a second time.
JK: Come up here. And maybe, what, 45 minutes or an hour yet.
DK: Yeah.

[Long silence]
JK: So… I don’t know—
DK: The big thing is getting VP up to that dam there before—with all these people here… And Jerry, let’s see…
JK: Well, and one other thing. You know, people are going to wonder why the chopper leaves, and then ten minutes later comes back. But…
DK: I’ll bet you the word will get around that he took him somewhere. I’ll bet it will.
JK: Well, I’m—I’ll go behind the hill. They won’t see me land over there.
DK: Yeah, I know it.
JK: I can keep hidden behind the hill, but [Pauses] they can hear the noise, maybe.
DK: Yeah. They’re having trouble out—open the door, see if they’re still arguing out there.
[Sound of door opening, voices]
JD? – Walking straight out.
[??]
VP? – You can go here?
JD? – Yeah.
VP? – Then go over here?

JD? – No way out back here, no.

VP? – No good. (***) this side.

JD? Yeah. And if you go out like that, so nobody sees—

VP? Yeah.

JD? – Better you just get in the car and…

JK? – Yeah, I'm waiting for you to go, VP.

DK: You got too many people out there?

JD? – No, (***)

VP? – [In Hmong?]

JD? – Well, let's walk down, Dave.

[Screeching noise, sounds of moving or dropping parts]

(36:39) DK: Famous last words, Jack. Hog says, 'Oh, there's not going to be any mob, no problem.'

JK: Yeah. [Chuckling]

DK: Guard standing right there in the garden.

[Inaudible. Other background voices throughout this section]

(37:05) JK: Now Dave, what did VP say again?

DK: He says when I was trying to get a place to switch, like at 53 and 44 and an ammo dump, he said, 'No.' He says, 'There's no place. After today, why it's all the other side. All communist.' So this finishes our flying—unless we're going to work for the other side.

JK: And that's very doubtful. I don't think that's [Pauses] so… I guess we're making the last flight out of here.
DK: Yeah. Those fucking USAIDers down there in Vientiane, sitting out there happy-go-lucky in KM 6. They think everything’s all right.

JK: If they’d see this place right now they’d [Chuckling] have second thoughts!

DK: Yeah.

JK: God, I’d like to hear a—the sound of the C-46 coming in! [Chuckling]

DK: Oh, boy!

JK: Old Al Rich and—

DK: Well, shit, VP is not ready to go up there, anyhow.

JK: Yeah. Yeah, we just had a note delivered down to hold off for a while. Gonna pick him up… [Both looking at watches]

DK: It’s 9:04

JK: Back from the hill here, behind the King’s house, at a little dam site area.

DK: And then you’re going to transfer him from there over to a place by 337.

JK: Yeah.

DK: And come back here.

JK: To wait ‘til Hog can get out of here. And when Hog’s ready to go, he’ll load you up, and then come over and get on the chopper himself, and we’ll go.

DK: That’ll be the sticker right there, maybe him getting on the chopper by himself with you.

JK: Yeah.

[Auto horn honks]

JK: Well, I won’t blast out of the area, Dave. I’ll stay until you’re off the ground safe.

DK: Yeah. Well, I’ll probably be taking off first, won’t I?

JK: Yeah. Well, we’re both going to be going about the same time.

DK: Yeah.

JK: Yeah, you’ll probably be going first.
DK: ‘Cause Hog’s gonna load me up, and then he’s gonna probably drive up there, maybe to that pad where you can go pick him up!

[Sound of what sounds like a motorcycle]

JK: Well, he said he’d get on the chopper with me.

DK: Here?

JK: Here.

DK: Well, you better watch it.

[Motorcycle speeds away]

JK: Well, there’s just too many loaded weapons around here to—everywhere you look.

39:46 – 40:11 [Loud “buzzing” sound (plane engine?) drowns everything else out]

DK: —7 so far today.

JK: Well, a C-47 is supposed to be (*** over us.

DK: 9:06. (***)

JK: You know, I wonder if the crowd sits around like this. [Wind noise] The more restless they get (*** You look around the ramp, there are abandoned suitcases over there.

DK: Yeah.

JK: —laying over there and clothes all over, shoes, trash of all kinds.

(40:55)

[Noise much further in the background]

JK: Offices there yesterday, they radioed in—

DK: The radio operator was telling Vientiane—telephone operator

[Long pause]

(41:11) —**Jack Knotts returns from his trip evacuating Vang Pao from Long Cheng.**

[Sounds like chopper rotors are running]

JK: I started south, and I was going to try and come back, [Pauses] go down an ways and then come back. I didn’t want to land until I saw the signal. He saw me way out there and he flashed it like this twice.

DK: Yeah.
JK: Had a white panel. Man, I saw that, dove down in, I came back in low. There were just three of 'em there.

DK: Yeah.

JK: He and two bodyguards.

[Rotors are slowing down]

DK: Two, huh?

JK: And he had—he made sure when he got out that he could bring four people—four in the chopper.

DK: Yeah.

JK: And, you know, the 337 ridge.

DK: Three-three-seven ridge.

JK: Three-three-seven ridge. He's on the [Pauses] east end of it. You know that little—

DK: East end.

JK: Was that little pad there like—about straight out from here.

DK: OK. How far from strip?

JK: On the other edge of the ridge from the strip—all the way on the other end.

DK: Oh! Is anybody else around?

JK: Well there's a village near there, and they came running up and they recognized him and wai'ed to him and he said he'd be waiting there when we came in, in about a half an hour or so.

DK: Mm-Hmm....

[Rotors continue to decelerate]

DK: Well, there was a...

JK: Well, he knew if he just laid that panel flat on the ground that I couldn't see it 'til I was near overhead, so he sort of stood up and flashed it at me.

DK: Yeah.

JK: That was really great.
DK: Well, it’s getting a little bit hotter here. They hit—Jerry was talking to me over there at the airplane when [Pauses] One other guy come up there and said, ‘This guy’s pretty upset, ‘cause he wants to get his family out, and he’s mad about the 46s not parking up here or down here, one or the other. And he says if he don’t get ‘em out, well he’s gonna kill somebody. And ol’ Hog, cool Hog, he says, ‘Oh, no biggie, no biggie.’ Then he come back a second time, he said the same thing.

[Rotors still slowing down]

(43:22) DK: I told Hog we need to make the big move when that 130 comes in. Forget about them 46s, if they get here first or after, they’ll—

JK: That’s right, the next one—

DK: The next one to land—

JK: The next one, ‘cause it’s—

DK: The one—46s are not dependable anyhow, and they’re liable not to show up again. So…

[Rotors down to a low rumble]

JK: I wanted to save this note from Hog, but I didn’t think it—it’s good to have it on me.

DK: Why not? By god, I’ll save it.

JK: Well, I, I—I want it, but I [Pauses]

DK: Damn right, keep it.

JK: Worse gets to worst, and you know.

DK: Keep it.

JK: I’ll just tear it up if worse gets to worst.

(44:14) In the apartment of Ken and Brigita Wilson, Vientiane – May 14, 1975

DK: —is it [Pauses to look at watch] 9:45 when we took off, right?

[A child’s voice in the background]

JK: Well, you sort of sauntered across the runway there, and Jerry came down with the people, right? In the jeep—

DK: I started up to the office to get him.

JK: Is that it? Because the 130 was on the ground at this time, right?
JK: It had just landed, and I wasn't going to get out of my chopper. I was going to be ready to go, you know?

DK: And I—when I ran across the runway, I reminded Jerry again, I said, 'Let's make it now, when the 130's on the ground.' And then he—he came right down. And you saw me get in the airplane.

JK: Yeah.

DK: I started up and I took off, while Matt Hoff was—

JK: No, I saw you start to crank, and Jerry then drove over in front of my chopper and he got out, and I started to crank, but he got out and came to the window and he says, 'No, I can't go with you from here. It'd be too obvious,' He says, 'Meet me behind the King's house in the little saddle back there.' Well, I know that place, 'cause we used it a few years ago when things were tight. So I said, 'OK, Jerry,' and he said, 'Well, in about ten minutes.' 'OK.' So then he got back in the jeep and drove away.

DK: And he come back over to my airplane, and got everybody on, I believe, didn’t he? So then I took off ahead of the 130, and then you took off ahead of it also.

JK: I was right behind you, Dave.

DK: Right behind me.

JK: When you pulled out, you had just broken ground, and I was already lifted. I was right on your tail.

DK: Well, and old Hog got up to that hill behind the house pretty fast, didn’t he?

JK: Well, [Yelling noise] but then we both drove out, and like we were going down south. You circled back over the field,

DK: To take a picture.

JK: Is that what you were up to?

DK: Of the 130, yeah.

JK: Yeah, beautiful.

DK: That’s what I was doing, yeah.

JK: Well, I sort of hung out a little ways, waiting for the 130, ‘cause I didn’t think he’d leave the main ramp until the thing took off! But it—remember? It hung and hung—it just stayed there on the ground for so long.

DK: I know! He lined up, and I don’t know why he stayed—
JK: He just stayed—I thought he blasted, too, and he just stayed there!

DK: And it helped Jerry that much more get up the hill.

JK: Well, maybe so. ‘Cause I didn’t wait. I finally zigged in very low and came around just a corner of the hill, and landed right there in that saddle behind the King’s house, and there wasn’t anybody around. I just sat there for a couple minutes waiting for him to come out. Finally, a white jeep came around the corner. I thought [Chuckles] if a local jeep came around there with a bunch of soldiers on it, I’d been about to shit in my pants, but I didn’t! He came around the corner.

KW: (***) in your pants. [Making fun of JK’s last comment]

[Child’s voice in background]

JK: And then—and then he wouldn’t get in the chopper. He made—he didn’t want to leave yet!

DK: (***)?

JK: Yeah, he got his suitcase out,

DK: Mr. Cool, huh?

JK: Yeah—of the back, and then he started talking on the radio, and he messed around, messed ar—finally—and this was, this was a very bad thing to Jerry, he’d been there so long. He saluted.

DK: Did he?

JK: Yes, he came to attention, and just like he was saluting the jeep. But he was really saluting 10 or 15 years of hard work that turned into nothing and the whole thing, you know? He saluted the jeep, and turned around and walked over and got in the chopper. He didn’t even put in the back, he just—his little suitcase. He just held it right on his lap. It was a small one. And we took off—I edged off—

DK: I was right behind you then.

JK: Yes. You were up circling, edged off of there, and there were a whole gaggle of soldiers walking out that road that went back from the King’s house up around the hill, and just as we lifted off and we were just sort of hanging there in the air, hadn’t really started flying yet. Two of these soldiers dropped their M-16s off their shoulders, and took ahold of the lever and threw a round into the chamber. And my heart jumped in my mouth. I thought they were going to let us have it. And we just edged off and sort of went around a corner of the hill, and they never fired. And then I saw you, picked you up, and we followed you on out. Or—well no, I went over to get VP.

DK: (***) VP, yeah.

JK: Went over to get him.

DK: He got right on, didn’t he?
JK: Oh, he—the whole village was out there.

DK: Yeah.

JK: They all went—everything was so happy, and they were waiting, and VP and his two bodyguards came up with their burn guns and jumped in the back seat, and we were off—we weren't on the ground more than a minute.

DK: So then we headed out and overheard Checkpoint Peter. Just past Peter, I wanted to fly over that karst north of 218, 'cause I didn't know who was on the road down there, you know? They were going to start shooting at me!

JK: I noticed you changed direction. That was very good.

DK: And got a little altitude, because—

JK: Yeah.

DK: What did we know? I didn't know where the w—

JK: I was thinking the same thing.

DK: Did you raise up, too?

JK: Yeah, I thought—I said, 'Dave's OK. He's thinking about that road and that karst, and he's gonna keep it just perfect there.' [Both laugh]

DK: (***)

JK: And then you noticed the C-46!

DK: Yeah, and the C-46 overheard us and he called in, 'Hey Dave, hey Dave, You read?' We never did get ahold of this 46 to tell him to abort. (***)

KW: Let me ask you a question, Dave. Was the original plan that when—that you and Jack would be the last out and nobody else go in after you left? Based on communication (***)

JK: Yeah.

DK: They weren't supposed to go in. They weren't supposed to land unless they had contact with Hog. So later on, things got screwed up—strictly because of radio communications, we couldn't call either one of those guys! And we heard them calling us and calling Hog, but they didn't hear us. And we said to abort a couple times.

JK: Oh, there was a most hellacious squeal on that radio, you couldn't stand it.

DK: Yeah, in your—
JK: Someone was breaking up the communications.

KW: So—

JK: Did you hear the fellows on the ground, Dave?

DK: That 113?

JK: No, that 353 that came up and they said, ‘Hey, Porter in the air. The customer on the ground?’

DK: No, I didn’t hear that.

JK: Oh.

DK: I missed that.

JK: And you never answered him, and you flew on. Then he said, ‘Jet Ranger, Jet Ranger. This is customer on the ground.’ It was a local, but somebody along the road down there.

DK: Well somebody called us at 113—

JK: That’s right.

DK: —when we got over there, too, and I says, ‘Go ahead, go ahead,’ but he never did answer.

JK: I never answered.

KW: Did anybody watch one of the 46s go in?

DK: No, but the pilots have got a good story to tell about that.

KW: Pretty well mobbed, huh?

DK: Yeah, they were. Very bad.

KW: Well—

DK: Yeah, so we landed at 113 and made the switch, and I headed straight for Udorn and Jack came to Vientiane and everything worked out OK then.

KW: You didn’t go to Namphong, then?

DK: What?

KW: You didn’t go to Namphong?

DK: I went to Udorn with Niedo—Niedinger, and—
KW: With he and, uh Jerry—

JK: Yeah, I thought they went to Namphong.

BW: Are there still many people there?

JK: They didn’t.

DK: At Long Cheng? Thousands. Very few got out. Very few. But the 46s went back in—both of ‘em, and they both got mobbed pretty bad. And the guy that threatened to kill this one other guy if he didn’t get his family and 14 people on, he was one of them that got on the 46. Hog told me.

KW: Who was he threatening to kill? Another (***)—

DK: Another guy if—

KW: (***)?

DK: No—

BW: Neil.

DK: — another of the guys who—good English-speakers on the ground there. I got into the middle of this argument, and then Hog was trying to calm him down. And then he walked away saying, ‘Oh, no biggie, no biggie.’ You know, calm old Jerry, and I thought it was terrible myself. And—anyway, they made it out.

KW: So—

DK: So then,

(52:07)

DK: Before VP went to leave up there, we were trying to get him where we—Jack eventually picked him up, why he had a little bit of trouble getting out up there.

JK: It didn’t—

DK: Guys coming in and seeing him and seeing—he was starting to yell at ‘em a little bit, and [Pauses] I didn’t know—I didn’t think he was going to get out as quick as he did. He sent one note down to Jack saying he’d been delayed a little bit, ‘cause we didn’t want him to take off and go up there before VP got there. That would have been bad.

JK: We were trying to time it a little.

KW: Especially with those soldiers that eventually you [Jack] saw there.

JK: Yeah. Well, they were walking up along that same road!
DK: yeah.

BW: What soldiers were they?

JK: Well, just some soldiers of his that were leaving the area, walking south.

(52:49)

DK: Oh, I took everybody—when I got to Udorn everybody was—the tower asked me my point of departure. I said, ‘That’s classified.’ And I said, ‘I’ll tell you on the ground.’ He says, ‘OK.’ He was American [someone coughs] (**).

JK: Oh! Beautiful.

BW: [Laughs]

DK: So he gets down there, gets out of the airplane—oh, on the way to Udorn, I told—old VP was in the back seat. And Hog was behind me, and I told him to, ‘Get clear in the back there with VP.’ And so he got there and I unstrapped my belt and I took a real good shot of them in the airplane.

JK: Oh, beautiful.

DK: So then when we go shut down at Udorn, why all of us gathered up next to the airplane, and I got another good shot there that should be good.

JK: Who met you on the ground down there?

DK: Nobody! Not a—well, they had their transport vehicles, but none of his officers at all! I don’t think they—they didn’t know we were coming!

KW: Did you taxi on the back 40?

DK: No. Not at the back 40, hell no. Right at the regular AB-1 ramp. Parked right beside the Matt Hoff 130, and I went over there and talked to Matt for quite a while, and we went out and took our pictures, and he gave me some money—

JK: Hey, tell—

DK: —for his pictures that—

JK: Tell Ken who was co-pilot on the 130!

DK: Yeah—oh boy, good old—none but old Joe Burch.

KW: Bird Shit.

DK: Jesus Christ.
BW: [Laughs] On the 130?

KW: Co-pilot.

BW: (***)

DK: So then—I'm only there about 30 minutes, and I think, 'OK, go to Vientiane, huh?'
So they filed my flight plan, and we don't have to go through this tower stuff, 'cause we got a guy down there or something.

[Woman is trying to quiet child]

DK: I get downwind at Vientiane, and they say, 'Go back to Udorn.' And I come up empty, and say... And what it was, is I said, 'God damn it, Phil, why don't you get your crap together?' you know, and I was really mad, you know? So I wrote that (***)

KW: Who you talking about?

DK: Phil—or no, somebody—no, it wasn't Phil, it was somebody else. So I go back down there, and what it was, is, when I took off, I went to talk to Stan—or, was it Stan, or who was it?

JK: Oh, you mean Big Three or s—

DK: I was talking to Stan or—Joe Hammer. I was off the frequency and they'd been trying to call me to come back to Udorn to bring Hog to Vientiane. And I didn't come back on frequency 'til we got up here at Vientiane and I was getting ready to land! And then they told me!

KW: You didn't have both radios on?

DK: I had 'em both on, but I've been having radio trouble so I had 'em both on the frequency. Normally I monitor .1 all the time, you know, where I can hear them calling, one on the cabin speaker and vice versa, but I didn't this time, so that was my fault. But boy, I was mad when I got back down there.

JK: Dave, tell—I think this is good. Tell about how they got Matt Hoff back to be the pilot on this thing.

DK: Oh, yeah. They caught Matt Hoff in Hong Kong yesterday. His bags were already checked in, and they caught him before he was getting ready to board the flight.

BW: Who was that?

JK: Back to the States!

KW: The captain on the C-130.
DK: On the 130. He got back to U Taphao, flew non-stop from U Taphao to Long Cheng on his first trip, then he got a second trip in. And there was no night flights made like Larry Joseph told us there was last night—

KW: Yeah, he said they were going all night long or something like that.

DK: And when we got there, Jack and I got there at five minutes to six—no, about 6:35 we got there—

JK: Yeah.

DW: —he was—the 130 was taking off with his first load.

KW: Taking off?

DK: Taking off. He was already there.

Jack: Yeah.

DK: Sure was.

KW: This—this was—?

DK: This is LP.

JK: At the warehouse at the airport?

DK: No, I think it's the one in town.

JK: Oh.

DK: And somehow Huxtable and Rubello and all those Americans drove out to 354. And we brought three airplane loads of 'em out today, and old Hollis Glass thinks everything's all—

KW: (***)

DK: —peaches and cream up there, and he's up there now, along with Frank, the one from—

KW: 354.

DK: Mm-Hmm. They're there tonight, and all the other customers are back in Vientiane. So as far as I'm concerned, why Luang Prabang's gone, too, and Savannakhet. There's—
KW: Pakse.

DK: —two [Pauses] What’s the spook’s name in Savannakhet?

KW: Stone?

DK: No, not the spook.

KW: JC. I don’t know.

DK: Anyway, they’re under house arrest in the USAID compound in Savannakhet.

[Another voice as he speaks, inaudible]

KW: The red-headed guy’s a spook?

DK: No, it’s a new guy. No, he came out. He came out.

JK: Yeah, I know who you mean. Wears glasses and he’s got curly hair.

DK: He’s the same thing as Rex Wilson in Pakse. Anyway, that place is finished, too.

KW: Wilson? Damn—I know (***)—

DK: Rex Wilson.

KW: —around the other day, and he’s a—

DK: He’s a spook, yeah. He’s in Udorn now. Their evacuation was by—out of Udorn. Rex, all he had to do was call on the radio to Udorn, and in 30 minutes that DC-3 launched out of Udorn to go direct to Pakse and they picked him up.

JK: Well, it was only a few days ago I was down there and Wilson and I went down to Kong Island to get the Dooley girls out of the hospital there and bring them back, because after it had been finished and (***) the whole thing’s been pretty close, actually.

KW: Well, Jack, I was down there I guess a week or two weeks before, and they'd already had rounds being fired in at Kong Island from the west.

JK: Is that right?

KW: There’s been a couple of soldiers wounded.

JK: No one told me that!

KW: Wounded. Oh, yeah.

(59:12)
DK: All right. That—that was—that’s already went down yesterday, though. They moved in there yesterday. And when I was coming back—

KW: When you say ‘they’, did they send a column up?

DK: A hundred and—a hundred people, supposedly, not necessarily in tanks, but some kind of vehicles, moved in there yesterday.

JK: Yeah, but they were PL in uniform, Brigitte.

BW: Oh.

JK: And they were in stripping the USAID offices and the radio man’s still in his radio office—

DK: Telephone operator—

JK: Or telephone—

DK: —was telling Vientiane this: ‘Yeah, they’re here. They’re doing it now.’

JK: They’re right there! He’s talking to ‘em!

BW: [Laughs]

DK: And there was a little bit of shooting going on.

BW: What about him?

KW: They rush at him?

DK: Yeah, a little bit.

JK: Well—

BW: He was a local, hmm?

JK: Yes!

DK: Yes.

BW: He get out or what?

JK: Who knows what happens to him?

DK: Tonight when I was coming back on the flight from 354, why I heard probably 10 times, ‘Ban Soun, Ban Soun, Lao chopper. Ban Soun, Ban Soun, Lao chopper.’

JK: Well, I—
DK: He never got an acknowledgement, 'cause that's all he ever said.

JK: I talked to Al Roman this morning at the—after I left you. I went down to cash a check at the
ACA compound, and Al said that the PL came around this morning some time and wanted to
‘borrow’—in [quotes] borrow—two jeeps. So what could they say? They gave him two of the
scouts.

DK: Yeah.

JK: So they'll probably arrive at Long Cheng in USAID Scouts.

DK: Yeah. This is the message that was sent down, huh?

JK: Yeah.

KW: Yeah, they had (***)

DK: Poor old Her Tou. He's still there, I bet, isn't he?

(1:00:56)

DK: —back from there now, that you're… Seven Charlie Alpha came in from where? Singapore?

JK: Yeah, and—

DK: Carried all your stuff out, huh?

JK: Bird Air, November 2-7—Charlie-Alpha came in—

DK: Well, Charlie Pennington was on it.

JK: Charlie Pennington was on board, co-pilot came in from Singapore to pick up some of our
things—took three choppers out. My god, the 1-4 Gulf and the 9-0-3, and the Bubble, 5-2
November.

DK: Put it on there about the chop out the Chinese.

JK: Oh, yes.

KW: The what?

JK: We had the Chinese sheet metal man that wanted to go home with his family, and [Pauses] he
spent a day in Vientiane too long, because the rate of the kip went so high he had to stay around to
make extra money! [Laughter] The next day when he tried to get across the border at Nong Khai,
they wouldn't let the Chinese out. So he was stuck here. So today, I mean, he's been up in the
office two—that's about three or four days ago. For two or three days he's been up in the office
every day just trying to work something out, which was impossible. We don't have any control over
those things. And today, John Melton took his passports for he and his family over to the tower to
the airport, Wattay, and charged $200 per chop—

BW: [Sound of surprise, laughter]

JK: —for he and his wife and children, and [Pauses] the DC-6 is not to carry any passengers, but
they had them hidden back in the back.

BW: Who's paying for it?

JK: And the company paid. The company paid, and when he gets in Bangkok he's OK. He's got a
chop out of here, so he's all—which was very nice. That was a good…. And he was all smiles.
Dave and I saw him when he was—they were—no, you didn't see him. You weren't down there.

BW: Is he the one?

JK: Yeah, right. So Sue and I saw him, they were putting the door down in the back of the DC-6.
Man, he was just beaming from ear to war, waving his hand.

BW: We did they take off? Or just when you went over? [Laughs]

KW: This is the guy who wanted to fight Al Rich over at the DZ Club when I was there for your
party.

DK: Oh, that guy, huh? [Laughter] Gee!

JK: Why, did he—

DK: I don't know if I'm happy about that or not!

(1:03:20)

JK: —in the bottleneck area. And I didn't know where Dave was! I'm chugging along there, pretty
good power, and I kept thinking he was going to go ahead of me, you know? And finally I called
him. We decided to talk on 119.3. And I said, well, 'Hey, where are you? I'm out on the lake at
2800 feet,' And he says, 'Well, you know, Space, I'm right behind you!' 'OK.' So we chugged along
a little farther, and I said, 'Well, what do you think?' He says, 'Yeah, I think it's OK,' so [makes a
'pssht' noise] we just turned and went over there, and by that time he had caught up with me and
was sort of surging ahead.

DK: We went up the bottleneck, in other words.

JK: Yeah.

DK: Didn't go up 157.

JK: Yeah, we went around there.

DK: 'Cause it looked like it was bad.
1374
1375  [Pause]
1376
1377  DK: Hello! [Kouba’s girlfriend Phoxay walks in. Kouba turns tape recorder off. Recording over.]