

RESCUE DAWN: THE TRUTH *presents*

STORY OF ESCAPE

as told by the only living survivor, Pisidhi Indradat
with excerpts from Dieter Dengler's "Escape from Laos"

originally produced and edited by Chuck Sheley for *National Smokejumpers Association Magazine*



This is a true story, one that has never before been revealed to anyone in writing. It is being told at the urging of my subordinates, and being published in the funeral memories of my mother.

This story is a straightforward, unembellished account. I will use the real names of all the friends who were part of my fate, in memory of the brave spirits of all these beloved people. I will take this opportunity to thank my former instructors and commanders from the Naresuan Airborne Police Camp, who taught me to endure hardship like a man and, most important, taught me how to survive in the jungle. I'd also like to thank the Air America personnel who packed the parachute and made my 80th jump a safe one, enabling me to survive and write this story.

THE DAY BEFORE

On September 4, 1963, I had just come off a C-123 after completing the daily mission of delivering supplies to Northern Laos. After taking my parachute and survival bag back to the supply room, I went to the air-operations room to log my hours for that day. Next I checked with flight scheduling and found out that I was scheduled to fly on a C-46 the next day with the following crew: Joseph C. Cheney (pilot), Charles G. Herrick (copilot), Y.C. To (radio operator)

and Air Freight personnel including Gene DeBruin, Prasit Prahmsuwan and Tran Than. (I was part of this Air Freight team.) We were scheduled for three re-supply trips near the Vietnamese border, where Laotian Rightist forces were operating. After dinner I got ready for bed, because we had to board the aircraft before dawn the next morning.

THE OMEN

At 2100, Tran Than came to see me and told me that he did not want to fly the next day. I could not dissuade him, so I advised that he make his resignation to Frank Jahnke, the American section chief. When I arrived at the airport on September 5 at about 0530, I saw the C-46 parked in the area near the Air America restaurant. After picking up my parachute and survival kit, I went to the restaurant and told Cheney that Tran Than was not going. Cheney told me to find a replacement. Prasit Thane was in the standby room, because his flight had been cancelled and said that he would go. All personnel were aboard the aircraft by 0655. I corrected the flight log with the names of the personnel aboard and read the warning forbidding us to fly lower than 8,000 feet as there was enemy AAA along the flight path. Cheney read this, laughed and said, "If the plane gets hit, Y.C. To will probably have difficulty reporting to Vientiane, and they

will probably want numerous corroborating reports.” Y.C. To was from Hong Kong, about 40 years old and quite superstitious. He told Cheney not to talk about the flight, as that was a bad omen. Cheney did not answer him but laughed, started the engines and taxied to the runway.

THE FLIGHT

We took off from Vientiane Airport and headed over the Mekong River to Savannakhet Airport. The flight took a little over an hour and was the normal flight path taken by Air America planes from Vientiane to Savannakhet and other provinces in southern Laos. After completing the loading of our supplies, we took off at 0830 for Ban Houei San about 40 minutes away. We flew at 8,000 feet at all times in accordance with the warning. The left door had been removed, and I looked out and saw jungle and mountains. This was repetitious to me, as I had been one of the first Thais to do this work in Laos and had spent several thousand hours working aboard aircraft and on the ground. There was not a province in Laos where I had not been. I stopped reflecting as we began to drop altitude and entered the Ban Houei San area, a valley surrounded by mountains. We completed our cargo drops and retraced our flight path to Savannakhet. There was no sign or hint of enemy AAA.

THE SECOND DROP

After reloading, we returned to Ban Houei San for a second time. All went well until the final drop. We were dropping two bundles of rice, each one weighing over 600 pounds. The second bundle sort of floated and hit the left tail fin, causing it to vibrate menacingly. When we got back to Savannakhet, the pilot told the mechanics to check out the aircraft; if they found anything wrong, we would cancel the next flight. The mechanics found everything in working order. It was almost 1600, but we had time to do the job and still return to Vientiane before sunset.

THE SHOOTDOWN

We took off from Savannakhet Airfield, climbed to 8,000 feet and flew the same route as we had done on the first two trips. Y.C. To was sitting in the radio operator's seat behind the pilots. As for the others, we were either sitting in the passenger seats or lying down. I took off my jacket and wore only a shirt and my brand-new jeans that I had just bought in Bangkok. An eight-inch jungle knife and a compass were attached to my field belt.

It was about ten minutes before we reached the drop zone. I was lying down eating a piece of fruit. A violent explosion happened close to where I was lying near the right wing of the aircraft. We abruptly lost altitude, and I floated to the ceiling and fell back to the floor. I was certain that we had been hit by enemy AAA fire, and when I looked out the window, I saw puffs of smoke from AAA rounds as they were fired and exploded not far from our aircraft. I hurried to the cockpit and found Cheney disengaging the auto-pilot and turning the aircraft toward Savannakhet. At the same time, I noticed a large fire coming from the right engine, engulfing the whole wing and emitting a long stream of black smoke. Cheney turned off the right engine, and the fire went out for 10 to 15 seconds before starting up again, worse than before.

I hurried back and put on my parachute and tried unsuccessfully to find my survival bag, now covered by the bags of rice that were scattered all over the floor. The fire had now spread to the body of the aircraft and into the cargo area through a hole in the fuselage. I returned to the cockpit and helped the pilots put on their parachutes. Cheney ordered me to abandon the aircraft. I urged the pilots to go with me, but they refused and continued to try to maintain the plane's altitude.

I put a parachute on Y.C. To and pulled him to the door. He said he'd never jumped before and that the parachute he'd checked out required him to pull the handle to release the chute. Gene DeBruin had parachute experience as a smokejumper, but the others had little or no parachute experience. I solved the problem by taking our safety straps that we used when dropping cargo and making a static line with them. I then attached one end to the handles of the parachutes. I had Y.C. jump first. I would jump last. I saw all four chutes open. My parachute was lower than the others, probably because the aircraft was rapidly losing altitude. Before we jumped, heavy flames engulfed the plane, and I was unable to see through the curtain of smoke into the cockpit. It was so hot I felt as if I were burning alive. After I jumped, the plane exploded, and I saw a giant fireball falling to earth.

I SCANNED THE EARTH

I saw the parachutes of my friends above me. While I was floating, I scanned the earth and saw a wide plain at the base of the mountain. I could see that the others were heading for that area. I tried to turn into the wind that was blowing toward the plain and landed in a tree. I climbed down to the ground and left the parachute in the tree as a marker for search aircraft. It was 1630 in the afternoon, and the rescue aircraft operated until 1800. I found a small trail that did not look to be used very much. It was the rainy season, and footprints were easily noticeable. I hurried across the trail and hid in the dense jungle about 110 to 160 yards away from where the parachute was hanging. While I was sitting, I felt a pain in my right knee and felt that my pants were soaked below the knee. There was a tear of about two inches in my pants. I took off my pants and found the wound just above the kneecap. Yellowish flesh oozed out, and it was still bleeding. I tried to push the flesh back into the wound. I had some gauze with me and wrapped it around my knee. Then I poured tincture of iodine over the gauze. I put my pants back on and waited for help from the rescue aircraft. At about 1745, I heard the sound of an aircraft in the distance. I came out of the bush and climbed a tree. The sky was about to darken, but I could see four AT-6 aircraft flying in a line over my parachute and flying toward the plain area. A light rain began to fall, and I could hear the AAA start to fire. At the same time, the sound of 50-mm machine guns, hand-held automatic weapons and small arms fire filled the air. The aircraft quickly climbed for altitude, and I was able to see the emblem of the Laotian Rightist (friendly) Airforce on the planes as they flew away.

A PLATOON OF SOLDIERS

In the open area I saw a platoon of soldiers dressed in khaki uniforms. They were wearing caps, had their arms slung and

were carrying full issues of ammunition and other equipment. They were walking single file directly toward where I was hiding. I got down from the tree and hid again as they walked closer and closer. I could hear them talking in Laotian and Vietnamese, which meant that the Laotian Communists were operating with the North Vietnamese soldiers. They found the parachute and scattered out and started to search the area. The rainfall began to increase at dusk. They regrouped and headed back to the open plain area. I quickly came out of hiding and walked along the trail until I saw some light and heard a dog bark. As I moved closer, I saw four or five bamboo houses in the area. Around one house were seven or eight soldiers and two men wearing loincloths. I snuck along the tree line around the village until I found the main trail used by the villagers. I went into the jungle and traveled parallel to the trail until I ran into a small stream. The water wasn't deep, but the current was swift. It was night and difficult to travel.

I swam out and grabbed a hold of a log floating with the current in order to save time and keep from getting too tired. All I had to do was endure the cold water. I floated downstream for a considerable time, when I felt the stream getting shallower and the current starting to run faster. I couldn't see anything ahead. The stream quickly curved to the right, and the current became even stronger.

CAPTURED

As I came around the corner, I saw a campfire on the bank in a clearing. I immediately let go of the log and started to swim to the opposite bank. The current was so strong that by the time I got to the bank, I had been pushed closer to the campfire. The opposite bank was steep and provided no cover. I saw five men at the campfire. Two of them held muskets, two had long-handled sickles and the other one held a crossbow. They saw me from the light of the fire and shouted for me to stay put; otherwise, they would shoot. The two aimed their muskets at me. One of them began signaling with a wooden signal clacker. A couple minutes later, about ten Laotian Communist soldiers ran out of the jungle. They were armed with Chinese rifles, and two of them had hand-held French machine guns.

They waded across the river, tied my hands behind my back and slipped the rope around my neck in a noose. All the time they pointed their guns at my head and poked my body with the barrels. I was extremely frightened and thought that they were going to shoot me. It was the first time in my life that I had been so afraid of dying.

I was taken to another village, where I saw my four friends, who had also been captured. They were tied like me, with the end of the rope attached to a pole in the ground. They let us sit there all night without being interrogated. My watch and lighter were taken, but they allowed me to keep a sewing needle. I was also able to keep some parachute cord that I had tied around my waist in place of my belt.

SEPTEMBER 1963: FIRST PRISON

On September 6 at about 0800, we were marched to a house across a wide dirt field. We were taken inside and untied. They

started questioning the three of us who were Thais. The questions were mostly meaningless, but I was hit in the head once. The soldiers then ganged up on us and beat us badly. After that they started to question Y.C. To, but Y.C. couldn't understand, and the interrogator couldn't speak any other language, so he stopped.

At 1100, we were marched through the jungle until we reached a big road on which cars could drive. I found out later that this road was National Route 9, stretching from Savannakhet to the Vietnam border. After a while, we reached three ancient buildings with a brick wall around them. The insides of the buildings were covered with bullet marks, and the windows had been replaced with barbed wire. We were put into a room about five yards square.

After about two days, my wound began to get infected. My whole knee was swollen, and I could barely walk. I squeezed the pus out of the wound and tried to clean it, but the wound itself was still spread wide open. I decided to sew up the wound using my sewing needle and threads from inside the parachute cord. Using my fingers to close the wound tightly, I pushed the needle through and my friends tied the thread. It hurt more than anything I had ever endured in my life, but I had to do it to survive. Four days later, the wound started getting infected again with lots of pus. I honed a bamboo sliver until it was sharp and used it to cut out the stitches and the dead skin around the knee. I then put in three new stitches. The wound got better and within three months had disappeared.

We were imprisoned here for 27 days and had just two meals of rice and one cup of water a day. One at a time, we were allowed to go outside and dump our excrement dish. Our weight began to disappear, and we could notice the looseness of our clothes.

OCTOBER 1963: SECOND PRISON

We were marched along National Route 9 for three days, all the while meeting Russian trucks carrying Laotian and Vietnamese soldiers. There were machine-gun nests and bunkers at numerous spots along the route. I saw a military camp completely constructed of bamboo that must have been the location of several battalions. We were put in a second prison with a dirt floor. The roof was tin and covered with barbed wire. There were no windows or air vents, and just a little light was able to penetrate through nail holes in the tin roof. This cell was out in the open with no shade, and it was as if we were being baked in an oven. The floor was bamboo, raised about 18 inches off the ground. We were not able to stand up but had to be bent over all the time we were not sitting. The food was the same as before, one cup of sticky rice twice a day. After a month, all of us had dysentery and were passing blood. We had bowel movements many times during each day and night.

One night we heard what sounded like a mouse squealing. Prasit Thaneek picked up a stick and struck at the noise. The next morning we awoke and found a dead snake with two round lumps just below its head. Prasit cut the snake open and found two mice. We rubbed bamboo sticks together, started a fire, cooked

the snake and the mice, divided them up and ate them. We stayed here for three full months.

JANUARY 1964: THIRD PRISON

We next traveled on foot five hours to Muang Ang Kham Prison near the Vietnamese border. The prison was made of logs buried in the ground. It was rectangular, with thatch covering the logs on the roof. This place had a stream nearby and was cleaner and better ventilated than the others. There were three tall watchtowers made of bamboo. For 24 hours a day we were placed in stocks or "foot traps," as they were called by the Laotians. The stocks were made out of a single bottom board and a single top piece that was wedged at both ends. All five of us were forced to lay shoulder to shoulder with our ankles fixed in the holes of the foot traps. In a couple hours I felt numb all over. In order to defecate or urinate into our bamboo container, we had to break the bamboo flooring so that we could get the container below us.

Every morning at 0800, the guards would come in and take the top board off and let us out, one person at a time, to empty our excrement containers. They had four guards watching the person who was emptying his bucket. We took as much time as possible to empty our buckets in order to keep our feet out of the foot traps. It was winter, and we had only the clothes we were wearing. It was so cold that I couldn't sleep at night, and the foot traps kept my feet so numb I couldn't feel them. In addition to the foot traps, the guards put nooses around our necks at night and tied the end of the rope to a post outside the cell. When the guards came around to check at night, they jerked on the rope and we had to call out in response. We began to worry about the foot traps; if we remained like this, we'd be crippled for sure.

OUT OF THE FOOT TRAPS

The eighth day in this prison, I saw a metal piece of a machine-gun clip on the way to dump my excrement bucket. On the way back I pretended to drop my bucket accidentally and bent over and picked up the metal and a small rock. After the guards had put us back into the foot traps, I straightened out the piece of metal and ground it on the rock. It was several hours before I had produced a knife the size of my little finger. Using the knife, I slowly bore out the openings in the foot traps to give me room to move my feet. After three days, we had the openings widened enough that we were able to pull our feet out of the traps without the guards knowing. Thereafter, we were able to sleep comfortably, but we had to be alert and quickly put our feet back into the traps when the guards came.

Throughout this time, even though our mental state was confused, there wasn't anyone who could not control himself. No one was so dejected that he considered suicide. We still had hope that if we weren't killed, we might receive help from Air America, the U.S. government or the Red Cross. We started thinking of escaping, but there were no opportunities, as the guards were very strict.

FEBRUARY 1964: FOURTH PRISON

During the middle of February, we walked to Lang Khang Prison deep in the interior, adjacent to the Vietnamese border. We split

off Route 9 into dense jungle. There we encountered Vietnamese soldiers building a road. They had a full complement of road-building equipment, even large tractors. After five days, we arrived at Lang Khang Prison. There were high guard towers along the rectangular fence. The floor was dirt, and the walls and ceiling were made of trees about the size of a person's arm. There were long thorns in the wood, so one could not lean against the walls or touch the low ceiling. The cells were complete with foot traps.

At about 1600 on our first day, the guards led us outside the cell to a small stream, where we were allowed to bathe and wash our clothes for the first time. Before dark, the guards put us in the foot traps but also added some old-fashioned, heavy handcuffs. There were two ways of wearing them. One way was to have the hands together, as if praying. The other way was to put the wrists together with the fingers pointing out to the left and right. No matter which way they were worn, they were extremely agonizing. The first night was especially tortuous, trying to sleep in handcuffs and foot traps in the cold in wet clothing.

We used the knife to whittle away the foot traps as before. They didn't put us in the handcuffs during the day but did so only at night. Again, a rope was connected to the handcuffs and tied to a post outside the cell. The sleeping quarters of the guards were located about 30 yards away, and we were able to build a fire, although we had to work together to fan the smoke away so they would not see it. Every day when we went to empty our buckets, we tried to pick up pieces of wood and tin to bring back to the cell. We molded dirt around the tin and used it as a cooking oven.

EAT ANYTHING THAT MOVES

At this prison, grasshoppers and crickets, lizards and chameleons came into the cell in large numbers to escape the cold. When we woke up each morning, we would lie there motionless with our eyes open while we located any critter that had come close to us. We would quickly jump and grab it, squeeze the head to kill it and put it in the pile with the others. We then would make a fire and cook the catch, divide and eat. We did this every day in order to survive. When we first started to eat these insects and animals, DeBruin and Y.C. To were squeamish and declined to do so. But after seeing us Thais eating every day, they gave it a try and then ate it every day not because it tasted good, but because they had to. How can a person who once weighed 150 pounds exist on two lumps of sticky rice a day? In five months, we each had dropped over 20 pounds, but we were still alive.

PLANNING AN ESCAPE

When we first arrived at Lang Khang, we were guarded very closely. Later the guards became more relaxed, probably thinking that there was no way we could escape. Sometimes the guard who had watch duty would climb up on the cell roof and sleep until his replacement came. The replacement would do the same. We saw this but had to find a way to get our handcuffs off. The handcuffs were attached at one end and, when folded over one's wrists, were locked by a spring mechanism at the other end. We knew how to make a key, but we were lacking the material with which to do it.

OPENING THE HANDCUFFS

One morning when I was dumping my waste bucket, I picked up an empty toothpaste tube. Now we had something to work with. I used dirt to make a mold the size of the keyhole for the handcuffs. We melted the tube and poured it into the mold. It turned out to be a little large, but I used the small knife to scrape and shape it so it could be inserted into the keyhole of the handcuffs. The key worked with all the cuffs, and from that time on, we took the handcuffs off every night. We tied the cuffs to the bamboo flooring in case the guards came and pulled on the rope. We were about ready to make our escape. The next problem was figuring out how to get out of our cell.

ESCAPING THE CELL

The cell was made up of tree trunks about eight to ten inches in diameter. The roof was made of logs covered with thatch. One day when there was no guard nearby, we tried moving the largest log on the roof. After a while, we were successful and were able to create an opening large enough to put one's head through. We put the log back in place. Now we were ready to break out and were just waiting for the right time and opportunity. During this time, we tried to be on our best behavior with the guards, so they would feel more at ease with us. Some of the guards were talkative, and we found out there were no mines around the camp. We had been here three months. We didn't have a map, a compass or even a destination, except that we would head west. The height of the dry season was at the end of May, and we chose that time, thinking that traveling would be easy. That's what we thought. Y.C. To used pieces of bamboo to make a Chinese-style calendar so we always knew the date.

THE FIRST ESCAPE

On May 28, 1964, the time had come to make our escape. Each night, the guard would climb up on the roof and sleep, often snoring loudly. It would be a big problem if he slept on the log that we had prepared to move. That night the guard took over at dusk. He laid his weapon down on top of the cell, smoked a cigarette and climbed up on the roof and reclined on the opposite side from where we had prepared the log to move. After about two or three hours, we heard him snoring, so we moved the log. I climbed out first, followed by the others. The guard was still snoring loudly. I moved to the outside fence, pulled in wide enough to squeeze through and signaled for my friends to follow. We sat motionless to see if there were any guards along the outside of the fence. There were none. We moved in a direction that would avoid military quarters and headed toward a dry streambed where the walking was much easier.

After about three or four hours, we tried to find water but couldn't find a drop. When it started to get light, we hid and rested. We tried to sleep, but it was hard because of the many small bugs that swarmed around our faces trying to get moisture from our breath. Later we heard shouts from the soldiers who were tracking us. Their voices got close and then went away. That happened several times during the day.

That night we walked west. We were very fatigued and thirsty. The

sweat was pouring out, and we had no water to replace it. We were very weak. We cut down jungle banana trees with hopes of finding water in the heart to no avail. Our travel almost came to a halt as we tried to lick dew from the leaves.

On the third day, we had to catch our urine and drink it. The smell was bad; it tasted salty. We weren't concerned about food; the lack of water was the biggest problem. On day four, all of us felt as if we had sores in our throats. We traveled a very little distance. On the fifth day, DeBruin went into convulsions. My friends were unable to bring him out of it, so I tried another method. I urinated into his mouth. It worked! He choked, got up and ran away. We had to catch and hold him until he regained his senses.

CAPTURED AGAIN

I believe the soldiers weren't far behind, because we had left a lot of tracks. Near daylight on the sixth day, we heard the sound of frogs, indicating there might be water. We increased our pace in the direction of the sound. I walked ahead and found a water pond about four yards across and knee deep. When I scooped up the water into my mouth, I saw the reflection of a person in a Laotian military outfit standing on the cliff overlooking the pond. I jumped for cover and shouted for the others to beware. It was too late. Y.C. To and DeBruin had plunged into the pond. At the same time the sound of gunfire was heard in all directions. They had us surrounded. They shouted that we would be killed if we tried to flee. We all walked out and sat down in the pond. We didn't care if they killed us or not.

After they pulled us out of the water, they handcuffed us and put nooses around our necks. We walked about two hours to a small village. They beat us incessantly along the way. They wanted to know who led the escape. After some preliminary interrogation, they tied my legs to DeBruin's and hoisted us up a tree with our heads hanging about six feet off the ground. Not satisfied, they had the villagers find a red ant nest and beat the nest over our bodies. The ants bit us all over, but that pain was nothing compared to the pain in my ankles. I passed out and came to about dusk. I saw DeBruin laying beside me with his eyes closed. Our three friends had already been taken away. That night they brought us one ear of boiled corn to eat. We ate it all, including the cob. The next morning we were herded along a trail until dark, at which time I knew that we were back at Lang Khang.

BACK AT LANG KHANG

We were put into a barbed-wire pen and learned that our friends were being held in a corrugated tin cell. Three days later we changed places. All five of us were black and blue from the beatings. After three more days, they put all of us back into the cell from which we escaped. They weren't suspicious about how we got out of the foot traps and handcuffs. They thought that they had forgotten to lock us up on the day we escaped. The guards were replaced by a new team that was a lot stricter than the other teams.

On August 22, 1964, a truck pulled up in front, and soldiers carried a cardboard box to our cell. They told us it contained

things that were sent to us by a neutral party. In the box we found a Christmas card from Frank Jahnke, our boss at Air America. There were also canned goods, soap and cigarettes. Based on the date of the Christmas card, these things had probably been held for eight months before the package got to us.

Before dawn the next day, we boarded a Russian military truck and traveled through the jungle, mountains and valleys. There were 12 soldiers guarding us. We slept in the truck that night. We continued throughout the next morning until about four in the afternoon. They marched us into the mountains to the village of Ban Pha Tang. We then walked five days to our next destination.

THE FIFTH PRISON

We were taken to a large prison built in a cave, and it contained many other prisoners. I don't know how long they had been there, but they were all skinny, weak and dirty. We were herded into a cave with water dripping down, and it was cool and stunk. The floor was stone, but they had made a raised floor of split bamboo for sleeping. We were there only three weeks and moved again across the river. From there we walked another full day. We found out from the soldiers that this prison was new, especially built for foreign prisoners. We were told that no one had been held here before.

THE SIXTH PRISON

We arrived at Ban Tham in the evening. It appeared that it was a large village, as many villagers gathered around to look at us prisoners. This prison was like some of the others and located in a mountain pass covered by large, thick trees. A stream ran by in front, and there were tall guard towers at two corners of the fence. It had been almost a year since we were captured. We still hadn't been interrogated in any official way and had no news of the outside world.

We talked about escape every day. We clearly saw that our first escape effort had derailed because of the lack of drinking water. The Laos we had seen from the airplane seemed full of rivers and streams. We knew that our next escape would be during the rainy season, when we would have plenty of drinking water. We guessed that we were being held near the vietnamese-Laotian border.

EATING DOGS

Ten days after our arrival, we saw the guards kill a dog to eat. They tied the dog on a long bamboo pole with a couple cross poles so the dog was in a spread-eagle position. It was tied tightly and could not move. It was then immersed in water for two to three minutes before being removed. The dog would then vomit the food and water from its stomach. They did this three times, until the dog vomited clear water. The dog was killed by a blow to the head and then, still tied to the bamboo, roasted over a fire. They roasted it until all the hair over its body was burnt to a crisp. After scraping off the skin, they washed the dog with water, cut off the legs and head, and slit the stomach. One of the guards tossed the four legs into our cell. There was only bleeding skin on the bones, and no one dared taste it until that evening. Each one of us, with the exception of DeBruin, picked up a leg and started to nibble it.

It was tough and had started to smell bad.

INTERROGATION

Fourteen days later we were marched back to our fifth prison and put in the same cell we had occupied before. In the morning, soldiers cut our hair for the first time in over a year, and we were allowed to bathe in the stream. The soldiers gave us Laotian military uniforms to put on. We were taken to an old house, where a big man stood. He was wearing a khaki uniform and a sun helmet and wearing a pistol around his waist. Five soldiers carrying AK rifles were behind him. He had us line up and took a few photos of us. When he finished, we were again handcuffed and taken to the porch of the house where the interrogation began. The three of us Thais were questioned first. We were asked our first names, last names and ages. They inquired about various aspects of our personal history. They asked our rank and unit. We replied we were civilians working for Air America Company. He didn't believe us and warned us not to lie, or we would be shot. He asked how we knew how to parachute from a plane if we were not soldiers. We again affirmed that we were civilians and were forced to jump from the plane when it was shot down. They began hitting us immediately. The soldiers in back of us used the stocks of their weapons to hit us from behind until our chairs fell over to the floor. They pulled us back up again and had us lay our handcuffed hands on the table. He asked me where do the Thai soldiers do their parachute training? I answered that I did not know. He grabbed the AK from one of the soldiers and slammed the stock down onto my right hand breaking the bones on the spot. My hand hurt, but I had to endure it. He yelled, "If you guys don't tell me the truth, I'm going to shoot you." When the interrogation began, he spoke Laotian, but as it progressed, he started clearly speaking Thai. He pointed the gun at my head and had me write, "The [Thai] government sent me to invade Laotian territory and to kill Laotians." I had to write this and sign my name.

The interrogator was finished with us three Thais and started on DeBruin. He interrogated DeBruin in English with a French accent. DeBruin had to endure more pain than I did and fell out of his chair many times. The last time, he passed out. They threw water on him and continued the interrogation when he regained consciousness. In the end he was forced to write a confession just like us. We were taken back to Ban Tham.

THE CRUELEST PRISON

On March 4, 1965, we were moved to Pa Kuen Prison. It was the cruelest of them all. It had swarms of mosquitoes and horseflies and was crawling with all sorts of strange insects. The jungle trees were so large that we never got any sun. Our bodies looked like we had dermatitis, and the malaria attacks were more frequent. We got only one small meal a day and were short drinking water. There were aircraft passing over 24 hours a day, and we heard bombs dropping and AAA. The Laotian soldiers were more afraid of the aircraft than anything else, and we were beaten often because of it.

MEETING DUANE MARTIN

On the morning of December 3, 1965, a squad of Laotian soldiers

brought in an American military prisoner. He was tall, slender and handsome but looked fatigued and weak—probably from severe beatings, as he had bruises and cuts around his eyes and face. He was especially glad to see Gene DeBruin, another American. He introduced himself as First Lieutenant Duane Whitney Martin, a copilot from a rescue helicopter based in Nakhorn, Thailand. He had been overseas only two months and was shot down in Laos near the Vietnamese border on September 20. Martin said he was shot down attempting a rescue of an F-5 pilot. The pilot was being hoisted through the trees, when he saw a platoon of Laotian soldiers shooting at them. The main rotor blade was hit, and the helicopter fell straight down, landing on its side. Martin was the last one to scramble out and did not see the F-5 pilot, the other helicopter pilot, the mechanic or the door gunner. He quickly ran away and hid in some bushes. The second helicopter pilot, who was supposed to provide cover fire, did so for a few moments and then flew away. Martin was quickly captured. We received the first news of the outside world in over a year from Martin. The fighting was escalating, and there was no information about a prisoner exchange. We all developed malaria and had fever and chills every day.

According to the Arlington National Cemetery website, 1st Lt. Duane W. Martin, had been aboard an HH43B “Huskie” helicopter operating about 10 miles from the border of Laos in Ha Tinh Province, North Vietnam, when the HH43B went down, and all four personnel aboard the aircraft were captured. Duane W. Martin was taken to a camp controlled by Pathet Lao. Thomas J. Curtis, William A. Robinson and Arthur N. Black were released in 1973 by the North Vietnamese, and were in the Hanoi prison system as early as 1967.

MEETING DIETER DENGLER

Navy Lieutenant Dieter Dengler was shot down February 2, 1966, while flying a mission off the carrier Ranger. He was flying an A-1E propeller-driven aircraft that the Americans called the “Spad.” Dengler had been captured for two weeks and was severely beaten up when he arrived to where we were being held.

At the end of April, we walked three days to a new prison.

Editor’s note: Italicized paragraphs that follow are edited passages from Dengler’s book, *Escape from Laos*.

Tree and plane met with a violent shudder. I came to, lying on my back about 100 feet from the crash. It was important that I put distance between myself and the aircraft. My first Pathet Lao was different than I had anticipated. He was small and had muscular calloused feet and carried a long-bladed machete. Slowly, I pulled the sleeping bag over my body for camouflage.

As I began to think about the fix I was in, I nearly panicked. Escape and survival were not unknown to me. Since boyhood in Germany, thanks to the war and its aftermath, I had learned to fend for myself. I started north using a small compass attached to my watchband. It was hot, and dehydration and mosquitoes were driving me nearly mad.

No matter which way I went, I could not get away from signs of village life. I decided to take my chances and forded a river. The water felt great, and I scooped some into my shoe, dropped in an iodine tablet and drank the yellow liquid. It was getting dark, and I was exhausted from the day and in complete despair. I fell asleep within minutes.

Daybreak came, and I moved on, coming to some deserted huts. Hunger won over caution, and I entered one and filled my pockets with what looked like potatoes and headed west. I heard the sound of a Spad and ran to an opening in the jungle and tore off my shirt and waved it frantically. Still waving my shirt, I saw two more Spads and two Jolly Green Giant helicopters heading directly toward me. At that moment, I knew I had been spotted. Spotted indeed—but by the Pathet Lao. When they saw me, I saw them.

One of them pointed in my direction, and I turned and ran at a steady pace. It was very difficult to avoid trails as I worked my way through the brush. Arriving at an intersection of several trails, I checked to make sure it was clear and started to run across the clearing. Halfway across I heard someone yelling, “Yute, Yute!” I turned my head and met the cold steel gaze of an M-1 rifle, pointed at my face.

THE EIGHTH PRISON: BAN HOU EI HET

We arrived at this prison on May 1, 1966. It was a new prison, and we were told that no one had ever been kept there before. As we walked there, we passed military installations, AAA, tanks and even large tractors that were clearing a road through jungle and tall trees.

“How long have you guys been here?” I asked. “Two and a half years for the other guys, nine months for me,” Duane [Martin] said. A guard opened their hut, and I watched the other guys come out. The fourth man appeared. He had on green trousers, worn at the knees. His beard was long and red. It was obvious that he was an American. His name was Gene DeBruin. Their clothes were old and worn, but there was something more than that. When they looked at me, I could see the years written on their faces. There was an animal look behind their slight smiles, and their sunken eyes were haunted and hungry.

The prison was a fenced area about 24 yards square, with two cells made of logs similar to our other prisons. There were three tall guard towers outside the fence, and we had a new team of guards totaling 16. We were divided into two groups, one for each cell.

Gene came over and introduced himself. As Gene and I talked, the others came over and also introduced themselves. Gene asked a lot of questions that morning. “Hey,” he asked, “Have they come out with stainless-steel razor blades yet?” I didn’t know but was sure they had. “Well, I’ll be,” he mumbled, “That’s what I wanted to invent when I got out of this hellhole.”

Each morning, the guards would take all of us at one time to the

stream, where we would dump out our waste buckets. Every three days we were allowed to bathe and wash our clothes. They didn't put us back into our cells immediately when we walked back, and we were allowed to stay within the perimeter of the prison until breakfast. Opposite the camp was a high mountain covered with a thick blanket of trees. We figured it would take about six hours to reach the top of the mountain, but we wondered if there was a way down the other side. The whole time we were at this prison we never saw any outside soldiers or villagers. The sounds of trucks eventually disappeared, and all that was left was the sound of aircraft 24 hours a day. We often saw aircraft drop flares and bombs, and the sound of gunfire filled the air. At times it felt like an earthquake.

Gene brought me his blanket. I didn't want it, since I was sure it was the only one he had, but he kept insisting, saying that Duane's was big enough to keep the two of them warm.

We started to make escape plans. Some days the guards climbed the towers and went to sleep. Sometimes they left their weapons in the tower when they came down at mealtime; all 16 guards would eat together. We tried to be on our best behavior as we waited for the rainy season to arrive. As advance preparation, we dug and loosened the bamboo fence next to one of the guard towers. We did the same in the cell. Each day we poured drinking water and urine onto the base of the largest pole until we loosened it. We put it back into the hole and covered up all traces so the guards wouldn't notice anything and waited until the end of July and the rainy season.

Gene slid over and covered the door so the guards couldn't see us, and we all took off our footlocks. What really surprised me was that they were able to get out of the handcuffs. One of the guards told us we're going to be released. I looked around the table and saw troubled looks on the guys' faces. Gene said, "All the Pathet Laos are lying bastards, and nothing they told us before ever came true, especially when it came from that little no-good son of a bitch."

THE ESCAPE PLAN

Each one of us had an escape plan that we believed was better than the others. We had to bring them all together and come up with something that was acceptable to everyone. Martin and Dengler thought we should escape at night, not taking any weapons and not harming the guards. They told us that when Americans were taken prisoner they had to try to escape; otherwise, they would be court-martialed when they obtained their freedom. I listened and thought it was funny. There was no way they would be court-martialed in either case. Later they spoke of the Geneva Convention, which stated that if they didn't harm the guards while escaping, the guards didn't have the right to kill them if recaptured. Based on our last escape, I thought we had to have the weapons. Without them we had no way to resist recapture, and the guards could track us without fear of harm. I said that if this escape did not include weapons, I wouldn't go with them; I would just wait for my own time to flee. After considerable discussion, everyone agreed with me.

My plan was to escape at about 1600 on July 31, while the guards were eating in the mess hall. We would divide into two groups, get out of the prison, obtain weapons from the tower and capture the guards while they were eating. We wouldn't harm the guards but would put them in the foot traps and handcuffs and lock them in the cells. After that we could get shoes, rice and salt to take with us as we made our way to the top of the mountain. At the top of the mountain we would split into four groups and go our separate ways. We divided up as follows: Duane Martin and Dieter Dengler, Gene DeBruin and Y.C. To, Prasit Prahmsuwan and Prasit Thane, and me (alone).

Prasit thought we should be in two groups, with at least one American in each group. Y.C. wanted us all to go together. "It'd never work Y.C.," I said. "Hell, we can't get along even here." I wanted to go with Gene and Duane, because we got along so well. Y.C. was insistent; he wanted to have an American with him.

I also recommended that each group should head west and do most of the travel in the waterways. If anyone was rescued, they could direct searchers back along the rivers and streams looking for the others. Under no circumstances should anyone go into a village; otherwise, he would be captured. It was mid-June when we agreed on the escape plan. It had begun to rain a lot, and the water in the stream was rising. One month to go.

"Listen. Do you hear it?" Duane asked. I was drowned out by the noise of the heavy pounding of the first rain. "Wow, listen to it. Wait until the monsoon season hits. It's even louder then," shouted Gene. "Come on, baby, pour, will ya?" Gene grinned from ear to ear as the rain answered his bidding.

We offered suggestions about finding food in the jungle. Ferns that grew along the waterways were edible, as were figs that could be eaten green or ripe. The easiest animals to catch and eat would be baby green frogs and tadpoles. You would have to watch out for the baby black toads, which were poisonous. It would be hard to build a fire due to the rain.

The guards brought in a mirror and wanted to shave our beards. Gene was first. [One guard] scraped his beard off with a little knife. Occasionally, Gene cried out and little red rivulets trickled down his face. Gene now looked like somebody else. His face was still sunken and white, but he looked much younger.

THE ESCAPE

The guards became more lax and careless. When we emptied our waste buckets in the morning, only five guards went with us compared to all 16 at first. Even though we all had malaria and our bodies were in bad shape, we had hope. Y.C. To was in the worst shape, probably because he was the oldest. On July 25, Y.C. caught a fever so bad that he couldn't get up to eat. We began to worry that we would have to postpone our planned July 31 escape. Y.C. had a lot of spirit and even pleaded for us to move up the escape, as he felt he might not ever escape and would die in prison. We agreed to move it up to July 28.

The escape plan had to be changed at the last minute because of Y.C.'s illness. He could barely move his legs. Prasit said that taking him along with them would be suicide. No one said anything, but I knew Prasit was right. Finally Gene spoke up in anger: "Y.C., you're going with me! Don't listen to that damned Prasit. Prasit, you go to hell!"

"No," Y.C. said quietly. "Thanks but no thanks. He's right. You'll never make it out with me along."

"The hell! We'll make it. Anyway your legs might get better."

"By tomorrow? You don't believe that," Y.C. told Gene.

Then Y.C. very calmly said, "Gene, if you mean it, we'll go together." As Y.C. spoke, he watched Gene's eyes for a rebuff. Gene said, "You bet!"

On the morning of July 28, Y.C. was better and said he was ready.

The three Thais were better adapted to survive in the jungle than we were. Prasit had been a paratrooper in Malaysia, and he really knew the jungle well. With the added burden of Y.C., we three Americans were now at a real disadvantage. I waited until the three of us were alone to bring up the topic again.

"Gene, we just can't do it," I told him. He remained silent.

"Leave him be, Dieter," Duane said.

"Nah, he's right," Gene said, "So we don't go with the two of you."

"Don't be a fool. We want you with us," I said.

"And I want Y.C." Gene's determination was unwavering. Though the darkness hid his face from me, I could tell that he was worried but also dead set on his plan.

"Listen, you guys," he said, "Y.C. and I will go together, and after we make it over one ridge, we'll lie in wait for air contact. If you guys make it out before us, be sure someone looks for us." For a while all three of us remained silent.

After breakfast, we immediately began the escape plan. We rested and prepared ourselves mentally and at the appointed time heard the okay from Gene DeBruin. Dengler, Martin, Prasit and I got out first. Dengler climbed the tower and passed an M-1 rifle down to me, taking one for himself. Martin climbed up and grabbed a Chinese-made rifle with a bayonet. Prasit opened the cell for the others.

THE PLAN BACKFIRES

I ran toward the guards who were eating in the mess hall. I yelled at them in Laotian, "Stop! Don't move!" They froze for a few seconds, but then one of them reached out to grab his carbine, and then some of the others started to run. I had to shoot the

one who went for his rifle and then those who ran. Dengler and Martin appeared from the back and provided supporting fire. Our plan had not worked! We thought that they would be afraid to run when we threatened them, but the opposite happened. We tried not to let anyone escape and killed three of them, but the rest ran away. After taking knives and shoes from the guards, we waded the stream and ran up the mountain. After about an hour, we looked back and could not see any activity at the prison. When we split up, I stayed on the top of the high mountain.

Duane and I kept running. We heard the sound of someone coming to our left and ducked into the bush and froze. The familiar red head appeared, and there were Gene and Y.C. We started to move off together, but Y.C. held us back. Then Duane ran on ahead, while I stopped and took hold of Gene's hand.

"Go on, go on," he said. "See you in the States." I looked into Gene's face and got all choked up. I tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come. I pumped his hand, began running, then stopped and waved at him and Y.C.

NOW WHAT?

The next morning, I hurried alone down the trail on the back side of the mountain. I reached a stream at the base of the mountain by about 1200 hours. The stream was in very dense jungle, which is what I wanted. My plan was to float downstream at night and rest during the day. I wanted to avoid leaving tracks and put as much distance between me and the prison as possible. I was wearing a pair of torn jeans with no shirt and had sandals taken from one of the guards. I had also taken an M-1, a knife, some salt tablets and 24 rounds.

The first night I did not want to make any sounds constructing a raft, so I decided to grab a clump of bamboo and float downstream. The water was very cold, but I had to endure it. The advantage of floating was that I could travel fast without leaving any tracks. I could also save my strength. The big disadvantage was that the streams went by villages. I had to be very aware of crowing roosters and barking dogs, because that meant the presence of a village. The soldiers always kept a fire going when they camped near a stream. I floated until about 0400, when I heard the squawk of a chicken. Then I climbed onto the bank and into the dense bush and fell asleep. I woke up about noon.

TROUBLE ON THE FOURTH NIGHT

My drifting went well until the fourth night. I was hugging a log and heard numerous voices and could see a campfire in the distance. I let the log go and quietly climbed out on the opposite bank. The next day I walked slowly through the jungle and bypassed the place where I had heard the voices the night before. It was difficult to get my bearings as the jungle was so dense that I could not see the sun at times. I walked throughout the day and tried to rest that night. I couldn't sleep. Mosquitoes and leeches were all over the place, and I had chills and fever from the malaria.

I started walking again the next morning, looking for vegetables

and grass to eat. There was plenty of water, and pools filled with tadpoles. I ate tadpoles every day. I would scoop them up in my hands and let them swim down my throat. They were easy to find, easy to eat and were not poisonous. Salt became very important as the body loses it through perspiration. If the body doesn't get salt, one becomes very weak and begins to shake.

TRAVELING IN A CIRCLE

Traveling was extremely slow. It was raining all day. I couldn't see the sun and didn't know which way was west. I walked on guesswork and gut feeling. Finally I decided that travel was useless and looked for a good place to spend the night. I saw a large tree and headed for it. When I got there I realized it was the same place where I had spent the night before. I had wasted a whole day traveling in a circle! My body and soul were weak, and I admit that I cried and was very disheartened. I had the feeling that my life was going to end. I thought about my father, mother, brothers and sisters. My father used to travel through the jungle alone just like I was doing now. During World War II, he was a member of the Free Thais and had walked from South China through Laos to North Thailand all by himself. I never believed in fate. I never asked for help from the supernatural. I would help myself.

I pushed the brush aside and looked across the creek. Several abandoned huts sat in a clearing, and something about them rang a bell in the back of my memory. I knew we had been here two days before. Heartsickness and despair overcame me, and I wanted to hide the truth from Duane.

I fell asleep. When I woke up I was covered with leeches and spent considerable time pulling them off. They left sores that continued to bleed, and my body was completely red. Regardless, I started walking and came to another stream. I found a large log and waited until night before floating downstream. As before, I got out of the water when I heard a chicken. I rested during the days and traveled at night. Sometimes there was a village, and I would travel around it in the jungle rather than try to float by it. I traveled like that for three weeks.

Duane's malaria grew steadily worse. "Go on, leave me alone. I want to die by myself," Duane rasped. "Dieter, I'm going down to the village to get some food."

"That's a sure way to get killed," I told him.

"I'm going Dieter."

The trail turned left and suddenly a little boy was standing a few feet away. Seconds later, somebody yelled 'Americali,' and a villager appeared before us clutching a long machete over his head. I was on my knees, and Duane was also kneeling—holding his prayer-folded hands toward the man. The villager slashed at Duane's leg, the blade disappearing just below the groin. The next blow buried the blade deep into Duane's neck, and he fell forward.

The villager was swinging the machete at me, and I ducked and ran back down the trail and hid in the brush as five villagers ran

past me on the trail.

I figured that I had put considerable distance between me and the prison camp. My strength was gone, and all that was left was skin hanging on bones. The rifle and knife were a burden to carry, and I had run out of salt tablets. There were more villages, so it was harder to travel by water. I also felt that I could no longer take the hours in the cold water anymore. Many times I got so cold and cramped that I thought I would drown. I also heard gunfire at times and thought that I had gotten close to Laotian Rightist territory. If I had a map and compass, I would surely have completed my escape, but now I didn't know where I was. What was certain was that I was a long way away from the Ban Houei Het prison camp!

DAY 22 OF THE ESCAPE

It was almost impossible to determine direction, and I decided to find the best possible hiding place and rest for an extended period of time. I headed into the jungle toward the base of a nearby mountain, where I found a dry spot protected by a rocky overhang. There were banana trees to make a shelter with, and I was able to rest 24 hours without worrying about anything. When I started to walk the next day, the terrain started to change as the jungle thinned out, and there were more plains and groves. I had to stick to the mountains, as I would be easily seen if I walked through the open areas. The best place to travel was through the mountain passes, as there were food sources and water to be found.

I waited all day, but not a single plane flew over. I wondered if it was a Sunday or national holiday and if all the pilots were off work. I decided I would not take another step and would just lie in the jungle and die of starvation. The next morning I was no longer resigned to death.

The malaria hit me every day. My body was in terrible shape, full of scratches and sores. My feet were swollen to the point where I could hardly walk. The rifle and knife were so heavy I almost threw them away. My pants were now a mere loincloth. In short, I was a walking corpse.

They were all armed and were Viet Cong, not villagers. I could tell they were excellent trackers, because they were following my path exactly—even though it had been days since I had been there. I had lost my fear, and it was strange and interesting to watch my trackers track me.

On day 23, a slip sent me tumbling into the shallow river, and I cracked my head against a boulder. In a bowl-shaped depression, I saw a coiled, brilliantly colored snake. Not caring if it was poisonous or not, I snatched the snake and, as it coiled around my arm, stretched it out. I took the head in one hand and the tail in the other and bit it in half. The long brown liver hung from the body, and I began to eat it and kept eating it until half the snake was gone.

The noise I heard was a plane, and I realized that it was a Spad. I jumped from one boulder to another signaling the plane. A second

Spad was now circling. First I could hear them, and then I saw two helicopters. A shot echoed down the canyon, and I knew it was a race between the choppers and the Viet Cong.

The tree-penetrator slowly descended, and I again heard shots echo in the canyon. I was woozy and distant and finally pulled down one of the penetrator's three arms and sat across it. I held on with a death grip, and when I opened my eyes, a huge man was towering over me in the doorway of the helicopter. I grabbed his leg and hugged it, refusing to let go, afraid that he might go away.

DAY 26 OF THE ESCAPE: SOLDIERS

Late in the morning of the 26th day of my escape, I heard numerous voices and people walking toward where I was hiding. There were seven of them, and they were wearing pale khaki Vietnamese Army uniforms and carrying AK rifles. They chatted continuously as they walked. I could practically hear my heart beating. They were only about 10 yards away when they turned to the right and headed away. When they were out of sight, I started walking again in an attempt to put distance between myself and them.

DAY 27 OF THE ESCAPE: JETS

When I came out of the mountains on the morning of day 27, I saw a broad cornfield. Since I could not walk through it, I had to climb slowly through the mountains that surrounded it. I would climb for 10 minutes and rest for 20 minutes, because I was so extremely tired. I spent the night at the crest of the mountains in the rain and cold. Late that night, I heard the sound of vehicles and saw trucks traveling the ridgeline. The engines stopped, and the lights went out. About a minute later, jet aircraft approached, and I heard the sound of the explosion of rockets and saw the flashes of AAA and machine guns firing back. After about five minutes, the aircraft left, and everything got quiet. Then the engines started, the lights came on and they continued to drive off in convoy style. I began to worry about getting across that road, as there would be a lot of soldiers on a supply route like this one.

DAY 28 OF THE ESCAPE: MORE JETS

On day 28, I awoke and discovered that the road ran along the base of the mountain and would be blocking the path of escape. I had heard a lot of gunfire near the road the night before, so I knew there were soldiers in that area. I retraced my path to the edge of the cornfield, where I spent the night. During that night, a large aircraft dropped numerous flares, lighting up the whole area. Soon the jet aircraft appeared and began strafing like the night before.

DAY 29 OF THE ESCAPE: CLOSE TO DEATH

On the 29th day, I headed back through the mountain pass that I had come through on day 27. I tried to stay parallel to the road, skirting along the edge of the jungle. I came down with the fever again. My eyesight was blurred, my ears rang and I was so weak I couldn't stand and could only crawl. The rifle and knife were even heavier. I was confused and feeling close to death. I was able to move very little on the 30th and 31st days.

DAY 32 OF THE ESCAPE: I COULDN'T GET UP

I felt better on the 32nd day than I had the previous three days. The fever was finally gone. I reached the edge of the road before the sun came up. After watching for a fair length of time, I crossed the road and headed for the jungle and another mountain. I came across fresh footprints and tire tracks and tried to move quickly away from that area. It was still before noon. I remember falling and trying to get up but not being able to move. The ground, sky and jungle were spinning. I don't remember what happened next.

CAPTURED AGAIN

When I came to, I was sitting on the floor of a house with my hands and legs tied around a post. The house was filled with Laotian Communist soldiers and villagers. One of the soldiers said, "Why is this little dog so hard to kill?" An older man brought me some water, and the soldiers didn't say anything. I was no doubt a long way from the prison I had escaped from, and they did not know who I was or where I had been. I learned that I had been found by a female villager who was cutting bamboo sprouts. The villagers had carried me back to the village and informed the soldiers.

THE KIND OLD MAN

Late that morning, the same old man brought me some hot rice gruel with salt along with a cup of boiled water and tree bark. It was the first hot drink that I'd had in two years! I got chills and fever again, and the old man asked the soldiers to untie my hands so that I could lie down. They did what he said. He then covered me with an old rice sack and I slept until dark. When I awoke I was given a large amount of sticky rice with peppers and a cup of boiled bark water. I vomited and defecated until there was nothing left, probably because I hadn't had much to eat in the last 30 days, and my body wouldn't accept it. I drank some more of the astringent bark water and fell asleep until morning. The old man brought me more food, and this time everything was normal. I then slept for 24 hours. A new group of soldiers replaced the ones who were originally at the house, and I saw the leader go over and talk to the kind old man. The soldier called him "Phor Taseng" (a term of respect for the Administrative Zone Chief). I would probably have reached my time to die if I had not met someone so kind as this old man.

The next day, as the soldiers were preparing me to travel, I prostrated myself at the feet of the old man in thanks. He rubbed my head and gave me this advice, "Don't complain, don't try to escape. Just endure, and you won't die."

YET ANOTHER PRISON

We traveled for three days until we reached the headquarters of a large military unit, sheltered in a cave below a large mountain. From there I was taken to another large mountain, which contained a large prison constructed in a cave. Within the cave I was put into a cell made of clay, near the cave's mouth. The floor was split bamboo, about 20 inches above the ground. I was put into foot traps and stayed there for three months without being interrogated. There was no opportunity to speak to anyone else, and all I could do was glance at the other prisoners as they were let out to work each day. I would catch the fever twice a day.

All of the prisoners were Laotians, and two of them were Laotian Rightist officers who had been captured when their unit had been overrun in Savannakhet. They had been here a year and were allowed to work outside. When they found out that I was a Thai, they were very nice to me. They would sneak me leafy vegetables or fruit and medicinal vines for my malaria. The vines also helped keep away the fleas and ticks.

At the beginning of the fourth month, a Laotian Rightist battalion commander was put into my cell. He had been beaten severely and just laid there moaning. When the guards unlocked the foot traps the next morning, he was dead. My feelings were hardened, and I prepared myself to die. I told myself that I would not die in prison. I would take a gun away from a guard, even though I would be shot in the process. All I wanted was a chance to shoot some of them as well.

DIGGING OUT

At every chance, I started to dig my way out of the cell. I had been put in this prison in September 1966, and by October 1966, the hole I was digging was ready for escape. I needed to find a way to speak with the prisoners in the large prison in order to find out the trails outside the prison camp. The two officer-prisoners still chatted with me and brought me a piece of parachute cord and taught me how to make a fish net. One of the officers sold the net in the village and bought me a piece of cloth with which to make a pair of pants. The cloth was purchased from a communist soldier and was canvas that had been used to cover a tank. My health had improved, and my fever was down to once a day. Maybe the medicinal vines really helped me. My spirits were good, but the condition of my body was a different story. At the time we were shot down in 1963 I weighed about 150 pounds. Now I was lucky to be 90 pounds. But no matter what, I was going to trade everything, even my life, to get free.

I found out that most of the soldiers had moved north and that most of the villagers had fled into the jungle, because they feared the aircraft. For the whole year that I had been at this prison, aircraft had come to drop bombs and strafe every day, several times a day. This also resulted in beatings from the Laotian soldiers, as they would take their anger out on me. During a nighttime air attack, I would crawl out through the hole that I had dug and travel west to an area where there were both Laotian Leftist (Communist) and Rightist forces fighting.

RESCUE

On January 9, 1967, at 0400, aircraft circled and dropped illumination flares and bombs not far from the prison. A few minutes later, I heard the sounds of automatic weapons and light machine guns. I quickly undid the foot traps and handcuffs. Next I heard the sounds of feet racing toward the gate and the order to break the locks and release the prisoners. Someone yelled, "Which cell are the foreign prisoners in?" The cell door was opened, and someone ordered the prisoners to follow him. We ran about a half hour and crossed a wide stream, traversed a hill and moved onto a flat barren plain. We had reached Route 12. I was given a green

army shirt that was still wet with blood and had a bullet hole on the right side. We ran along the road for a long time until we got into the mountains, where the leader of the group set up a radio and immediately sent a signal. I was dead tired, and my feet were bleeding.

It was just starting to get light, and we could look out over the wide plain and see the Communist forces following us. Just then, four Phantom Jets showed up and opened fire on our pursuers and then left. When the jets left, four T-28s showed up and continued to strafe and bomb.

Our rescue group was led by a non-commissioned officer named Sergeant Tae. He said that he was the leader of a Cobra team of Laotian Rightists from Savannakhet. The sergeant had orders to attack the prison and rescue the prisoners. In all, there were 53 of us prisoners. I was the only foreigner (Thai) in the group. The others were villagers and Laotian Rightist soldiers, including the two Laotian Rightist officers who had befriended me. Twenty two people asked to go off on their own, as they had families in the area.

Sergeant Tae gave me a pair of sandals and some rice crisps and then ordered the remaining 31 of us to move out. He ran us part of the time and walked us part of the time. He sent out point men and set rear guards in a professional manner. His team knew the routes well. I learned later that two members of his team were from this area. We continued to travel until almost 1700 hours, when Sergeant Tae sent out another radio message, and helicopters approached and passed over us. After about 15 more minutes of travel, we arrived at a wide, rocky field and saw two helicopters and a platoon of Laotian Rightist soldiers.

The pilot was an American and asked, "Who works for Air America?" I introduced myself, and he shook my hand. He said his name was Jerry McEntee, and he was an Air America pilot from Udorn. I accompanied the soldiers who attacked the prison onto the first helicopter and took off at about 1730. There were 14 people total, including the two pilots and mechanic. The mechanic, who was Filipino, walked over to me and gave me a cigarette. I smoked, wondering if this was a dream. Was I really saved and not dreaming?

Twenty minutes later, the copilot told me that the remaining soldiers and prisoners had been overrun by the pursuing forces. I just cried and let the tears flow.

THEY WERE SHOCKED WHEN THEY SAW ME

When we arrived at Savannakhet, I was picked up by two Americans in a vehicle. I recognized one of them as Tom Fosmire, who was my radio instructor with Air America. They took me to the Laotian Rightist headquarters, where I received medical treatment. Among the soldiers were two of my friends from childhood. They were shocked when they saw me. I got a bath and new clothing to wear. After dinner and a debriefing, I went to bed but couldn't sleep. I still believed that this might not be true and that I was just dreaming. On January 12, I was flown to Udorn and spent the

night at the Air America Company. Later, I flew to Bangkok and was treated at the Bangkok Christian Hospital.

After Pisidhi Indradat's rescue in 1967, he returned to work at Air America, where he was the assistant manager of Security Operations until 1974. With the U.S. withdrawal and the fall of Indochina in 1975, Air America shut down operations. After that, Pisidhi worked for a Thai company in Bangkok and is currently retired in Bangkok.

After returning to the United States, Dieter Dengler was sent to the U.S. Navy Hospital in San Diego for recovery. The doctors said he was so malnourished that he was close to death when he was rescued and would probably have lasted only one more day. He weighed only 90 pounds, down from his normal 160. He also had malaria, worms, fungus and many other infections. After his release from the Navy in 1968, he went to work with TWA as a flight engineer. He retired to Sausalito, California, and died in February 2001 of ALS (commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease). Dengler wrote about his captivity and flight in the book *Escape from Laos*, which was published in 1979 by Presidio Press. A movie version of Dengler's life, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, was made by German filmmaker Werner Herzog and screened at the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1997. The movie later appeared on Cinemax and was nominated for an Emmy in 1999.

According to the Arlington National Cemetery website, nearly 600 Americans, including Duane Martin and Gene DeBruin, remain imprisoned, missing or otherwise unaccounted for in Laos. Although the U.S. maintains that only a handful of these men were POW status, over 100 were known to have survived their loss incident. The Pathet Lao stated during the war that they held "tens of tens" of American prisoners but added that they would be released only from Laos, meaning that the U.S. must negotiate directly with the Pathet Lao. Because the Pathet Lao was not part of the agreements that ended American involvement in Southeast Asia, no negotiations have ever been conducted with Pathet Lao for the prisoners it held.

Y.C. To, Prasit Prahmsuwan and Prasit Thanee are still missing.