



Timothy N. Castle. *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xiv + 371 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10316-9.



Reviewed by David Eyman (History Department, Skidmore College)

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A Mystery Out of Laos

During the Vietnam War the United States was loathe to admit to the presence of U.S. military personnel in Laos. Although air operations were conducted under the code names of Barrel Roll in northern Laos and Steel Tiger in southern Laos, these missions were directed largely at interdiction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Other U.S. military-related activities did occur in Laos during the war, of course. The geographic proximity of that country to North Vietnam was too good an opportunity for the American military to pass up. Timothy Castle has provided in this book a detailed look at one such operation in Laos: a program code-named “Heavy Green,” radar bombing operations at Site 85, located on a mountain near the North Vietnam border.

Castle has more than a passing interest in this topic. He served two tours in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, flying over Laos on thirty-eight combat support missions. He has taught at the Air War and Command and Staff Colleges at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. In the 1990s, he has traveled to Laos frequently in his capacity as a senior Department of Defense POW/MIA investigator for Laos and as a consultant for

NBC News.

The increasing air activity over Laos in the mid-1960s brought a concomitant requirement for improved navigational aids. The absence of such aids was a limiting factor in air operations, especially the Rolling Thunder bombing operations over North Vietnam. The first approach to this problem for the United States was to obtain permission from the Royal Lao government to install TACAN stations, useful for range and bearing information. The first such TACAN site was installed in April 1966. TACAN operations were an improvement, but still insufficient to meet the desires of the U.S. military. A better solution would be the installation of a ground-directed radar bombing system, such as the MSQ-77. But the installation of such an obviously offensive radar system in a “neutral” country carried with it a variety of sensitive issues. Over the objections of U.S. Ambassador William Sullivan, the White House decided to install a bombing radar at Site 85.

The bombing radar operation in Laos, code-named Heavy Green and using a specially-developed mobile radar system designated TSQ-81, began to come together

in early 1967. Qualified Air Force technicians were chosen to operate the site. To maintain the fiction that they were not military personnel, these technicians were released from the USAF and employed by Lockheed. Castle deals with this arrangement in great detail, using it as the basis for an argument that the U.S. government treated these personnel and their dependents poorly.

The radar was installed during the summer of 1967 and, late in October, the new “Lockheed employees” arrived to begin operations. Did it perform as advertised? Analysis of the results for Rolling Thunder is difficult. As Castle notes, “The answer is complex: some details are still available only in classified government documents, so the complete truth may never be known.” (p. 62)

The presence of the TSQ-81, and of TACAN installations in a variety of locations in Laos drew the attention of the North Vietnamese. In January of 1968, four North Vietnamese Air Force biplanes conducted bombing and strafing passes on Site 85, but did not destroy the operation. Understandably, questions were asked then about terminating Heavy Green and extracting personnel. Using the argument that evacuation could be done quickly, the operation continued. In March, North Vietnamese ground forces attacked the site, overrunning it and killing some of the technicians. The CIA, responsible for support for the radar sites in Laos, ordered the evacuation of all personnel by Air America helicopters, but only managed to extract five technicians. Fearful that the North Vietnamese would find the highly technical equipment useful, the USAF then bombed the site itself.

The questions which the author raises are intriguing, especially in the face of a continuing North Vietnamese denial of its participation in the attack on Site 85: What happened to the equipment? What happened to the USAF/“Lockheed” personnel not extracted from Site 85? Did any of those personnel survive the combined North Vietnamese/USAF attacks to be taken prisoner? And, in the question that gives the title to the book, knowing the North Vietnamese buildup was taking place, why did authorities wait “one day too long” for the evacuation of Site 85?

The tone of this book changes somewhat abruptly

slightly more than half-way through when Castle shifts from a reasonably objective account of the Heavy Green operation to a description of bureaucracies—United States, Laos, and Vietnam—fumbling away opportunities to answer the questions about the disposition of the equipment from Site 85 and the whereabouts of the remains of the technicians who were left there. At this point, Castle inserts himself into the book, listing his frustrations with inappropriate procedures and even recounting the adventures of an NBC news team of which he was a part as it managed to revisit Site 85 in 1994. Yet that visit, and a subsequent visit to Hanoi, did nothing to answer the questions about equipment and missing personnel.

One Day Too Long is, in essence, a mystery story in which the crime is not resolved to anyone’s satisfaction. Castle has done his research well, amassing an impressive array of facts about the Heavy Green operation from interviews, correspondence, and a variety of secondary sources. But, in the end, he has to admit failure in uncovering the fate of the missing equipment and technicians. The reader, moved along in the futile hope that the mystery will be solved momentarily, grows nearly as frustrated as the author. But it is not to be. Castle points his finger in what he considers the appropriate direction when he writes, “There is no pleasure in recounting the story of Site 85 . . . It is understating the obvious to say this is a case where the American public has not been well served by its government.” (p. 256)

This book is an interesting glimpse into one of the United States’ secret operations during the Vietnam War. It is well worth reading for anyone interested in operations in Laos or in the efforts of the U.S. government to cloak one of its somewhat-less-than-legal activities during this trying time.

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Charles W. Sanders, Jr. Book Review Editor, H-War
Kansas State University <hwarbook@ksu.edu>

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