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The 'War Room' at Nakhon Phanom

The Pentagon has tried gently to persuade the wives of those who never came home from the Vietnam War that it is almost futile to continue hoping. Yet the Pentagon itself hasn't abandoned hope; a relentless, computerized search for the men still goes on.

Operating out of a tin shack at Nakhon Phanom in far northeastern Thailand is an almost unknown military unit called the Joint Casualty Resolution Center. Giant computers piece together bits of information on missing pilots, such as their airspeed and where they went down. Air Force Brig. Gen. Robert Kingston, who runs the center, hopes at least to locate the graves if he can't find the missing men.

The Air Force's main mission at Nakhon Phanom, however, is not to locate war casualties but to create more of them. The 175 men engaged in the search are all but lost among the 5,500 at the base who carry out air strikes on Cambodia and keep the contingency plans for bombing the rest of Indochina up to date, right down to picking specific targets.

The secrecy surrounding Nakhon Phanom's build-up has nothing to do with genuine security. The Communists already know all about it. The real purpose is to discourage congressional probes into the billions being spent to maintain U.S. military might in Thailand.

For decades before war split Southeast Asia, Nakhon Phanom was a drowsy little village with a shady square and a few thousand people, a place where misfit Thai officials could be conveniently exiled.

In the '60s, Nakhon Phanom began its artificial growth. The very isolation of the town near the Indochina border made it perfect for a U.S. air base. It proved ideal for clandestine CIA and military missions.

Sister bases were built at Udorn, Ubon, Korat, Takhli and Utapao-Sattahip. These vast wind-swept fields of concrete, asphalt, hangars, barracks and service clubs are staffed by GIs who, in turn, are served by small, delicate Thais who hiss politely as they serve visitors the unfamiliar American beers and hamburgers.

In 1972, when it was obvious that the U.S. was pulling its forces out of Saigon, the Pentagon without fanfare transferred the 7th Air Force headquarters to Nakhon Phanom. Subsequently, the village has undergone a weird transformation. The sleepy square where elders squatted in the shade is now a raucous American frontier town. It rings to rock 'n' roll music from go-go bars like the Shindig and King Diamond. The pizza joints, such as Rocky's, are outnumbered by "massage" parlors and houses of prostitution where girls from neighboring farms are raffled off to GIs.

Along with music, the GIs have introduced heroin to Nakhon Phanom. The few villagers who once smoked opium, now join GIs in injecting heroin. Our sources in Nakhon Phanom say air-

men, "stoned" on drugs, have been seen directing bomber strikes.

Task Force Alpha, the \$5 billion boondoggle for spotting elusive Vietcong with electronic sensors, has been replaced now by the U.S. Support Advisory Group. Behind barbed wire and a concrete-reinforced wall, guarded by grim men with machine guns, a giant war room is set up in Strangelove-style. Its tiers of electronic consoles face a wall-sized map of Thailand and Indochina. Technicians use the huge map to keep track of the nearly 200 daily missions over Cambodia.

Under the code name "Blue Chip," the control operation supervises missions of B52s, F111s, F4s and other planes which swarm up from the six U.S. bases in Thailand. For closer coordination, giant C130 "Airborne Battlefield Control and Command Capsules" fly at 35,000 feet and directly supervise the planes. Each of the multi-million-dollar C130s is a miniature "Blue Chip."

At the Nakhon Phanom base, a string of communications trailers give 7th Air Force chief Gen. John Vogt immediate access to Air Force commanders and to other government bigwigs around the world. Through trailers with the code name "Muscle Trunk,"

'Blue Chip' controls nearly 200 daily missions over Cambodia: "It's like a gigantic stock brokerage office, only less noisy and more lethal."

he can speak directly over a bug-proof line with President Nixon.

Above the consoles, in the cool isolation of glass paneled areas, the generals and colonels survey the war room. Nearby, a colonel and enlisted man calmly "validate" targets which the U.S. planes may have questions about hitting.

Perhaps Blue Chip's eeriest aspect is that the elaborate bombing production covers not only Cambodia but the rest of Indochina. Real bombs hurtle down on Cambodia. Elsewhere, the planning, the photo-reconnaissance, the targeting goes on, but no bombers take off. They stand at the perpetual ready.

The whole operation is like a gigantic stock brokerage office, only less noisy and more lethal. Our sources, who visited areas barred to newsmen,

reported back to us on the clinical atmosphere. "It's just an office where men work 9 to 5 or might have an early morning shift," one source said. "Men doing their job, business-like, orderly, rather neat, efficient, a slight air of tension in the room. Nothing very blood-thirsty.

"For the man sitting at his console in Blue Chip," the sources added, "bombing is just a pencil notation or two. That is it. To the pilot, it is flying over Cambodia and pushing a button and seeing bombs fall within the proper target. A few minutes later he's back at his swimming pool, tennis courts, air conditioned bars. Everyone's compartmented. Everyone's doing his little job. And somehow each of these little compartments fit together in such a way that every day maybe another dozen villages are wiped off the earth."

Footnote: Air Force spokesmen, while disagreeing with our sources' view of the Cambodian air war, honestly answered all of our questions on Nakhon Phanom. The spokesmen confirmed our sources' description of the physical set-up of Blue Chip. As for the drug problem, the spokesmen said that users are swiftly removed from sensitive jobs and that the overall drug totals for airmen in Southeast Asia are declining.