Chapter 1.

Military Bases and Logistics

Introduction

Anglosphere participation in the US-led war in Việt Nam, which included military operations in Laos and Cambodia, has remained little commented upon in the English-speaking mass media, popular or academic literature. The SEATO alliance headquartered in Bangkok underpinned the organisation of US allies and partners. SEATO researchers distilled world news into interpretations of Communist threats in their “Trends and Highlights” reports.\(^{52}\)

This chapter explains some of the visible elements of Anglosphere collaboration at major formation levels, though these contributions of many thousands of military personnel, mainly over the period from 1962-1968, were relatively conspicuous, but were only given very occasional and controlled media attention.

The airfield near Leong Nok Tha, known as Operation Crown was a minor link in the chain of US Air Force bases in Thailand at that time. These bases were used for massive bombing of North Việt Nam and Laos. As F.N. Kirk explained in an MOD document, the specifications for the Crown runway stated that the new “Mukdahan airfield” was to be 1,254 metres (4,094 ft) long.\(^{53}\) Vic Flintham drew the connections between the war in Laos, Crown, the US satellite communications base at Phu Mu, as well as the RAF, RNZAF and RAAF deployments. Flintham described Crown as “…close to the US signals post at Phu Mu…”\(^{54}\) The airfield provided landing facilities for Commonwealth flights from Singapore and Butterworth en route to USAF Tân Sơn Nhứt, near Sài Gòn, and notably, for the CIA’s private contractor, Air America. “Between February 1967 and April 1968, Sioux helicopters of the Royal Engineers Air Troop were based at Leong Nok Tha.”\(^{55}\) These were for the Post Crown Works.

11 Independent Field Squadron RE, with an attached Australian RAE troop, was one of the many units that participated in the airfield’s construction. A list of units that were rotated

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\(^{54}\) Vic Flintham, High Stakes: Britain’s Air Arms in Action 1945-1990 (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2009), 284-86.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
through Operation Crown and worked on the construction of the air field can be found on the 11 Indep Fld Sqn blog. There were also Thai civilian labourers, as Hank tich Lawrence documented. The road network that interconnected USAF air fields, Post Crown Works, was partly built by RNZE troops, RE's and Thai Army engineers and Thai civilian labour. There were also surveyors of 84 Survey Squadron RE, Pasir Panjang, Singapore and a long list of support staff from medics and cooks to pay clerks and diesel fitters. 11 Indep Fld Sqn RE was part of 28 Commonwealth Brigade Group, which was part of 3 Gurkha Infantry Division. The Brigade was the formation that was prepared for an invasion of Laos under SEATO Plans during the period from 1962 to 1968. The invasion plan was eventually abandoned, but the preparations and pre-positioning of forces and heavy equipment, mainly in Thailand were substantial. Much of this combat-readiness and demonstrations of overwhelming force were carried out in response to the successes of the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies in Laos as a warning to them not to advance further west towards the Mekong River.

Another Australian contribution to the war was the RAAF 79 Sabre Squadron stationed at the large US air base at Ubon Ratchathani, in Thailand. This required the unit to be redeployed from Butterworth, Malaya, to Ubon, and to be focused beyond former duties of maintaining security in Malaya. This required delicate negotiation with Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. This was negotiated to his satisfaction, as this cable dated 17 May 1962 from the British Commonwealth Relations Office indicated. The Australian government also had their own anxieties about what appearances the deployment gave, which included a “...Desire that any fighting that may occur shall not be in nature of white versus brown.” And they were “...most anxious for reasons of internal presentation in Australia not to appear to be merely following American lead and so place emphasis on S.E.A.T.O. obligations.” The Australians flew support missions to protect the air-space of Ubon Ratchathani and RAAF Airfield Defence Guards patrolled the perimeter on the ground. They also provided the fire  

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brigade and in-flight refuelling of US planes.\footnote{Dennis Pearce, “Inquiry into Unresolved Recognition Issues for Royal Australian Air Force Personnel Who Served at Ubon between 1965 and 1968”, Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal (Canberra: Australian government, 2011), 8-20} The unit was commanded by RAAF officers, but its mission was integral to the US command structure. See page viii for map.

In 1962 Britain’s RAF also responded specifically to the crisis events in Laos and dispatched 20 Squadron Hawker Hunter FGA9s to Yenhee Airport near Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, as part of the SEATO regional pre-positioning of forces. The RAF deployment was codenamed Operation Bibber. They trained with USAF counterparts till November that year, before returning to regular duties.\footnote{RAF Museum, “British Military Aviation in 1962,” RAF Museum, \url{http://www RAFmuseum org uk/milestones-of-flight/british_military/1962 cfl} (Date accessed: 22 May 2009) (site discontinued August 2014).}

**Leong Nok Tha, Operation Crown**

Leong Nok Tha (also spelt Loeng Nok Tha) was a proposed British Commonwealth invasion of Laos coordinated with US forces to the North. The SEATO Plan involved a crossing of the Mekong near Savannakhet, capture of the old French air field at Seno, the seizure of the Mekong towns, partition the country along the 17th parallel, then advancing East along Highway 9 and severing the Hồ Chí Minh Trail near the Việt Nam border. Crown was to be the air-bridge across the Mekong River for troops and heavy equipment. Numerous documents mentioned a perceived risk of an invasion of Thailand from Laos in accord with assumptions embodied in the Domino Theory, which predicted a communist takeover of the whole of South East Asia. The Pathet Lao, however, did not have an air force, nor could they obtain one. US air superiority over Laos was all-but unassailable. In reports of USAF attacks on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, they referred to this undefended air space in terms of its ‘survivability’ for US crews.\footnote{Bernard C. Nalty, “The War against Trucks Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-1972,” United States Air Force (Washington DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, United States Air Force, Washington, D.C., 2005), 61.} See page viii map.

Air power and the strategic location of air fields was the key element of this military superiority. Operation Crown was first conceived in 1962. British Cabinet minutes for 17 October 1963, marked the formal decision to approve the project and stated both the intent of building the air field and the British government’s hesitancy in taking up the task. The Cabinet document concluded with the words: “Foreign Office please pass to Washington as
my telegram No. 48. There was concern regarding runaway costs, but also anxiety about lessening London's influence in Washington, and what perceptions might have been formed in Canberra and in Wellington. They did not mention any threat to Britain.

The village of Kok Sam Lan, adjacent to the air field was renamed Ban Kok Talat, which was ten kilometres south of Leong Nok Tha town and 110 kilometres north of Ubon Ratchathani. Crown was 25 kilometres, as the crow flies, from the Laos border. Engineer and support elements of the Brigade Group were detached from their permanent base at Terendak Camp, Melaka, in West Malaysia. Some units were posted to Crown from Britain. Documents and personal accounts revealed the collaboration to be far more extensive than the voluntary provisions of the SEATO Treaty. A telegram to British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan sent by US President, Lyndon B. Johnson, on 22 May 1964 expressed US government appreciation: "I greatly value the close consultation our two governments have had and the parallel actions we have been taking..." The Summary Record of Meeting 1, Honolulu 2 June 1964, includes the following comment:

...any SEATO contribution. Martin said 'keep them doing what they are: UK building a field near Savannakhet; Australia has aircraft at Ubon. Felt that troops into Mekong towns (inside Laos) will not all be US (but UK and Australia feel that their ground forces are tied up in Borneo; might provide air). [Crown was here referred to as being close to Savannakhet in Laos]

Some of the historical details of Crown's progress were written by then serving officers and published in Corps journals. Australian Brigadier P.J. Greville wrote in Chapter Three, quoting Captain Malcolm van Gelder, who more accurately described the location for the airfield as follows:

The airfield location was strategically midway between the two US bases of Ubon and Nakom Phanom [sic.], but not too close to the Mekong River, the border with Laos.

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66 Ibid., n.p. "In the event of a threatened invasion from Laos SEATO now plans to hold the Mekong by moving troops to Thailand.
US authors were more candid about the purpose of their presence in Thailand. They were there to fight a secret war in Laos, as Robert Kaylor stated in a caption of one photo, “56th Special Operations Wing Skyraiders prepare for missions over Laos”. Kaylor included a number of photos of planes parked on the Pierced Steel Plank (PSP) apron at Nakhon Phanom (NPK). 69

The Crown airfield specifications provided for a compacted laterite runway, which was then to be capped. The runway was upgraded to incorporate a bitumen capping, achieved at considerable expense, as the bitumen plant had to be constructed in Britain and transported by sea, then trucked from Bangkok to Crown along 600 kilometres of deeply rutted roads with diversions through muddy creek beds where bridges were inoperable.

Each of these solutions proved inadequate, especially after monsoon rains, as heavier aircraft sank into the runway’s surface. Though unfinished, Crown was prematurely handed over to the Thai Minister of Defence, Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn, on 17 June 1965. The runway was then resurfaced in pavement quality concrete and completed in 1967. There were no landing lights, except an improvised line of bonfires, and no fire brigade.

Greville reported that New Zealand Prime Minister, Keith Holyoake, visited Crown in 1964, in a Kiwi Air Force Bristol Freighter. There was some other air traffic at the airfield, in spite of the risks posed by the low-intensity insurgency war being waged across the north east of Thailand. 70

As early as 1964-5, SEATO allies were anxious that the project had run late and over-budget, and failed to achieve (load classification number) LCN 30, calling into question both British engineering competence and commitment to the SEATO alliance. One particular SEATO exercise, Kachorn Suek, scheduled for March 1966, illustrated the pivotal role of Crown in the preparations for the invasion of Laos, noted in a Foreign Office document. 71 And 72 The then bitumen runway surface was weak in places, due to subsidence, and unsuitable for all but light planes. British documents described the situation, included in a 1967 brief. The

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70 Ibid., 23.
A photograph of an Air America plane on the runway at Crown, was taken by RE veteran, Derek Sandilands. Documents demonstrated beyond doubt that the CIA were using this facility. According to Secret telegrams, British officers sought clarification as to how they should entertain Americans in civilian clothes with no badges of rank. They were instructed to welcome the visitors to the Officers’ Mess:

1. "On 20th September 5 aircraft landed, two C 123 and one CARIBOU landing in the space of half an hour. Four of these five aircraft were from different agencies and were unaware of the movements of the others."

In 1965-66, when the runway had still not achieved the required standard, the instructions from Bangkok directed the RE officers on site was to keep Air America and other users informed of the readiness status of Crown. This file was marked “TOP SECRET U.K. EYES ONLY” and “GUARD” and received a second review in 1991. As this cable stated, “...THIS INFORMATION WAS CIRCULATED TO ALL RELEVANT AMERICAN AIRCRAFT USERS INCLUDING AIR AMERICA IN THAILAND AND IN LAOS ON 1 OCT.” British and Commonwealth SAS soldiers used Crown as a lily-pad for their incursions into Laos. They crossed the Mekong in small craft as specialist commando teams. Robert Fleming’s account of these covert operations included interviews with identified former British SAS soldiers.

British Hansard recorded, on 15 December 1965, British MP for Ashfield, William Warbey, asked then Secretary of State for Defence, Dennis Healey, how many British troops were in Thailand on the Operation Crown project. The reply given by Healey was token. “...62 officers and 670 other ranks have served in Thailand since 1st January, 1965, the majority –

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77 Ibid., 1.
32 officers and 565 other ranks – being there for the construction of the airfield at Loeng Nok Tha. 79

Decades of campaigning for recognition in Australia resulted in the Australian government’ CIDA Report, 1993, which documented post-facto the Australian participation in Operation Crown. It stated in part:

The Committee also received a submission on behalf of 2 Field Troop Royal Australian Engineers (RAE), who served in Ban Kok Talat for five months in 1964 and for six months in 1965-66. On both occasions the troop’s employment was associated with construction of an airfield at Leong Nok Tha (Operation ‘Crown’) as part of Australia’s commitment under SEATO… in six separate insurgent incidents in the ‘Crown’ area, eighteen Thai dead and five wounded were reported including police and government officials. 80

Post Crown Works
After the completion of the airfield the Engineers built a road from Crown to Ban Khok Klang near Yasathon, as part of Post Crown Works. 81 Corps histories documented these projects. The authors of this 1967 journal ranged from Major to Brigadier. They wrote with illuminating clarity, situating the engineering projects to the war and plainly recognised the hazardous nature of the undertaking:

Loeng Nok Tha District is only 100 miles from North Vietnam, and since early 1965 had been a prime target for Communist activity. In view of poverty and the very low standard of living of its inhabitants, and their lack of proper administration, this was not really surprising. 82

The intended purpose of the projects was not revealed to the Other Ranks, although officers engaged in risk management knew about the dangerous nature of the work. The level of risk can be ascertained from these authors’ allusion to helicopter use:

… The area of the road was subject to some minor terrorist activity… For this reason recce and survey parties were not allowed to remain out at night. When the helicopters were available parties could be repositioned next morning with the minimum of delay.\(^8^3\)

The risk of attacks on foreign military engineers at work was mentioned in the Thai media:

…that… young Thais, a hundred or more at a time, were being taken across the Mekong River …to a training camp near Hanoi…. They were then returning to …join guerrilla groups in the surrounding jungles. During the first four months of 1966 they killed seven out of thirty eight policemen in Loeng Nok Tha District, as well as a number of other officials, headmen, teachers, and so-called informers.\(^8^4\)

The authors reported the skills which they employed to obtain consent and cooperation from the Thai civilian population, for which they accredited the counterinsurgency warfare expertise of RE Major-General R.L. Clutterbuck, OBE:

Compensation for accidents, and in one case for oil pollution of a padi [sic.] field, [sic.] were speedily dealt with. This … gave a good background to a reputation for fair dealing… All … were done officially. Many others were done unofficially.\(^8^5\)

Medical staff also contributed to building trust with Thai civilians:

No mention of Communist Relations would be complete without credit being given to the successive Force Medical Officers and their staffs. The sick parades in Camp and the clinics in villages probably did as much as anything else to maintain good relations.

\(^8^3\) Ibid., 197-207.
\(^8^4\) Ibid., 192.
\(^8^5\) Ibid., 209.
It is possible that too long a stay of the force in the area would have usurped the local government power and kudos. (...) *POST CROWN was essentially a military project with a limited short-term objective.*\(^{36}\) (Italics added)

The road was extended from Ban Khok Klang to Waeng District HQ by Thai military engineers. This would connect with roads to Roi Et and Khon Kaen and the connection to Korat, Udon Thani and Nakhon Ratchisima; as well as the connection between Khon Kaen and Ubon Ratchathani. Clearly, the road had military importance to the USAF.\(^{37}\) See map - (Appendix: page 115).

New Zealand’s then Minister of Defence, Mark Burton delivered a particularly frank statement in February 2003, in which he acknowledged that Crown air field was a military project and linked this with the US war in Laos. He announced that personnel who served in Thailand between 1962 and 1971 were eligible for a newly issued medal. In addition, Burton acknowledged that RNZAF transport aircraft, an SAS detachment, and Army engineers were included. So, it is highly probable that NZSAS commando teams flew to Crown to join their counterparts who crossed the Mekong and infiltrated into Laos:

In the 1960’s and early 1970’s, Thailand was threatened by both Communist insurgency in the northeast and invasion along the Laos border. As part of an allied response to these threats, New Zealand deployed military forces to Thailand in the period between 1962 and 1971, including RNZAF transport aircraft, an SAS detachment, and Army engineers...\(^{38}\)

There was silence in London which remained at the time of writing.

**Operation Bibber**

In 1962, the RAF sent 20 Squadron Hawker Hunter FGA9s to Yanhee Airport near Chiang Mai, Thailand in response to military developments in Laos. Operation Bibber was part of the pre-positioning of SEATO forces into the region. The RAF trained with USAF counterparts in the style of flying that had been employed during the Malayan Emergency. The tour ended in November 1962. RAF Museum recorded the deployment and its link, both to events in

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., 197-207.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 192-207.

Laos and to SEATO activities. Archival documents included reports of the unit’s rehearsal activities:

R.A.F. Detachment Chiengmai [Sic.] came about through the rather unsettled state of affairs in Laos that existed in the early part of the year, and gradually deteriorated as the year progressed.  

Flight plans and reports demonstrated that the RAF exercises carried out included “FAC low flying, photographing practise targets like bridges. The report for Oct-Nov 1962 described:

... ground attack ... low level navigation exercises ... “quickie” strikes, i.e. ten ...Hi-lo-hi strikes, reconnaissance exercises with U.S. troops in the field and three days of F.A.C. training.  

US accounts of the SEATO exercises were more candid:

Simultaneously to the deployment of the JTF-116 in Thailand in May 1962 the exercise Air Cobra took place. It involved RAF Hunters, RAAF Sabres and Canberras, USAF F-100s and F-102s, French Vautours, and RTAF F-84Gs and F-86Fs.  

The overall integration of RAF and RAAF units into the US war in Laos was explained in The Plain of Jars, an article by Walter J. Boyne, in June 1999, for the US Airforce Magazine:

...operations continued with SC-47s, one of which was shot down Feb. 11, 1962...  

Also in 1962, the buildup continued. Two squadrons of F-100D fighters were deployed to Takhli RTAB, Thailand. These were augmented by Marine UH-34D and A-4 units. It was for a time a combined operation, featuring an RAF Hawker Hunter squadron and Australian Sabre squadron.  

The success of a Pathet Lao offensive in March 1964 led to the activation of “Yankee Team” armed reconnaissance, using a combination of USAF RF-101Cs and US Navy RF-8As and

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90 Ibid.
RA-3Bs. US air operations intensified in 1964, with the initiation of Operation Barrel Roll, which continued until 1973.”

79 Sabre Squadron RAAF Ubon Ratchathani

RAAF 79 Sabre Squadron was despatched to Ubon Ratchathani to patrol and protect the Ubon Ratchathani air-space. Australians protected the air field perimeter, staffed the fire brigade and refuelled US planes in-flight.

The work was dangerous in several ways, partly it was a danger to health; but there was always a risk of coming under attack, as Michael John Claringbould explained:

Late April 1967, Thai police overran an insurgency camp and discovered documents … by a group calling itself Thais who love their country offered a five hundred dollar bounty to any Thai who assassinated an American serviceman...” and “…the US facilities at Ubon were attacked by terrorists only a short time after the RAAF withdrawal...”

These Australians subsequently struggled to achieve recognition of warlike service. This campaign was pursued for decades by Richard Stone and Mal Barnes, spokespeople of the RAAF Ubon “Reunion-Recognition” Group. The Australian acknowledgement helped to reveal more of the extent and context of Commonwealth involvement, the number of personnel, the nature of the units and the intentions that lay behind Ubon as well as the Engineer deployment.

This inexplicable reluctance to bestow eventual official recognition was described belatedly in the 2000 Mohr Report, but not entirely rectified till 2011. Mohr confirmed both the long-term stress and the actual danger experienced by RAAF personnel:

...RAAF [personnel] undertake the air defence alert tasks with its aircraft at ‘Alert State Five’, from dawn to dusk seven days a week ... [which]

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required that two fully armed aircraft be held on the operational readiness platform, preflighted, with pilots in close presence, ready and able to become airborne within five minutes to engage an intruding aircraft with a view to its destruction. …and the next alert state, which called for a ‘Combat Air Patrol’ to be mounted with two aircraft airborne at all times, was beyond the Squadron’s capability.\textsuperscript{98}

In February 2011, a further investigation into the most intense period of Ubon service was published, chaired by Professor Dennis Pearce AO. With such specific terms of reference, however, some official secrets remained buried.\textsuperscript{99} New Zealand’s efforts to recognise their veterans of Operation Crown and Post Crown Works in 2003 surpassed the Australian acknowledgement.\textsuperscript{100} London remained silent.

\textsuperscript{100} Mark Burton, "New Medal to Be Awarded for Service in Thailand" (Date accessed: 11 December 2008)