Interdiction at Ban Bak, Laos by John W. Dennison

The following is a summary derived from Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report, “Interdiction at Ban Bak, 19 December 1970 to 5 January 1971”. (Review and Comments by Norman Malayney)

On 20 October 1970, the USAF started its northeast monsoon (dry season) interdiction campaign called Commando Hunt V. The primary objective was to reduce dramatically the flow of personnel and material to RSVN and Cambodia.

Intelligence sources estimated the North Vietnamese would substantially increase their supply activities through Laos during the 1970-71 dry season. NVA logistic system in Cambodia had been severely impaired by the loss of the port of Sihanoukville early in 1970 and the US/RSVN cross border operations in May-June 1970. This required the enemy to increase his re-supply efforts on his one remaining infiltration route to Cambodia and RSVN, the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos.

The trail complex begins at four mountain passes along the North Vietnamese/Laotian border: Nape, Mu Gia, Ban Karai and Ban Raving.

In October 1970, the NVA started to move supplies into Laos across the Mu Gia and Ban Karai passes, but road traffic south of these defiles remained light due to heavy rain and two tropical cyclones. As the enemy road maintenance crews repaired the road system and the rivers subsided, truck movements increase along the trail system. During November there was an average of 252 Igloo White sensor-detected truck movements per day, but most of the traffic was in Northern Steel Tiger.

On 27 November, a high of 889 sensor-detected truck movements was counted. The total number for November was 7,564. During December, the number of truck movements detected increased to an average of 665 per day. The highest daily total for the month of December was 1,037 and the overall total for the month reached 20,601.

When flooded the Xe Kong Rivers acted as a barrier to the continued movement of supplies down the trail system. The Xe Kong flooded in October and continued to carry an unusually high amount of water during November. Reliable reports indicated the North Vietnamese were storing large quantities of supplies to the north of the river, waiting a time when the Xe Kong could be forded. Studies of sensor-detected truck movement patterns, climatic conditions, and North Vietnamese supply procedures led 7th AF Intelligence to suspect there was a major storage complex in the Ban Bak area. Similar indications had been noted during the previous dry seasons.

Between 1 September and 18 December 1970, 25 items of Intelligence relating to targets in the Ban Bak area were received. Two pertained to points within one kilometer of the storage area eventually uncovered. One was an aerial reconnaissance photo on 4 September showing bunkers and a large open area containing supplies. The other was a 20 November report from a FAC of antiaircraft artillery fire and supplies stored on the side of the roads. There were both FAC and photo recon reports of truck revetments, supplies, possible truck parks, and storage area located from one to seven kilometers away from the river with the majority being from two to five kilometers to the north.
Main supply entry points from North Vietnam to the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos.

Area enlarged on succeeding page
During November, sensors detected almost four times as many truck movements into the Ban Bak area from the north than those departing southward. Intel signs indicated a major supply dump and storage area near Ban Bak and north of the Xe Kong River existed; the next task was to find it.

Shortly after midnight on 19 December 1970, a FAC from the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron crossed the mountain range that parallels the border separating Laos and RSVN. Both the pilot and navigator were experienced in night FAC missions. At approximately 0100, the O-2 flew over the ford where Route 924 crossed the Xe Kong River. On the previous night, FAC had sighted and directed a strike against a ferry operating near that point. Tonight there was no activity.

The river water level had not dropped sufficiently to allow trucks to cross by fording. The waterway continued to act as barrier, complicating the movement of supplies further south by truck. Almost every night, FAC counted 20 to 30 truck moving south through the “White Cliffs,” a ridge area which served as an ideal landmark and interdiction point for air strikes. South of the White Cliffs the trucks seemed to disappear into a triple-canopy jungle plateau.

After surveying the ford on the Xe Kong River, FAC flew north following Route 924, one of the main roads in the Ho Chi Minh trail complex. It was dirt, some 20 feet wide and in excellent condition. Vehicles could be driven at speeds up to 25 miles per hour along the route and the truck drivers, according to the FACs, had become ‘brazen’ regarding the observation of the FACs. Large labor crews maintained the road and road cuts were repaired within a day.

FAC sighted nothing between the Xe Kong River and the triple-canopy jungle area. But, upon leaving the area, nine to 12 trucks moving south down route 924 came in view. It was difficult to determine the exact number of trucks because not all had their lights on. The night was CAVU with a bright moon at 30 degrees above the horizon. The moonlight aided FAC in locating the vehicular traffic moving along the trail. The NVA drivers drove with a minimum of headlights, using the brightness of the moon to illuminate the road. The low angle of the moon also lengthened the shadows created by tall trees astride the road, making it more difficult to locate parked trucks.

FAC notified the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) C-130 code named “MOONBEAM,” that he had a target and requested a strike. MOONBEAM reported a flight of F-4s was in the vicinity. FAC continued to track the trucks with a Uniscope (an image intensifier that used reflected light from the stars or moon to identify targets) it amplified light about one million times. But before the F-4s arrived, the trucks entered the triple-canopy jungle plateau area, and turned east off the road into the trees. FAC raised their Uniscope amplification to full volume. The trucks continued through the jungle and the Uniscope picked out flickers of light as the headlights reflected off the foliage. Then the vehicles turned north moving to an area 700 meters east of Route 924.

The trucks stopped, doused their lights, turned them on, and then doused them again. About this time two F-4s from 8th TFW, Ubon AB, Thailand, arrived armed with Mk 82 bombs and CBU 24 cluster bombs. FAC fired a smoke rocket to mark the target. On the first pass there were no secondaries. FAC moved the fighters 100 meters to the southeast. On the second pass a 23 mm AAA gun began to fire. On the third pass, a huge orange ball with black smoke mushroomed a thousand feet into the sky.
BDA for the strike was listed as four trucks destroyed and two probably destroyed. In addition, there were reports of eight small, nine medium and 11 large secondary explosion; four medium sustained fires (trucks burning), and three extremely large sustained fires that were bright orange in color with flames rising 150 to 200 feet in the air accompanied by thick black smoke. The extremely large secondary explosions appeared to be ammunition and POL storage areas. The secondary explosions continued for one hour as FAC orbited the target area.

As the secondary explosions and fires continued, FAC contacted MOONBEAM who confirmed observing the inferno from high above. FAC left the area and passed visual reconnaissance of the target to a replacement FAC. The area was struck again at 0400.

The first FAC into the area during daylight was a lone OV-10 using binoculars instead of a scope. His initial task was to confirm the previous night truck toll, extent of the road cuts, and BDA. He confirmed two destroyed trucks and indicated that the long sought truck-park, fuel and ammunition storage area “Bomb Dump” had finally been found. FAC observed evidence of bamboo trellis work over the roads and trails. Where the trees had been knocked away by the previous night air strikes, he could see POL barrels and vehicle tracks. He noticed a ravine that ran off Route 924 into the truck park/storage area and discovered evidence the ravine was also covered with a bamboo trellis, in addition to the triple-canopy jungle.

Another sign indicating the area was important to the NVA was the presence of intense AAA fire. From the time the AAA opened up on the F-4s, until it stopped 36 hours later, the AAA batteries fired at any airborne target. FAC observed trucks moving and ground activity indicating NVA attempts to transfer supplies from the area. He notified the daytime ABCCC HILLSBORO, the target continued to be lucrative and requested additional strikes.

Two F-4s from Ubon arrived armed with Mark 82 fuse-extended bombs and CBU 24s. The first attack was a probe strike. In a probe strike, ordnance is placed off to one side of the target to explore the possibility of additional targets. By directing ordnance delivery in a probing pattern, FAC could reconnoiter an area by observing the location of secondary fires and explosions emitted from supplies that might be otherwise covered from visual reconnaissance. The Bomb Dump area was expanded by the probing method until the size of it exceeded an area 1,000 meters wide by 1,500 meters long. Additional air strikes were called in. The 8th TFW, Ubon and 366th TFW Da Nang, 35th TFW Phan Rang AB, 388th TFW Korat, and Carrier Task Force 377 pounded the area. Every expanse they hit caused explosions and fires. FAC reported detonations hurtling fuel barrels 2,000 feet high where they exploded in the air.

Fire balls rose 2,000 feet in the air and ammunition rounds exploded at 9,000 feet. There were red, orange and white fires from ammunition, POL, and hard ordnance, respectively. The ravine, where the trucks left the road to move into the storage area, became a river of fire as burning POL flowed down it. The explosion hurtled so much debris in the air, the FACs flew off to one side near the target and directed strikes, while another FAC read off AAA locations.

After 36 hours the AAA began to dwindle and then stopped all together. The air strikes continued throughout the day. As one aircraft completed its attack and cleared the area, another flight prepared to begin its strike. Fire and smoke could be seen 20 miles away. One F-4 strike hit a bunker right in the entry way. A large fire ball erupted out of the bunker rising to an altitude of about 300 feet in the air. On the ground enemy trucks were trying to move out of the area.
A FAC fired a smoke rocket to mark a truck for a fighter, and hit the windshield destroying the vehicle before the fighter could complete the strike.

After 19 December 1970, the operation continued with destroying supplies and hampering enemy recovery efforts.

- On 20 December, secondary explosion and fires numbered 3,318 and 53 respectively. Twenty F-4 aircraft and four F-100 aircraft struck the target.
- On 21 December, 25 sorties were flown against the target.
- Sorties flown from 22 to 25 December decreased the number of explosions each day.
- Then on 26 December, secondary explosion and fires were 2,520 and 33, respectively. On that date a new high in sorties was flown against the target, 27 F-4s, 6 F-100s, and 10 A-7s, for a total of 43.
- Twenty-eight sorties including three B-52s struck the target on the 27th.
- On 2 January 1971, 43 strikes sorties were flown resulting in 2,273 secondary explosions, most of which were attributed to hitting a cache of artillery shells: 15 F-4s, 6 F-100, 2 A-7s, 20 A-4s.

Even with all the strikes, enemy truck drivers continued to use the truck park and storage area. By 5 January it was estimated this single target yielded a total of 10,097 secondary explosion, 435 secondary fires, 43 trucks destroyed, and 11 damaged.

**Question**: Did the 12th TFW at Phu Cat participate in these operations? If F-100s from Phan Rang took part, then surely 389/480 TFS must have provided F-4 strikes?

The 12th TFW files for Phu Cat make no mention of this event and the records lack any operational reports. I would appreciate hearing from Phu Cat AB veterans who can confirm the 12th TFW F-4Ds participated in the Ban Bak attacks, for the 12th TFW history project. From Oct-Dec 1970, two-thirds of 12th TFW missions were flown out-of-country. mmalayney@yahoo.com