

March 16, 2020

Board for Correction of Air Force Records
SAF/MRBR
550 C Street West, Suite 40
Randolph AFB TX 78150-4743

This letter is submitted in support of the recommendation for the Congressional Medal of Honor for Philip J. Conran, USAF Col (Ret), for actions in Moung Phine, Laos on October 6, 1969.

My name is Ken Hessel. I served as the Agency Air Operations Officer in Savannakhet, Laos (Lima Site-39) from Oct 1, 1968 until Oct 1, 1973. I briefed the pilots and scheduled/directed all of the Air America/Continental Air Services flights that flew out of Savannakhet, Laos. It is important to know that no agency people (case officers or their dependents) traveled to or from Savannakhet except by air, and that no operations (military in nature) were undertaken without air support of some kind. Essentially, everything that happened in Laos (operational or otherwise) depended on air support in one form or another. I did not get involved with the U.S. military except in emergency situations, where we were occasionally called upon to help with a situation that required aircraft at my disposal. These types situations with U.S. military personnel did not happen often, but when they did I was usually working with an orbiting, Air Force C-130, which functioned as a communications, command and control center for covert, U.S. military operations in central and southern Laos. If I remember correctly, the call sign for the nighttime orbit aircraft was "Moonbeam" and the daytime orbit call sign was "Hillsboro". My call sign in Savannakhet was "Churchbell". The day of the Moung Phine infil, Oct 6, 1969, I was not involved other than to furnish a CASI, (Continental Air Services, Inc) twin engine, Baron aircraft for the Agency case officer conducting the operation to use as a platform to oversee/direct the mission. The mission was to infil SGU (Special Guerilla Forces) into a LZ (LS-300) in the Moung Phine, Laos area. At this point, it is important to understand that, I and all of the aircraft that I managed, communicated on VHF channels only. We had no capability to communicate on any UHF channel. Contrary to this, the Air Force, command and control orbit, aircraft had the capability to monitor, receive and transmit on all of the VHF channels we used on the ground and/or in our aircraft. So, we had the capability to communicate with the orbit aircraft, but they first had to respond to our call on a VHF frequency.

Back to the Moung Phine infil, I'm not sure of the mission objectives, but most likely it, was a a high priority "hit and run", trail, interdiction operation that MR-3 (Central Laos) case officers and their SGU troops were continually tasked with. These missions were meant to interrupt the flow of NVA troops and materials down the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam. Anytime an operation of this type was undertaken, and discovered beforehand by the enemy, the NVA converged on the target area like moths being drawn to lantern light. This was because keeping the

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trail open was the #1 priority of all NVA troops in Central Laos. From what ultimately happened at the LZ, I ASSUME the infil was compromised in time for NVA troops to converge on the LZ (LS-300) and set a trap for the SGU troops and U.S. Air Force helicopters. In this case the case officer said his ground contact told him the LZ was secure, and that he made a low, slow pass the length of the LZ without drawing any ground fire. I was not briefed on the specific mission objective. The case officer will know if the mission objective was something other than what I have assumed here.

I spent the day in my office at the Savannakhet airport and thru communications with the case officer, who was monitoring the situation on the LZ from a CASI Baron, I knew when the first and second helicopters were shot down. I had no knowledge of what happened on the ground at the LZ until reading the after action reports sent to me by Tom Briggs in December of 2019. I have forgotten anything I might have known concerning SGU casualties except that there were some killed and wounded, and I have no idea where any SGU survivors of the operation might be living today.

In talks with the case officer after the rescue operation was completed that day, and even today in our old age, we marvel at the fact that anybody escaped the trap that the NVA set that day at Moung Phine. I'm certain that the actions of several Air Force people, both in the air and on the ground, qualified them as true heroes, but the actions of then Major Phil Conran (that I've only recently read about) seem to go far beyond the call of duty. His actions in organizing the resistance of the downed troops, and directing the firepower of the air support aircraft, saved what seemed to me to be a hopeless situation. His doing these things, leaves no doubt in my mind that he is the primary person responsible for saving so many lives that Oct 6 day in 1969 - including all of the American airmen involved in the infil attempt.

Ken S. Hessel
Savannakhet Air Operations Officer
10/1/68 to 10/1/73

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