

## Dr. Jon Evans, 22 Charlie, and CIA Operations in Laos

*Tracy E. Rich*

---



Left: The Air America flight line at Udorn Thani. Below: A CASI Beech Baron like the one Dr. and Mrs. Evans boarded on January 5, 1969.

---



### *An Ill-fated Flight*

On the evening of January 5, 1969, Dr. Jon Evans stood on the Air America operations flightline at the sprawling Royal Thai Air Force Base at Udorn Thani<sup>a</sup> awaiting the arrival of the CIA pouch run to Vientiane. At his side in the gathering dark was his wife of 25 years, Doratheia. A registered nurse, she worked part-time in the Bangkok medical unit where he was a regional medical officer (RMO). The couple had traveled to Udorn Thani from Bangkok on the “50 Kip,” a shuttle flight that got its nickname from the Thai currency and

the 50K at the end of its tail number. With the first leg of the journey behind them, they would board a second plane for the short hop across the Mekong River to the Laotian capital.

Evans had retired from the US Army Medical Corps several years earlier, but he had not been ready to settle down. He had tried civilian life two decades before, when he left the military after World War II, volunteering to serve a community that had been without a physician for four years. Disenchanted with the routine

of private practice, however, he was soon back in uniform.

Evans and Doratheia enjoyed the Army’s challenging assignments and overseas experiences, including a stint at the US Army Hospital in Tehran in the mid-1950s and as senior medical adviser to the Korean army. The two of them, he said, had “a ball.” During the early 1960s, Evans was back in Iran, serving as senior medical adviser to the shah and the Iranian army and command surgeon for the US Army Mission. By

---

a. Udorn Thani was generally referred to as Udorn during this period.

---

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the US government.

1967, however, with little chance of reaching flag rank and every prospect of being stuck stateside in hospital administration, Colonel Evans was ready for something new and different. Besides, his two daughters were now married, and he and his wife had more freedom to take on interesting assignments.

Evans's decision to leave the Army after 23 years and sign on with CIA in May 1967 may also have been influenced by his longstanding ties to the world of intelligence. According to an unconfirmed report, Evans had spent some of World War II with the Office of Strategic Services, and his subsequent military career included both a tour as military attaché in India and an assignment in what is now the National Military Intelligence Center. In 1948, Evans had been detailed to the newly created CIA, where he met Dr. John Tietjen, CIA's Chief of Medical Services. During his 18 months with CIA, he served as an operational support officer, a post in which he helped organize first-aid courses and develop medical kits for use in the field.

After his return to the Army, he continued to work closely with CIA; during his tour of duty in Tehran, for example, he treated agents in Tehran, and in New Delhi he expedited the flow of information from the attaché's office to the agency. Now, once more on the CIA payroll, he waited patiently at Udon Thani in the night chill.

The flight that would take Dr. and Mrs. Evans to Vientiane was operated by Continental Air Services, Incorporated (CASI), a subsidiary of

### **Jon Price Evans, M.D.**



A career military physician, Jon Price Evans was commander of the hospital at Fort Carson, Colorado, when he retired from the Army in 1967. Before assuming that post, he had commanded the hospital at Patrick Air Force Base in Florida and served at McDonald Hospital in Fort Eustis, Virginia. He had also served at the headquarters of Gen. Matthew Ridgway, in the office of the Surgeon General, and at the Army's Kennedy General Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Evans signed a contract to work for CIA after leaving the Army and was almost immediately sent to Bangkok as a regional medical officer.

Evans, the only child of a well-to-do florist, was born on December 14, 1914 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. According to his daughter, he changed his given name from John to Jon when he went into the military because a cousin also named John Price Evans enlisted at the same time. After attending Wyoming Seminary (a coeducational boarding school), he obtained a degree from Washington and Lee University and a medical degree from Temple University. He specialized in obstetrics and gynecology. Evans joined the Army in 1943 while doing his residency at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital. He later obtained a degree in public health from the Walter Reed Institute of Research. In addition, he was a graduate of the US Army's Command and General Staff and Armed Forces Staff Colleges.

Evans enjoyed sports and was on the wrestling team during high school and college. In addition, he held several elective offices. He was also a keen photographer who processed his own black-and-white film. A "tinkerer," he bragged that he could fix almost any common household item. At his wedding to Dorathea Ruth Thomas on October 21, 1943, he cut the wedding cake with a Civil War-era sword from his family's collection. The Evanses had two daughters, Jean and Jone. At the time of his death, Evans had three grandchildren.

Continental Airlines that provided contract flying services to CIA and others in Southeast Asia. Unlike the better known Air America, CASI was purely commercial and available to CIA through contract with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The airline owned a variety of small and medium transport planes, including the Beechcraft Baron, a twin-engine piston-driven aircraft that was a workhorse in the fleet and was highly regarded by the airline's pilots for its dependability. CASI's missions, transporting men and supplies as part of the agency's support to the

Indochina war, were sometimes overt and sometimes covert—a practice that could complicate normally routine business practices in an emergency.<sup>a</sup>

It was well known in aviation circles in Indochina that contract flying in Laos was not for the rule-bound or faint of heart. CASI pilots had to be skilled at dealing with mountainous terrain, short takeoffs and landings mandated by jungle airstrips, and even an occasional water buffalo on the runway. Anthony "Tony" Bertucci was one of the airline's veteran fliers. His partner on the flight, Richard

a. See Timothy Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: United States Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955–75. PhD dissertation approved for public release by AFIT/CI, Wright-Patterson AFB and provided to DTIC, December 17, 1991.

Arlie Harter, had come to CASI from Air America but had far less seniority. Harter was bucking for a promotion to the captain's seat—and this pouch run was supposed to help him seal the deal.

As the Evanses stood on the tarmac at Udon Thani, opposition to the Vietnam War was soaring back home, and the US role in ostensibly neutral Laos was becoming controversial in Washington. Although it would be almost a year before Senator Stuart Symington would launch Congressional hearings into US involvement in East Asia, the media had been speculating about possible US paramilitary activity in Laos. Such involvement would be in direct contravention of the Geneva Agreements of 1962, and public verification that it existed would pose problems for a sitting administration.

Laos was nevertheless regarded by US policymakers as central to containing the spread of communism in East Asia, and Washington had been providing economic and military aid to the kingdom since 1950. In March 1961, Kennedy issued the orders that created a program of extensive CIA paramilitary operations supported by Thai-based covert US military agencies—a program that escalated after the Geneva Agreements forced the withdrawal of overt US military components. The neighboring kingdom of Thailand, equally determined not to let Laos fall to the communists, became Washington's "unsinkable aircraft carrier" in the region.

By 1969, when Jon and Dorathea Evans were on the flightline awaiting the arrival of 22 Charlie, the airbase at Udon Thani was a beehive of



The flight from Udon Thani to Vientiane should have taken 15 minutes. It crashed near Nong Khai, just short of the Mekong River and the Laos.

activity, playing host to dozens of US Air Force fighter jets and to a fleet of fixed and rotary wing aircraft operated by CIA proprietary Air America. Despite this presence in Thailand, CIA had so far been able to conceal the full extent of US assistance to anti-communist authorities in Laos. US officials in Washington, Bangkok, and Vientiane knew, however, that they were walking a very fine line.<sup>a</sup>

The CASI Beechcraft Baron designated 22 Charlie had left Vientiane early on January 5 en route for Luang Prabang, the Lao royal capital; Long Tieng, the headquarters of General

Vang Pao and his CIA-backed guerrilla army; and Nam Yu, the isolated highland village from which the legendary Anthony "Tony Poe" Poshepny mobilized the hill tribes in support of the agency's secret war. Udon Thani was its last stop before the return to Vientiane.

Bertucci was in the captain's seat when the pouch run left Vientiane. Harter took over at the halfway point. He would be in command of the aircraft as it completed its well-worn route. There was no pouch to collect in Udon Thani, and at about six o'clock, once Dr. and Mrs. Evans

a. See Bill Lair memoir, "An Excellent Idea": Leading Surrogate Warfare in Southeast Asia, A Personal Memoir," [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)



were aboard, the plane taxied down the runway to join the queue awaiting clearance for takeoff. Apparently because the flight was a fixture in Udorn Thani's daily routine, Harter did not announce their departure to the military air controllers or the nearby Brigham GCI (ground control intercept) station.

The flight to Vientiane usually took about 15 minutes. It was not a big deal for Evans, who had already earned praise for his willingness to travel on short notice. Just weeks before this trip, Evans had been awarded the Legion of Merit by the ambassador to Thailand for "exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services." Since late 1968, he had paid regular visits to Vientiane as medical adviser to the chief of station. At the time of his current trip, that COS was Larry Devlin, who had replaced Saigon-bound Ted Shackley several months earlier. On arrival, Evans would presumably be whisked from the airport to learn more about the operational requirement that had led the station to summon him this time.

At 051356Z, the CIA Station in Vientiane sent a flash cable to Bangkok. It was almost midnight, and Baron 22 Charlie was overdue. The delay in realizing the plane was missing was attributable in part to the lack of notification to the tower and ground intercept station in Udorn Thani. The pilots had also failed to make an emergency radio call, an act that should have been standard operating procedure.

Eventually, wreckage was spotted 8 miles south of Vientiane along the narrow road that paralleled the Laotian-Thai border. Given the

location, the debris could belong to 22 Charlie. The station dispatched two helicopters and its senior air officer, Charlie Gabeler, to investigate. Doctors aboard the choppers, including the Vientiane Embassy physician, would determine if that was the case—and if there were any survivors.

Within a few hours, another cable was flashed from Vientiane to Bangkok. Two Americans had been brought to the hospital in Nong Khai, then a sleepy provincial town on the Thai side of the Mekong. The first, a woman, was reported to be in critical condition. The second, a man, was less seriously injured and was conscious. The two had been aboard 22 Charlie. The embassy physician headed from the crash site to the hospital as a medevac was put on standby.

As the investigation of the wreckage continued, a Thai doctor on the scene radioed Vientiane with news of a grim discovery. Two bodies had been found in the plane. The crash had also killed a Thai couple on the ground. The remains from the plane were put on board a Jolly Green Giant helicopter for evacuation and identification. The chopper bearing the two bodies headed to Udorn Thani, leaving several CIA officers behind. They would remain at the crash site until dawn, when they could determine if Evans had been carrying any classified documents in his personal belongings and if there were other security concerns.

While the officers waited in the dark by the wreckage, another station officer radioed Vientiane from Nong Khai, alerting the station that Mrs. Evans, though still in shock, had



been stabilized and was being flown to the base hospital at Udorn Thani. Vientiane informed COS Bangkok, who requested that agency officials in Udorn Thani ensure that friends of the Evanses get to the hospital as soon as possible to comfort her.

22 Charlie had been airborne for seven minutes. Harter would never get his promotion, and Dr. Evans would never complete his mission in Vientiane.

### *Aftermath*

Three hours after Bertucci, Harter, and Dr. and Mrs. Evans had taken off for the quick flight to Vientiane, CIA officers in Washington, Bangkok, Vientiane, and Udorn Thani had mobilized and were working to determine what had occurred and how best to deal with it. At CIA Headquarters, Air Branch officers were trying to understand the cause of the accident. DCI Richard Helms was informed that an agency officer from Vientiane had positively identified Dr. Evans as one of those who died in the wreckage of 22 Charlie. As agency officials looked after Mrs. Evans, arrangements were

being made to transport her husband's remains back to the United States, and a memorial service was scheduled for January 16 at the International Church in Bangkok. CASI officials assumed responsibility for Bertucci's treatment and Harter's burial.

In Vientiane, Amb. William Sullivan, who controlled the entire US program of covert aid to Laos, was contemplating the broader political implications of the downed aircraft. There would be an accident investigation and, inevitably, press coverage. How would US officials explain the presence of officers from Embassy Vientiane at the crash site in Thailand? What would the media say if and when they found out that the plane was flying from Udon Thani to Vientiane? How would they explain Dr. Evans's travel from Bangkok to the Laotian capital? In short, how could all concerned keep the incident from fueling press speculation about US engagement in Laos?

In Bangkok, station officers greeted with skepticism Ambassador Sullivan's suggestions for heading off a public controversy. They pointed out that it was well known that CASI did not operate Beechcraft Barons in Thailand. They also argued that denying that Vientiane was the ultimate destination of 22 Charlie could create more problems than it solved. If it turned out the destination was widely known—a reasonable prospect given the regularity of the pouch run—the crash of 22 Charlie would be surrounded by an air of mystery and would thus attract more attention. Bangkok suggested that officials neither confirm nor deny that the plane was headed for Vientiane. Embassy press officers were advised to keep

the announcement of the crash short and factual.

Back in Washington, CIA officials were also reluctant to go along with the ambassador. They pointed out that, when Thai and US aviation authorities investigated what happened to 22 Charlie, they would inevitably discover the true destination of the flight. Indeed, they saw no alternative but to record the truth on the requisite forms and notifications. At the same time, they reminded agency officers in Vientiane, Bangkok, and Udon Thani that all aircraft crashes were sensitive—and that this crash was more sensitive than most. As a result, even in notifying the Evanses' next of kin, they had confined the details released to time, location, type of aircraft, and identification of casualties. Coverage in major newspapers was minimal.

As State and agency officials debated the best way to minimize the political fallout and preserve deniability of CIA operations, routine administrative issues assumed a much greater importance. CASI needed information on Dr. and Mrs. Evans to submit its insurance claim, but there was disagreement about who should submit the information in order to maintain cover. There was similar disagreement over the filing of employee compensation forms. With one of Evans's sons-in-law brandishing the prospect of a lawsuit against CASI, these details had to be addressed quickly—but carefully. They might wind up in court. CIA's Office of General Counsel was brought into the picture, but it would be months before all of the insurance, pension, and other financial details were settled.

Meanwhile, in Vientiane, a medical officer was still needed to carry out the duties that had put Evans in the seat in 22 Charlie, and a request was sent to Saigon for assistance. A medical officer was duly assigned some months later.

### ***Interment and Memorial***

Jon Price Evans was buried in Arlington National Cemetery near the Memorial Chapel Gate on February 6th. Dorathea, who died 30 years after the plane crash, is buried with him.

Dr. Evans's death would not be reflected on CIA's Memorial Wall until May 23, 2023, when during CIA's annual Memorial Day function, CIA Director Burns made public the names of five previous inductees to the Hall of Honor and introduced one new one, Dr. Jon Evans. Director Burns opened the dedication of the new star by saying,

*Today, we dedicate the 140th Memorial Star to Dr. Jon Evans. This new star commemorates a life that was lost decades ago—but the passage of time neither lessens his sacrifice nor diminishes the debt we owe him and his family....*

*We are joined by one of his daughters and 13 members of Dr. Evans's extended family, including grandchildren and great-grandchildren. On behalf of everyone at CIA, thank you for being here. We are immensely proud to count Jon as a member of our Agency family, and we will always be grateful for his heroic service to our country.*

Before the dedication ceremony, the family of Dr. Evans received briefings that detailed Dr. Evans's and his wife Dorothea's service. Participants in the meeting at a follow-on luncheon said the family genuinely appreciated the discussions because it filled in so many gaps in

their understanding of why Jon and Dorothea were traveling to Laos. The family members noted that even in the later years, Dorothea never disclosed to them what the mission was in Laos, and even what they were doing in Bangkok. Dorothea kept her commitment to secrecy of our

mission even with her own family despite the tragedy and passing of time. His daughter would tell another guest at the ceremony that "her father had been her hero, and he is even more of a hero now."

### *Afterword*

Since the Memorial Wall was installed with 31 stars in 1974 many have been added. By 2008, when former CIA historian Nicholas Dujmovic reviewed the wall's history in *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 52, No. 3 (September 2008), there were 89 stars. Perhaps it was inevitable, given when the Memorial Wall was first engraved, that sacrifices in the line of duty which predated its creation would be lost in past history and will for a time go unnoticed, as Dujmovic pointed out in his article. In Dr. Evans' case, his story was raised in this manuscript, which only recently led to the reconsideration of the circumstances of his death and the decision to commemorate his death on the Memorial Wall.

### *A note on sources:*

This article is based on staff cables, personnel records, newspaper accounts, and interviews with and recollections of CIA and CASI personnel familiar with the setting and events. For a broad, unclassified examination of the US government's secret war in Laos, see *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, by Dr. Timothy Castle (Columbia University Press, 1993). For an in-depth, assessment of CIA operations in Laos, see *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos* by Thomas Ahern, Jr. (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006). Originally published as a classified history, CIA declassified most of the book and posted it to its Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room on CIA.GOV.



*The author:* Tracy E. Rich was a member of CIA's History Staff when this article was originally written in 2016. She has since retired.