

UNCLASSIFIED

PART II:

The Quiet War, 1964-1968 (U)

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Chapter VI

Into the Shadow of Vietnam (U)

● In July 1964, the Defense Department began looking into ways of interdicting communist infiltration routes and facilities in the Laotian panhandle. This step was taken to sustain South Vietnamese morale and divert the Saigon government's attention from proposals to bomb North Vietnam with VNAF aircraft. On July 26, Defense proposed that single-seat VNAF A-1Hs or USAF two-seat A-1Es with American/VNAF pilots attack several military camps, barracks, and antiaircraft sites identified as potential targets. Twenty sorties a day would be scheduled from early August on, with conventional ordnance carried if napalm was politically unacceptable. The entire operation was to be justified on the grounds that North Vietnamese infiltration through the Laotian panhandle violated the Geneva accords.¹

● From the start, Ambassador Unger disliked the proposal because it held little political or military benefit for Laos. The general feeling of Souvanna and his countrymen was that infiltration via the corridor was not their problem, even though it involved their country. The Royal Laotian Government's interest centered in northern Laos—the heart of the country—and the corridor was not essential to its defense. The Laotians viewed attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail as another instance of their country being dragged into a struggle between the big powers over a matter outside its prime concern. Unger thought that Souvanna would probably see the air strikes as endangering rather than enhancing his political position. More important, like the French, he believed the United States was fighting an unwinnable war in South Vietnam. If the administration wanted to up the ante, Unger thought Souvanna would applaud the interdiction of Route 7, open support for Operation Triangle, help in retaking the Plain of Jars, and he might even suggest U.S. air power hit Hanoi—the root of the problem.²

● Additionally, Unger saw American napalm policy as contradictory. In the past, Washington had shied away from using the ordnance because of international repercussions or the risk of escalation. In fact, on instructions from Bundy, Unger had turned down Souvanna's request to drop napalm at Phou Kout. Although the ambassador had no quarrel with this decision, he called attention to Defense's proposal to employ it in the corridor but not in an area Souvanna considered vital.³

● Unger was also worried that the trail strikes would harm Washington's long-range political objectives in Laos, and end forever the facade of American support for the Geneva accords. However, he admitted the United States would not be alone, since there were no signs the Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese were willing to live by the accords either. The administration had hoped the careful application of stronger military measures would stop nibbling, but it obviously had not. If bombing the trail failed to halt infiltration, Unger wondered if the next step would be the introduction of American ground troops. He concluded by pointing out that Souvanna's permission for the Air Force and VNAF to attack these targets would be given only on condition he received adequate support for northern Laos in return.⁴

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1. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 89, Jul 26, 1964.
 2. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170, Jul 27, 1964.
 3. ● *Ibid.*
 4. ● *Ibid.*

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By mid-August, corridor planning had progressed to the point that a coordination meeting was needed between the three Southeast Asia ambassadors, their staffs, and appropriate military commanders.⁵ The conference convened at Udom on August 18. The revised plan replaced the VNAF A-1s with RLAF T-28s because an enthusiastic Thao Ma had privately assured Gen. William C. Westmoreland, USA, the new COMUSMACV, that his pilots could hit the twenty targets selected. The RLAF air chief figured it would take ten days using the ten Savannakhet-based T-28s. However, the conferees were concerned that some of the targets were too well protected by antiaircraft guns for a T-28 to successfully attack. Unger and Tyrrell agreed to go over the list and sort out those they thought Thao Ma's pilots could handle. The rest would be held back for Yankee Team "to eliminate during armed reconnaissance missions."⁶

MACV's list swelled to forty targets in a little over two weeks, but the country team believed the RLAF could manage all forty since they presented less risk than those in northern Laos. The strikes would take twice as long, however, for Unger had ruled out [redacted] pilots, asserting they were vital to northern Laos and could not be spared. Since political considerations outweighed the tactical value, he also ruled out Yankee Team.⁷

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Another meeting in Saigon on September 11 firmed up the corridor air plan. First, the conferees whittled back the list to twenty-two targets. Next, they suggested a series of sharp, heavy attacks by VNAF/Farm Gate aircraft to inflict maximum damage and to prevent the Pathet Lao/NVA from dispersing. However, if the goal of these air attacks was psychological, they could be spaced over several weeks and split between the RLAF T-28s and Yankee Team. The latter would go after the hardest targets—five bridges—under the "suppressive fire" cover since all five had antiaircraft sites within ten to fifteen miles. The remaining seventeen were delegated to the RLAF. Because Ambassador Unger favored the psychological objective, the conference estimated that 188 T-28 and 80 USAF Yankee Team sorties over twelve days would be needed. Napalm would not be dropped.⁸

Unger was not enthusiastic about using USAF planes on the trail but, after listening to Tyrrell and other airmen, changed his mind. He likewise concurred in the MACV list but said the projected sortie level was too high. For example, twenty-five aircraft against a single bridge did not fit the category of a "suppressive strike." Such a mission would merely frighten the Laotians and could jeopardize the entire Yankee Team concept. A sustained, widespread harassment over a longer period would do more to keep the enemy off-balance than a quick, large-scale destruction of a few military strongpoints. Unger felt that Souvanna did not have to be told Yankee Team was now a strike operation, if the number of planes stayed at the present level. He thought a flight of four "escorts" could readily be passed off as a "suppressive strike."⁹

After reviewing the MACV target list, the State and Defense Departments instructed Unger to seek Souvanna's permission for the corridor strikes, using primarily the RLAF T-28s. As the operation unfolded, Yankee Team would be brought in to hit the more difficult and lucrative targets.¹⁰

5. Vientiane was represented by Unger, Tyrrell, Law, and [redacted] Martin, Easterbrook, McCoskrie, and the embassy political counselor flew up from Bangkok. U. Alexis Johnson, William H. Sullivan, [redacted] and General Westmoreland.

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6. Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 485, Aug 20, 1964.

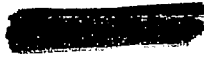
7. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 423, Sep 7, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 197, Aug 29, 1964.

8. Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 913, Sep 19, 1964.

9. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 448, Sep 13, 1964, 486, Sep 22, 1964.

10. Memo, Benjamin H. Read, Exec Secy, Dept of State, to McGeorge Bundy, White House, subj: Laos Situation, Sep 18, 1964; msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 275, Sep 25, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 524, Sep 29, 1964.

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Into the Shadow of Vietnam

Unger met with Souvanna on September 29 and discussed the planned corridor strikes with Thao Ma's T-28s. The Prime minister wanted to interdict Route 7 in lieu of hitting the trail. He feared the Pathet Lao would kick off a major offensive against Kong Le at Muong Soui once the roads dried. Unger explained that the panhandle program would not draw sorties away from the north, [redacted] If more sorties were needed to protect Kong Le, he would furnish them. Besides, the ambassador added, the North Vietnamese had been using the trail too long in violation of the Geneva accords. It was time they learned they could no longer do this with impunity. Souvanna acceded, but he stipulated that every target must be cleared by the FAR General Staff and that care be taken to avoid civilian areas. Unger assented but did not mention USAF Yankee Team participation because he considered "suppressive action in [the] course of such strikes a matter on which we already have Souvanna's concurrence."¹¹

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The T-28 fleet available numbered thirty-three. Ten were usually based at Savannakhet under Thao Ma's control,¹² but they often were shuttled to Wattay for strikes in northern Laos. The remainder (twenty T-28s and three RT-28s) [redacted] were used for special air warfare training [redacted] At this point, Thao Ma said he would need fifteen T-28s for the corridor instead of ten. The balance could come only from the [redacted] pool; but with three T-28s down for maintenance, the air operations center had just fifteen planes to schedule each day. Since he had promised Souvanna more sorties in the north if called for, Unger asked General Moore for all T-28s above VNAF needs. Despite their severe G-force limits that barred such combat maneuvers as dive bombing, he would accept RT-28s and exchange them for Water Pump's attack models.¹³

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Secretary McNamara had earlier been told of the worldwide T-28 shortage. On August 14, he ordered the Air Force to take twenty of the trainers out of storage and convert them to fighters at a cost of \$169,000 each. Eight days later, President Johnson decided to give Military Assistance Program, Laos, ten of these planes and give Air America five more H-34s for the search and rescue force. However, none of these planes would be ready until early in 1965, and Unger's T-28 request had to be weighed by Washington against other priorities. Inevitable delays ensued.¹⁴

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The T-28s were not the ambassador's sole concern. Souvanna was still afraid the Pathet Lao would attack Kong Le at any moment. The keys to a communist offensive were the supplies they had on hand and their capability to replenish those supplies; and to allay the prime minister's fears, Unger now pressed Washington to permit USAF F-100s and F-105s to attack targets in northern Laos, mainly along Route 7. The Ban Ken bridge, where Route 7 crossed the Mat River at the eastern end of the Ban Ban Valley was picked as an ideal bottleneck target. Unger knew that committing USAF jets would deepen American military involvement and run a higher political risk. Just the same, he strongly hinted that the United States was obliged to make this strike since Souvanna had approved the corridor assaults.¹⁵

President Johnson then upset corridor air planning: even though he wanted the panhandle strikes started as soon as possible, Johnson disapproved Yankee Team participation in either a

11. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 524, Sep 29, 1964, 531, Sep 29, 1964.
12. [redacted] Thao Ma's T-28s were composed of the six given the RLAf by Chadbourn between July and August 1963 and the four "on loan" from Water Pump since May 18, 1964 (not part of the RLAf T-28 inventory).
13. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 550, Oct 1, 1964, AIRA Bangkok to 2d AD, C-0113, 240330Z Sep 64.
14. [redacted] Msgs, ASD/ISA to CINCPAC, 260015Z Sep 64, CINCPAC to ASD/ISA, 030446Z Oct 64; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Helicopter Requirements in Laos, Sep 12, 1964.
15. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 550, Oct 1, 1964.



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suppressive or air cover role. With no firm evidence that Hanoi was planning new attacks on Kong Le, the President held back USAF jet operations against Route 7 or the Ban Ken bridge. On October 7, the State Department told Unger that American participation would be limited to escorted photo-reconnaissance missions.¹⁶

By coincidence, the Coordinating Committee for United States Missions Southeast Asia (SEACORD) held its first organizing session the day after Unger received his instructions from Washington. This group was the brainchild of General Taylor, former U.S. Army chief of staff and American Ambassador to Vietnam since July. In mid-September, Taylor concluded that the conflicts in Laos and South Vietnam could no longer be kept separate; they were both part of a larger Southeast Asia war. He thought a council of high U.S. civil and military authorities, including the CIA and CINCPAC, should regularly gather to discuss and iron out problems the country team would soon be facing. In addition, the committee would suggest to Washington possible U.S. courses of action in Southeast Asia. Strongly backed by Ambassadors Unger and Martin, SEACORD was approved on October 7, 1964.¹⁷

Within SEACORD the opinion was unanimous: the corridor strikes could have the desired political and psychological effect only if the United States joined in. Washington had pushed for this operation, and backing out now would strain its relations with Laos. Moreover, if the Laotians had to go it alone, this could well be the end to the air program. Unger was aware that Thao Ma's early, bubbling support would turn to deep gloom once the RLAF suffered a few losses. More important, if Yankee Team did not join in, the vital infiltration targets would go untouched. The committee was also puzzled over President Johnson's withholding USAF fighter cover for the T-28s, even though the rules of engagement let U.S. planes intercept communist MiGs over Laos. Accordingly, SEACORD asked the President to lift his restrictions on American involvement.¹⁸

The Joint Chiefs, Admiral Sharp, and General Westmoreland championed these views. Nevertheless, President Johnson agreed only to the MiG combat air patrol and emphasized that the combat air patrol would not suppress or retaliate against ground fire unless assisting in search and rescue. At the same time, Unger was informed that Yankee Team corridor strikes were still included in the overall planning and that approval would soon be granted [after the upcoming election?]. In the interim, American operations were confined to photo reconnaissance and MiG combat air patrol.¹⁹

Starting on October 13, the RLAF worked central and southern Laos [redacted] flew from twelve to eighteen sorties a day in the north, mostly in support of MEO and FAK operations near Tha Thom. This was the only action in the region, since the anticipated enemy offensive against Kong Le at Muong Suoi had not yet begun. On October 23, [redacted] reported that, in the preceding ten days, nearly 250 westbound trucks had been counted on Route 7. The communists were plainly quickening their reinforcement and resupply of positions on the plain and at Tha Thom. Colonel Tyrrell wanted [redacted] to crater the road in carefully selected areas free of enemy anti-aircraft fire and the Meo teams to begin small minelaying forays at scattered points. The country team wanted a USAF interdiction strike on the Ban Ken bridge instead of this limited harassment, but permission was not forthcoming.²⁰

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16. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 313, Oct 7, 1964.

17. Msgs, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 870, Sep 16, 1964, 1017, Oct 2, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 478, Sep 21, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 21, Sep 21, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Saigon, 727, Sep 25, 1964, 783, Oct 7, 1964.

18. Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 1068, Oct 9, 1964.

19. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 9578, 132204Z Oct 64, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 121657Z Oct 64, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 330, Oct 13, 1964.

20. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 665, Oct 23, 1964.

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On October 27, Tyrrell received an overlay of the FAR General Staff's Operation Anniversary Victory in which the Meo planned to recapture several Pathet Lao strongholds east and south of Xieng Khouangville, relieving pressure on Tha Thom. Enemy strength was put at eight battalions—two North Vietnamese. Vang Pao had ten battalions—nine Meo and one FAR. The plan included [REDACTED] T-28 flights starting the next day, with the pilots switching operations on November 3 to Military Region II headquarters at Paksane [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] SAW ground support personnel were to shuttle from Vientiane in the same manner. To control the air strikes, the Laotians consented to furnish indigenous forward air controllers familiar with the region. Tyrrell estimated that fifteen sorties a day could be flown using the six T-28s on hand; but if the Pathet Lao attacked Kong Le at Muong Soui, the aircraft were to be diverted to assist him.²¹

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The shortage of T-28s had concerned Unger and Tyrrell earlier; and along with the trail strikes, Anniversary Victory required support. These actions, in time, stretched T-28 assets thin. In late October, thirty-one of the fighters were available. Thao Ma had thirteen at Savannakhet, but RLA maintenance was poor and the airmen were literally flying them into the ground. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] three reconnaissance models and four that belonged to Water Purification. This left eleven T-28s, three that had been grounded for some time due to a shortage of parts. Of the remaining eight T-28s, usually two or three were down for normal maintenance. This pared the number available at Vientiane to five or six. As long as this situation persisted, there was little hope of the [REDACTED] pilots cratering Route 7, much less helping to defend Muong Soui. The ambassador again appealed to Washington for more T-28s.²²

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Unger also desperately needed RT-28s. He had three, but two were continually down for maintenance and needed parts. Since the end of September, he had been staving off Admiral Sharp's and General Westmoreland's persistent requests for Yankee Team to conduct escorted reconnaissance missions in northwestern Laos. The ambassador had agreed "in principle" to Yankee Team flying above latitude 20°N, but insisted that the flights be kept east of the Ou and Heup Rivers. In other words, he had no opposition to Yankee Team flights over Samneua but he preferred RT-28s in the provinces of Phong Saly, northwest Luang Prabang, and Nam Tha. Unger was even leery of these flights because they might be construed as a "provocative new step [leading] to reprisals."²³

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On September 27, MACV drafted a long list of reconnaissance targets that included six in Nam Tha and Phong Saly Provinces, some as close as ten miles to the Chinese border. A later list specified eleven missions, one within five miles of the border. General Westmoreland had a keen interest in the progress of Chinese road construction in the northwest. In January 1962, Souvanna had allowed the Chinese to begin building a road between Mengla and Phong Saly. After the Geneva accords were signed, Phoumi Nosavan, as deputy prime minister, visited Peking and verbally approved construction of other segments. The Mengla-Phong Saly section, which actually followed a previous road, was finished in 1963. Westmoreland now wanted an update, but Unger again told the MACV commander that missions over sensitive northwest Laos should be avoided as needlessly provocative.²⁴

The State Department concurred with Unger. Yankee Team missions over the area were banned unless reliable intelligence showed suspicious communist military movements or factors

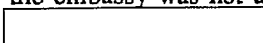
21. [REDACTED] Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-896, 290930Z Oct 1964.

22. [REDACTED] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 688, Oct 21, 1964, 698, Oct 31, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-908, 301450Z Oct 64, Det 6, 1st ACW, to 2d AD, 040400Z Nov 64.

23. [REDACTED] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 438, Sep 9, 1964, 693, Oct 31, 1964, CINCPAC to JCS, 032143Z Sep 64.

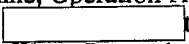
24. [REDACTED] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 553, Oct 1, 1964, 642, Oct 18, 1964, PACAF AFSSO to DIA SSO 010215Z Jul 71.

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the embassy was not aware of justified missions so close to China's border. SAC's U-2s or  (in this case, the Yao) were able to perform the task. Yet, State wanted Tyrrell to see if the RT-28s were available, suggesting the flights begin in northwest Luang Prabang and, depending on results, perhaps later extended into Phong Saly and Nam Tha Provinces. The Joint Chiefs of Staff subsequently directed Admiral Sharp to delete all Yankee Team above latitude 20°N from the schedule. MACV was told to draw up an RT-28 schedule for the northwest, but Unger had but one flyable RT-28—he needed more and quickly.²⁵

Unknown to Unger, McNamara had approved the transfer of three T-28s and nine RT-28s from South Vietnam to Laos; but another week passed before this took place. On October 30, Unger said sufficient new pilots and mechanics had graduated from Water Pump training that he could support five more T-28s. The next day, Admiral Sharp ordered Westmoreland to transfer that number of reconnaissance versions to Vientiane. However, the planes had to be put in flying shape, and that took another two weeks. SAW detachment pilots were not notified that the planes were ready for pickup at Bien Hoa until November 18.²⁶

SEACoord saw this as only a stopgap allotment and called for still more T-28s at the November 5 meeting. After reviewing RLAf accomplishments in the corridor, the members concluded that, although serious damage had been inflicted on several targets, ten had only been lightly bombed and needed to be hit again. Furthermore, Thao Ma had added eight new targets to the November list and scheduled over 450 sorties. The group determined that Admiral Sharp should ship in five more T-28s to meet these goals, but these aircraft did not arrive from South Vietnam until December.²⁷

Meantime, Operation Anniversary Victory had run into unexpected snags. In preparing for the switch  to Paksane, Capt. Robert T. Schneidenbach, a communications specialist from Water Pump, had set up a rudimentary air support operations center at Military Region II headquarters. From there, communications were by SSB radio to Tyrrell's office and by landlines to the air operations center in Vientiane. However, Paksane was not used as a forward operating location because General Khamkong (Military Region II commander) failed to provide the forward air controllers or forward air guide/air liaison officer teams as promised. Ambassador Unger asked the air commandos to fill the breach as they had done in Operation Triangle, and Schneidenbach and a noncommissioned officer left Paksane for Tha Thom, joining GM 13 there on November 4. Over the next five days, the two men served as ALO and FAG, directing nearly a hundred T-28 strikes on Pathet Lao troops trying to take the town. The Pathet Lao were reinforced by three North Vietnamese Army battalions; and in a series of night and early morning attacks, they turned GM 13's flank. Tyrrell at once flew in an Air America plane to evacuate the USAF team. The T-28s continued to attack suspected enemy positions, however, and the ground situation eventually stabilized. Vang Pao did not achieve his objectives, but the NVA counterattacks were blunted. The Meo general later told Tyrrell that without the T-28s, Tha Thom would have fallen. He also reported that NVA units suffered heavy casualties from the air strikes and were badly demoralized.²⁸

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In spite of these compliments, special air warfare personnel complained that the Laotians placed the same exaggerated reliance on air power at Tha Thom as they had at Phou

25. Msgs. SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 370, Oct 23, 1964, JCS to CINCPAC, 232200Z Oct 64, CINCPAC TO JCS 280340Z Oct 64.

26. Msgs. ASD/ISA to CINCPAC, 231950Z Oct 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 543, Oct 30, 1964, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 180715Z Nov 64.

27. Msgs. AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 1415, Nov 6, 1964, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 010300Z Nov 64, Det 6, 1st ACW, to SAWC, 071000Z Dec 64.

28. Msgs. AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-962, 110950Z Nov 64, CX-963, 110956Z Nov 64, CX-998, 191158Z Nov 64, Det 6, 1st ACW, to SAWC, 161050Z Nov 64.

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Kout. Too often, FAR and Meo officers used air as if it were a magic wand. After waving it over the battlefield, they would simply "sit back and wait for the T-28s to destroy the opposing forces." The air commandos believed that, in the long run, this would retard the proper development of the Laotian armed forces.²⁹ Time would show how correct their assessment had been.

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● On November 24, Colonel Law visited Muong Soui to observe the training of the neutralist gunners by the [redacted] detachment, but Kong Le was more eager to show him plans for a new attack on Phou Kout. Intelligence reports disclosed the North Vietnamese had reduced their garrison on the mountain to two companies. With the odds in his favor, Kong Le thought the time ripe to retake it. The assault was scheduled to begin in two days, and he intended to lead it personally. From what he saw of the plan, Law concluded that it skimmed on strike and airlift support, had not been coordinated with Vang Pao (who was to carry out diversionary moves), and depended too much on a "sudden surge of the Gung Ho spirit." Kong Le agreed to postpone the attack—but only for a few days.³⁰

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● The country team favored another try for Phou Kout, chiefly because the morale of the neutralists at Muong Soui had been boosted when Kong Le took personal command. The team was willing to furnish the needed air support and help redo the plan. The revision eliminated Vang Pao's role, replacing it with an envelopment from two sides preceded by heavy artillery and air strikes. The T-28s would bomb and strafe communist positions southeast of the mountain and be controlled by [redacted] artillery spotters in L-19s. An attack from this direction was expected to meet merely light resistance. Once the base of the hill was secure, the neutralists intended to go up the east slope, the same route the Pathet Lao had taken to seize the summit. Law warned it would not be easy; and unless the neutralists were willing to close with the enemy, the results in the end would be a failure as before.³¹

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● On December 1, twelve [redacted] sorties, directed by the [redacted] artillery spotters, hit the mountain with fragmentation bombs and five-hundred-pound high-explosive bombs. The pilots reported large bunkers and numerous foxholes, but no enemy. The pilots had not been fired upon, and the mountain seemed deserted. Kong Le knew nothing of this, however, as he had retired to a Buddhist retreat (a cave nearby) to do penance and "assure the success of the attack." After approving the revised plan and agreeing to lead the troops, he had turned the operation over to a subordinate, Col. Somboun Vongphrachanh. Although Law was quite upset over Kong Le's last minute "tackling of the psychic," there was little he could do.³²

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● The next day, nine T-28s hit Phou Kout and five neutralist battalions moved out, easily occupying the preliminary objective at the base of the mountain. On December 3, the neutralists began working their way up the east slope as the T-28s continued to strike suspected enemy positions. By the middle of the afternoon, one of the minor peaks near the mountain's summit fell to the neutralists. When word reached Colonel Somboun's headquarters, it touched off intense but short-lived jubilation, for at this point, the troops began to mill around and failed to press home the attack. Further, those at the bottom of the mountain did not put out patrols.³³

● The North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao counterattacked on December 4, hitting the infantry on the captured peak with 82-mm recoilless rifle fire and forcing their withdrawal back

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29. ● Msg, Det 6, 1st ACW, to SAWC, 161050Z Nov 64.

30. ● Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-618, 241100Z Nov 64.

31. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 804, Nov 25, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-619, 251040Z Nov 64.

32. ● Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-1059, 301200Z Nov 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 324, Dec 1, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-664, 031415Z Dec 64.

33. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 828, Dec 2, 1964, 835, Dec 3, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-648, 061050Z Dec 64.

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down the slope. The enemy brought up tanks the next day and, from positions in the nearby woods, fired over 130 rounds into neutralist positions, destroying a 105-mm howitzer with a direct hit. By dusk, Kong Le's men had suffered twelve killed and sixty-eight wounded. At first, the [REDACTED] FACs could not find the enemy armor that continuously changed locations; but on December 6, they spotted the tanks near the edge of the woods and the T-28s destroyed four of them. Neutralists monitoring the radio heard the Pathet Lao say their commander and several of his staff had been killed by the air strike.³⁴

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The next few days were quiet. The T-28s made only occasional strikes into the woods due to the hot antiaircraft fire. There was no reaction until December 10, when a North Vietnamese battalion suddenly pounced on the unwary neutralists, who beat a hasty retreat to Muong Soui. Kong Le now emerged from his meditations and sacked Colonel Somboun, but not for failing to take Phou Kout. Instead, the Laotian colonel was replaced because he was suspected of embezzling 1.5 million kip³⁵ in troop funds.³⁶

On December 1, President Johnson had approved a series of military measures designed to signal U.S. willingness to use force to counter further aggression from Hanoi. As an adjunct to this plan, which was concerned mainly with South Vietnam, he authorized USAF and Navy planes to fly armed reconnaissance missions over Laos.³⁷

At the same time, Ambassador Unger departed Vientiane for his new post in Washington as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. His replacement was William H. Sullivan, another Asian expert and protege of Averell W. Harriman. As special assistant to Secretary Rusk, Sullivan had chaired the Vietnam working group, an interdepartmental committee for handling all Vietnam planning and activities. On December 10, even before he formally presented his credentials to the king, Sullivan discussed the administration's new bombing program with Souvanna and sought the prime minister's approval of that program.³⁸

The prime minister's reaction to increased air operations against the North Vietnamese was termed "excellent" by the new ambassador. Souvanna approved armed reconnaissance in the panhandle and, as he had done with Unger, asked that Yankee Team conduct similar flights along Route 7 in the Plain of Jars. When Sullivan asked him if he really understood the meaning of "armed reconnaissance," the prince replied that when American aircrews "see anything moving on the road, either day or night, attack it." He did object, however, to Sullivan's suggestion that the United States inject more candor in its public statements on air operations in Laos. He held to his position that actions speak louder than words, "and in this instance, we should let the action speak for us."³⁹

Back in Washington, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance presented the JCS armed reconnaissance program, termed Barrel Roll, to the National Security Council on December 12. McGeorge Bundy of the White House staff said it "fulfilled precisely the President's wishes;" and barring notice to the contrary, operations should start immediately. Napalm was deleted, however; all concurred that the RLAF should dispense it first. Further, in deference to Souvanna, public statements were limited to just those instances when an aircraft was lost and spokesmen were to refer to the flights as escorted reconnaissance missions

34. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 841, Dec 4, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-648, 061050Z Dec 64, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-1088, 070502Z Dec 64.

35. (S) The kip is the basic monetary unit of Laos.

36. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 860, Dec 8, 1964, 869, Dec 10, 1964, DIA to AIG 623, et al, 140533Z Dec 64.

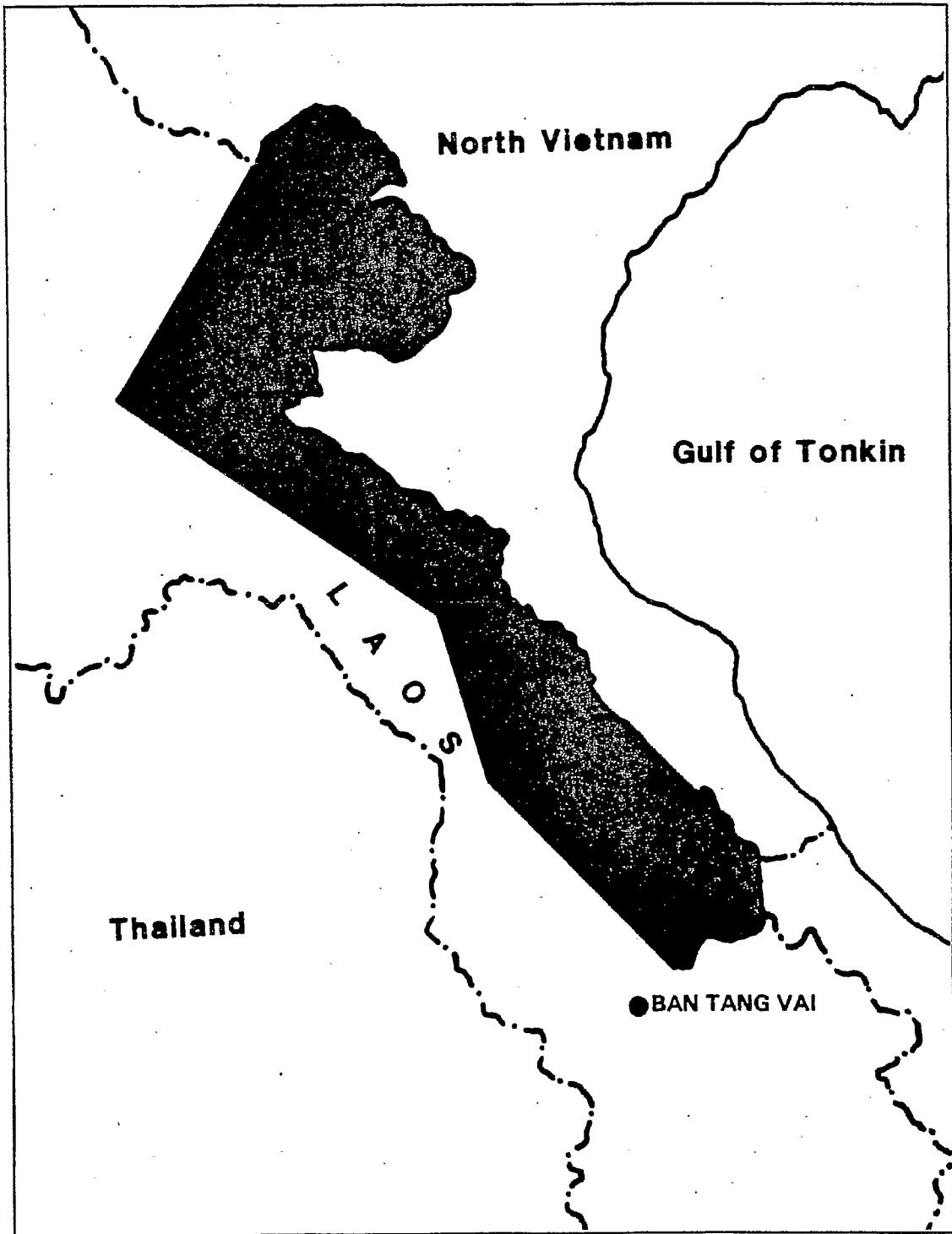
37. (S) *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, 113-16, 241-48.

38. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 868, Dec 10, 1964.

39. (S) *Ibid.*

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requested by the Royal Laotian Government. Finally, all flights were to be coordinated with Ambassador Sullivan in Vientiane. The first missions of Barrel Roll were flown against targets in southern Laos by the Air Force on December 14 and the Navy on December 17.⁴⁰

On December 19, an interdepartmental meeting centered on the second series of Barrel Roll missions. The Joint Chiefs thought that, toward the end of this period, the attacks should shift from the corridor to Route 7. Since Souvanna had repeatedly asked the United States to interdict this road, the rest of the group not only assented but switched priorities. A west-east armed reconnaissance of a forty-mile stretch of Route 7 between Nong Pet and Nong Het, was set as the first strike of the second series (the third Barrel Roll mission), but it steered clear of the Ban Ken bridge. Nong Het was a main enemy resupply and transshipment point that contained a dozen or so storage buildings. A mountain trail led away from the area to the south, and Yankee Team photos showed a nearby corral enclosing what appeared to be pack animals. Still, of the four missions cleared for December 27, 1964 through January 3, 1965, this was the only mission that took in the northern section of the country. The weight of the effort fell on the corridor—a portent of future operations in Laos. Ambassador Sullivan approved this series on December 20. The 2d Air Division also received permission for an escorted RF-101 to accompany the strike force, flying below the established level of ten thousand feet if necessary for accurate bomb damage assessment. Yankee Team rules of engagement governed the reconnaissance planes and escorts.⁴¹

The first USAF armed reconnaissance mission in northern Laos (Barrel Roll 3) was flown on December 21, using four F-100s based at Da Nang for strike and two Korat F-105s for MiG combat air patrol. Route 7 was clear with no traffic seen; but immediately after the F-100s turned to escape anti-aircraft fire at the Ban Ken bridge, the sky suddenly filled with intense flak and automatic weapon tracers. The jets dove on the enemy emplacements, splattering them with 20-mm cannon fire as well as cluster bomb units (CBUs). Several of the aircraft were stitched with small-arms fire but all returned safely to Da Nang. The Able Mable RF-101 flying bomb damage assessment was at ten thousand feet and reported several flak bursts below that altitude. Since the Voodoo was in no imminent danger, the F-105 escorts did not attack.⁴²

For the week of January 4-10, a USAF night armed reconnaissance from Nong Pet to Nong Het was approved, and General Moore prepared to lay on the mission using a C-130 flareship and four F-100s. The latter were selected because the B-57 crews training at Clark for night operations were not yet qualified, but the selection of the C-130/F-100 team puzzled the PACAF commander, Gen. Hunter Harris, Jr.,⁴³ for the same reason. The F-100s at Da Nang had no recent night missions and the C-130 transport crews were just getting into flare work. The Hercules did offer superior operational advantages over the C-123 because of its navigational equipment, speed, payload, loiter time, and range; but to General Harris, there was no substitute for crew experience. His first choice was the A-1E/C-123 team, since it had clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in similar operations in South Vietnam. He also wanted an infrared-equipped RB-57 to be pathfinder of the mission. However, because of his firm belief that the operational commander was usually the best judge in selecting forces and tactics, Harris did not direct Moore to make the changes.⁴⁴

40. JCSM-1041-64, Operations in Laos, Dec 11, 1964; MR, subj: Meeting of NSC Principals, Dec 12, 1964, in JCS 2339/164; *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, 253-54.

41. JCSM-1050-64, Operations in Laos, Dec 17, 1964; msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 3081, 191725Z Dec 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 666, Dec 20, 1964, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 202243Z Dec 64, 2d AD to COMNAVFORJAPAN, et al, 070646Z Jan 65.

42. Msgs, 2d AD to JCS, 211040Z Dec 64, 211150Z Dec 64.

43. General Harris succeeded General Smart as CINCPACAF on August 1, 1964.

44. Msg, CINCPACAF to 13th AF, 2d AD, 060400Z Jan 65.

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Moore did substitute a C-123 for the C-130 but the strike aircraft stayed F-100s. The mission was set for January 8 but was scrubbed two days in a row because of bad weather over Route 7 and the Plain of Jars. The weather also threatened two other Barrel Roll missions scheduled that week. Admiral Sharp wanted to fly them just as soon as the weather cleared, but he needed a waiver because of Washington's forty-eight-hour "sterile period" requirement between missions (hoping that Hanoi would get the signal). Sharp's waiver request was rejected, the forty-eight-hour rule prevailing. The Joint Chiefs did offer one concession. Missions aborted by weather could be banked and flown later if the forty-eight-hour order was adhered to.⁴⁵

Several months earlier Ambassador Unger had urged a U.S. jet attack on the Ban Ken bridge, only to be refused by President Johnson. The JCS, in the first part of October, sent planning guidelines for a future strike to General Harris and Admiral Moorer. These guidelines specified the development of a plan to drop one span of the bridge on a single mission with a probability of success of 85 percent (a second try was not authorized if the target was not destroyed). The plans submitted by PACAF and PACFLT graphically portray the difference in tactical doctrine of the two services, even when using identical ground rules for the same target.⁴⁶

The Navy's plan required about thirty A-4s and twenty A-1s accompanied by sixteen flak-suppression F-8s/F-4s—in effect, the strike complement of a pair of aircraft carriers. Moorer opposed using such a large force against a small point target that, at the height of the dry season, was expected to be obscured by smoke, haze, and dust. He preferred fewer planes and restriking if required to knock out the bridge. He further favored variable-fuzed, high-explosive bombs or the Snake Eye, a high-explosive (or hard) bomb with three retarders that allowed low-altitude release with enhanced accuracy. The plan specified a flak-suppression flight with conventional hard bombs and eight Zuni rockets. Moorer deleted napalm and CBU-2A, since delivery would have required the bombers to pass directly over the target at low level and because napalm's coverage decreased when release speed exceeded 250 knots. Both types of ordnance demanded multiple passes, and intelligence indicated thirty-four 37-mm/57-mm revetted guns within fifteen hundred yards of the bridge. Odds were quite high that several aircraft would be lost.⁴⁷

PACAF originally planned for thirty F-105s since the JCS thought Ban Ken was a multiple-truss bridge. A force this size, requiring numerous passes over the bridge and its defenses, was unacceptable to Secretary McNamara. However, later Yankee Team photos showed Ban Ken to be a single girder bridge with two concrete piers and three deck-type concrete spans. Based on these photos, the PACAF plan was scaled down to twelve F-105s with four AGM-12 Bullpup⁴⁸ missiles fitted to each aircraft and eight F-105s with a mixed load of CBU and napalm for flak suppression of the antiaircraft positions, which were said to contain thirteen 57-mm guns. In contrast to Moorer, Harris believed a low-level, high-speed pass directly overhead was the best tactic, since it presented the most difficult target for enemy gunners to track. CBU was judged ideal for flak suppression, with napalm a "bonus ammunition" to be dropped on the CBU pass. Harris admitted that napalm "spread thin" in a high-speed, five-hundred-knot delivery. Even so, he thought that it was a good weapon against wooden targets and personnel and that it had a "high psychological factor."⁴⁹

45. Msgs, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 071144Z Jan 65, 081359Z Jan 65, 091141Z Jan 65, 2d AD to JCS, 080913Z Jan 65, JCS to CINCPAC, 092258Z Jan 65.

46. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 9501, 062024Z Oct 64.

47. CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 072254Z Oct 64, CINCPAC to JCS, 121100Z Oct 64.

48. Developed by the Navy, the Bullpup allowed strike aircraft to "stand off" beyond the range of enemy small-arms fire. After launch, two flares in the aft end of the missile permitted visual tracking by the pilot, who used his cockpit missile stick to give steering commands. A radio receiver in the missile picked these signals up and guided the Bullpup to the target. In contrast, the Zuni was unguided after firing.

49. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 121100Z Oct 64.

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These plans lay in limbo for two months. When Ambassador Sullivan stopped off at CINCPAC headquarters on the way to assuming his new post in Vientiane, one of the briefings from Admiral Sharp and his staff was on the Ban Ken strike plans. Sullivan withheld judgment until he had a chance to study them in detail with Tyrrell. On December 10, he opted for the Air Force plan because it needed fewer aircraft. This was in line with recent Washington thinking; but he balked at the inclusion of napalm as a "bonus munition," particularly when PACAF professed it had limited worth in high-speed delivery. Moreover, General Harris touched a sensitive nerve when he said napalm's introduction added a valuable "psychological factor." Sullivan asserted that it was precisely because of these psychological factors that the embassy in the past had vigorously resisted napalm's use. He would continue to do so unless dispensing the ordnance was dictated by valid military reasons in a highly critical situation. He wanted napalm excised from the USAF plan and contended that, if and when Washington ordered the strike, it should have "minimum exploitable psychological repercussions and should be surgically as neat as possible."⁵⁰

Another month went by before Ban Ken was brought up again. In the interim, Ambassador Taylor had returned to Saigon from Washington and had briefed SEACORD in early January on the various decisions associated with his Washington conversations. After reviewing all Barrel Roll missions to date, the group concluded that the strikes had done little to discourage communist insurgency or Hanoi's willingness to pursue the insurgency. However, they believed that the interdiction program (such as it was) had not been given a fair chance and favored an additional thirty days of "maximized performance" that included the long-sought air strike on the Ban Ken bridge. If it went down, the conferees confidently predicted that pressure on northern Laos would be relieved and that, in the end, fewer sorties would be needed in the area.⁵¹

On January 10, 1965, the National Security Council approved a mission (Barrel Roll 9) to be flown during the week of January 12-17 against the Ban Ken bridge. The order to CINCPAC specified conventional ordnance—not napalm—and skipped secondary targets. Nevertheless, due to heavy flak encountered by the December 21 missions (Barrel Roll 3), the strike force was expanded from the usual four bombers with two to four flak suppressors to a force of sixteen and eight respectively. It was also thought that, with the use of the larger force, Hanoi might get the "signal."⁵²

Looking for convoy traffic to back up on Route 7 once the bridge was out, Moore and Westmoreland proposed a follow-on night armed reconnaissance of the road—the oft-postponed Barrel Roll 7. Both officers believed the possibility of such a lucrative target evolving after the bridge strike (now set for January 13) warranted waivers of the forty-eight-hour rule and the ban against overflying the Ban Ken bridge. Ambassador Sullivan and Admiral Sharp thought so too. While the idea was sound, Washington refused to approve two missions with less than forty-eight hours delay between them because two Barrel Roll assaults so close together would most likely blur the signal to Hanoi.⁵³

The Ban Ken strike force, with sixteen F-105s, attacked the bridge as scheduled on the 13th. Ten planes were loaded with eight 750-pound bombs each, and six planes had two Bullpups and six 750-pound bombs each. Eight F-100s armed with CBU, Bullpups, and 20-mm guns flew flak suppression; and four F-100s maintained the MiG combat air patrol. For the first time, an

50. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 870, Dec 10, 1964.

51. () Msgs, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 2077, Jan 7, 1965, 2086, Jan 8, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1030, Jan 11, 1965.

52. () Msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV and CINCPACFLT, 100616Z Jan 65.

53. () Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1040, Jan 12, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 112000Z Jan 65, JCS to CINCPAC, 3681, 121618Z Jan 65.

RF-101 with a pilot who knew the area acted as pathfinder to aid in identifying targets. The two flights of F-105s, flying in loose trail, dropped fifty-two bombs on their first pass and destroyed the bridge. Only the piers were left standing, and most of them had the tops sheared off. The remaining ordnance was randomly dispensed for mopping up. Several passes were needed for the six F-105s carrying Bullpups. The dust and smoke created by the strike prevented accurate guidance of the missiles. Only one was fired at the bridge, and it scored a direct hit. The rest were directed to the enemy guns firing from a nearby bamboo grove. Unfortunately, an F-100 and F-105 making guided missile runs with the Bullpups were shot down. The two pilots—Capt. Albert C. Vollmer and Charles L. Ferguson—were later recovered by Air America helicopters and returned to Udom.⁵⁴

● Military authorities viewed the Ban Ken strike as enormously successful, hoping it augured future results. All agreed several important lessons were learned from the raid. The strike pilots, for example, recommended that, if this many aircraft had to be flown against a small point target, the time over target should be lengthened to allow more room for aircraft maneuvers, thus cutting the risk of midair collisions. However, the pilots questioned the use of the AGM-12 on targets of this type. All of the missiles had functioned properly, but the need for multiple passes increased the exposure of the delivery aircraft to enemy ground fire. General Moore strongly endorsed this view, saying that Vollmer and Ferguson would not have been shot down and the battle damage inflicted on the others might have been avoided if the force had withdrawn after the destruction of the bridge was confirmed. Last, the pilots pushed for an upward reevaluation of the damage expected when an aircraft such as the F-105 salvos six to eight 750-pound bombs. Not only could this destroy a bridge completely, the pilots concluded, but it would also be an excellent tactic for cutting or cratering roads and for the creation of rock slides and chokepoints.⁵⁵

● Ban Ken also brought into the open for the first time that U.S. planes were doing more in Laos than merely flying reconnaissance. When several of the flak-scarred F-100s had to land at Udom, a few State Department officials became worried lest someone spot the jets and the press begin asking embarrassing questions. Sullivan saw little chance of this happening. Although a few RTAF personnel had seen the damaged aircraft, the ambassador saw no cause for alarm since "their past record of taciturnity [was] impeccable." No Laotian had been told of the losses (Souvanna was visiting the king in Luang Prabang), and Sullivan concluded: "We are in a very sound position to stonewall this operation by our usual stance that we cannot comment on operational questions."⁵⁶

● Sullivan had not reckoned with the Pentagon. The raid was barely a few hours old when Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) announced the loss of the two fighters. During the question period following the briefing, he declined to describe the mission the planes were on but admitted four other U.S. planes had previously been shot down over Laos. From "Pentagon sources," John W. Finney of the *New York Times* learned that "the flights had been on a strafing and bombing mission against the supply lines . . . used by the communists to supply their forces in Laos and South Vietnam." Mark S. Watson, the noted military analyst for the *Baltimore Sun* cryptically observed that "the F-105 Thunderchief was not designed for reconnaissance but the 'heavy business' of bombing." Both correspondents reasoned this clearly showed a stepping up of American military action in Southeast Asia and was not just tit-for-tat retaliation.⁵⁷

54. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1044, 1047, Jan 13, 1965, PACAF to CINCPAC, 131012Z Jan 65, 2d AD to JCS, 131055Z Jan 65, 131127Z Jan 65, 141946Z Jan 65.

55. ● Msg, 2d AD to JCS, 141946Z Jan 65.

56. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1049, Jan 13, 1965.

57. ● *New York Times*, Jan 14, 1965, p 1; *Baltimore Sun*, Jan 14, 1965, p 1. Put together, the two articles painted

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Ambassador Sullivan was piqued over the briefing and especially the newspaper articles, noting they "will cause much pain here." He was chiefly concerned that the inability of Washington officials to keep quiet could ruin the Barrel Roll program and result indirectly in extensive future losses of American lives. He wanted State, Defense, and the White House to recheck all message addressees to make sure only those agencies with an absolute need to know saw the Barrel Roll cables. The need to maintain silence should be reemphasized, and "if there are still some who feel a compulsion to babble, we might be able to dissipate this feeling by letting them ride shotgun in our SAR helicopters."⁵⁸

Whether Sullivan's forceful statements and suggestions had any effect on Washington is debatable; but the next day, down at the LBJ ranch, reporters asked President Johnson to spell out precisely the extent of American participation in the war in Southeast Asia. The President would only comment that it was public knowledge the United States was helping the Royal Laotian Government defend itself. Beyond that, he did not think it wise or desirable for him to go into exact details. He conceded this might lead to further press speculation, and if this was what the reporters wanted to do, there was little he could do about it. That same day, the State Department declined to say if the United States was still bound by the 1962 Geneva accords, while making it clear that the air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail would continue.⁵⁹

Despite the successful raid on the bridge, events in Laos were taking a turn for the worse. Around Samneua, the communists took several troublesome Meo enclaves, and all indications pointed to the beginning of the enemy's annual dry season offensive. On January 20 at Wattay Airfield, a disaster struck the RLAF's meager T-28 force. An electrical malfunction in a T-28's .50-caliber gun caused it to fire into the plane in front, detonating that plane's bombs. A chain reaction of explosions ensued; and before the damage could be controlled, nine RLAF T-28s and one Cessna were destroyed. Two C-47s suffered only minor damage, but the parking apron, a hangar, and three other buildings were torn up. Miraculously, there were no casualties. The loss of the T-28s was critical since they were helping Meo troops near Samneua hold their ground. Taking advantage of the turmoil and crisis, Phoumi Nosavan attempted his final try at a coup. On the third of February, Phoumi fled to Udon, his march on Vientiane from the southeast foiled by Kouprasith Abhay's loyal troops.⁶⁰

The forced departure of Phoumi left a void in the FAR military leadership that Ouane Rathikone, Kouprasith Abhay, and Bounpone Makthepharak quickly filled. Ouane remained Chief of Staff, holding sway in most of northern Laos, Bounpone and lesser officers took over Phoumi's area in the south, and Kouprasith solidified his control over Vientiane and the rest of Military Region V. As before, each general in the new troika retained his clan ties and interests while distributing the spoils to his followers. Each general remained suspicious of the others, and none of the three seemed strong enough to eliminate his rivals and unify the army.⁶¹

Meanwhile, the situation in Samneua Province worsened as the communist offensive intensified. On January 20, the Meo lost the key position of Ban Hong Non (Lima Site 86) to an estimated six to eight enemy battalions. At this point, Vang Pao surmised that the

a reasonably accurate picture of U.S. activities in Laos during the previous seven or eight months. Among the items mentioned were the additional T-28s turned over to the RLAF, Souvanna's demand that secrecy be maintained, and that the recent upswing in military activity could be tied directly to Ambassador Taylor's early December meetings in Washington. The reporters erroneously described the raids as part of a systematic interdiction program designed to choke off the men and supplies moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

58. () Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1056, Jan 14, 1965, 1067, Jan 16, 1965.

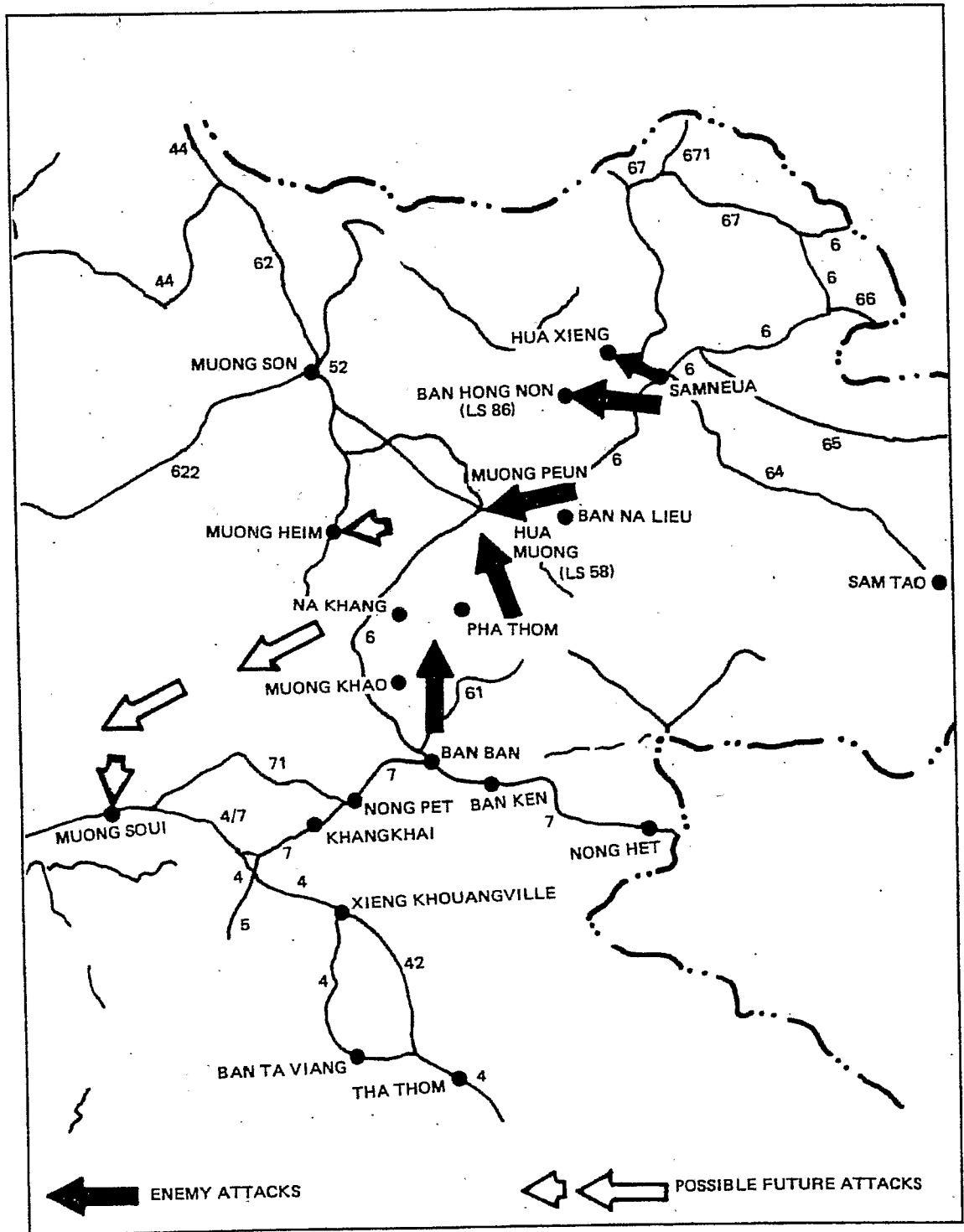
59. () *New York Times*, Jan 14, 1965, p 1.

60. () *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 7-65, Feb 12, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1211, Feb 4, 1965.

61. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A-125, subj: Indications of Political Shifts to the Right, Jan 8, 1965; Charles A. Cooper, et al, *Security and Assistance in Laos* (Santa Monica, 1965), p 14.

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Enemy Attacks in Northeastern Laos
January–February 1965



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communists' chief thrust would be toward Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), a center of Meo strength in the region. He figured the attacks west of Samneua sought to secure the communist right flank prior to assaulting Hua Muong.⁶²

The fall of Lima Site 86, coupled with the accidental loss of the nine T-28s at Wattay on the same day, prompted Ambassador Sullivan to warn Washington that the Royal Laotian Government might ask for U.S. jets to strike Pathet Lao positions. The demand for deeper American involvement was averted when [redacted]

[redacted] which had continued to conduct over twenty T-28 strikes daily in the north, almost without interruption. When the enemy push temporarily slowed, the few attractive targets did not need a heavy dose of American air in northeastern Laos; but if conditions took a turn for the worse, Sullivan was sure the RLG would want USAF jets to hit enemy concentrations in Samneua Province. Considering the fluid situation there and to capitalize on fast-breaking intelligence, [redacted] he again proposed that future Barrel Roll missions be originated, planned, and coordinated from Vientiane.⁶³

General Moore endorsed Sullivan's suggestions, adding that the "ideal place" to coordinate USAF [redacted] and embassy planning was the ASOC at Udom that belonged to the 2d Air Division's Deputy Commander for Laos Affairs. Udom had the personnel to write such plans, the ASOC facilities, navigational aids, and the ground-controlled intercept site as supporting radar. These made the base a "natural focal point" for controlling out-country operations; and if USAF aircraft based in Thailand were authorized for strikes in Barrel Roll, their operational control could easily be vested in the deputy commander.

On February 5, Ambassador Sullivan and General Maddux, Thirteenth Air Force Commander, discussed the proposed reassignment of an RF-101 squadron to Udom and upgrading of the deputy commander's headquarters. As early as September 1964, General Moore had urged that four to six RF-101s and appropriate photo-developing equipment be shifted from Tan Son Nhut to either Don Muang or Udom. The purpose of the move was to improve Yankee Team operations in Laos above latitude 20°N. When Sullivan learned that a Voodoo could reach Route 7 in fifteen minutes from Udom as opposed to ninety minutes from Saigon, he was enthusiastic about the transfer. This quick reaction coincided perfectly with his long-held tenet that, for Barrel Roll to be effective (and for Hanoi to get the signal), air power had to react to fast-breaking intelligence. Furthermore, the Chinese border was in range of unescorted reconnaissance sorties from this northern Thai base without refueling. The range of escorts, if needed, reached as far north as the 21st latitude, and air refueling stretched this to China's borders. These operational advantages and RTG opposition to placing highly visible USAF aircraft at heavily traveled Don Muang tipped the scales in favor of Udom. The RTG approved the move on February 25.⁶⁴

Sullivan's enthusiasm for the RF-101 shift did not extend to the deputy commander concept. He conceded there was much merit in placing more emphasis on the Udom headquarters and that the MACV channel was slow and cumbersome. On the other hand, he did not wish to press the proposal for fear of antagonizing General Westmoreland. Besides, he contended, command and control were purely military problems that an ambassador should not meddle in. Nevertheless, he sent his lukewarm support for the idea to the State Department.⁶⁵

62. PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest 10-65, Mar 5, 1965; msg, AIRA United Kingdom to CSAF, 201240Z Jan 65.

63. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1096, Jan 21, 1965, CINCPAC, 270531Z Jan 65.

64. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1229, Feb 5, 1965, 13th AF to CINCPACAF, 061544Z Feb 65.

65. See note above; msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 062055Z Feb 65, AmEmb Bangkok to 13th AF, SECSTATE, 1210, Feb 26, 1965.

(b) (1)
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[REDACTED]

Into the Shadow of Vietnam

Regardless of Ambassador Sullivan's stance, General Maddux was not about to throw in the towel on the command and control matter. In his view, having MACV in the air request chain of command merely slowed things down and added complications, and he thought that General Westmoreland should concentrate on counterinsurgency operations in South Vietnam—a task his command was designed to do. Maddux strongly suggested to General Harris that all USAF operations in Laos (not just Yankee Team) be handled by the deputy commander since centralized control of air through this headquarters would speed up USAF responses to country team requests. The ASOC's communications net linked directly with 2d Air Division, the air attaché's office in Vientiane, and all radar sites in Thailand. In addition, Udom was the ideal locale to coordinate Air America, [REDACTED] and USAF planning and to evaluate the results. After the RF-101s and the photo equipment arrived, Maddux wanted to set up a target intelligence section within the deputy commander's organization to work with Vientiane in developing targets. The Thirteenth Air Force Commander concluded his appeal to Harris by urging that every effort be made to encourage the embassy to work with the Udom headquarters.⁶⁶

(b) (1)
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Meantime, Vang Pao's earlier prognosis that the main communist drive would be against Hua Muong (Lima Site 58) proved correct. In late January, the enemy began building up his forces and supplies north of Ban Ban along Route 7. By the end of the month, the communists were edging south via Route 6 toward Hua Muong. To halt this move, the Meo counterattacked at Ban Hong Non, recapturing a few minor positions; but in the space of three days (February 8-10, 1965), Muong Khao, Pha Thom, and Ban Na Lieu fell to the foe. This occurred despite seventeen T-28 sorties on February 10 that reported two hundred enemy killed and twenty buildings north of Ban Ban in flames. The enemy began to tighten the vise around Hua Muong with four to six battalions. On February 13, a convoy of nearly fifty trucks was sighted about twelve miles east of the village, but the attacking T-28s, [REDACTED] were driven off by heavy antiaircraft fire.⁶⁷

(b) (1)
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As the enemy closed in, Vang Pao (now Military Region II commander) ordered that the children, the sick, and the elderly be evacuated. Air America Caribous airlifted several thousand people to Sam Thong and Long Tieng in two days, and about six thousand more refugees fled westward into the hills. Colonel Law observed, "Military wives with five or ten kids just don't go alone. Husbands [also] take off." He proved correct—the Meo soldiers, unwilling to part with their families, abandoned their positions and drew back to Na Khang (Lima Site 36). The situation rapidly deteriorated, and on February 14, Hua Muong fell.⁶⁸

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The questions now were could Vang Pao hold Lima Site 36 and, if he did not, could a line of resistance be formed later at Kong Le's headquarters near Muong Soui. Law flew to the neutralist camp to find out if the paratrooper general was preparing for such a possible defense. He discovered the neutralists had done nothing; Kong Le was too busy haggling with his battalion commanders over finances, promotions, and who was to blame for Phou Kout. Unless something was done quickly, the whole Meo effort might dissolve, leaving the enemy perched on Kong Le's doorstep. To slow down the communists, Colonel Law urged the T-28s be augmented by heavy U.S. air strikes on Pathet Lao/NVA supply points along Routes 6 and 7.⁶⁹

Sullivan concurred and on February 15 called on Washington to assign top priority to Barrel Roll missions in northeastern Laos. These would embrace not only armed reconnaissance

66.) Msg, 13th AF to CINCPACAF, 061541Z Feb 65.

67.) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 120645Z Feb 65, CSAF, 2072, 121204Z Feb 65, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1274, Feb 12, 1965.

68.) Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-88, 120600Z Feb 65, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1277, Feb 13, 1965, COMUSMACV, 140453Z Feb 65. Ouane Rathikone ordered three companies of GM 14 airlifted to Vang Pao's assistance, but the order was not carried out because the troops were loyal to Khamkong Vongnarath.

69.) Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-96, 151200Z Feb 65.

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and attacks against fixed targets, but special strikes inspired by fast-breaking intelligence. In line with this thinking, Colonel Tyrrell and the FAR G-2 (Intelligence) came up with two such targets in the Samneua section for which instant fragging was asked. The first consisted of four 105-mm howitzers about twenty miles south of Samneua adjacent to Route 6; the second was two supply and bivouac areas near the town of Hua Xieng.⁷⁰

The air attaché was also working on another high-priority target along Route 7. Meo roadwatch teams had just discovered about twenty tanks scattered along a road near the village of Ban Houa Xieng, roughly twenty miles southwest from Samneua just off Route 6. Several self-propelled 37-mm and 57-mm guns accompanied the vehicles, and four 105-mm artillery pieces and other assorted antiaircraft guns were found two miles south of the village. This "target complex," the largest yet seen in northern Laos, posed a critical threat to the Meo forces trying to thwart the communist takeover of Samneua Province. Due to friendly guerrilla action in the area, there was no assurance the convoy would remain stationary for long; and speed was of the essence.⁷¹

With no machinery to handle special, quick-reaction targets, Sullivan's request that such targets be struck presented a problem. All potential targets had been screened through an elaborate and time-consuming process that relied heavily on aerial photography for verification. Approved targets went on lists from which missions were eventually scheduled. For Tyrrell's three targets, Washington had no Yankee Team or U-2 photography nor were they on any RLG-approved list; and before the State Department would consider the strike, it wanted Souvanna's views.⁷²

Actually, the prime minister had approved the target right after its discovery, and he wanted U.S. aircraft to attack it as soon as possible. As usual, his sole concern was publicity. If the strikes were carried off without a loss, he wanted nothing said about them. Sullivan was willing and pleaded with Washington to keep the lid on any "uncontrolled publicity" should the mission be authorized. Once Souvanna's thinking was known, State lost no time in approving the mission, while stressing that secrecy be maintained in deference to the Royal Laotian Government.⁷³

On February 17, 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered Admiral Sharp to conduct this special mission (Barrel Roll 30). The targets listed for the mission, however, omitted the truck convoy spotted by the Meo teams. The four 105-mm howitzers in fixed positions around Ban Houa Xieng would be hit instead, using not more than twelve strike aircraft and six flak suppressors carrying conventional ordnance. The type of planes would be left to General Moore, the sole restriction being they could not be launched from Thai bases. Prestrike weather and photo reconnaissance was authorized as well as support aircraft for MiG combat air patrol and search and rescue. No date was set for the mission and it did not have to follow in sequence after Barrel Roll 29. Even the forty-eight-hour sterile period between this and other missions was waived—but just for this strike.⁷⁴

When the CINCPAC staff got the JCS order, they saw at once that it did not include the truck convoy. Admiral Sharp wired General Westmoreland to hold Barrel Roll 30 until he could obtain clarification. He felt that the convoy was too valuable a target to let slip by and that hitting just the howitzer batteries might flush the trucks and allow them to scatter. In less than ten minutes, Sharp received another message from the Joint Chiefs that added the convoy

70. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1283, Feb 15, 1965.

71. () Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 2089, 151530Z Feb 65, CINCPAC, 2095, 171220Z Feb 65.

72. () Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 696, Feb 15, 1965.

73. () Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1294, Feb 16, 1965, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 700, Feb 16, 1965.

74. () Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 5385, 170213Z Feb 65.

but stipulated that it must be positively identified prior to attack. If this was impossible, no bombs were to be dropped. Later instructions from Sullivan prohibited firing into the nearby hills, since Meo teams were located there.⁷⁵

● Barrel Roll 30 took place on February 19 (four days after the convoy was seen) by eight F-105s of the 12th Tactical Fighter Squadron out of Da Nang. The fighters were armed with rockets and AGM-12 Bullpup missiles. The eight F-100 flak suppressors carried cluster bomb units. The flight did not proceed directly to Ban Houa Xieng, but flew first to Samneua. The crews detected about thirty trucks on the town's outskirts and attacked, destroying three and leaving three others burning. Several small buildings in the town were reportedly demolished. Enemy ground fire downed one F-100.⁷⁶

● After reading the operational report of Barrel Roll 30, Ambassador Sullivan had several questions—he had thought the primary target had been the 105-mm howitzers, with the truck convoy near Ban Houa Xieng next. Instead, the F-105s hit trucks and buildings in the southern outskirts of Samneua, roughly twenty miles from the requested targets. The artillery battery and truck convoy near Ban Houa Xieng was untouched. More important, the F-105s had attacked Samneua, which Sullivan claimed MACV knew was off limits. In fact, certain aspects of the mission appeared so “bizarre” to the ambassador that he wondered if there had not been a communication breakdown somewhere. He canceled all Barrel Roll missions until a satisfactory answer was secured that indicated all U.S. agencies were on “the same wavelength.”⁷⁷

● To reassure Ambassador Sullivan, Admiral Felt sent Maj. Gen. Theodore R. Milton to the February 22–23 SEACoord meeting. (Milton, earlier the Thirteenth Air Force Commander, was then CINCPAC Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations.) The 2d Air Division explained it had not scheduled the howitzer target as first priority because several of Colonel Tyrrell's messages stressed there was no assurance the trucks would stay put and that any large convoy caught on Route 6 could be considered enemy. The 2d Air Division took this to mean that the trucks and self-propelled guns had first call. Since no one disapproved the scheduling nor questioned the target priorities, the interpretation had been that everything was satisfactory. Samneua was selected solely for area orientation, as a “fix” to pinpoint Route 6 for the three-minute southward flight to Ban Houa Xieng. When the strike force turned on heading, about thirty-five trucks caught the flight leader's eye. He ordered an attack since this could have been the earlier convoy rolling north, and hitting the trucks was within the intent of all embassy messages. Further, the 2d Air Division had no information that the town had been put off limits by Souvanna or Sullivan. Finally, and contrary to first reports, no building within Samneua's environs was struck: a truck hit by a Bullpup missile had exploded and set fire to a nearby shack.⁷⁸

● After listening to General Milton⁷⁹ and reading the 2d Air Division's explanation, Sullivan admitted the pilots acted within the full intent of their instructions. He would lift the standdown. Still, one notable fact remained: Barrel Roll 30 had not hit any of the targets Sullivan had specifically discussed with Souvanna. The ambassador was not sure how he would justify this to the prime minister—but he would try. Perhaps more important, the episode raised second thoughts

75. ● Msgs, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 172135Z Feb 65, 172245Z Feb 65, JCS to CINCPAC, 5446, 172258Z Feb 65, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1300, Feb 18, 1975.

76. ● Msgs, 2d AD to JCS, 190928Z Feb 65, 191530Z Feb 65, JCS to Dir/NSA, 201431Z Feb 65.

77. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1328, Feb 20, 1965, COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1336, Feb 21, 1965.

78. ● Msgs, PACAF to CINCPAC, 230100Z Feb 65, 230105Z Feb 65. The first message was 2d Air Division's explanation to PACAF, retransmitted to CINCPAC. The second message contained PACAF's support for 2d Air Division.

79. ● Milton believed Sullivan was now convinced “we cannot read his mind and that he must tell us in advance rather than denounce us afterwards.” [Msg, 13th AF to CINCPAC (exclusive for Adm Sharp from Milton), 231250Z Feb 65.]

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for Sullivan about quick reaction strikes. For some time, he had been arguing for them; but following Barrel Roll 30, he was not sure they could be flown with any degree of success. Even for briefed targets, more precise methods needed to be developed, perhaps with each U.S. agency involved assuming a fixed responsibility for some aspect of the mission.⁸⁰

General Milton offered a suggestion at the SEACoord meeting that satisfied the ambassador's criteria and had the potential to put everyone "on the same wavelength." Under his proposal, the embassy, based on local intelligence, had the responsibility of defining a target and proposing a strike and then, after clearing the strike with the RLG and listing any political or military limitations, sending the request to Washington for approval (or rejection) and the addition of any other restraints. Once approved by Washington, CINCPAC was to assign the mission to MACV, stipulating any restrictions imposed by the embassy, the RLG, or Washington. From this point on, regular fragging procedures were followed, including procedures for secondary targets. It was up to MACV to ensure that the unit that made the strike had sufficient information or to suspend the mission until the information was available. General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp assented to this new procedure. The State Department and the JCS endorsed it on March 5.⁸¹

In addition, the Joint Chiefs recommended a step-by-step procedure for quick reaction targets. The embassy was to initiate all such requests, stating why expeditious or extraordinary action was needed, obtaining strike approval from the RLG, and defining any political or military limitations. After making sure the mission could be carried out, MACV recommended the strike force, ordnance, route, and other details. Admiral Sharp added his comments and, if Washington approved, the strike followed the usual Barrel Roll fragging procedures. Although this drawn-out method made a genuine quick reaction nigh impossible, Sullivan agreed to it on March 8, 1965.⁸²

Earlier, at the same time as the Pathet Lao/Vietnamese Army began to increase pressure on the Meo in northeastern Laos, the Viet Cong stepped up terrorist activities in South Vietnam. President Johnson, after an attack at Pleiku on February 7 that killed seven and wounded 109 U.S. personnel, called the National Security Council into session. By coincidence, the President's Special Advisor on National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy (William P. Bundy's brother), was in Saigon conferring with Ambassador Taylor and General Westmoreland. In a telephone conference with the President, they recommended an immediate retaliatory air strike against North Vietnam. The council approved four targets, and they were struck on the 7th and 8th. On February 8, Secretary McNamara asked the Joint Chiefs to plan for an eight-week program of military actions against North Vietnam as a reply to any "further provocations." On the 10th, even as this request was being staffed, the Viet Cong bombed an enlisted men's barracks near Qui Nhom, killing 30 and wounding 21 others.⁸³

The next day, the Joint Chiefs completed the plan requested by McNamara. It called for eight weeks of air attacks on the north, broken into two to four USAF/VNAF strikes per week. The chiefs saw the reprisal rationale gradually diminishing and the bombing becoming a routine day-to-day operation and wanted to deploy 350 additional aircraft, including a fourth aircraft carrier, nine USAF tactical fighter squadrons, and thirty B-52s with supporting KC-135 tankers. The President approved the program, called Rolling Thunder, on the 13th.⁸⁴

80. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1347, Feb 23, 1965.

81. () *Ibid*; msgs, COMUSMACV to AmEmb Vientiane, CINCPAC, 240938Z Feb 65, CINCPAC to JCS, 262352Z Feb 65, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 752, Mar 5, 1965.

82. () Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 752, Mar 5, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1421, Mar 8, 1965.

83. () *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, II, pp 270, 276, 302-303; Jacob Van Staavem, *USAF Plans and Operations in Southeast Asia, 1965* (Washington, 1966) pp 6-7.

84. () *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, pp 319-321.

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Into the Shadow of Vietnam

On March 2, the United States began the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Even before the first F-105s had lifted off from Takhli and Korat, it was clear these air operations were to have a significant impact on those in Laos. Ambassador Sullivan had gotten an inkling of this at the February 22-23 SEACORD meeting when General Westmoreland said he was going to ask Washington to consolidate Barrel Roll, Rolling Thunder, and Yankee Team into a single program. This meant, for example, that once the RF-101s arrived at Udom, they would be scheduled for photo missions over North Vietnam. If the RTG approved, the Thai-based strike aircraft would also attack targets in the north. In pursuing these operations, both photo and strike aircraft would overfly Laos.⁸⁵

Sullivan contested Westmoreland's consolidation plan for several reasons, the most important its potential harm to Souvanna's relations with the Soviet Union. Even with all the covert and overt U.S. military activity in Laos, the prime minister still enjoyed the backing of the Russians because, like the North Vietnamese, he never admitted anything. As long as Souvanna could keep up this public posture, he would have the continued support, however lukewarm, of the Soviet Union. However, if Barrel Roll and Yankee Team spilled over into North Vietnam, Souvanna could no longer claim Laotian air space was not being used for attacks against his neighbors. If this use were ever admitted, Sullivan was sure the Russians would denounce Souvanna and perhaps break off diplomatic relations. Worse, the North Vietnamese might invade Laos in full force and overrun the country.⁸⁶

Sullivan added that Barrel Roll and Yankee Team were initially developed solely for Laos, and "the tricky nature of our operations requires them to stay (however artificially) in the same compartment." This is why he had gone along with the Air Force on moving part of Able Mable to Udom. A small group of reconnaissance pilots operating exclusively over Laos were bound to acquire the special skills needed to enhance the quality of photo intelligence. Considering the rash of short rounds, Sullivan contended that this criteria applied equally to strike pilots. They, too, should be completely familiar with the terrain, their targets, and the rules of engagement. Moreover, it was clear to Sullivan that as Rolling Thunder unfolded, it would siphon more and more sorties from Barrel Roll. Consequently, he wondered if it was possible to assign a separate, Thai-based unit the specific task of working Barrel Roll. Put another way, Sullivan wanted some thought given to "dedicating" a squadron or wing to this area.⁸⁷

As yet, the ambassador had no particular unit or service in mind but was partial to a specific plane—the Douglas A-1H Skyraider. From the moment Barrel Roll began, Sullivan had been impressed with this vintage aircraft's performance, particularly its ability (relative to jets) to absorb battle damage. The ambassador claimed he would not be so bold as to ask for, say, a dedicated Marine A-1 unit. Doing so would intrude into the very complex problem of controlling U.S. air power, something "well beyond our perspective as we peer out from under the jungle canopy of Laos." Nonetheless, he made it plain he found the prospect inviting.⁸⁸

Sullivan afterwards voiced his views to General Harris who was reported to be "very much in agreement" but preferred jets over prop-driven A-1s. Sullivan deemed this satisfactory even though

junior officers involved in the program show a distinct preference for the A-1H, which has longer time on target, more capability to absorb flak, less likelihood of smacking into a mountain at high speed, and more ability to stay with and protect choppers on SAR missions.⁸⁹

85. (C) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1356, Feb 26, 1965.

86. (C) *Ibid.*

87. (C) *Ibid.*

88. (C) *Ibid.*

89. (C) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1393, Mar 3, 1965.

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When no positive response was forthcoming to his open hints, the ambassador tried another tack: A special Thai-based unit performing strikes, placing delay-fuzed bombs and antipersonnel weapons, and conducting reconnaissance in Barrel Roll was a good way to send a signal to Hanoi. A recent country team review of all Barrel Roll missions concluded it was hard to determine just what signal Hanoi was getting. Sullivan saw the signal as "scattered, if for no other reason than the program itself had been scattered," and a more systematic operation was needed to send a clearly defined signal. This did not mean a drastic overhauling but merely establishing and hitting interdiction points, chiefly at night, by a special group of planes whose pilots had become "experts" in Laos operations. Sullivan believed this plan would get a clearly audible signal to Hanoi. He did not rule out spectacular strikes now and then, but he felt that they "created more diversion than destruction" and that the "big show" cost the Air Force and Navy too many planes. He also remarked that Souvanna was partial to air operations since they were less likely to provoke communist propaganda.⁹⁰

MACV opposed the assignment of any unit exclusively to Barrel Roll because it reduced flexibility. The "single manager for air" concept, which was to be the Air Force's main argument against other attempts by Sullivan and his successor to secure a wing dedicated to Barrel Roll, was not raised. Even so, General Westmoreland backed off from his plan to merge Barrel Roll, Yankee Team, and Rolling Thunder. For the time being, the areas stayed separate and the question of dedicated forces was shelved.⁹¹

In March 1965, the embassy and MACV put the finishing touches on a small-scale chokepoint program designed to slow the North Vietnamese truck flow into Laos and to increase the burden on enemy supply lines. The chokepoints were locations along primary routes where, due to topography, the roads were easy to cut but very difficult to bypass. Admiral Sharp concurred in the importance of chokepoints, but he repeated that it was more important to focus on the logistic bases supporting infiltration. He thought that destroying stored material and equipment before the monsoon came would make it very difficult for the enemy to keep troops in the field once the rains came. Besides, while the embassy and MACV had identified a few chokepoints and the initial bombing was no problem, keeping the roads blocked was the key to effectively slowing down trucks and porters. Moreover, the forty-eight-hour rule gave the enemy time to clear away the antipersonnel mines and fill up the crater holes, with little chance of these missions living up to expectations. In sum, Admiral Sharp felt that chokepoints were not good substitutes for strikes on supply dumps or other fixed targets.⁹²

Sullivan stressed he did not specifically object to hitting supply dumps, but he did object to "jumping around" from one type of target to another. Allowing special missions, no matter how worthy, to draw off sorties lengthened the time required for a systematic chokepoint/seeding program to pay dividends. By turning down special strikes, Sullivan sought to get the Barrel Roll chokepoint effort going full steam and send a "steady signal to Hanoi."⁹³

Under this program, once the roads had been cut, the chokepoints were to be periodically reseeded with delay-fuzed bombs and antipersonnel weapons to harass repair crews and add to the cratering, with the stalled traffic exploited by armed reconnaissance. However, with the gradual shifting emphasis to Rolling Thunder and the recent flurry of requests for "special missions," the Air Force and Navy might be hard pressed to sustain this new program. To prevent its dilution, Ambassador Sullivan rejected specials against the Ban Ken bridge and Nape

90. ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

91. ⁹¹ Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 060107 Mar 65 [date-time group incomplete].

92. ⁹² Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, Feb 2, 1965, COMUSMACV, 030638Z Mar 65, SECSTATE, 1394, Mar 6, 1965; msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 050253Z Mar 65.

93. ⁹³ Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1416, Mar 6, 1965.

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staging areas. Such fixed targets could be banked, he asserted, to be hit later when the regular armed reconnaissance effort had tapered off.⁹⁴

In accord with Sullivan's thinking, CINCPAC's staff studied route interdiction possibilities near Samneua, using current topographic maps, latest Yankee Team photography, and roadwatch team reports. They concluded that all motor traffic in northeastern Laos was funneled through Samneua on Routes 6 and 65, and they identified several chokepoints. One included cliffs on the side of a hairpin curve on Route 6 about five miles southwest of Samneua. At another point, the road had several sharp turns with overhanging cliffs, narrow wooden bridges, and no place to bypass. CINCPAC intended to discuss these chokepoints with Ambassador Sullivan during a mid-March conference of mission chiefs at Baguio, Philippines. If approved, the plan was to use 750-pound bombs with delay fuzes that detonated at varying intervals, triggering earth slides and pestering repair crews for days afterwards, and to follow this with regular seeding with antipersonnel mines to deter portering around them.⁹⁵

The chokepoints selected by the CINCPAC staff were free of friendly forces. They were confirmed as legitimate targets by [redacted] personnel familiar with Samneua. Striking all the chokepoints at the same time would have required more than a hundred planes—a Barrel Roll mission much larger than any previous one. It was too close to the "spectacular show" Souvanna frowned upon. As Sullivan was en route to Baguio, Emory C. Swank, Sullivan's deputy, recommended that the missions be spaced over a few days, even at the cost of the element of surprise.⁹⁶

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At Baguio, Admiral Sharp briefed Sullivan on the Samneua chokepoints. The ambassador validated them on the condition that the missions were flown on consecutive days instead of all at once. This required that Washington shrink the sterile period from forty-eight to twenty-four hours. The Joint Chiefs requested National Security Council approval for the strikes (Barrel Roll 42 through 55) with seven day and seven night missions over two weeks and no limitation on the number of strike aircraft per mission. The chiefs also proposed that the forty-eight-hour sterile period be permanently lowered to twenty-four hours. However, it appeared to the State Department that, if all these missions were sanctioned, they would not meet Souvanna's "nonspectacular" criteria. The plans were believed to be good examples of the trend toward enlarging the scale and frequency of Barrel Roll. Sullivan's approval of CINCPAC's chokepoints had raised the eyebrows of officials at State, who wondered if trimming the size of Barrel Roll was still the ambassador's position.⁹⁷

Since his talk with Admiral Sharp, Sullivan had undergone a change of heart. He no longer saw any harm in a single armed reconnaissance flight per day⁹⁸ (or seven a week, mixed day and night), and reseeding missions as required. He thought that this was within Souvanna's guidelines, and Sullivan did not want to appear rigid regarding the number of aircraft per mission. He felt that the field commander was the best judge of what was needed to hit the target while assuring crew safety. On the other hand, Sullivan continued to like chokepoints better than supply stores or concentrations; it just seemed logical to block lines of communication before demolishing depots. Moreover, attacking logistic targets was possible during the rainy season when the communists, lacking air transport, had a hard time resupplying their troops.⁹⁹

94. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, Feb 2, 1965, COMUSMACV, 030638Z Mar 65, SECSTATE, 1394, Mar 6, 1965.

95. Msg, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 062145Z Mar 65.

96. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 101157Z Mar 65.

97. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 780, Mar 14, 1965.

98. The 2d Air Division's armed reconnaissance frag orders usually called for four strike aircraft per day and two to four per night. In case of chokepoints, sixteen bombers and twelve flak suppressors were normally employed. Reseeding missions used twelve bombers and twelve suppressors.

99. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1470, Mar 16, 1965.

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On March 18, Sullivan went along with General Westmoreland's request that the rest of the missions (Barrel Roll 32-40) be flown on the basis of one mission every twenty-four hours. Noting that the number of flying days was decreasing, the ambassador urged that every advantage be taken of the good weather while it lasted. Because of Sullivan's new position, Washington at once pared the sterile period to twenty-four hours and, on March 23, applied it to reseeded operations as well.¹⁰⁰

On April 3, Ambassador Sullivan's hand was strengthened as Barrel Roll was split into two programs. The first, Barrel Roll, was oriented toward northern Laos; the other, Steel Tiger, focused on interdiction of the infiltration routes in southern Laos that supplied the Viet Cong.¹⁰¹ Under this setup, Sullivan spelled out RLG needs and the Barrel Roll program supported them. He was also given more leeway in handling approved programs. For example, he could speed up or slow down attacks on chokepoints near Samneua and Route 7 without clearing the changes with Washington. Strong indications suggested that the ambassador would be given greater freedom in planning and carrying out future operations. Steel Tiger was not expected to cut into Barrel Roll sorties even though panhandle strikes would ultimately intensify. Nevertheless, the Joint Chiefs accented that the new interdiction effort would have first call on American air power in Laos.¹⁰²

While welcoming the Barrel Roll realignment, Ambassador Sullivan cautioned Washington that RLG approval was needed for new programs and for the United States to attack targets. Washington was reminded that, above all, Laos was not North Vietnam and was to be treated the same as Viet Cong-held territory in South Vietnam. Laos was a friendly country; and Laotian national interests and conditions, as interpreted by Souvanna, took precedence. On occasion, the United States might have to sacrifice military opportunities or temper them to the political climate. Air power in Laos would in every instance have to operate within this framework. It was a point that would bear repeating.¹⁰³

Sullivan thought he had the ideal way to make Barrel Roll "solely responsive" to RLG needs. Again, it lay in designating a special unit of aircraft and pilots "to carry out the bread-and-butter portion of Barrel Roll, supplemented as needed . . . by PACFLT and Second Air Division assets for bigger operations."¹⁰⁴

Sullivan described RLG requirements in the new Barrel Roll as twofold: a systematic interdiction of Routes 6, 65, and 7 and a rapid response to calls for help in case of a major Pathet Lao/NVA push in northern Laos. He acknowledged that political factors (such as the Geneva accords) posed problems and limited the American ability to assist.¹⁰⁵

Guidelines for Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger had been established at the SEACoord meeting on March 27. The demarcation zone or belt between Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger extended from the confluence of the Ca Dinh and Muone Rivers to a point just north of the Route 8/Nape Pass intersection. Search and rescue in Steel Tiger had been assigned to the 2d Air Division, which used HH-43 helicopters from Nakhon Phanom. (To increase the flying range, Sullivan suggested that fuel be pre-positioned at friendly held points in the panhandle. An HU-16 aircraft was transferred to Udom for SAR control, but Air America retained the rescue responsibility for Barrel Roll. The CIA agreed to prohibit its roadwatch teams from within two hundred yards of a motorable road so that targets detected closer than this could be considered hostile.¹⁰⁶

100. (S) Msgs, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, AmEmb Vientiane, 161121Z Mar 65; AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1487, Mar 18, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 7481, 192332Z Mar 65, 7592, 231549Z Mar 65.

101. (S) *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, 337-38; msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 7484, 231953Z Mar 65.

102. (S) Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 809, Mar 20, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 7624, 231953Z Mar 65.

103. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1511, Mar 22, 1965.

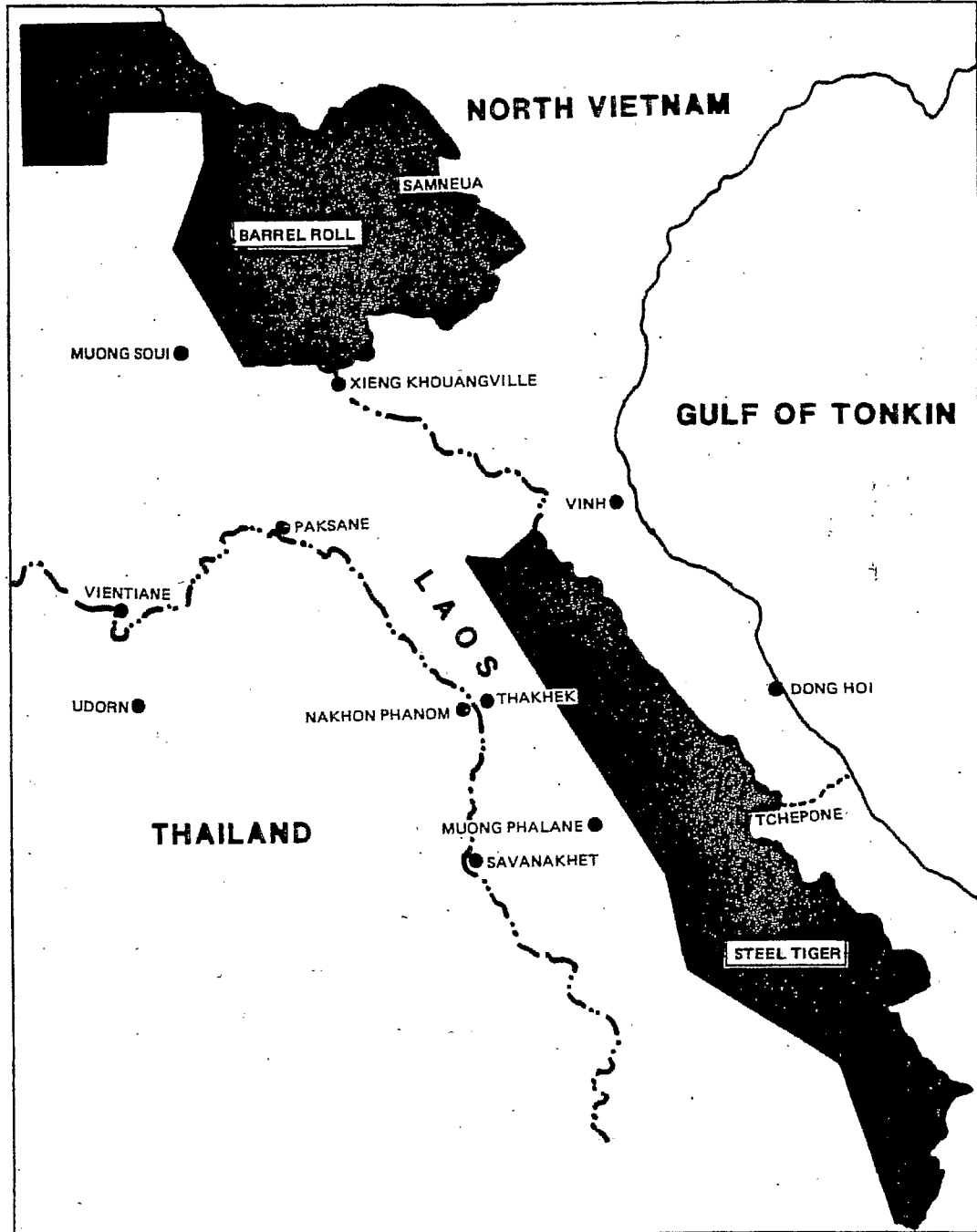
104. (S) *Ibid.*

105. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1544, Mar 27, 1965.

106. (S) *Ibid.*; msg, CINCPACAF to CSAF, 300237Z Mar 65.

UNCLASSIFIED

Barrel Roll/Steel Tiger Areas
April 1965



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Sullivan did not fare as well in seeking dedicated forces. Admiral Sharp insisted it was unnecessary to station a special unit at Udom or anywhere else specifically for Barrel Roll. There were plenty of strike aircraft on hand in the theater to carry out Barrel Roll missions and those in Steel Tiger, Rolling Thunder, and Yankee Team. CINCPAC saw no benefit in earmarking specific units for a single program because it reduced flexibility. He thought Barrel Roll should be responsive to RLG needs as outlined by Sullivan, but "how these requirements are fulfilled . . . is a military problem which is my responsibility."¹⁰⁷

Sullivan understood this rationale, but he reminded Sharp that at Baguio it was a CINCPAC suggestion to put a fairly senior commander at Udom. If Generals Westmoreland and Moore were persuaded to delegate Barrel Roll decisions to the deputy commander, Sullivan thought it would go a long way toward solving the problem. As a alternative that might be more palatable, he proposed designating Thai-based aircraft as those responsible for Barrel Roll and placing them under the deputy commander's control.¹⁰⁸

The ambassador's sudden shift behind General Maddux's prior suggestion to give the deputy commander more responsibility should not have been surprising. Before, Sullivan had been cool to the idea because he did not want to irritate General Westmoreland, but the recent division of Barrel Roll cast the matter in a different light. With MACV and Washington concentrating on corridor infiltration, the country team was able to devote its energies to northern Laos. To discharge his mandate, Sullivan wanted (and needed) more flexible air operations, and he saw the ideal setup as an approved bank of targets with the military commander closest to the intelligence sources able to direct sorties as needed. The deputy commander's location at Udom made him ideally suited for this task. For example, if an early morning weather reconnaissance aircraft noticed that a chokepoint needed reseeding, he could divert a sortie from a fragged target. If friendly troops or contract pilots spotted an enemy truck convoy, the target could be cleared with the embassy and a quick reaction strike ordered. Even so, the military representatives told Sullivan what he wanted was impossible. Missions were scheduled too far in advance and, because of "politics," were equally divided between the Navy and Air Force. Loading and unloading various weapons, complex pilot briefings, and overly restrictive rules of engagement ruled out quick reaction strikes. Finally, with Sharp's "reminder from the quarterdeck" that military matters were his responsibility, the SEACOORD conferees were loathe to engage in operational planning "with a striped-pants type."¹⁰⁹

After mulling over Sullivan's objectives and suggestions, Admiral Sharp concluded that most of them could be met if the ground rules and rules of engagement were changed. Washington had to authorize the armed reconnaissance target bank and remove restrictions on the number of aircraft or missions a day. The "operational commander" needed authority to commit alert aircraft without clearing the launch through Washington. Ambassador Martin had to procure Thai agreement to launch U.S. planes from bases in Thailand for both banked and quick reaction targets. This meant the OP-01 report¹¹⁰ could no longer be filed twenty-four hours in advance. However, by using Thai bases for all Barrel Roll missions, Sharp thought the RTG might accept a generalized briefing on the mission before the details were firmed up. If not, the aircraft had to be from carriers or from U.S. resources based in South Vietnam. Sharp did not mention to the Joint Chiefs Sullivan's suggestion to give the deputy commander at Udom more authority. Ambassador Martin said he believed the Thai Supreme Command

107. (C) Msg, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 261930Z Mar 65.

108. (C) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC (Personal Amb Sullivan to Adm Sharp), 260716Z Mar 65.

109. (C) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1544, Mar 27, 1965.

110. (C) Sent by the 2d Air Division to the embassy at Bangkok, the OP-01 report contained the mission number, number of aircraft by type and mission, launch base, and estimated time of departure. Martin used this information to brief the RTG.

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would buy the generalized briefing, but he made no commitment to approach them on the matter.¹¹¹

Sullivan briefed Souvanna on the new Steel Tiger program on March 30. The prime minister asked a few questions and gave his permission. As in the past, the embassy was to keep in close touch with Thao Ma and take every precaution to avoid short rounds. Souvanna commented that, at this time of year, the forest canopy in the south was thick and heavy and the weather was poor. He requested periodic reports of the results.¹¹²

Considering the merits of the deputy commander's headquarters at Udorn, it was odd Admiral Sharp did not address this point to the JCS; but he was looking further down the road than the Udorn headquarters. From messages crossing his desk, Sharp knew the day was close at hand when Thailand would house several USAF wings and serve as a launch base for a sustained air campaign against North Vietnam. This called for an organization much bigger than the deputy commander's. He wanted to remove MACTHAI from MACV, put an Air Force lieutenant general in command, and make him responsible for all U.S. activity in Thailand. This officer would control the Thailand Military Assistance Program (where the emphasis was already shifting from the RTA to the RTAF), Barrel Roll, and (in time) Rolling Thunder. Since Steel Tiger was designed to choke off the enemy logistic flow into South Vietnam, it would remain the responsibility of Westmoreland and Moore.¹¹³

In June 1964, General Westmoreland had agreed to a three-star COMUSMACTHAI separate from COMUSMACV, but much had happened since then. He favored instead centralized control of the entire American military effort in Southeast Asia. He noted that the three ambassadors had thought along these lines when they created SEACORD. This informal committee often met in Saigon, where MACV and its Air Force component command, the 2d Air Division, were located. Under U.S. contingency plans, COMUSMACV was the Commander, United States Forces, Southeast Asia, and the 2d Air Division commander was in charge of all air. Since Southeast Asia was already a theater, the ideal was air operations handled by a single headquarters with a single commander. This was consistent with USAF doctrine on the employment of air power. Simply stated, Westmoreland wanted one man in charge of all air activity in Southeast Asia, and a separate COMUSMACTHAI with distinct air responsibilities did not achieve this. Further, Westmoreland did not think the Thai were as sensitive as before to an officer stationed in South Vietnam wearing the COMUSMACTHAI hat.¹¹⁴

Ambassador Martin had stayed out of the MACTHAI-MACV hassle because he saw it as an interservice quarrel; but following the meeting, he was not so sure. The Thai MAP was tilting toward the RTAF, and with several USAF units at RTAF bases (and more to come), the thrust in Thailand was clearly on air power. Above all, Martin strongly dissented from Westmoreland's assessment of the Thai—they were still upset over President Kennedy's unilateral founding of MACTHAI. Every time a senior U.S. military commander visited Bangkok, Hanoi and Peking trumpeted that the Americans were telling their Thai puppets what to do next. The Royal Thailand Government had grown so thin skinned to this propaganda charge that high-ranking officials privately told Martin they hoped the sticky situation in South Vietnam would pin Westmoreland down and compel him to cancel his periodic visits to General Easterbrook, DEPCOMUSMACTHAI.¹¹⁵ Deferring to Thai sensitivity, Martin supported severing

111. (S) Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 300238Z Mar 65, AmEmb Bangkok to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1462, Apr 1, 1965.

112. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1571, Mar 30, 1965.

113. (S) Msgs, CINCPAC to CHJUSMAGTHAI (Personal Adm Sharp to Maj Gen Easterbrook), 020013Z Feb 65, COMUSMACV, 270325Z Mar 65.

114. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 301040Z Mar 65.

115. (S) Martin stressed that the Thai respected General Westmoreland and had complete confidence in his military ability. They just did not like COMUSMACTHAI being in Saigon.

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MACTHAI from MACV and designating an Air Force lieutenant general as COMUSMACTHAI. The ambassador already knew the RTG would accede to this action. The entire question was brought up at the April Secretary of Defense Conference in Honolulu, but McNamara put off a decision for almost two months. On May 27, he approved the separation of MACTHAI from MACV and appointed General Easterbrook as COMUSMACTHAI in lieu of a USAF officer, but an Air Force brigadier general would serve as MACTHAI Chief of Staff. However, it was more important to the Air Force that MACTHAI—unlike MACV—would control none of the air units in Thailand.¹¹⁶

The upswing in strike operations in Laos and North Vietnam heightened the burden on search and rescue, causing authorities to take a closer look at the program. In February 1965, Air America had asked for an additional four H-34 helicopters, increasing its fleet to sixteen. The helicopters would not be used solely for rescue but in all phases of Air America operations. H-34s were short worldwide, and Admiral Sharp spent the better part of a month seeking a few. He eventually requested that the U.S. Navy supply them from a source outside the Pacific Command.¹¹⁷

Gen. John P. McConnell, the new Air Force chief of staff, objected to giving these helicopters to Air America for search and rescue. With more American air power deployed to Southeast Asia, it was time to bring in additional USAF rescue helicopters and personnel. Ambassador Sullivan rejected McConnell's views, stressing to Admiral Sharp that Air America's success in search and rescue stemmed from pilots knowing the Laotian hinterlands "like the back of their hand." Sullivan emphasized that Air Force crews would enter these operations "dangerously cold" and, by implication, not do as well. Further, Air Force crews were prohibited from operating regularly in Laos, because of the Geneva accords. Sharp sided with Sullivan, seeing no reason to change because of Air America's outstanding rescue performance.¹¹⁸

In the spring of 1965, the Air Force had two HU-16s and seven HH-43s in Thailand available for search and rescue. The airmen normally worked the panhandle, the contract pilots northern Laos; but this was not a hard and fast rule. Several times, Air America C-123 control/cargo ships and T-28s manned by the airline's pilots flew SAR missions in central and southern Laos; but since the C-123s lacked beacon homing equipment, they were generally less satisfactory. On April 3—the kickoff date for Steel Tiger—an Air America control ship conducting a panhandle search and rescue directed suppressive fire on what were thought to be enemy troops. The troops turned out to be friendly forces; four were killed, with five more wounded. Following this incident, Thao Ma decided that one of his officers must be on board the control ship during any Steel Tiger search and rescue and that the crews had to be briefed at Savannakhet before flying the mission. Since the control ships operating over the corridor were chiefly Air Force, Sullivan figured the only way he could comply was to place the HU-16 and its crew under Air America cover.¹¹⁹

Interwoven with the control ship problem was the difficulty with SAR missions flown in the northwestern part of North Vietnam near the Laotian border. Rescue aircraft going into this area were stationed in South Vietnam or with the Seventh Fleet in Tonkin Gulf. Forces based in Laos or Thailand would be closer and better, but Sullivan worried that the political risks might be more than Souvanna could accept. On the other hand, the ambassador did not want Air America flying into North Vietnam, even though the airline had pulled off a successful

116. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1456, Mar 31, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 2998, 272224Z May 65; hist, COMUSMACV, 1965, Annex A, p 102.

117. Msgs, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 100920Z Feb 65, CINCPAC to JCS, 121120Z Mar 65.

118. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 060002Z Mar 65, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 231155Z Feb 65, AmEmb Baguio (Amb Sullivan) to AmEmb Vientiane, 1, Mar 9, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 132125Z Mar 65.

119. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1620, Apr 7, 1965.

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SAR just over the border on April 5. One way out of this dilemma was an earlier SEACoord suggestion that USAF HH-43s stage to remote lima sites close to the North Vietnamese border. These sites were for the most part controlled [redacted] and there seemed slight chance of enemy detection. Sullivan proposed USAF-marked T-28s for helicopter escort, manned by Water Pump pilots flying out of either Nakhon Phanom or Udom. He further proposed that rescue combat air patrol as well as control ship support come from the Air Force or Navy.¹²⁰

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General Moore disliked all of these new ground rules and proposals. First, 2d Air Division regulations barred any search and rescue control ship from directing air strikes, and the unfortunate incident with the Air America C-123 could not be repeated with an HU-16. Consequently, there was no need to land at Savannakhet to pick up an RLAF officer and, above all, no need to sheep-dip USAF aircrews. If Thao Ma was adamant about having his personnel on the scene, Moore suggested that an Air America C-123 be sent to Savannakhet for pickup whenever a SAR was in progress and that the HU-16 continue to handle the rescue until this aircraft arrived. Moore further opposed having Water Pump pilots fly cover—jets based in Thailand or South Vietnam, with their responsiveness and firepower, were better for this mission. Last, he was only lukewarm to pre-positioning the HH-43s at remote sites because of logistic requirements and the helicopter's slow speed. Westmoreland backed him up.¹²¹

Ambassador Sullivan offered a rather complicated and time-consuming compromise. One of the two USAF HU-16s, with USAF marking and crew, was to work jointly with Air America in northern Laos, but it was to be the sole aircraft to respond if an American plane was downed within North Vietnam. During a panhandle SAR, this same Albatross could answer the first mayday but not carry out the SAR; this was the job of the second HU-16. This latter aircraft was to be based at Nakhon Phanom, stage through Savannakhet, and be flown by a sanitized USAF crew. As soon as this crew was briefed and the RLAF officer got on board, their role was that of scene commander, assuming this from the first HU-16. The ambassador implied he did not know what all the fuss was about—he believed the biggest problem was merely “an optical one of shifting some available USAF assets from Udom to stage through Savannakhet.” It did not entail any change in basic SAR control procedures.¹²²

Then General Harris, in turn, disagreed. The PACAF commander pointed out that the HU-16s were pre-positioned in orbit over the Laos-Thailand border each time the Air Force and Navy flew in Laos or North Vietnam. The crews were in continuous radio communication with rescue personnel in the deputy commander's ASOC, as well as with strike aircraft. Experience had shown that if a SAR was to have a chance of success, the HU-16 must be allowed to fly unrestricted to the distress scene, whether it be in Laos or across the border in North Vietnam. Sheep-dipping robbed the crews of the Geneva Convention's protection and confined them to Laos. Instead, to avoid Sullivan's complicated procedures, Harris suggested that Thao Ma be pressured to rescind his prohibitions. CINCPACAF was willing to turn over the search and rescue to the Air America C-123 (called the Victor control ship) as soon as it arrived on scene. He also preferred U.S. aircraft, with U.S. markings, flying cover for SAR helicopters, but he did not specify jet or prop-driven aircraft. After reviewing all the telegrams, Admiral Sharp sided completely with General Harris.¹²³

While Sullivan fenced with the military over SAR methods, Thao Ma and the FAR general staff anxiously watched the start of a Pathet Lao buildup opposite Muong Phalane. On April 13, the RLAF chief requested that U.S. jets strike two enemy troop concentrations about

120. *Ibid.*

121. Msgs, 2d AD to PACAF, 111000Z Apr 65, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 130800Z Apr 65.

122. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1666, Apr 13, 1965.

123. Msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 140150Z Apr 65, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 172210Z Apr 65.

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fifteen miles north of the town. He suggested that T-28s lead the bombers, mark the target with smoke rockets, and then act as forward air controllers. Further, he wanted to place an RLAf officer on board the Victor control ship, using the plane to relay messages between the T-28s and strike aircraft. As a further precaution against short rounds, government troops were to indicate their positions with white panels. Both Sullivan and Souvanna ratified the request—the first use of U.S. aircraft in close support of Laotian ground forces. Ambassador Martin also received RTG permission to employ Thai-based USAF aircraft on the mission.¹²⁴

The communist troops were hit the next day by sixteen F-105s from Korat carrying CBU-2A and 750-pound bombs fuzed "instant." Following Thao Ma's plan, the mission used the RLAf T-28s and the Victor C-123 and was completed without a hitch. Damage was unknown, however, due to dense vegetation surrounding the target. The first flight sighted no enemy troops; the second, after dropping its bombs, spotted five or six running soldiers. The 2d Air Division believed the mission was wasted.¹²⁵

Considering only visible bomb damage, the 2d Air Division's assessment was correct; but the new procedures linking RLAf T-28s and Air America control ships seemed sound. General Moore advocated an alert force of four aircraft to be allocated (not dedicated) to the deputy commander's ASOC. Delighted with Moore's offer, Ambassador Sullivan accepted it instantly, and Martin quickly got RTG approval. These Thai-based jets (soon called Bango/Whiplash)¹²⁶ were able to respond at once to emergency air requests from the embassy at Vientiane, as well as to requests from other sources. When the mission was close support of ground troops, the embassy either provided forward air controllers or concurred in the means chosen to control the strike.¹²⁷

Also impressed with the April 14 mission's coordination, Thao Ma modified his demand for an RLAf officer to be on board any control ship handling a panhandle search and rescue. Rescues in the area's eastern section (where most of the trails were) were allowed to proceed as before, removing the need to sheep-dip USAF aircraft and crews; but an RLAf officer aboard the control ship was still required in central Laos (where the FAR were engaged against the Pathet Lao). This increased the workload on Air America, impelling Sullivan to ask that the airline be given three more C-123s with UHF homing capability to serve as SAR and strike control ships, as well as hauling cargo. CINCPAC endorsed this request and the previous one for four additional H-34 helicopters. Finally, to replace the "marginally effective" HH-43s, the Air Force ordered six HH-3 Jolly Green Giant helicopters modified for combat, three for Da Nang and three for Nakhon Phanom. However, these aircraft were not scheduled to arrive until October 1; and until then, search and rescue in the northwest fringes of North Vietnam had to remain an Air America mission.¹²⁸

Sullivan reluctantly went along; but near the end of June, he realized a new remedy was needed. On June 20 and 21, two Air America H-34 helicopters had been badly shot up rescuing an F-4 pilot inside North Vietnam, about forty miles east of Samneua. Even though both aircraft managed to limp back to Nakhon Phanom, Sullivan once more sounded the alarm over the airline conducting rescues across the border. Losing either helicopter would have been "terribly embarrassing" for the U.S. and Laotian governments. Sullivan [redacted] most hesitant to see this situation go on. They knew the Air Force was bringing in the HH-3,

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124. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1688, Apr 14, 1965.

125. (U) Msg, 2d AD to JCS, 140932Z Apr 65.

126. (U) Bango was the call sign for F-4s; Whiplash the call sign for F-105s.

127. (U) Msgs, 2d AD to AmEmb Vientiane, 190801Z Apr 65, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1770, Apr 22, 1965.

128. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1821, May 7, 1965, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 240120Z Apr 65.

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but the scheduled October date might be too late. The ambassador wondered why no one had acted on his prior suggestion to place fuel at isolated lima sites and stage the HH-43s from them. The selected lima sites (36, 46, and 107) were held by FAR and Meo ADC (militia) battalions and were considered secure for this type of operation. Friendly troops also occupied sufficient countryside to screen observation, not only from the communists, but also from "the prying eyes of ICC, French, press, etc." Sullivan thought the helicopters could fly to these sites, refuel, have enough range to fly the search and rescue, and return to the forward operating location for another refueling before going back to Thailand. If Admiral Sharp accepted the plan, Sullivan was sure he could "nudge the [Washington] machinery into motion."¹²⁹

Sharp shared Sullivan's concern over the ever increasing risk in Air America rescue operations. "This is properly the job for the military," he observed, "and we are going to take it on just as quickly as we can get in shape to do it." CINCPAC next contacted Generals Harris and Moore. Harris cabled General McConnell in Washington that this was what chance the Air Force had been looking for—a chance to move into the search and rescue picture, replacing Air America. McConnell approached the other chiefs and they authorized two unmodified (unarmored, no SSB radio) CH-3Cs to be sent by Tactical Air Command to Nakhon Phanom for ninety days temporary duty. Fuel was flown to the lima sites, and the first HH-43 staging flights took place on June 26. Two days later, the Royal Thailand Government authorized the deployment to Nakhon Phanom of the two CH-3Cs and between twenty and forty personnel.¹³⁰

The question of special air warfare pilots flying T-28s during search and rescue was likewise settled. When this was first proposed, the Bangkok embassy did not think it a wise move, since the RTG approved the SAW deployment solely as a training mission.¹³¹ The United States did have permission to use Thai-based forces in SAR over Laos; but to the embassy, using Water Pump's T-28s "with freshly painted USAF insignia" was the equivalent of stationing five bona fide Air Force fighters at Udon. However, using Nakhon Phanom or Udon as a staging base would require a new RTG clearance. The embassy hinted the Thai would thumb down the idea.¹³²

Sullivan went along with this rationale for two months; but by mid-May, he was troubled over how often he had given Air America T-28 pilots permission to fly low cover for SAR helicopters. He had been obliged to do this because the Navy could not furnish any A-1Hs for alert at Udon and because those from carriers always seemed to arrive over Laos too late. Sullivan knew that every flight by a contract pilot in a T-28 jeopardized the Air America mission. There was a close call the previous week when a T-28 was shot up on a SAR mission over North Vietnam but managed to crashland in friendly territory. Accordingly, Sullivan urged again that the Udon SAW pilots be allowed to put USAF markings on their T-28s and fly this low coverage when needed.¹³³ This time, General Harris went along and the Bangkok embassy agreed to ask the Royal Thailand Government On June 4, 1965, the Thai Supreme Command gave approval.¹³⁴

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129. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 2065, Jun 22, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2085, Jun 26, 1965.

130. Msgs, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 230353Z Jun 65, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD (Personal Maj Gen Moore to Amb Sullivan), 251057Z Jun 65, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 230131Z Jun 65, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2133, Jun 28, 1965.

131. However, one of Water Pump's original missions was to provide a readily available source of U.S. aircraft to augment the RLAf, if needed. [Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 052053Z Mar 64, CINCPAC to JCS, 130443Z Mar 64.]

132. Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to 2d AD, SECSTATE, 1313, Mar 10, 1965.

133. Eventually, three-sided brackets were mounted along the rear half of the T-28 fuselage. Panels with either RLAf or USAF insignia were slipped into the brackets depending on the mission. Training flights carried no national markings whatsoever. [Personal recollections of the author.]

134. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to AmEmb Bangkok, SECSTATE, 1884, May 18, 1965, AmEmb Bangkok to

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The creation of Steel Tiger fostered further relaxation of Washington's hand on air operations. Beginning on April 14, the Joint Chiefs let CINCPAC approve all Yankee Team missions over Laos except in the extreme north (where the Chinese were poking along on their road) and in the remote western reaches (where Pathet Lao activity had dwindled since Phoumi's forces fled Nam Tha). Except in an emergency, no aircraft was to enter or leave Laos via North Vietnam nor could route reconnaissance be flown under ten thousand feet. If this altitude proved unsatisfactory, a single low-level, high-speed pass could be made. Although escorts were authorized, suppressive fire on the towns of Samneua, Khangkhai, and Xieng Khouangville was forbidden—even if an escort was fired upon. Missions not falling in these categories needed clearance through the Joint Chiefs for a case-by-case review, and all missions still had to be coordinated with the embassy in Vientiane. This particularly applied to retaliation strikes—which required Sullivan's specific approval.¹³⁵

On April 17, Washington's grip on strike operations in Laos was eased more. CINCPAC and the embassy were allowed to set up Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger missions together, without worrying about their number, the division between day and night sorties, sterile periods, or how many planes per mission. Secondary targets were selected from the embassy/RLAF lists. If there were no night secondary targets, aircrews were allowed to drop ordnance on Tiger Island, North Vietnam, or in free-strike zones in South Vietnam. Chokepoints were to be reseeded as often as needed. Cratering was authorized as an appropriate secondary target. All conventional ordnance was allowed, but napalm was banned. In coordination with or at the request of the embassy, any fixed or mobile target of opportunity could be hit without checking through Washington, but the instructions did not mention the use of U.S. aircraft for close support of Laotian ground forces.¹³⁶

On May 3, Sullivan agreed to a MACV proposal to reverse the priorities between armed reconnaissance and secondary targets. That is, aircraft could hit a fixed target first, then fly armed reconnaissance of roads and lines of communication. The ambassador took this action because Colonel Tyrrell convinced him that aircraft, if they still had sufficient rockets or 20-mm ammunition to perform effective route interdiction, could maneuver better once they had dropped their bombs. Even so, the ambassador suspected that there was a good chance MACV might let the secondaries detract from the armed reconnaissance program. So, "at the risk of being accused of being an armchair Air Marshal," Sullivan reminded Westmoreland that now was the time to focus on trucks. "Later, when roads are impassable, we can concentrate on depots in fair assurance the Viet Minh will not . . . be able to resupply them." However, Sullivan exaggerated when he said there was still two months of good flying weather left "to plaster the depots."¹³⁷

At the same time, the first Bango/Whiplash fighters went on alert. Beginning on May 5, Tyrrell received several reports that a group of ten to twelve enemy tanks were maneuvering on the Plain of Jars. On one occasion, T-28s took off but could not find the tanks because of weather. On May 9, the armor was seen near Muong Kheung, and eleven T-28s were instantly fragged, followed by a flight of Bango F-4Cs. After dispensing their ordnance, the [redacted] T-28 pilots marked the target and flew as forward air controllers for the jets. All told, four tanks were destroyed and seven damaged. Tyrrell judged the response and results excellent, with the F-4s arriving one hour and fifteen minutes after they were requested.¹³⁸

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AmEmb Vientiane, SECSTATE, 1821, May 19, 1965, 1956, Jun 4, 1965.

135. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1664, Apr 13, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 9048, 141830Z Apr 65.

136. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 171853Z Apr 65.

137. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1787, May 3, 1965, COMUSMACV (Exclusive for Gen Westmoreland), 031057Z May 65.

138. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2460, 100105Z May 65.

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The alert aircraft worked almost daily over the next two weeks. On May 22, three F-4s from Ubon flew close support for FAR troops trying to hold Muong Nga in northern Luang Prabang Province. During the melee that afternoon, a liaison plane was shot down. The next day, four F-105s from Takhli rendezvoused with Victor control as part of the search and rescue effort to locate the pilot. The jets flew high combat air patrol and were to drop ordnance only to protect the SAR H-34s and T-28 low combat air patrol. However, the Victor forward air controller called in the F-105s to destroy a cluster of shacks and "to strike fear into the enemy." The Thunderchiefs unloaded 20-mm cannon fire and fifteen 2.75-inch rockets at what turned out to be friendly villagers and FAR soldiers huddled within. The final toll was thirteen dead and nineteen wounded. Since the jets were under positive control, Sullivan took full blame for the incident; but needless to say, the Air America C-123 pilot was on his way back to the United States within forty-eight hours. It was ironic that, after his considerable doubt over the HU-16 control ships and their procedures, Sullivan suffered his most serious short round at the hands of personnel he believed better suited for SAR work in northern Laos than the Air Force.¹³⁹

In mid-July, the alert jet force was enlarged. At least two, but no more than four, F-105s and F-4s each would be on fifteen-minute alert from sunrise to thirty minutes before sunset. They could be used in Barrel Roll, Steel Tiger, or for SAR rescue combat air patrol missions. The Vientiane embassy made most Bango/Whiplash requests, but airborne aircraft could ask for strikes on targets detected along approved armed reconnaissance routes. (Later, preplanned targets would be added to improve the use of the Bango/Whiplash force.) The Udom ASOC scrambled the fighters, and gave them the mission's radio frequency, rendezvous instructions, and target information. It also sent CINCPAC and the Bangkok embassy a modified OP-01 report whenever the fighters were launched. No ordnance was dropped in close air support strikes unless a target was marked or the fighters were cleared by the T-28 forward air controllers. Communication between T-28 FACs [redacted] and strike pilots would be via the HU-16 or Victor C-123. Since the Muong Nga incident, the C-123 had to have an RLAf interpreter on board for all missions. T-28s were not needed if the target was on an approved armed reconnaissance route or if the air attaché at Vientiane said forward air controllers were unavailable.¹⁴⁰

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This Bango/Whiplash expansion came just in time to support a small RLG wet-season offensive in Military Region II to retake the positions around Samneua lost during January and February 1965. Vang Pao's command post and the starting point for this operation was Na Khang (Lima Site 36). Between it and Lima Site 58 lay Keo Fa Mut, a key hill some six thousand feet high. Recognizing the area's importance, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had set up strong defenses. When the Meo met stiff resistance, more than forty T-28 sorties were flown against this position beginning July 21. These strikes—chiefly with white phosphorous bombs—were controlled by a USAF [redacted] air liaison officer team, headed by Capt. Keith R. Grimes. Bango/Whiplash aircraft also hit the hilltop with 750-pound bombs. On July 22, the FAR and Meo seized the south slope. Since monitored radio communications indicated that the two North Vietnamese companies on the summit had been ordered to hold to the last man despite acute shortages of food and ammunition, the T-28s and F-4s continued to pound the hill. On one occasion Captain Grimes used four Navy A-6s that were "wandering around" seeking a suitable target. On July 28, RLG forces took Keo Fa Mut without further resistance. The cost to the Laotians were four dead and thirty-three wounded. On the other hand, eighty-three enemy bodies were found, with about forty more still in

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139. (S) Msgs, 2d AD to AIG 914, 221752Z May 65, 231404Z May 65, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2558, 231245Z May 65, SECSTATE, 1919, May 25, 1965.
140. (S) Msgs, 2d AD to 23d ABG, et al, 130915Z Jul 65; Fact Sheet, MACV, Bango/Whiplash, Aug 16, 1965.

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collapsed foxholes and bunkers. Considering the standard enemy practice of carrying away as many dead as possible and having orders to hold to the end, Vang Pao thought that both companies had been annihilated. However, isolated pockets remained; and as government forces cleared them out, Bango/Whiplash fighters hit several truck parks and the eastern end of Route 6 to keep reinforcements from getting through. By August 17, Vang Pao's troops had mopped up and the Meo general declared the area secure.¹⁴¹

Emory C. Swank, Sullivan's deputy in Vientiane, later visited Keo Fa Mut and claimed that it "had to be seen to be believed." Extensive tunnels led to all machinegun and mortar positions, and underground supply depots and command posts with elaborate trench work had been built. The North Vietnamese doubtlessly regarded these positions as impregnable but had not reckoned with air power. Swank reported, Evidence of the telling effect of friendly air bombardment is visible everywhere, especially in the craters fifteen to twenty feet deep and probably twice as wide which covered the mountain tops. The enemy had been literally blasted from his earthworks in a striking affirmation of the role air power can play in close support of ground forces.¹⁴²

The Military Region II forces next pushed along the ridge lines toward Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), and the USAF FAG/ALO teams went with them to control air strikes. However, in the first ten days of September, bad weather grounded many of the T-28s and jets, but this same weather also hampered enemy resupply. The skies broke clear on September 11; and on the 19th, following two days of strafing by T-28s, five hilltops northwest of Hua Muong fell. On September 21, Vang Pao's troops reentered Hua Muong (Lima Site 58) after nearly two months of hard fighting in the precipitous, heavily forested, and inhospitable terrain of northeastern Laos. During the campaign, RLAF T-28s flew 788 sorties and the Bango/Whiplash jets flew 288. Ambassador Sullivan said in a message to Brig. Gen. John R. Murphy (who had replaced Colonel McCreery as deputy commander), that air power broke the back of the enemy. Air power also helped put "aggressive drive into the friendly forces," and Vang Pao was grateful. Then, after adding his own kudos, Sullivan closed with: "We'll try to stir up a little more action on another front in the near future."¹⁴³

141. (C) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2976, 121141Z Aug 65, DIA to AIG 7011, 230130Z Aug 65; intvw, John F. Fuller, AWS historian, with Lt Col Keith R. Grimes, Sep 74; PACAF DI Report, *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Jul 22, 1965 [hereafter cited as *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, with appropriate date].

142. (C) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A-66, subj: A Visit with General Vang Pao, Sep 21, 1965.

143. (C) *Ibid*; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Sep 2, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to Dep Comdr/2d AD, 211010Z Sep 65.

[REDACTED]

Chapter VII

See-Saw on the Plain (U)

① During the summer of 1965, as Vang Pao edged toward Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), Ambassador Sullivan and military authorities spent much time and effort seeking a way to halt communist aerial resupply flights into northeastern Laos. The embassy first got wind of these flights in April, when [REDACTED] reports suggested a pair of Soviet-built Il-14 aircraft might be making occasional night runs from North Vietnam, one dropping flares and the other dispensing cargo. Since the intelligence was sketchy, it was possible the flares were ground fired and the flights covert 34-Alpha (34-A) missions.¹ Even if they were enemy planes, the chances of catching one in the act seemed pretty slim; Pathet Lao territory was "nasty country" at night, demanding the best navigational equipment and pilot skills. There was also an outside chance the transports were engaged in innocent passage or had Souphanouvong or other Pathet Lao officials on board. If so, Sullivan believed Souvanna would rule out any attempt to down the aircraft. In fact, the very thought of American fighters blazing away at a transport loaded with Pathet Lao very important persons already had Sullivan "spinning his prayer wheel." Nonetheless, as part of the April 17 relaxation of Washington control over air operations, President Johnson approved the use of U.S. aircraft to intercept these flights. His decision was somewhat unusual, catching Sullivan and Souvanna by surprise, for neither had requested it. All in all, however, Sullivan welcomed the President's action.²

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② Yankee Team photos later confirmed two North Vietnamese Il-14s parked at the Samneua airfield. The country team's consensus was that it was best to attack these planes on the ground, but Souvanna had banned air strikes on the town or airfield and leaned toward the RLAF T-28s flying the mission. He also had prohibited hitting the Il-14s at remote landing sites or in the air since they could be carrying passengers. The only avenue open was to catch the North Vietnamese flagrantly dropping supplies by parachute. For this reason, Souvanna soon reversed his preference for the T-28s (he concluded they might bungle the job) and wondered instead if the Air Force could undertake such "a refined type of intercept."³

③ PACAF thought the mission could be conducted by Souvanna's ground rules but not until precise information on the flights was at hand. Thus, during most of May, the GCI radar sites at Nakhon Phanom and Udon monitored the Il-14s. They found that the North Vietnamese had now switched to day operations and occasionally flew as far south as the Plain of Jars. By May 23, two fixed routes (with offloading in two northeast areas) were pinpointed. Deeming the warning time for scrambling interceptors sufficient, the 2d Air Division suggested that Bango F-4Cs begin a ground alert at Udon for this mission on June 1. The air support operations center would launch the F-4Cs in flights of from four to ten, depending on the number of target aircraft airborne and the routes followed. (Enemy flights varied from one to six transports.) Positive identification was to be made prior to any attack, and all intercepts made within Laotian air

1. (S) 34-A operations were covert operations carried out north of the Demilitarized Zone.
2. (S) Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 914, Apr 17, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1689, Apr 19, 1965; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to Alvin Friedman, ASD/ISA, subj: Duck Soup, Sep 7, 1965.
3. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1725, Apr 23, 1965, 1802, May 4, 1965.

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space. PACAF stressed that the mission had to succeed on the first try. Otherwise, the communists would revert to night operations at once.⁴

4. (U) Souvanna approved the daylight intercepts—now coded Duck Soup—on June 2. Ground rules laid down by the JCS, Ambassador Sullivan, and the 2d Air Division specified that the North Vietnamese transports must be engaged in aerial supply when taken under fire. For this purpose, four Whiplash F-105s would stand alert at Korat from late afternoon until darkness. If scrambled by the deputy commander's ASOC, they were to fly at low level, staying clear of communist radar, Samneua, and all known flak batteries. The ASOC would monitor 34-A missions and civilian aircraft, feeding the information to the Duck Soup flight so there would be no inadvertent shutdown. In addition, a FAG team from Na Khang (Lima Site 36) would help direct the fighters to the latest enemy resupply [redacted] personnel would send any information directly to the FAG team for retransmitting to the victor control ship, which would act as a radio relay between the ground and the Duck Soup flight. Direct communication between the interceptors and FAG team was authorized, however.⁵

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5. (U) Duck Soup ran into snags from the start. The June 5 losses of a Navy F-4 and an Air Force F-105⁶ and the subsequent search and rescue pulled the Air America C-123 off alert and into the air. Three days later, Sullivan called on General Moore to substitute the HU-16 Albatross or the Udom-based HC-54 control ship⁷ for the Victor C-123, which was needed to help haul supplies to Lima Site 36 for Vang Pao's summer offensive. No sooner was this switch approved than Sullivan asked that all Duck Soup aircraft stand down until June 21 to place Air America airlift on a full-day rather than a half-day basis. Meantime, the ambassador promised to examine the current intelligence on North Vietnamese aerial resupply. If necessary, he would suggest changes in the current procedures governing alert and control aircraft.⁸ By June 18, Sullivan concluded that the Air America airlift could not revert to flying only in the morning. To keep the supplies flowing to Vang Pao and the scattered Meo outposts in Samneua Province, the airline's C-47s had to work into the late afternoon. This cut any chance of a Duck Soup intercept to roughly two hours before sunset and at night. Given these conditions, 2d Air Division recommended the program be canceled.⁹

6. (U) To save Duck Soup, Sullivan proposed an alternative he felt was practical and relatively simple. It avoided stopping the supply flights and lessened the chances of a "misdirected intercept." Under this plan, only assets in Laos would be used. Two RLAF T-28s would be moved to Vang Pao's Military Region II headquarters at Long Tieng, which had a recently lengthened 4,200-foot runway and excellent communications to Vientiane [redacted]. The fighters would be flown by Air America pilots thoroughly familiar with the terrain and

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4. (U) Msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 291935Z May 65, 13th AF, 311235Z May 65.

5. (U) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1950, Jun 2, 1965, 2d AD to 6234th TFW, Dep Comdr/2d AD, et al, 030853Z Jun 65, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 2621, 030950Z Jun 65, 2626, 041212Z Jun 65.

6. (U) Sullivan described June 5 as "another day of fun and games which included such features as an F-105 pilot parachuting into the suburbs of Vientiane and checking into the Embassy for a change of clothes and a ride home." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, date-time group blurred.]

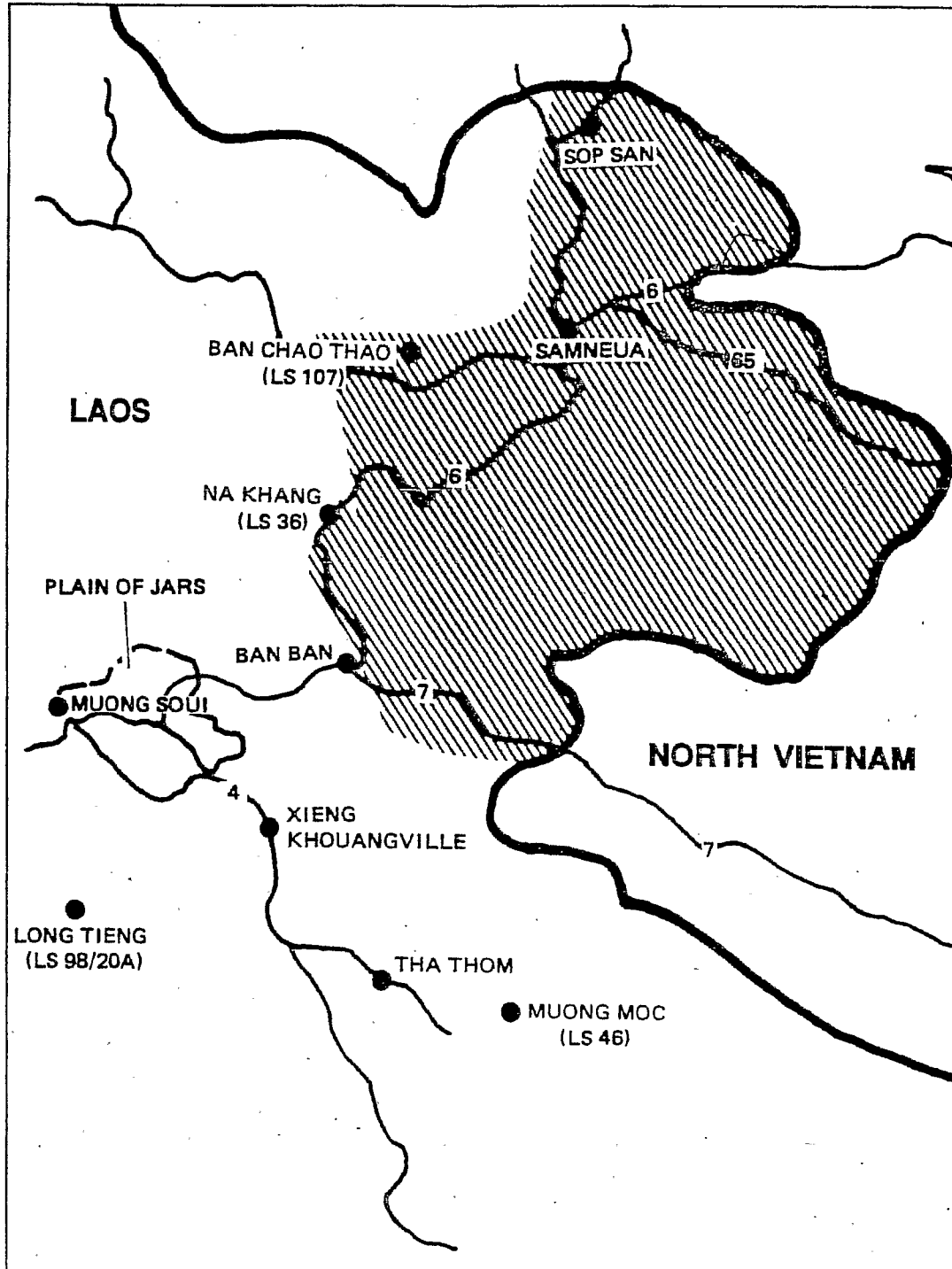
7. (U) Three HC-54s on rotational temporary duty from Guam and Tachikawa AB, Japan, had just arrived at Udom to assume the HU-16's duties. The HU-16s were soon transferred to Da Nang and limited to missions in the Gulf of Tonkin. The HC-54s, with their higher ceilings, were better suited for operating over the mountainous terrain of northern Laos; but they were not properly equipped to act as a flying command post, lacking adequate backup communications and special control equipment for assuming effective direction of a search and rescue mission. In December 1965, two HC-130s arrived as replacements for the HC-54s, which were phased out by April 1966. [Capt B. Conn Anderson, USAF, *USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), pp 42-43.]

8. (U) Msgs, Dep Comdr/2d AD to 2d AD, 080913Z Jun 65, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 110030Z Jun 65, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD, 111110Z Jun 65, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, 160006Z Jun 65.

9. (U) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD, SECSTATE, 2047, Jun 18, 1965, SECSTATE, 2079, Jun 25, 1965.

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Duck Soup Operating Area



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operating conditions in northern Laos. They would be given enemy aircraft identification training before deployment. Their planes, armed only with .50-caliber machineguns, would stand daily alert until five in the evening, when they would take off from Long Tieng and be in the vicinity of the most recent sightings within twenty minutes. They would then loiter to dusk before flying back to Udom. If a North Vietnamese transport was seen, the T-28s would give chase but withhold fire until the FAG team at Lima Site 36 approved. Since Souvanna had agreed to Duck Soup, Sullivan envisioned no problem in getting him to accept this modified plan but did not foresee the State Department's opposition.¹⁰

Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, put Sullivan on notice that State was not willing to run the risk of Americans flying T-28s in Laos, except during an emergency search and rescue mission in planes marked with U.S. insignia. He thought the use of Laotian [redacted] for Duck Soup should be explored. With all the pilots trained by Water Pump, surely Sullivan could find two such individuals. Like Air America personnel, they should undergo intensive aircraft identification training before being sent to Long Tieng. To make sure the Laotian [redacted] fully understood the instructions passed to them, Unger suggested stationing reliable interpreters in the Vientiane air operations center and with the forward air guide at Lima Site 36. Lastly, the former ambassador said there was no evidence of Soviet involvement in the airlift; but if their participation became evident, all intercepts were forbidden.¹¹

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The Joint Chiefs reminded Admiral Sharp that Duck Soup had been laid on by the "highest authority," and that he and Ambassador Sullivan should come up with a solution, preferably one not using U.S. personnel. Sharp, however, sided with Sullivan; it was better for American pilots to tackle such a sensitive undertaking than the Laotians [redacted]. If an American pilot was shot down, the admiral felt the chances of his falling into the wrong hands could be reduced by enlarging the search and rescue force during all Duck Soup operations.¹²

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Meanwhile, Colonel Tyrrell and General Murphy had a back-to-the-drawing-board session at Udom, trying to hammer out a plan acceptable to Washington. The air attaché and deputy commander decided to substitute Bango F-4Cs for the T-28s. The Udom jets would pull ground alert beginning at five each evening, allowing Air America time to complete resupply missions in northeast Laos before having to clear the area. If the Lima Site 36 forward air controller did not call for a scramble, the F-4s would take off at dusk for an airborne alert in the general vicinity of Na Khang. If a North Vietnamese transport showed up and sufficient light remained for a positive identification before making a firing pass, the FAC would call in the F-4s. (Tyrrell and Murphy also held that the A-1Es were just as reliable for this type mission as jets.)¹³

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After consulting with Ambassador Sullivan on July 18, Admiral Sharp again stated that the best solution was to station two T-28s with Air America pilots at Long Tieng and to follow the format sketched out by the ambassador, including the additional SAR forces. Tyrrell's and Murphy's F-4 proposal was acceptable, since it also included American personnel. Sharp thought it was time for the Joint Chiefs to convince the State Department to modify its objections to Air America pilots flying intercept missions. The chiefs dropped the impasse into McNamara's lap in the hope he could talk Secretary of State Rusk into reconsidering.¹⁴

Over the next month, Washington reviewed the intercept problem. On August 24, Undersecretary of State George W. Ball expressed strong reservations about these missions,

10. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2079, Jun 25, 1965.

11. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1121, Jun 30, 1965.

12. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 5168, 031650Z Jul 65, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 032317Z Jul 65.

13. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 18, Jul 6, 1965.

14. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 180035Z Jul 65; memo, Blouin to Friedman, Sep 7, 1965.

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particularly when the last sighting (from a non-American source, at that) had been on June 21. Furthermore, the Pentagon was troubled over the number of aircraft that would be tied down on alert. The State Department's stance compelled Sullivan to closely reexamine Duck Soup. Although enemy transports were spotted on July 15 (several at night), July 25 (two in the late afternoon), and on August 10 (several at night), he now deemed the flights too few to justify a full-time alert. The downturn in sightings was partially attributed to poor weather, but GCI radars showed that the North Vietnamese had gone back to flying chiefly at night. Since there were no all-weather interceptors in the theater he could call on, the ambassador sought discretionary authority to trigger Duck Soup when sightings and conditions warranted. He did not say if he would use the T-28s or F-4s but agreed to keep Washington informed. On September 2, Admiral Sharp endorsed Sullivan's position.¹⁵

Three weeks passed with no action on Sullivan's request. Finally, at the urging of the JCS, McNamara approached Rusk on September 24. He was told that Sullivan would not receive this authority because the drops had fallen off and were almost entirely at night. State further pointed out that, over the past five months, neither Souvanna nor any other RLG official had raised the resupply subject with the ambassador. The matter might logically be expected to come up if the airlift was hurting the Royal Laotian Government. In addition, it would be hard under international law for Washington to claim prisoner-of-war status for Air America pilots since they were actually U.S. civilians. If captured, they might be treated as "unprivileged belligerents," and capture would confirm to the communists the paramilitary nature of Air America. This information was furnished Sullivan on the 28th, but the State Department wanted him to understand it had not closed the door to using Air America pilots in T-28 intercepts. If enemy aerial resupply resumed in force, the decision would be reexamined.¹⁶

Sullivan realized that State was set against Duck Soup. In early October, when Maj. Gen. Ouane Rathikone, RLA Chief of Staff, reported that Il-14s were making occasional daylight drops in Luang Prabang Province from the general area of Dien Bien Phu, Sullivan did not ask for reactivation of the intercepts. Instead, he promised Ouane he would see if U.S. strikes could be cycled against Dien Bien Phu in the hope of catching some of the transports on the ground. However, when the ambassador sent the information to COMUSMACV, it was in an almost offhand manner—if Westmoreland had a few spare aircraft he did not have targets for, he might find it profitable to schedule them against the Dien Bien Phu airfield.¹⁷

Duck Soup was not considered again, and an incident in South Vietnam in mid-September may have had a bearing on this, even though the incident was not mentioned in any State Department cables to Sullivan. Two F-100s made a pass so close to an ICC C-46 that the startled commission pilot nearly lost control of his plane. The ICC sent a strong protest to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and the 2d Air Division investigated the matter. Although the pilots were cleared, State could not understand how Air Force fighters could intercept an aircraft that had "ICC" stenciled in large letters on the wing and fuselage. If this could happen in the clear weather and broad daylight of South Vietnam, the chances for mistakes were much higher in Laos where the weather was poor and there were innumerable nonmilitary flights, including two a week between Hanoi and Vientiane. Since the intercepts were limited to the late afternoon and twilight, the odds against positive identification and for an inadvertent shootdown were far higher. The near miss in South Vietnam may well have ended any State Department endorsement of Duck Soup.

15. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 130, Aug 24, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220, Aug 28, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 020537Z Sep 65.

16. Memo, SECDEF to CJCS, subj: Enemy Resupply Activity Northern Laos Duck Soup, Sep 24, 1965; msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 192, Sep 28, 1965.

17. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 330, Oct 4, 1965.

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18. If Admiral Sharp thought that back in February he had satisfied Ambassador Sullivan's need for H-34s, he was too optimistic. In early June, Sullivan told the DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, Col. Jack G. Cornett, USA, that the Air America helicopter fleet needed to be increased to twenty-six H-34s due to SAR commitments. Nevertheless, the worldwide shortage of these machines persisted, and those that could be found were costly to maintain. Even if Air America got the helicopters, it had to find qualified flying personnel or train the pilots from scratch. Moreover, the required expansion of the airline's Udom facilities would not be cheap. Cornett concluded that if the H-34 remained the backbone of the Air America fleet, the U.S. effort in Laos was in trouble.¹⁸

19. Two USAF CH-3Cs arrived in Thailand on July 5, and Cornett proposed that the embassy authorize the use of those aircraft for SAR in northern Laos (CH-3Cs had already been approved for SAR over North Vietnam). Unlike the HH-43s, there was no need to pre-position these two machines at remote lima sites. If an aircraft was lost in Laos, Cornett envisioned the nearest H-34 or CH-3 flying to the rescue. It would most likely be a CH-3, since one would be on ground alert at Nakhon Phanom during all planned missions. By using the CH-3s, extra H-34s would not be needed for Air America, which could use the sixteen it had for cargo hauling, and the Udom facilities would not require expansion. All told, a lot of Laos MAP funds could be saved.¹⁹

20. Cornett was well aware of Sullivan's reluctance to use the Air Force and his high esteem for Air America. He admitted that the airline pilots that had been there for some time knew the area better than their USAF counterparts, but training and orientation flights could overcome this handicap. Moreover, new Air America pilots were no different than USAF types; both came to Laos without local experience and both had to learn the country. Admiral Sharp at once threw his weight behind Cornett. At a July 9 meeting between embassy and deputy chief personnel, Vientiane's representatives sided with the military.²⁰

21. Even though country team members opted for USAF SAR helicopters in Laos, Ambassador Sullivan still preferred Air America. He realized that sooner or later he would have to accept USAF HH-43s and/or CH-3s for SAR in this area on a "first-come, first-served basis;" but before giving in on this touchy subject, the ambassador wanted Washington's guidance. In the interim, he discussed the matter at Udom with Colonel Cornett and Lt. Gen. Paul S. Emrick, PACOM Chief of Staff. They agreed that, for the time being, the final decision would be left hanging. Sullivan also accepted an interim limit of twenty-one for the H-34s.²¹

22. Two HH-43s and two CH-3Cs were at Nakhon Phanom, two HH-43s were at Udom, and six HH-3s were due to arrive in Thailand during September and October. As soon as the crews for the HH-3s were checked out, the HH-43s and CH-3s would be withdrawn from Thailand. Wanting to "explore all alternatives," Washington asked Sullivan to clarify if these Thai-based USAF helicopters would do SAR from bases in Thailand and land in Laos just to refuel or would they stand ground alert at various lima sites. If the latter were the case, Washington wanted to know what sites were involved, what the risks of exposure were, if it would be wiser to limit the Air Force to flying SAR only in Steel Tiger and North Vietnam, and if Souvanna had been consulted or his permission obtained for USAF rescue operations in northern Laos?²²

18. (S) Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 070900Z Jul 65. In this message, Colonel Cornett repeated to Admiral Sharp a cable he had sent to Ambassador Sullivan.

19. (S) *Ibid.*

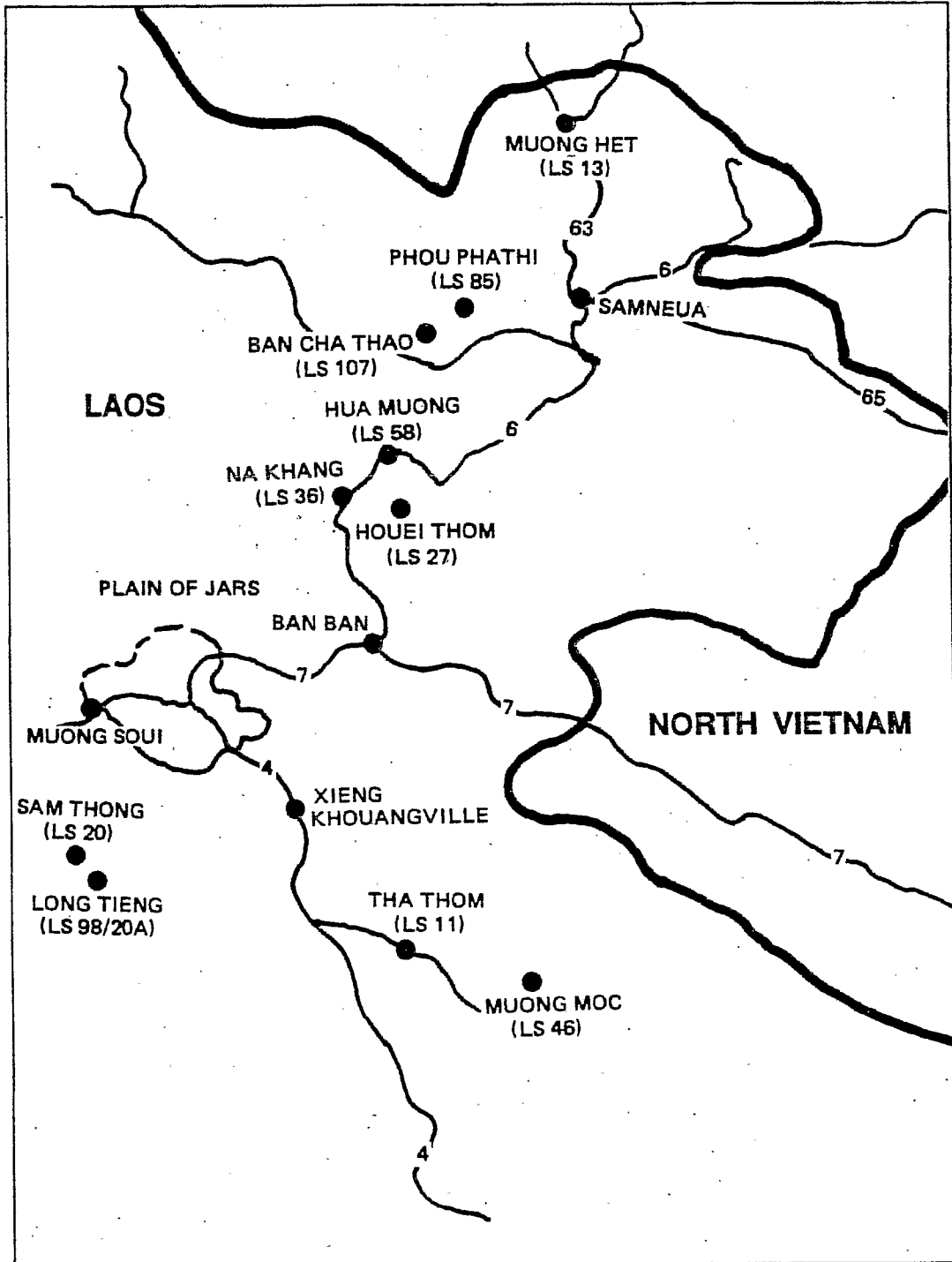
20. (S) *Ibid.*; msgs, CINCPAC (Adm Sharp) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), 072228Z Jul 65, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 091205Z Jul 65.

21. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 21, Jul 13, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 130711Z Jul 65.

22. (S) Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 56, Jul 21, 1965.

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Lima Sites in Northeastern Laos



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Emory C. Swank, Sullivan's deputy in Vientiane, replied that for now the embassy wanted the CH-3s to stand ground alert and be used in North Vietnam. Fuel for them and for the HH-43s had already been shipped to Na Khang, Muong Moc, and Ban Cha Thao (Lima Sites 36, 46, and 107). These were isolated sites "in areas closed to itinerant travelers, including journalists," and the risk of exposure was slight. In particular, Lima Site 36 was sufficiently defended and equipped to permit helicopters and crews either to be permanently based there or rotated back to Thailand once a week.²³ Feeding or housing the crew was no problem, but a small maintenance contingent (not to exceed nine) was needed. An Air America pilot familiar with the area would be sent to Na Khang to act as navigator for SAR missions until the Air Force pilots were proficient. Lima Site 36's location made it an ideal quick reaction base for SAR in western North Vietnam and for northern and central Laos as well. In fact, Swank now proposed releasing the H-34s from all SAR work and employing them exclusively for high-priority airlift. They would fly a rescue mission only if they happened to be closer to the downed pilot than the USAF helicopter. Swank thought he would have little trouble getting approval from Souvanna once the prime minister was told the changes were dictated by the rising tempo of air strikes against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese.²⁴

On August 5, 1965, Washington decided that due to "political factors" Air America would continue all search and rescue work in the Barrel Roll area. USAF helicopters based in Thailand would be used in North Vietnam and could be pre-positioned on the ground at Lima Site 36 for this purpose. No pre-positioning was approved for Sites 46 and 107; they would serve solely for helicopter refueling. No personnel or USAF-marked aircraft were to stay overnight at Site 36 or anywhere else in Laos. Washington did leave the embassy a loophole: "Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters may be used in extremis for SAR missions in Laos, operating from either Site 36 or directly from bases in Thailand."²⁵ In other words, if it came down to a choice between an American pilot being captured and imprisoned or the Air Force flying a SAR in enemy-controlled Laos to save him, the rescue always took precedence. Instead of denying Swank's basic request, Washington discreetly gave it a stamp of approval.

During the next two weeks, local bad weather and the absence of navigational aids in northern Laos hampered Detachment 1, 38th Air Rescue Squadron, in maintaining its alert at Lima Site 36. Several times its helicopters could not reach the site. With the weather clear in North Vietnam, however, Rolling Thunder sorties often flew without any SAR forces pre-positioned in Laos for a quick response. The 2d Air Division urged that the ground rules be changed to permit the CH-3s to stay overnight at Na Khang and escape Thailand's marginal weather. To keep a low American profile at the site, the aircraft and crews would have "convertible sheep-dipping." Under this scheme, the helicopters would fly into Laos and stand alert without any national markings, the crews wearing Air America-type clothing without insignia or identification. USAF decals and uniforms would be locked inside the aircraft and readily available for any mission over North Vietnam. Hence, the 38th Squadron could take on a "local coloration" while in Laos and revert to USAF status once over North Vietnam. Since Vang Pao's Hua Muong offensive had pushed the defensive perimeter of Site 36 out thirteen miles, Ambassador Sullivan did not fear American exposure and endorsed the 2d Air Division's request.²⁶

While Washington was mulling over this new development, an F-105 was shot down just inside North Vietnam on August 28. The pilot was still missing two days later, chiefly because

23. This was the first time anyone had suggested keeping helicopters in Laos overnight. All previous discussion centered on having them return to Thailand around dusk.

24. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 94, Jul 22, 1965.

25. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 92, Aug 5, 1965.

26. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 194, Aug 20, 1965.

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of the bad weather that delayed departure of the SAR helicopters from Nakhon Phanom. This incident clearly showed the importance of staging the machines to Lima Site 36 in adverse weather. Sullivan once more pressed Washington for approval of the 2d Air Division's request.²⁷

On August 31, Washington agreed to allow the CH-3s to remain overnight at Na Khang. This approval rested on the strength of Sullivan's assurance that security at Site 36 was adequate. If it deteriorated, the State and Defense Departments reserved the right to review their action. In truth, it was strongly suggested that the 38th Squadron's helicopters not shuttle to Na Khang if the weather in Thailand was satisfactory. Washington also wanted a detailed plan and expressed two serious reservations about sheep-dipping the crews. First, discovery of this ruse would bring on a far messier public relations problem than simply admitting that the Air Force was operating in Laos. Second, if the crew was captured, the ruse would be obvious and might make prisoner-of-war treatment harder to claim. However, Washington was willing to listen, if Sullivan thought that sheep-dipping the crews was essential.²⁸

The plan the ambassador submitted did not specify sheep-dipping and had just five USAF personnel (pilot, copilot, engineer, and two medics) staying overnight at Lima Site 36. They would carry USAF identification cards and wear standard flight clothing without insignia. Rotation would be every three days, the crews bringing their food for this period; and the helicopters would bear American markings in flight. However, these markings would be removed at Site 36 to minimize the risk of a casual identification, and ground personnel would be brought into the country only to do emergency maintenance. Sullivan promised a continuous review of the site's security and, in what was a highly unusual position for him, said he did not think it necessary to inform Souvanna of these arrangements.²⁹ The Pathet Lao shelled several outposts ringing the site, a week after the USAF CH-3s started full-time operation from Na Khang, but Sullivan did not believe the mortar attacks were triggered by the presence of the helicopters on the site. The site was one of Vang Pao's main bases and a center of Air America resupply operations—it was a logical target, with or without the USAF presence. The FAR and Meo quickly followed up with reinforcements; but the ambassador conceded the risk, while sharply reduced, was not eliminated. Nevertheless, the benefits of pre-positioning and maintaining the helicopters and their crews overnight outweighed any thoughts of ending the alert.³⁰

The State Department did not completely share the ambassador's confidence over the security at Site 36 and reviewed the various cover stories developed for helicopter operations following the attack. The result was a course of action to be followed if a CH-3 were shot down or crashed in North Vietnam. If this happened, the press would simply be briefed that a helicopter had been lost while flying a humanitarian search and rescue mission and further comment declined on the grounds that additional information would endanger future rescue efforts. However, if the Pathet Lao attacked and overran Lima Site 36 and captured a CH-3 and/or its crew, exposure of the complete picture of USAF use of the site from captured personnel and the POL stores was possible. The cover story (the helicopter had been forced to make an emergency landing during a humanitarian mission and was captured while making repairs) would not be credible in the light of this condemning evidence, raising the question of why was the United States flying search and rescue in Laos in the first place. Since SAR was an adjunct to strike operations, the United States and the Royal Laotian Government would be placed in the embarrassing position of having to admit violating the Geneva accords.

27. [REDACTED] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 223, Aug 30, 1965.

28. [REDACTED] Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 140, Aug 31, 1965.

29. [REDACTED] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 249, Sep 7, 1965. Sullivan already had Souvanna's permission to stage the Air America H-34s to Site 36. Lacking any outward identification, the USAF crews bore a striking similarity to the airline's pilots and could easily be passed off as nonmilitary crewmen.

30. [REDACTED] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 285, Sept 16, 1965.

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Consequently, State suggested that if Na Khang fell to the communists, spokesmen should admit a helicopter had been captured while engaged in search and rescue and refuse to say anything more because of the jeopardy to future rescues. Removal of the crew insignia and markings was out since it would be inconsistent with this line.³¹

Ambassador Sullivan continued to contend that the chances of the Pathet Lao overrunning Site 36 and capturing a CH-3 and its crew were "extremely remote." If they did, the best course was to acknowledge it publicly and explain that Americans were in Laos because of a humanitarian SAR mission. Should a crew or helicopter be captured, the presence or absence of crew insignia and aircraft markings was immaterial. The ambassador additionally recognized that the pre-positioned fuel drums were inconsistent with any cover story. The best bet, he said, was to stick to the line that the 38th Air Rescue Squadron was on a search and rescue mission, then decline further comment.³² Fortunately, there was a lull in communist attacks on Lima Site 36 [it was merely the calm before the storm] and the State Department's anxieties subsided.

During October, however, the shortcomings of the CH-3s in search and rescue became apparent. They surpassed the HH-43s and H-34s in range and speed, but their lack of armor plating raised the odds against survival in combat. On November 5, a CH-3 from Site 36 was sent into North Vietnam to look for an A-1E that been conducting an electronic search for a downed F-105. When it arrived in the area where the A-1 went down, the CH-3 was hit by ground fire and the crew bailed out. A Navy rescue helicopter en route to the scene was also struck by ground fire and made an emergency landing in North Vietnam. The second CH-3 was on its way to the first site when it got word of the Navy aircraft in distress. It diverted and, aided by other Navy helicopters, rescued all the crewmen. None of the ships had enough fuel to fly to the other crash site. Eventually, the SAR for the first CH-3 was called off and the crew was listed as missing.³³

The loss of the CH-3 in North Vietnam raised questions in Sullivan's mind about cover stories for downed and captured crewmen. He knew that under the Geneva Convention such individuals need only give name, rank, and serial number, but he also knew that the communists had ways of making prisoners talk. It could be highly compromising to the Royal Thailand Government and Royal Laotian Government (not to mention the United States) if a captured crewman confessed he was operating out of Thailand or Laos. He wanted to know if it was possible for General Moore to tell his people that, if captured, they should say their operating base was Da Nang or elsewhere in South Vietnam. Sullivan sought Moore's comments and "a standard line we can all stick to in the event of future shootdowns with the likelihood the crew was captured."³⁴

Neither Moore nor Harris had ever cared for cover stories. When Moore passed Sullivan's request to General McConnell, the Air Force Chief of Staff left no doubt in anyone's mind where he stood. To McConnell, it was one thing for the State Department, Defense Department, or CIA to come up with cover stories as pap for the public or newsmen, but quite another to ask captured flyers to go along. For some time, all airmen had been trained to rigidly adhere to the Code of Conduct, which did not provide for cover stories. When Moore transmitted McConnell's strong views to Sullivan, he closed with: "We can recommend no other course of action."³⁵

31. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 188, Sep 25, 1965.

32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 319, Sep 28, 1965.

33. Ltr, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to Comdr, 2d AD, subj: SAR Mission (6 Nov 65), n.d., in hist, 38th ARS, Oct-Dec 65, Doc 7.

34. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD (Maj Gen Moore), SECSTATE, 465, Nov 8, 1965.

35. Msg, 2d AD (Major Gen Moore) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), 120133Z Nov 65, retransmitted as msg, PACAF to CINCPAC, 140519Z Nov 65.

See-Saw on the Plain

The American contribution to the war in northern Laos had slipped into the shadow of the more visible conflict in South and North Vietnam. Nowhere was this more clearly illustrated than in the growing public awareness of events in Southeast Asia. In October 1965, a rash of articles appeared in American journals depicting the bombing of North Vietnam by Thai-based American planes. When interdiction missions on the trails in southern Laos resumed in the following months, they fast became the worst kept secret of the war. A visiting congressman told reporters the United States was bombing Viet Cong supply lines in Laos as well as "hitting them on the ground," moving the Russian ambassador in Vientiane to raise the question with Sullivan for the first time; and a *New York Times* story early in December related MACV plans to intensify the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³⁶

These reports heightened the dilemma faced by Washington and Sullivan. American operations were being carried out with the approval of Souvanna (at times, at his request). The prime minister could never admit this because he wished to preserve Laos' neutral status as best he could. He insisted on secrecy, and cover stories seemed the best way to achieve it. Even the Russian ambassador indicated to Souvanna and Sullivan that his government was willing to wink at United States' operations in Laos if they were not officially acknowledged.³⁷ Too much public disclosure, however, threatened this frail balance.

All through these reports, there were no references to Barrel Roll or American air power supporting Royal Laotian Government ground forces. The December 13 issue of the *National Observer* printed a full-page story on Laos, complete with a map prominently outlining the Plain of Jars but not one word on any U.S. air strikes in that area. Perhaps the reporters who knew of Vang Pao, the Meo, Water Pump, and the search and rescue force saw it as "small potatoes," a side show to the main events in North and South Vietnam. Whatever the reasons, they did not file stories on the actions in northern Laos as they had done in 1960 and 1962 or when Kong Le was being driven back to Muong Soui. To the Americans involved in this area, it was just as well. They were not in the limelight and could work relatively unencumbered as long as they stayed within the guidelines established by Souvanna and Sullivan. The single stipulation seems to have been that what they saw and did there, stayed there. Things were not to be discussed except with people that had an absolute "need-to-know." Little wonder then, that the war in northern Laos was soon spoken of (if at all) as "The Silent War," or "The War That Never was." Ambassador Sullivan, as can be seen from his cables, aimed to keep it that way.

From the moment he arrived in Laos, Sullivan had been deeply concerned over the numerous short rounds attributed to U.S. aircraft. In nearly all cases, investigating boards concluded that the major cause was the failure of the pilots to know precisely where they were relative to friendly positions. By the beginning of the 1965-66 dry season, Sullivan looked for bombing mistakes in the panhandle to decline due to the coverage afforded by the radar at Nakhon Phanom and at Da Nang. On the other hand, Kong Le was planning his perennial try for Phou Kout mountain and Vang Pao was defending his isolated lima sites and was also seeking to keep what had been wrested from the communists during the recent wet season. These Royal Laotian Government actions demanded more RLAF and USAF "flying artillery" and close air support sorties. Further, MACV intended to quicken the armed reconnaissance program, especially at night, and Rolling Thunder aircraft with unexpended ordnance could now hit fixed targets validated by the RLAF on the leg back home. To Sullivan, this increased air activity

36. Msgs, COMUSMACTHAI (Maj Gen Stilwell) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 091305Z Oct 65, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 735, Oct 16, 1965; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 386, Dec 11, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 587, Nov 30, 1965; *New York Times*, Dec 4, 1965; msg, ASD/ISA to JCS, et al, 102012Z Dec 65.

37. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to SECSTATE (Bundy), 687, Dec 27, 1965, retransmitted as msg, CJCS to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 271729Z Dec 65.

The War in Northern Laos

seemed ripe for more accidental bombing in Barrel Roll, even though short rounds there had been rare. The ambassador grew quite uneasy.³⁸

Sullivan knew that placing a navigational aid in the country would assist aircrews in fixing their position. Out of the ambassador's discussion with General McConnell and his staff came the decision to locate a tacan station somewhere in Samneua Province. An automatic device, the tacan did not require permanent servicing, just an occasional visit by a maintenance technician. Personnel of the USAF 1st Mobile Communications Group surveyed several locales and settled on Lima Site 27 (Houei Thom) with Lima Site 36 (Na Khang) as an alternate. Because of the logistic lag, they suggested a TRN-17 tacan now in boxes at Udom. Unfortunately, this portable set needed the constant presence of two technicians. For this task, they suggested sheep-dipped Air Force enlisted men. Sullivan deferred action on the project due to Washington's well-known sensitivity to placing Americans in forward areas. (Site 27 had been attacked several times but never overrun.) On October 23, 1965, however, the ambassador asked that the project be given a high priority. He was sure of Souvanna's approval since the RLAF T-28s could use it for navigation as well. (Actually, the RLAF T-28s required additional radio equipment to use the tacan.) General Westmoreland added his endorsement, noting that the navigational aid would be a boon to the 34-Alpha crews flying into North Vietnam at night.³⁹

It was not until November 27 that Washington assented to a tacan in Laos and the modification of the T-28s so the RLAF could use it. If Souvanna consented, the TRN-17 was to be located at Lima Site 36, not Lima Site 27. Air Force personnel could install it and perform periodic maintenance, provided they were attached for that purpose to the air attaché office at Vientiane. No permission was given for the airmen to perform day-to-day operations. These were to be done by [redacted] the Laotian civil aviation branch, or Air America. If Sullivan had no such individuals, he was to get them. Their availability was to coincide with the equipment's installation.⁴⁰

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[redacted] the friendly village of Ban Nam Hiang was hit by U.S. jets for the third time, twice on successive days. Col. Paul A. Pettigrew,⁴¹ air attaché at Vientiane, flew at once to Savannakhet for a talk with Thao Ma while an embassy team went to Ban Nam Hiang. Though no one in the village was seriously injured, Sullivan was quite upset. He had relaxed the operating rules in July and September, but at no time were villages to be struck unless on the RLAF-approved list. "Either someone is not getting the word," he told General Westmoreland, "or else the word is being conspicuously ignored."⁴²

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The next day, as the Laotian cabinet discussed the attack on Ban Nam Hiang, Generals Westmoreland and Moore flew to Udom to confer with Sullivan. The Americans agreed a tacan was needed to cover Steel Tiger. A South Vietnam location was out, however, because friendly forces controlled no high ground across the panhandle border, and the tacan would have to be put in Laos. Thao Ma had already suggested Phou Kate mountain near Saravane in southern Laos and asked that USAF and not Thai personnel man the equipment. If Americans were used, they would have to be sheep-dipped USAF airmen with Air America cover or genuine civilians recruited by the Department of Defense or the Central Intelligence Agency. The airmen were preferred since USAF personnel were already staying overnight at Lima Site 36 in the search and rescue helicopters. The two tacan technicians, either in mufti or as sheep-dipped Air America

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38. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 404, Oct 23, 1965.

39. *Ibid*; msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 251125Z Oct 65.

40. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 340, Nov 27, 1965.

41. Colonel Pettigrew had succeeded Colonel Tyrrell as Vientiane air attaché in July 1965.

42. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 020715Z Dec 65, SECSTATE, 634, Dec 10, 1965.



See-Saw on the Plain

employees, could be stationed there without making the U.S. presence any more obvious. They could live with and be supported by the HH-3s (which had replaced the CH-3s), and they would appear to be part of the search and rescue group. This same cover could be adopted by tacan personnel at Phou Kate mountain. The conferees summed up: "Our thought is that they would enter and leave Laos 'black' and wear civilian clothes in the same manner [as] USAF ordnance loaders in Vientiane and Savannakhet. Alternatively, they would be sheep-dipped as Air America technicians."⁴³

Washington informed Sullivan on December 14 that it still favored native personnel to handle the tacan's everyday operation and he should speed [redacted] recruiting and arrange for any technical training. When working at the two sites, [redacted] would be sheep-dipped as Laotian civil aviation personnel. However, training would take time and the navigational aids were urgently needed. Consequently, two USAF airmen at each site, disguised as Air America employees, would operate the equipment until the [redacted] were ready. If the latter's availability was delayed more than six weeks, Washington would arrange for civilian contract technicians under Air America cover to replace the airmen.⁴⁴

At this time, twenty-seven [redacted] enlisted men were being trained by the air section of JUSMAGTHAI to man five tacan sites in Thailand. If the [redacted] agreed [redacted] Sullivan could draw from this group. These men had a good grasp of English and electronic theory but were short on tacan experience. Their USAF instructors estimated they would need between ten and sixteen weeks of intensive training on a working TRN-17, followed by two weeks on-the-job-training at the Laotian sites. As soon as the Air Force made the money and training facilities available, it was judged that another four months were required before [redacted] could staff the sites.⁴⁵

Since four months was far too long, the Joint Chiefs on December 28 told Admiral Sharp to furnish contractor technicians under Air America cover. These men were to replace the USAF teams within six weeks after the tacans were installed, to be succeeded in turn [redacted] as soon as they were qualified. Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, USA, Chairman of the JCS, men in Southeast Asia, urged that everything be done to "get this worthwhile show on the road." However, ground action was heating up—Lima Site 36 no longer appeared safe (the search and rescue helicopters had been withdrawn to Long Tieng)—and the security of Phou Kate mountain was in doubt. Thus, by the end of 1965, none of the tacans were in place and the chances of putting one in the Barrel Roll area seemed quite slim.⁴⁶

In early January, Thao Ma arranged for a FAR battalion to be camped near Phou Kate, and fears over security there were allayed. On January 6, after conferring with Ambassador Martin and Generals Westmoreland and Moore at Udom, Sullivan approved the immediate installation of a tacan on the mountain. Maj. Gen. Charles R. Bond, Jr. (who had replaced General Murphy as Deputy Commander, 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force) was designated the "action agent." He was to supervise the sheep-dipping of the 1st Mobile Communications Group airmen, prepare the site, and set up the tacan. MACV would furnish the U.S. Army CH-54s heavy helicopters to move the gear from Udom to Phou Kate. By January 11, the

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43. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 605, Dec 3, 1965, 610, Dec 4, 1965, 634, Dec 10, 1965, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 3861, 051219Z Dec 65, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), Info Amb Sullivan, 100442Z Dec 65.

44. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 389, Dec 14, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 648, Dec 15, 1965.

45. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1187, Dec 16, 1965, 1226, Dec 23, 1965.

46. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 9466, 282320Z Dec 65, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, Dep Comdr, 2d AD, 3955, 240647Z Dec 65, COMUSMAGTHAI (CJCS) to JCS, 251220Z Dec 65; hist, 1974th Comm Gp, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1966, p 84.



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TRN-17 was assembled on the mountain top and the "cooking-in" process had begun. Two days later, the equipment had been flight tested and was on the air as channel 72.⁴⁷

Because of the precarious situation at Lima Site 36, it was agreed that an alternate location was needed for northern Laos. By January 26, survey teams of the 1st Mobile Communications Group recommended Skyline Ridge adjacent to Lima Site 20 (Sam Thong). The Skyline site promised good reception for aircraft—it was six thousand feet in elevation—but its southern location meant its coverage was not as much as Lima Site 36's. From a tactical standpoint, the latter was still the most practical place to put a tacan; but the situation at Na Khang was "not exactly comparable to Waikiki," and the embassy could give no guarantee the site would not be overrun. By February 17, the tacan at Skyline was in operation (although intermittently, due to a balky power amplifier), just in time to aid USAF fighter-bombers defending Lima Site 36 from a North Vietnamese attack. Three days after the tacan at Skyline was working, the first contingent of technicians from the Federal Electric Corporation arrived at Udom. On February 25, Sullivan gave approval for additional SSB radios and USAF maintenance personnel from the 1973d Communications Squadron at Udom to enter Laos. By March, they had set up a direct air request net between Udom's tactical air control center, the Vientiane and Savannakhet air operations centers, and the Seventh Air Force at Tan Son Nhut.⁴⁸

In mid-October 1965, Pathet Lao deserters claimed that five new North Vietnamese battalions were bivouacked near Ban Ban. This raised the estimated enemy order of battle in northern Laos to between nine thousand and ten thousand men. Roadwatch teams saw communist engineers feverishly working to repair and improve Route 7 in the north and Routes 12 and 23 in the central panhandle. Aerial resupply in Samneua and the Plain of Jars also picked up. Between October 2 and 12, seventeen unidentified transports were sighted, all making drops at night. These actions indicated the communists planned to renew their efforts in the coming dry season to clear Route 6 and attempt to wipe out the isolated FAR and Meo pockets in Samneua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. During the first three weeks of October, the [redacted] countered with 300 Barrel Roll sorties, while the Air Force and Navy flew 285. In addition, Bango/Whiplash flew another 43 sorties in reply to FAR direct air support requests.⁴⁹

Vang Pao wound up his limited wet-season campaign on October 23, terming it a success, and the neutralists apparently decided it was their turn. On November 10, Lt. Col. Sing Chanthakouman, the commander at Muong Soui, suddenly announced he was going to retake Phou Kout. To root out enemy bunkers on the mountain, he wanted U.S. jets armed with 750-pound bombs. Colonel Pettigrew passed a request for twenty-four sorties to the 2d Air Division for November 11, anticipating several more days of strikes with sixteen sorties a day. This abrupt assault on Phou Kout, which should have been coordinated beforehand to assure proper air support, caught the 2d Air Division short handed. To meet Colonel Sing's request, the division had to divert sorties from fixed targets and to scramble Bango/Whiplash aircraft.⁵⁰

For the next three days, U.S. jets pounded Phou Kout, hoping to reduce the enemy bunkers to a point where the neutralists could seize and keep this long-standing enemy

47. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 718, Jan 6, 1966, 2d AD to 1st Mbl Comm Gp, 060911Z, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 061105Z Jan 66, 110336Z Jan 66, CINCPAC to JCS, 110340Z Jan 66. Since this facility was used chiefly for tactical support, it was not listed in any unclassified flight publications. [Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 220131Z Mar 66.]

48. Msgs, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 261112Z Jan 66, 141028Z Feb 66, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 171025Z Feb 66.

49. Msgs, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp, 190421Z Oct 65, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CS-448, 210500Z Oct 65, DIA to AIG 925, 041738Z Nov 65; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Oct 14 and Oct 28, 1965.

50. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 6232d CSG, 101000Z Nov 65. This message was to be passed to DEPCOMUSMACHAI's TACC.

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stronghold. Pilots and ground observers reported good results and accurate bombing in the face of heavy 37-mm and automatic weapons fire. Two more days of air strikes were requested.⁵¹

General Westmoreland did not like this helter-skelter approach to scheduling. Whenever more than eight sorties a day were needed to support RLG ground forces, he wanted the request sent two days in advance. The request should give the desired times over target, forward air controller rendezvous coordinates, and the types of targets to be hit. Where conditions precluded two days advance notice, requests should coincide with the ordnance loaded on Bango/Whiplash. Westmoreland further asserted that giving the Laotians so many USAF sorties would render them overly dependent on such support in the future. Finally, he reminded the embassy that interdiction in Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger had first call on air assets, including Bango/Whiplash. Nevertheless, he furnished the requested sorties.⁵²

Sing's troops assaulted Phou Kout on November 16, using Kong Le's old plan of going up the mountain's northern slope, but were driven back by the deeply entrenched enemy. Undaunted, Sing planned another try on the twentieth and Pettigrew asked for thirty-six sorties covering November 19 and 20. While the air attaché's request was two days in advance as Westmoreland wanted, it was not honored because it ate into the interdiction commitment. The best that could be done was to allocate four Bango/Whiplash aircraft that could be turned around to supply eight sorties. MACV also instructed the 2d Air Division and TG 77.0 to make all sorties in excess of interdiction needs available.⁵³

MACV's stand posed a basic policy question: When are sorties earmarked for interdiction to be diverted to close air support? Granted, Pettigrew had sought an average of twenty or more sorties each day for the last five days, but they had been urgently needed. The neutralists were attempting to retake Phou Kout, and a communist thrust threatened Thakhek⁵⁴ as well as friendly positions along the Kum Kam River south of Route 9. Considering the circumstances, Sullivan thought all available aircraft should have been sent to help out.⁵⁵

General Westmoreland's orders from Secretary McNamara were somewhat in opposition to Sullivan's thinking. In July, McNamara became concerned over what he saw as too much Air Force and Navy planning for Rolling Thunder. Contending that the war would be won or lost in South Vietnam, he wanted first priority given to supporting ground operations there. Not one bomb was to be dropped in North Vietnam or Laos if the sortie would be better used in the south, clearly defining the main theater of operations.⁵⁶ The secondary theater—almost equally important—was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Without it, the communists could not keep the war in the south going. Barrel Roll (interdiction and close air support in Laos) and Rolling Thunder (strikes in North Vietnam) came last. Ambassador Sullivan was aware of the administration's policy. He emphatically agreed that South Vietnam was the main theater; but he was more aware than anyone else, perhaps, of one major factor underlining all U.S. actions along the trail. Souvanna had given his blessing for these air strikes on two conditions: the United States would refuse to publicly admit the strikes were going on and would supply needed air power beyond

51. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-474, 131015Z Nov 65; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Nov 11, 1965.

52. Msg, COMUSMACV to AIRA Vientiane, 140742Z Nov 65.

53. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 161100Z Nov 65, 171240Z Nov 65, COMUSMACV to AIRA Vientiane, 171745Z Nov 65.

54. Souvanna thought that the enemy was intent on rice gathering at Thakhek and would soon retreat back into the hills; but if the push continued, the prime minister intended asking for more U.S. air strikes, including the use of napalm. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 488, Nov 14, 1965.]

55. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 506, Nov 18, 1965.

56. It is not clear if McNamara meant all U.S. aircraft in Southeast Asia or just those in South Vietnam. If he meant all, he was in error, since Thailand-based planes were forbidden to hit targets in South Vietnam.

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the RLA's capability. Sullivan believed that the prime minister's requests had been within reason. If General Westmoreland continued to refuse air for such operations as Phou Kout, Souvanna might well sour on the Americans and shut off further strikes in the panhandle. It was better to share a little air power and show good faith than to withhold it because the operation was not militarily feasible or did not promise lavish bomb damage assessment.⁵⁷

Smack in the middle of the sortie discussion, Souvanna asked that U.S. jets hit RLA's Target 253, an armored vehicle park on the outskirts of Khangkhai. This attack on the former neutralist capital was in reprisal to the communist thrust toward Thakhek that threatened to cut the country in half. The 2d Air Division was called on to fly a "maximum feasible effort" for November 20—the day the neutralists planned to go up the side of Phou Kout mountain. This time General Westmoreland delivered—he ordered sixteen F-105s diverted from Steel Tiger to the Plain of Jars to fly the Khangkhai strike. Due to bad weather, however, just eight Thunderchiefs flew the strike. The next day, Radio Peking announced that four U.S. planes "wantonly" attacked Khangkhai with rockets and 20-mm cannon fire. All air operations in Barrel Roll were temporarily suspended pending bomb damage assessment photographs. Unseasonably poor weather gripped the area, and a Yankee Team RF-101 could not take pictures until November 24. The photos disclosed six buildings in the cantonment area and eight small structures adjacent to the northern end of the target destroyed. Several bombs had fallen outside the vehicle park, but none had landed inside the town or on the ICC helicopter pad as Peking claimed. Through it all, Souvanna stayed calm. If asked by the press to answer Chinese charges, he intended to steadfastly hold to "no comment" and wanted Washington to do the same.⁵⁸

The 2d Air Division could not reschedule sorties for Phou Kout until December 2. This time, sixteen F-105s hit the mountain and repeated the strikes the next two days. Bango/Whiplash planes strafed enemy reinforcements moving westward along Route 7. However, Colonel Sing's troops would not move out; and on December 5, Souvanna went to Muong Soui to build a fire under them. Instead, he came away asking Swank for another three days of concentrated F-105 strikes (sixteen each day). The Navy shared this workload with the Air Force, though bad weather prevented all but a few sorties from reaching the mountain. The D-day of December 9 was now pushed back to December 21 or 22. Colonel Pettigrew once more requested sixteen sorties a day for three days, starting on December 19.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, along Route 6 to the north of Phou Kout, three North Vietnamese Army battalions began tightening the cordon around Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), and all plans for pounding Phou Kout were shelved. On December 21 (the start of the three-day Meo New Year), Vang Pao's hard-pressed troops evaporated northward, marking the third time in 1965 that Lima Site 58 had changed hands. Na Khang (Lima Site 36) next came under pressure, and twenty sorties a day were reserved for its defense.⁶⁰

At this juncture, President Johnson entered the picture. On December 7, Viet Cong radio had proposed a truce for South Vietnam so South Vietnamese and U.S. soldiers could attend Christmas Eve church services and celebrate the holiday. On December 23, the President accepted; and under an agreement Ambassador Lodge worked out with the Saigon government, allied ground operations would cease and all aircraft in South Vietnam and Thailand would stand

57. MR, MACV, subj: Record of Questions and Answers in Meeting between Secretary McNamara and His Party, Ambassador Taylor and His Staff, and COMUSMACV and His Staff, Jul 16, 1965.

58. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 171115Z Nov 65, COMUSMACV to 2d AD, 190607Z Nov 65, NMCC to CINCPAC, 202007Z Nov 65, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 531, Nov 22, 1965, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 312, Nov 23, 1965, PACAF to CINCPAC, 241334Z Nov 65, 242033Z Nov 65.

59. Msg, JCS to Dir/NSA, 021218Z Dec 65, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 061310Z Dec 65, 151307Z Dec 65, COMUSMACV to 2d AD, CTG 77.0, 070450Z Dec 65.

60. Msg, DIA to AIG 7011, 280425Z Dec 65; *Effect of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Dec 23, 1965.

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down. This also wiped out all air strikes in North Vietnam and Laos. Seeing no reason for this, Sullivan asked that the orders from the "highest level" be rescinded where Laos was concerned. Lima Site 58 had fallen, and Lima Site 36 might well be next. Tha Thom (Lima Site 11) was also coming under sporadic artillery and mortar fire. Souvanna had asked for help, and with Rolling Thunder canceled for thirty hours, plenty of air power was available. Sullivan asserted a Christmas bombing truce might spell disaster for the Royal Laotian Government.⁶¹

Sullivan's pleas did not fall on deaf ears, but the results were about the same. The JCS notified CINCPAC on December 24 that air operations would stop, except for Bango/Whiplash, which would be used to meet Vientiane's needs. Nevertheless, Pettigrew at once requested forty sorties for Phou Kout and Na Khang on Christmas Day. Both areas would have ground FAGs or airborne FACs in O-1s, C-47s, or T-28s to direct the strikes. To ease identification, all targets would be marked with smoke.⁶²

Why Colonel Pettigrew asked for forty sorties when just four Bango/Whiplash aircraft were on alert is puzzling. The best these planes could do was to make one, possibly two turnarounds, a maximum of twelve sorties. Perhaps, with Sullivan's cables and Rolling Thunder stopped, the air attaché may have thought more than the usual four aircraft would be put on alert. However, Sullivan's personal message to Admiral Sharp on Christmas Day complains that embassy personnel were told that CINCPAC had limited them to only eight sorties. Obviously, these were the four Bango/Whiplash jets rearmed and refueled just one time. Sharp sent a message three hours later directing MACV and PACFLT to furnish the forty sorties, but the only U.S. strikes in Laos during the truce were two alert missions from Thailand.⁶³ At first glance, it seems the field purposely failed to follow CINCPAC's instructions. There is an explanation, however. Crews relieved from duty beginning December 24 did not wait around the barracks hoping to fly on Christmas Day. They went to a movie, downtown, or to Bangkok for the holidays—as aircrews were wont to do whenever given time off from the drudgery of wartime flying.

Although full-scale fighting and air strikes resumed in South Vietnam on December 26, President Johnson was under domestic and foreign pressure to extend the bombing halt over North Vietnam. It was argued that the North Vietnamese would never agree to negotiate while their country was under air attack. Continuing the bombing halt was an enticement to lure Hanoi to the conference table, and Johnson felt it was worth a try. His decision had an instant impact on Laos. On December 29, Defense Secretary McNamara told the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he wanted a net increase there equal to the number of sorties that usually flew north. However, in line with the President's directive, no aircraft from carriers were to fly over North Vietnam, effectively limiting the Navy to missions in Steel Tiger.⁶⁴

Sullivan saw no better place for these extra missions than Phou Kout and Na Khang, but when enemy action in these areas suddenly slacked off, most of the 200-300 daily sorties went to Steel Tiger and to Tiger Hound, a special interdiction campaign. Concentrated in Laotian territory contiguous to South Vietnam (the southern end of the panhandle), Tiger Hound relied chiefly on aircraft based in South Vietnam and used USAF FACs with Laotian observers to control air strikes. From December 24, 1965, through January 6, 1966, Barrel Roll received 614

61. *New York Times*, Dec 23, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 678, Dec 23, 1965.

62. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 9230, 231423Z Dec 65, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, CINCPACFLT, CINCPACAF, 231736Z Dec 65, COMUSMACV to 2d AD, 240030Z Dec 65, AIRA Vientiane to CTF 77 and All TG Comdrs of CTF 77, 2d AD, *et al*, 240810Z Dec 65.

63. Msgs, AIRA (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC, 250305Z Dec 65, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, CINCPACFLT, 250650Z Dec 65, JCS to Dir/NSA, 271142Z Dec 65.

64. *New York Times*, Dec 27, 1965; *Washington Post*, Dec 27, 1965; msg, NMCC (Adm Mustin) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 292342Z Dec 65, CINCPAC (Adm Sharp) to NMCC (Adm Mustin), 300930Z Dec 65.

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sorties (560 Air Force, 54 Navy), compared with 1,487 sorties for Steel Tiger (700 Air Force, 787 Navy) and 399 sorties for Tiger Hound (309 Air Force, 90 Marine Corps).⁶⁵

The western Plain of Jars was stable for the next two weeks. The neutralists during the respite sacked Colonel Sing and came up with a new plan for Phou Kout. Since they had lost all previous "king of the mountain" tussles with the North Vietnamese, the neutralists decided to forego any more assaults. Instead, massive doses of American bombing would reduce the mountain top to rubble (it already resembled a no-man's land), and it would be bypassed. With their rear thus secured, the Laotians would strike out at several other communist positions. The objective was to form a north-south perimeter arcing through the Pen River, about ten miles east of Muong Soui. The operation's starting date was not firm since it called for eight battalions. The Americans thought the plan held little promise; it was hard to coordinate and, as before, the neutralists lacked the "fighting spirit and will to win."⁶⁶

The eight neutralist battalions were in place on January 25, 1966, and the 30th was tentatively selected as the starting date. Pettigrew now asked that USAF close air support sorties be jumped from twenty-four to thirty-six per day. On February 1, however, President Johnson ended the thirty-seven-day bombing halt; and the planes that might have been used at Phou Kout were sent back north. From January 28 to February 3, the neutralists received mostly T-28 support from Wattay. U.S. jets flew only forty-four close support sorties, twenty-four in the Plain of Jars and twenty at Lima Site 36. Although most of the Rolling Thunder weather aborts were diverted to Barrel Roll, they hit road segments, despite roadwatch team reports that the cuts were being bypassed by the North Vietnamese. The neutralist push sputtered, then died. Only the 2d Paratroop Battalion—Kong Le's old outfit—gained any ground. Even so, another assault was set for February 20.⁶⁷

The communists, after a month's layoff (coincident with the bombing halt), resumed their try to gain control of Route 6. During the night of February 12, they easily overran Houei Thom (Lima Site 27); five days later they attacked Lima Site 36. In the days that followed, Lima Site 36 was lost, napalm was first used on enemy troops in Laos, and the air attacks were so devastating that the enemy was scarcely able to occupy the captured ground.

The battle for Site 36 began around midnight on February 16 with the loss of an outpost a mile south of Na Khang. Following this, the communists, camouflaged with rice sacks, crept to within eight hundred yards of the airstrip and poured mortar fire on it in the early morning hours. The troops at the strip answered with 105-mm and 75-mm howitzers and the initial thrust was thrown back. As the enemy regrouped in the murky darkness, an AC-47 Spooky gunship appeared overhead in response to the site's distress call, the first time the C-47 transport conversion appeared in Laos. The Spooky mounted three 7.62-mm miniguns on its port side that were fired electrically by the pilot. The ship carried 16,500 rounds for each gun, which fired 6,000 rounds per minute. The plane also carried forty-eight Mk-24 flares of two million candlepower each. In spite of poor air-ground communications with the site, the AC-47 dropped flares and spewed out its fire. The startled enemy broke and ran. By dawn, only a single FAR outpost had fallen.⁶⁸

On the morning of February 17, during a lull in the fighting, the site's USAF forward air controller took off and flew east to control air strikes at Lima Site 27. He returned to find that

65. (S) *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Jan 6, 1966; msg, AIRA Vientiane to JCS, 103, 180430Z Jan 66; msg, CINCPAC to DIA, 150332Z Mar 66.

66. (S) Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 41, 240950Z Jan 66.

67. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 251216Z Jan 66, JANAF Atachés Vientiane to DIA, 102, 190550Z Feb 66, AIRA Vientiane to JCS, 485, 120919Z Mar 66.

68. (S) Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 109, 211125Z Feb 66, AIRA Vientiane to JCS, 485, 120919Z Mar 66; Anthony, p 28.

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radio contact had been lost with the ground and the airstrip again under mortar attack. The defenders managed to mark the communist positions with smoke shells, and the FAC directed jet strikes near the runway. He then had his Air America pilot land their Pilatus Porter plane on the shell-pocked airstrip. After racing to a nearby trench, the forward air controller started acting as a forward air guide, while a [redacted] pilot in a T-28 stayed aloft as a FAC. Both men spent the rest of the day directing T-28 and Bango/Whiplash strikes. The communists were beaten back and the camp remained in friendly hands during the night.⁶⁹

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CIA

● Vang Pao had won the first two rounds, but he was not overly anxious to fight for Lima Site 36 for more than a few days since standup battles ran counter to his basic guerrilla philosophy. Still, he knew that if Site 36 fell, Lima Site 48 would be next and, with it, control of Route 6. The CAS commander at Site 36 remembered Ambassador Sullivan's canon that napalm could be used only to prevent the loss of a major friendly position. This site certainly fit that category, and the North Vietnamese attackers were conveniently massed in the nearby woods. He believed there was little chance of hitting the defenders, especially when the strikes were being pinpointed by experienced forward air controllers, and asked the embassy for USAF jets loaded with napalm to bomb the enemy and, hopefully, save the site.⁷⁰

● The North Vietnamese attacked the runway at dawn on February 18. They got within twenty-five yards of the strip before being repulsed by AC-47 and F-105 strikes. The Meo then swept the strip area and expanded their perimeters. Helicopter operations resumed, and Vang Pao landed to take personal charge of the defense. The North Vietnamese, who had been reinforced, made another charge at the strip. A ricocheting bullet wounded Vang Pao in the chest and upper arm, and the Meo general was swiftly evacuated by helicopter to Korat.⁷¹

● The enemy troops were apparently determined to seize the site at all costs, and Sullivan decided it was time to use napalm. That afternoon, four F-105s from the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing at Takhli dropped sixteen BLU-1B napalm cans on the communists in the trees two hundred yards southwest of the airstrip.⁷² The North Vietnamese kept coming, however, and Site 36 was soon nearly surrounded. The POL storage area and some buildings, including the hospital, were on fire. The friendly troops began to be evacuated, although the forward air controller continued to call in USAF jets almost to the end.⁷³

● The last Meo was airlifted out of Lima Site 36 on February 19. Afterwards, Whiplash F-105s dispensed napalm, destroying the war materiel left behind. While air power had failed to save the site, it had exacted a high cost from the enemy. During the three-day battle, F-105s and F-4s flew 165 close support sorties and the Spooky gunship provided night support; during a lull in the battle, the forward air controller counted seventy enemy dead in a rice paddy close to the area of the first napalm strike. Refugees later passing through Na Khang told of dead North Vietnamese strewn about like tree stumps, estimating more than one thousand casualties. Another

69. ● Intvw, Proj CHECO hist, with Capt Ramon A. Horinek [unit unknown], Feb 20-21, 1966. Horinek was the FAC at Lima Site 36 (Feb 17-19, 1966).

70. ● Capt Melvin F. Porter, *The Defense of Lima Site 36* (Proj CHECO), Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), pp 2-3.

71. ● Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 109, 211125Z Feb 66, AmEmb Vientiane to AmEmb Bangkok, SECSTATE, 903, Feb 18, 1966.

72. ● This was not the first napalm drop in Laos. On October 5, 1965, a Navy A-4E loaded for a Rolling Thunder mission with rockets and napalm was launched to look for a downed aircraft flying a Barrel Roll mission close to North Vietnam. Due to ground fog, the A-4 pilot could not locate any of his assigned secondary targets within North Vietnam and wandered back across the border into Laos south of Route 7. He ran low on fuel and decided to drop his ordnance on a clear section of road about ten miles west of the border. The A-4 returned to the carrier, landing with only six hundred pounds of fuel remaining. TG 77.5 pilots were again reminded they were not to drop napalm in Laos under any circumstances. [Msg, CTG 77.5 to AIG 913, 051218Z Oct 65.]

73. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 900, Feb 18, 1966, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 180235Z Feb 66; Porter, pp 8-9.

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refugee said an enemy column carrying dead and wounded to the rear took nearly six hours to pass his position [redacted] at Vientiane played down most of the refugee reports but conceded that between two and three hundred North Vietnamese died in the fight. The enemy ranks were so depleted that nearly a week went by before the site was occupied. Since Sullivan anticipated a Royal Laotian Government action to retake the lost ground during the upcoming wet season, it seemed the North Vietnamese had scored a Pyrrhic victory.⁷⁴

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The concerns now were that the losses of Lima Sites 27 and 36 portended a fresh North Vietnamese offensive in northern Laos. If Site 48 were next and it fell, the communists had Route 6 secure. The next target then could well be the neutralists on the western fringe of the Plain of Jars. Sullivan did not have the answers, but he felt the loss of the lima sites was in reprisal to the "loudly heralded but rather feebly executed attack on Phou Kout." For two years, the neutralists had been trying to take this mountain without success. This latest try may have been the last straw for the North Vietnamese Army, and the push on Vang Pao's outposts was probably the direct result of neutralist moves on the Plain of Jars. Nevertheless, the ambassador did not think the enemy would concentrate anywhere in Laos because of U.S. air power; the old "nibbling strategy" would continue. The Soviet ambassador, Boris Y. Kimasovsky, later told Sullivan he had talked with "these people" and it was his opinion there would be no major NVA offensive. Sullivan did not know if this was Hanoi's signal that its objectives in Laos were limited, but he believed Kimasovsky actually had little insight into Hanoi's purpose.⁷⁵ However, within three weeks, the North Vietnamese would show what they had up their sleeve.

At this point, the neutralists temporarily called off their February 20 Phou Kout assault since the USAF sorties for softening the bunkers and entrenchments had been diverted to Na Khang's defense. Then, after discussing it with Souvanna, Kong Le decided to take up defensive positions. Calm enveloped Muong Soui until March 4 when the communists suddenly lobbed in fifteen mortar rounds, killing two civilians. Two days later, they attacked and retook the northern anchor of Kong Le's line. During another probe, a captured NVA soldier divulged plans for an assault on Muong Soui inside of four days. The loss of the town would spell disaster for the Royal Laotian Government. It was the last government position on the Plain of Jars and the gateway to Sala Phou Koun. It was also the operating base of the [redacted] artillery battery, and Ambassador Sullivan was determined to use napalm if the communists attacked. Until the enemy did, none of the sixteen sorties a day Pettigrew had asked for would carry napalm.⁷⁶

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Normally, Souvanna Phouma would have agreed with Sullivan, but the situation at Muong Soui was critical. After consulting with his military commanders, the prime minister concluded that Phou Kout's capture would save Muong Soui. He requested that U.S. jets armed with napalm clear out the deeply entrenched enemy so his troops could take the mountain. A review of Colonel Sing's plan (he had been restored to Souvanna's good graces) convinced the country team it could well succeed if about thirty planes, most loaded with napalm, preceded the assault.⁷⁷

ALL CIA

Under FAC direction, the air bombardment was unleashed on March 14. Their morale lifted by sight and sound of the exploding ordnance, the Laotian soldiers scrambled up the east slope and most of "Old Baldy" was soon in their hands. This time, the napalm strikes had "neutralized the spirits" that lived on the mountain. The enemy clung tenaciously to the north

74. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 061215Z Mar 66; Porter, p 10.

75. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Sullivan) to AmEmb Manila (Harriman), SECSTATE, 905, Feb 20, 1966, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 916, Feb 24, 1966.

76. Msgs, DEPCHUSMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 210100Z Feb 66, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 108, 211040Z Feb 66, 128, 040850Z Mar 66, AIRA Vientiane to Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 061217Z Mar 66, JCS to Dir/NSA, 091010Z Mar 66.

77. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 978, Mar 11, 1966, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 101450Z Mar 66, retransmitted COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 110845Z Mar 66, JCS to Dir/NSA, 121050Z Mar 66.

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See-Saw on the Plain

slope and, from Hill 1157 to the east, poured in heavy fire. Obviously, the North Vietnamese Army was not going to cave in easily, having fought hard to clear out government positions over the previous six weeks. Moreover, the capture of Phou Kout threatened the communist grip on the Plain of Jars. Colonel Pettigrew now called for eight sorties per day (all FAC-directed) to saturate the bunkers at the summit and side of Hill 1157. Sixteen more sorties would be needed at Lima Site 48, which had suddenly fallen to the communists on the night of March 12/13.⁷⁸

(S) In spite of the napalm attacks, the enemy held Hill 1157. On the night of March 17/18, a volunteer neutralist demolition team attempted to infiltrate the area and blow up the bunkers. The group was discovered before it could set the charges; five of the soldiers were killed and four wounded. Since the start of the assault, Laotian casualties stood at ten dead, thirty-one wounded. Though unknown at the time, the high-water mark of the Royal Laotian Government offensive had been attained.⁷⁹

(S) At four in the morning on March 20, elements of the Pathet Lao 2d and 701st Battalions swept the neutralists off Phou Kout. They also captured Phou Douk to the south, tightened their control around Phou Song, and began a random shelling of Muong Soui. Even though Sing's troops outgunned and outnumbered the communists and held better terrain, Sullivan reported they now had "a severe case of the galloping blue funk" that was spreading to all the units at Muong Soui, including the [redacted] battery. The ambassador feared that the neutralists, with their loser's complex, would "simply fold up and run" at the first sign of an enemy attack. Most exasperating was the attitude of the FAR General Staff. In typical Laotian fashion, it focused on two separate and irrelevant events—the March 23 Armed Forces Day parade and the March 28 visit to Vientiane by Thanom Kittikachorn, Thai Prime Minister. On top of this, several FAR officers displayed a private glee at the plight of the neutralists at Muong Soui.⁸⁰

(S) Sullivan was bent on doing all he could to get the Laotians "to pull their socks up and make a determined stand." Failing this, the country team would start "kicking as many tails as we can" and lay on heavy air strikes in the plain and around Muong Soui. As a first step, Pettigrew asked the 2d Air Division to hit RLAFF Target 217, the Ban Liang military complex near Khangchai. After this strike, he wanted 18 sorties daily for Barrel Roll interdiction and 24 sorties for close support. He further requested a Cricket forward air controller⁸¹ and an AC-47⁸² to fly night armed reconnaissance along Route 7, but the 2d Division could furnish just four sorties for RLAFF Target 217. Terming it "folly" to send so few planes after such a heavily defended site, Sullivan canceled the mission. He dispatched a message to Admiral Sharp asking him to "gently and discreetly prod our friends in Saigon to give us the aircraft we will need for

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78. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 150330Z Mar 66, JCS to Dir/NSA, 161108Z Mar 66; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Mar 4-17, 1966. There had been no contact with the defenders at Site 48 since March 12, so information on the situation there was scanty. It was later determined that a battalion-size NVA force had bypassed the major defenses around Muong Heim and infiltrated to within fifty yards of the main base. All friendly positions were struck simultaneously, and the neutralists were routed with heavy casualties. [Msgs, DEPCH/USMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 180825Z Mar 66, ARMA/AIRA Laos to DIA, et al, 171, 190620Z Mar 66.]

79. (S) Msg, JANAF Anachés Laos to DIA, CIA, et al, 171, 190620Z Mar 66.

80. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1006, Mar 21, 1966, JANAF Anachés Laos to DIA, 187, 260604Z Mar 66.

81. (S) Cricket FACs were Thailand-based, U.S. pilots in O-1 aircraft with Laotian observers in the backseats. They received target information from roadwatch teams and identified targets by flying at tree level. When targets were validated, fighters were diverted from alert or from armed reconnaissance/strike missions. During seven days in January, seventy-one trucks were spotted this way in Steel Tiger with forty-five destroyed. O-1 pilots also performed good bomb damage assessment since they flew lower and slower than jets. [Msg, CINCPAC to DIA, 150332Z Mar 66.]

82. (S) When he asked for the AC-47, Pettigrew suggested its mission terminate in the Plain of Jars from the northeast. This way, the North Vietnamese would think it was one of their aerial resupply transports that were active once more. [Msg, USAIRA Vientiane to Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 100430Z Mar 66.]

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this effort." The next day, F-105s and other aircraft flew 70 sorties against RLA Target 217, demolishing over twenty-five buildings. By March 25, U.S. jets had flown 195 close support sorties in the Muong Soui area.⁸³

● The situation at Muong Soui was critical. The neutralists were demoralized, and the FAR general staff showed little inclination to assist. Many were reminded of similar events a few years earlier, following the loss of the northern provinces to the Pathet Lao, when Phoumi Nosavan had hoped the United States would bring in its ground forces and "save" Laos. In truth, Souvanna Phouma believed that Hanoi's current offensive was designed to force Washington to do now what it would not do in 1959 or 1961. Ambassador Sullivan did not think so—if the communists really wanted the United States in Laos, they would take a direct action like seizing Thakhek or another town on the Mekong River. On the contrary, Sullivan thought the North Vietnamese wanted to keep American GIs out of Laos to preserve their relative free hand and would limit their actions to what was acceptable under the unwritten ground rules—the annual exchange of real estate in the northeast.⁸⁴ The North Vietnamese had undeniably diverted far more supplies, trucks, and troops for military operations in northern Laos than ever before. The reason for this North Vietnamese buildup was unclear, but Ambassador Sullivan believed the Pathet Lao had put heavy pressure on Hanoi to sustain its military and political posture with the Royal Laotian Government. Neo Lao Hak Xat, the Pathet Lao's political party, needed several strong shots in the arm; and Ho Chi Minh could hardly afford any further weakening of a movement that had been so helpful in his attempt to achieve a united Vietnam. More important, the North Vietnamese Army wanted to drive home the point that they, not Souvanna Phouma or the United States, called the shots in northern Laos. The growth of FAR and Meo strength, Vang Pao's capture of Lima Site 58, and the stepped-up American air effort particularly (limited though it was) were likely seen by Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap as efforts to dislodge the North Vietnamese Army from key positions in northern Laos. Obviously, Giap thought it was time to teach Souvanna and the FAR "a hard lesson."⁸⁵

● One point was now quite clear to Sullivan. In a way, it did not matter if the NVA chose to knife deeper into Laos or not. They had amply demonstrated they could carry out an impressive logistic/offensive operation in the teeth of air and guerrilla harassment and in a theater with no direct bearing on their military effort in South Vietnam. So far, air strikes in northern Laos had been merely harassment, but the heavy and frequent attacks on such targets as Ban Liang and the intensified armed reconnaissance and interdiction in Barrel Roll threatened to make it more costly and difficult for Hanoi in the future.⁸⁶

● However, other important matters clamored for immediate attention. The morale of the neutralists continued to plummet, and troops of Independent Battalion 8 abandoned their positions near Phou Kout on March 30, 1966. The men walked back from their lines to the airstrip of Lima Site 108 (Muong Soui), demanding they be returned to Vang Vieng. Kong Le refused to intervene; and after several futile discussions with the mutineers, Colonel Sing called for aircraft to evacuate them. Before sending Air America, Sullivan consulted with Souvanna, who suggested he comply with the request. The episode led the ambassador to say: "We've got a lot more sow's ears than we have silk purses in this lot. I'm afraid we can't promise much in a most unpromising predicament."⁸⁷

83. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1006, Mar 21, 1966, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 200510Z Mar 66, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 200400Z Mar 66, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 100430Z Mar 66, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 3499, Mar 25, 1966, 2d AD to CINCPAC, 251009Z Mar 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 187, 260604Z Mar 66.

84. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1015, Mar 23, 1966.

85. ● *Ibid.*

86. ● *Ibid.*

87. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1039, Mar 31, 1966.

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Sullivan, Pettigrew, and other country team members met with the FAR General Staff and Souvanna on April 2. At the meeting, Maj. Gen. Ouane Rathikone lamented the performance of the neutralists and petitioned Souvanna to press Kong Le to reinforce Muong Soui. Ouane also asked Sullivan for more air strikes on enemy supply buildups in the Plain of Jars and for assurances of close air support "with the most effective weapons available" if and when the NVA assault came. Next, Ouane and Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay voiced dissatisfaction with the Barrel Roll interdiction campaign. Why is it, they asked, that so many U.S. jets were being used in the panhandle when the real fight was in the Plain of Jars? Sullivan promised more interdiction sorties and to help defend Muong Soui with as many aircraft as he could get his hands on.⁸⁸

CAS and USAF photo-analysts at Udon pinpointed over a hundred lucrative targets in northern Laos. A systematic analysis of Routes 6, 65, and 7 further uncovered large enemy caches and storage complexes. Pettigrew proposed that the Seventh Air Force (formerly 2d Air Division)⁸⁹ conduct heavy interdiction of as many RLAf-validated targets as possible over a two-week period. Paralleling this operation would be a methodical interdiction of Barrel Roll lines of communication where heavy road traffic had been seen. This would alleviate pressure on Muong Soui and compel the enemy to divert some logistic flow from South Vietnam. Pettigrew wanted at least eighty interdiction sorties a day, to convince Ouane and others that the United States intended to support RLG forces, its own forces, and those of South Vietnam.⁹⁰

Many factors worked against the eighty sorties a day the air attaché wanted. First, there were not enough aircraft available in the theater to take care of the major air campaigns. For example, the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Udon could not meet the sortie load imposed on it. Its "Wolfpack" worked North Vietnam, Steel Tiger, and Barrel Roll and stood Bango alert. Admiral Sharp had sent a priority request to the JCS for deployment to Thailand of three additional fighter squadrons, but Thai bases could not handle many more U.S. planes without beefing up the facilities.

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CIA

Moreover, for the past three months, high-explosive bombs had been in short supply, particularly five-hundred-pound bombs. During February and March, Sullivan had needed five thousand of these iron bombs for the RLAf and Firefly pilots. Since he received merely twenty-eight hundred he had to resort to rationing. The shortage continued; and in early March, Admiral Sharp set a limit of three thousand U.S. sorties in Laos. He did agree not to count weather divers and Rolling Thunder aborts against this ceiling. Even so, when Pettigrew asked for eighty sorties a day, it was evident the extra missions would have to come out of some other area's allocation.⁹²

On top of this, Sullivan and Westmoreland were still at odds over the importance of northern Laos to the Southeast Asia theater. The ambassador earlier fretted that he had not received

88. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1051, Apr 3, 1966.

89. During the COMUSMACTHAI/COMUSMACV discussions, Westmoreland had suggested that a numbered air force replace 2d Air Division. In March 1966, due to the current scope of USAF activities and planned additional force deployments, McConnell acted. Effective on April 1, this reorganization did not alter any existing relationships. At the same time, Headquarters 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force at Udon became Headquarters Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force, or Hq 7th/13th for short. [Msg, CSAF to CINCPAC, 171547Z Mar 66.]

90. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 061035Z Apr 66.

91. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 020346Z Apr 66.

92. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 859, Feb 5, 1966, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), SECSTATE, 838, Feb 1, 1966, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 021055Z Mar 66, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp 030630Z Mar 66.

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sufficient close air support. In March, he was irked because his interdiction needs could not be systematically met. After talking with Brig. Gen. George B. Simler, 2d Air Division Operations Chief, and Brig. Gen. Rockly Triantafellu, 2d Air Division Intelligence Chief, Sullivan had hoped to get more interdiction sorties during March. All he secured, however, were thirteen armed reconnaissance sorties scheduled for Routes 6 and 7. (Sullivan admitted his records did not show how many were flown.) The net result was an unimpeded enemy buildup on the Plain of Jars "with all the repercussions that implies." Sullivan reemphasized the quid pro quo relationship between northern Laos and the Air Force's interdiction of the trail. He also remarked to Westmoreland that Colonel Pettigrew and General Bond had pleaded regularly for more Barrel Roll sorties to no avail. The ambassador claimed he was "fast reaching the end of the rope on this matter."⁹³

Sullivan added that he had two choices to emphasize his exasperation, neither of them palatable. He could put the entire problem on Washington's doorstep and ask for adequate measures to satisfy RLG needs ("that way lies bloodshed and heartburn"). Conversely, he could exercise his authority and suspend Steel Tiger until he received better allocations for Barrel Roll (instantly vetoed as being "irresponsible and contrary to the national interests"). Sullivan wanted to iron out this problem "in the family" without having to go higher and asked Westmoreland to impress on his staff the need to pay some attention to the air effort in northern Laos. The ambassador did not think the requests for eighty sorties were out of line, since Barrel Roll was but a small fraction of Seventh Air Force's daily schedule. In addition, he suggested that General Moore regularly send a team to Vientiane or Udom to program targets and make Barrel Roll more productive. Otherwise, U.S. neglect might impel the Royal Laotian Government to ask the Air Force to stop bombing the panhandle.⁹⁴

Whether Souvanna Phouma would have told the United States to end attacks on the trail is debatable, but Sullivan had made his point. Westmoreland agreed that Barrel Roll deserved more attention. Weather permitting, Sullivan could expect more sorties within forty-eight hours. In the interim, General Moore would send staff members to Udom to confer with General Bond and embassy representatives. After this planning meeting, Seventh Air Force personnel would meet regularly with the country team at Vientiane or Udom.⁹⁵

General Westmoreland next informed Admiral Sharp he had furnished Sullivan 612 sorties in March, but the ambassador claimed he needed more. Sullivan was quick to stress that the 612 sorties were, in fact, diverts from Rolling Thunder that dropped ordnance on road segments, not support for troops-in-contact. One way COMUSMACV thought he could help was to draw from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and General Moore discussed this with Lt. Gen. Lewis W. Walt, USMC, III Marine Amphibious Force Commander. Westmoreland was confident the Marines would not let him down. Even so, he reminded Admiral Sharp that South Vietnam and the adjacent areas of Steel Tiger, Tiger Hound, and Route Package I in North Vietnam⁹⁶ still held higher priority.⁹⁷

93. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland), 020630Z Apr 66.

94. *Ibid*; msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland), 061140Z Apr 66.

95. Msg, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), retransmitted as 7th AF to CINCPACAF 081144Z Apr 66.

96. To maintain the independence of Navy air power, CINCPAC had unilaterally divided North Vietnam into six geographical armed reconnaissance "route packages." On December 10, 1965, he assigned PACAF Route Packages II, IV, and V, while PACFLT was to cover I and III. In poor weather, each service could fly into the other's primary operating area if they gave prior notice and the service concerned concurred. Route Package VI (northeastern North Vietnam) was subdivided into VIA (USAF) and VIB (USN). In the ensuing weeks, the Navy more and more conducted its missions in the coastal areas, a practice that left the bombing of most of the inland and more strongly defended targets to the Air Force. [Rprt, JCS Rolling Thunder Study Gp, Air Operations Against North Vietnam, Apr 6, 1966.]

97. Msgs COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 080825Z Apr 66; AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 061140Z Apr 66.

See-Saw on the Plain

Meanwhile, CINCPAC's staff had tabulated the sorties flown in Laos and Route Package I during March and April 1-7, 1966. Barrel Roll had received 1,420 of 5,111 sorties in March but only 63 of 1,872 during the first seven days of April. Admiral Sharp informed General Westmoreland that, from these figures, 28 percent of the March effort in Laos went to Barrel Roll, but less than 4 percent thus far in April. While agreeing the priority should stay in Steel Tiger and Route Package I, Sharp said the current ratio seemed "disproportionate."⁹⁸ Further, at the present rate of 275 sorties a day in the panhandle areas, it was possible that ordnance in short supply was being wasted. Sharp suggested that flights of two aircraft could garner the same results in Steel Tiger and Route Package I as flights of four or more. Finally, Sharp wanted Westmoreland to reexamine targeting procedures and, wherever possible, call in ground alert aircraft "when a 'catch' is bigger than the scheduled effort can handle." Thus, Sharp saw no reason to use the Marine fighters.⁹⁹

During this exchange of views, Muong Soui remained quiet. The North Vietnamese made no moves past Phou Kout, and some were spotted withdrawing from the vicinity of Lima Sites 48 and 36. A large number of trucks still used Route 7; and although this might portend a renewed offensive, it was more likely the communists were building up their supply caches for the upcoming wet season. On April 4, the FAR General Staff, Kong Le, and acting defense minister Sisoumang Sisaleumsak (Souvanna Phouma had left for Tokyo and Moscow) set up a joint command for Muong Soui's defense. The neutralists would protect the defensive line's center, the Meo would cover the flanks, and FAR GM 2 would be in reserve. A similar arrangement at Muong Hiem had proved worthless; and the Americans shook their heads, predicting that if the enemy struck Muong Soui, the neutralists would scatter like chaff before the wind.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, time was on the government's side. General Walt committed twenty-two hundred sorties to the Seventh Air Force to be used as General Moore saw fit. Moore earmarked them for Steel Tiger, allowing jets from Thailand to be dedicated to Barrel Roll. Additionally, thirty-two sorties per day were scheduled for northern Laos, with extra aircraft fragged "on hard intelligence." A tactical air control system, including an airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC) RC-47¹⁰¹ and more forward air controllers, was formed to control and divert strike aircraft. A-1Es from the 602d Air Commando Squadron were sent on temporary duty from South Vietnam for the rest of the dry season. These planes (call sign Sandy) assisted in the visual reconnaissance/forward air controller role along with the normal rescue combat air patrol duties with the search and rescue force.¹⁰²

In view of these preparations, Secretary of Defense McNamara stipulated that first priority in air operations was to be given to "what Westmoreland calls the 'extended battlefield,' i.e., South Vietnam, Laos, and Route Package I of North Vietnam." Attacks on other targets, especially those in Route Packages II through VIB, were not to be carried out unless no legitimate targets existed on the "extended battlefield." McNamara's orders did not specifically mention Barrel Roll, but it

98. The original words in the message, "it did not seem logical," had been lined out.

99. Msg, CINCPAC (Adm Sharp) to COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland), 100143Z Apr 66.

100. Msgs, CINCPAC to AIG 921, 050422Z Apr 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 090246Z Apr 66.

101. Sullivan wanted some control over the Barrel Roll air strikes, and Seventh Air Force was concerned that planes going north could not pick up the C-130 ABCCC. The RC-47 (Dogpatch) operation was very "loose" initially. The intention to use the aircraft as a radio relay did not work out too well because of language barriers, communication equipment problems, and terrain interference. The temporary duty crews had been given no training, so they had little idea of how to perform or what was expected of them. Crews were briefed at Udom by CAS and 7th/13th personnel, and orbits were chosen more or less relative to where strike activity was planned or anticipated. Crews picked their way to the scene, with routes selected to avoid a fixed pattern, to bypass flak batteries, to circumvent weather, and to take advantage of terrain. By July 1966, permanent personnel arrived and began to replace the original three-month temporary group, and a semblance of order gradually emerged. [Robert M. Burch, *The ABCCC in SEA* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969), pp 7-9.]

102. Msg, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 121125Z Apr 66.

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was clear that northern Laos did not fit Westmoreland's definition. However, the Defense Secretary did not order a sortie cutback.¹⁰³

● The Barrel Roll program was still a modest one. From April 15 to April 28, the Air Force flew 2,101 strike sorties in Laos with just 435 flying north. The T-28 Fireflies added 162 sorties, and Bango/Whiplash planes supplied 111 interdiction and 13 close support sorties in the vicinity of Phou Kout and Muong Soui. The Navy and Marines contributed 484 sorties—all in Tiger Hound. The major endeavor in Barrel Roll centered on storage and supply facilities around Samneua, Ban Ban, and along Routes 6, 65, and 7. Other missions included the Xieng Khouang airfield and a restrike of RLAF Target 217, the Ban Liang military complex near Khangkhai. Numerous roads were cut, and armed reconnaissance claimed 33 trucks destroyed.¹⁰⁴

● There were some phenomenal, but unconfirmed, results. On April 18, a roadwatch team, from a distance of five hundred yards, witnessed a strike on two enemy battalions located about nine miles from Samneua. The team claimed all the bombs hit the target, killing about three hundred troops. On April 24, an A-1E forward controller directed a jet strike on a North Vietnamese headquarters. He reported exceptional accuracy, with about 75 percent destruction and an estimated two hundred enemy soldiers killed.¹⁰⁵

● Despite these air attacks, the communists did not appear to slow down. In early May, CAS roadwatch teams reported an increase in enemy troop and vehicle movements along Routes 6 and 7. No one was sure if the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao were gearing up for the long anticipated assault on Muong Soui or if the movements were related merely to stocking for the rainy season, foraging, and bolstering local security. One thing was certain—the communists still had enough muscle to mount a multibattalion strike without warning. On May 11, for example, they attacked Ban Song, a remote lima site about fifteen miles southeast of Lima Site 27 (Houei Thom). After a stubborn two-day defense, the Meo garrison of 800 withdrew, together with 650 old men, women, and children.¹⁰⁶

● Vang Pao kicked off a drive at about the same time to retake Muong Hiem (Lima Site 48). It fell on May 10 and by May 23, the Military Region II commander had surrounded Na Khang, his ultimate objective. Inclement weather that day in North Vietnam canceled Rolling Thunder, and eighteen fighters, each carrying three thousand pounds of bombs, were diverted to Na Khang. As the jets swooped in, USAF forward air guides saw the enemy break and run. It was too late; the bombs cascaded squarely on the fleeing troops. Americans inspecting the battlefield later declared Vang Pao's estimate of three hundred killed by air a conservative one. For the next three weeks, the Meo mopped up communist pockets and beat off patrols probing the defenses of the various sites along Route 6. Even though Na Khang was back in his hands, Vang Pao did not reestablish it as a major operating base because he did not want to provoke a strong enemy reaction in the 1966-67 dry season.¹⁰⁷

103. ● Msg, SECDEF (McNamara) to CINCPAC, 162229Z Apr 66.

104. ● *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Apr 15-28, 1966; msg, JCS to Dir/NSA, 150355Z Apr 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 246, 160500Z Apr 66, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 031024Z May 66.

105. ● Warren A. Trest and SSgt Dale E. Hammons, *USAF Operations from Thailand, 1966* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), p 73.

106. ● Msgs, CINCPAC to DIA, 030417Z May 66, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp, 112320Z May 66.

107. ● Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 303, 140532Z May 66, 336, 280530Z May 66; *DIA Intelligence Bulletin*, 113-66, Jun 13, 1966, p A-12.

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Chapter VIII

The Stalemate Continues (U)

From the beginning of Steel Tiger, General Westmoreland had tried to persuade Ambassador Sullivan to employ napalm along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. On January 6, 1966, at Udorn, he proposed its use for Tiger Hound, stressing that all sorties would be under forward air controller direction and in areas occupied only by enemy troops. Sullivan turned him down, prompting the Army general to record,

Ambassador Sullivan is keenly sensitive to local political problems and in the guise of these is getting involved in details of military operations concerning which he has a marginal feel. The discussions became somewhat intense as we debated the necessity of the restrictions he had imposed.¹

The ambassador did forward Westmoreland's request; and although CINCPAC supported COMUSMACV, Washington once more refused to sanction napalm except in a "highly critical situation." Interdiction did not meet this criterion, and introducing napalm during the Rolling Thunder bombing halt was judged out of place.²

Sullivan broke the ice by approving napalm on February 18 for the defense of Lima Site 36, and on March 8, Westmoreland and Moore asked to be allowed to use the ordnance in Steel Tiger under FAC control. If the ambassador approved, aircraft from South Vietnam loaded with napalm could be diverted to Laos. This would save iron bombs, particularly when low ceilings prevented high-explosive delivery. Since Brig. Gen. Thao Ma, RLAFCOM commander, had asked Sullivan for napalm on several occasions, General Westmoreland suggested giving it to him—if Souvanna Phouma approved. The ambassador relayed the request to Washington, and his cable showed he was not as unbending as some of his critics claimed. The cable also showed how far his thinking on napalm had come in two years and showed that he no longer worried about the United States being accused of using the ordnance to escalate the war. The communists had been charging the United States with this for the past fourteen months, and he saw little likelihood of them wringing any more propaganda value out of it. His one overriding concern was a short round that resulted in suspension of all Air Force and Navy operations in Laos.³

The administration knew napalm would render overall air operations in Steel Tiger more flexible but was also concerned about short rounds.⁴ If napalm was used, Washington wanted it tightly controlled, meaning tied into Steel Tiger forward air controller procedures. If Souvanna agreed, Sullivan could authorize napalm—but only against RLAFCOM-approved targets under FAC

1. General Westmoreland's Historical Briefing, Jan 10, 1966.

2. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 719, Jan 6, 1966, CINCPAC to JCS, 120020Z Jan 66, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 474, Jan 18, 1966.

3. Msgs, COMUSMACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 110255Z Mar 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 984, Mar 14, 1966.

4. As U. Alexis Johnson wrote to Cyrus Vance: "Bill Sullivan must attempt to explain to the Prime Minister what has happened and, in addition to the loss of life and property damage to innocent persons, we have to consider the loyalty of villagers to Souvanna. . . . While appreciating the problems of the pilots. . . . and the risks to which they are subject, I deeply feel we should most urgently search for some way of at least sharply reducing these . . . costly mistakes." [Ltr, Dep Under SECSTATE for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson to DEPSECDEF Cyrus Vance, no subj, Mar 8, 1966.] It should be noted that the number of sorties in Laos had gone way up while the incident rate (sorties flown versus short rounds) had gone down.

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control. Napalm could still be dispensed anywhere in Laos during an emergency "or in a situation in which the particular offensive or defensive military action already undertaken would otherwise fail"—this rule had not changed. Washington emphasized that no one was to admit or confirm that napalm was being dropped along the trail.⁵

Although General Westmoreland was in part successful, the rules set forth by Washington (approved the next day by Souvanna) barred the use of napalm on fleeting targets. Westmoreland protested that it was absolutely essential that every means at hand be available to destroy enemy trucks, vehicle parks, and moving targets on the trail. Sullivan replied that, while Souvanna had agreed to the use of napalm against trucks caught along the roads, this had met with "resounding silence" in Washington. The ambassador implied his hands were tied, but he sought clarification from the State and Defense Departments in light of his discussions with the Laotian prime minister.⁶

Souvanna's position stimulated a reconsideration by the administration, which finally decided that napalm could be dropped on any target of opportunity discovered by Cricket, Spooky, or Tiger Hound FACs. In addition, MACV could dispense it on motorized vehicles coming down the trail and on antiaircraft/automatic weapons firing at aircraft. In both cases, the strikes had to be directed by forward air controllers; and truck parks could not be hit unless they were numbered RLAFF targets. Other than trucks, fleeting targets (such as river, barge, and sampan traffic) did not qualify as legitimate napalm targets.⁷

Near the end of April 1966, the success of the increased air campaign in Barrel Roll induced the Seventh Air Force to request Sullivan to allow napalm in that area on the same categories of targets as in Steel Tiger. FACs were scarce in northern Laos, and General Moore suggested assigning validated RLAFF targets as alternates whenever controllers were unavailable. The ambassador at once vetoed the "free use" of RLAFF targets as alternates for napalm strikes, citing the constant shifting of friendly and enemy positions. He wanted unused napalm returned to base or released on North Vietnamese Army targets along Route 7.⁸

General Westmoreland added his voice to the debate. He recognized the problem of constantly changing friendly positions and agreed with bringing napalm back to base. However, with the iron bomb shortage, he was not enthusiastic about dropping the ordnance in a "dump area," wanting to make every sortie count. Moreover, because of each mission's different "profile," hitting NVA targets in the vicinity of Route 7 posed problems; but he was willing to make these strikes as a last resort. Even so, he reminded Sullivan of how much more could be wrung out of each Barrel Roll mission carrying napalm if they had approval to hit all RLAFF-validated targets when under FAC control, Vientiane-designated RLAFF targets when FACs were unavailable, and vehicle traffic and active gun positions in an armed reconnaissance area.⁹

The ambassador mulled over Westmoreland's message for a week. On June 8, he took an action that mirrored the changing conditions in Laos. He approved napalm for RLAFF validated Barrel Roll targets if the planes were under FAC control, for motorized vehicles, and for enemy gun positions firing on an aircraft. Sullivan also listed six targets, three along Route 7 and three on Route 65, that could be struck whenever FACs were not available. He asked only that crews be briefed on the significance of precise navigation and target identification to assure accurate delivery on true targets.¹⁰

5. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 602, Mar 24, 1966.

6. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1024, Mar 25, 1966, COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1034, Mar 30, 1966, SECSTATE, 1048, Apr 2, 1966, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 311203Z Mar 66.

7. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 060958Z Apr 66.

8. Msgs, 7th AF to COMUSMACV, 210125Z Apr 66, 241115Z May 66, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 050500Z May 66, 261000Z May 66.

9. Msg, COMUSMACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 301020Z May 66.

10. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 080440Z Jun 66.

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The "precise navigation" Ambassador Sullivan wanted was still hard to come by in northern Laos. During the defense of Na Khang, the tacan on Skyline Ridge had been barely adequate for the area. A location that would enable the tacan to cover Barrel Roll and offer high-altitude guidance for planes going to and from North Vietnam was sorely needed. Eventually, Lima Site 185 was tentatively selected as a new tacan site. This was a Meo enclave deep in enemy territory, roughly thirty miles west of Samneua. While Vang Pao thought the navigational aid could be set up at Lima Site 185 without much trouble, he worried over security. The North Vietnamese constantly swept the area, and he felt a better location was Lima Site 85 at Phou Phathi. This karst ridge of fifty-five hundred feet was situated just seventeen miles from North Vietnam's border but, unlike Site 185, would need some time to prepare. Either locale could also serve search and rescue helicopters as a forward staging base.¹¹

During the spring of 1966, there was still some thought given to placing a tacan at Na Khang (Lima Site 36), but Sullivan had disapproved this when Vang Pao recaptured the village and decided not to reestablish it as one of his main bases. Sullivan also did not want the tacan at Muong Son (Lima Site 50) because, without nearby Lima Site 36 for support, it was highly vulnerable to a communist takeover.¹² On June 8, the ambassador proposed two peaks on Skyline Ridge that required little site preparation. One rose seventy-two hundred feet, the other fifty-two hundred feet. He also asked if some place near Luang Prabang would suffice, but the 1st Mobile Communications Group had surveyed nearly all these sites and found them unsuitable for various reasons. Finally, on June 29, General Bond again suggested Lima Site 36 or Lima Site 85.¹³

After consulting with his advisers, Sullivan considered the security at Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85, long a Meo stronghold) sufficiently strong to warrant the navaid being placed on its summit. To avoid the introduction of additional American personnel into Laos, he wanted periodic maintenance done by the "circuit-riding tacan technicians" manning the set at Skyline Ridge. Sullivan also wanted a low-frequency radio beacon set up at Lima Site 85 to provide a dependable navaid in northeastern Laos for planes that were not equipped with tacan. Admiral Sharp endorsed the TRN-17 tacan and low-frequency beacon for Phou Phathi on July 14. The equipment was moved to the site on September 6, and it was installed and flight checked by the 24th. As with the Saravane and Skyline sets, the tacan was stripped of military markings and serial numbers and repainted.¹⁴

While Vang Pao was busy regaining the lost lima sites, reports from Vientiane and Savannakhet indicated that the FAR General Staff was trying to oust RLAFC Chief Thao Ma, who had been a controversial figure in the Laotian political/military arena for some time. Since he was not a member of the hereditary elite but a self-made man who had risen from the ranks, his position of power was deeply resented by many Laotian generals. Nonetheless, he had proven to be a strong and effective military leader and, in terms of American values, had earned a place of respect.¹⁵

Thao Ma's troubles had begun when he was the protege of General Phoumi. Many FAR officers had long resented this association, especially his willingness to go out of channels to

11. Msgs, Det 5, 6499th Spt Gp, to 2d AD, 181400Z Mar 66, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 221010Z Mar 66; Capt Edward Vallentyne, *The Fall of Site 85* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1968), p viii.

12. Sullivan's fears were well founded. On the night of June 16/17, about two hundred Pathet Lao/NVA troops attacked the site, but the Meo held on after being reinforced. [Msg, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 250230Z Jun 66.]

13. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 080915Z Jun 66, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 291054Z Jun 66, CINCPACAF to AIRA Vientiane, 022243Z Jul 66.

14. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 105, Jul 12, 1966, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, 140152Z Jul 66, 1st Mbl Comm Gp to CINCPACAF, 290907Z Aug 66; *USAF Communications and Air Traffic Control Operations in Southeast Asia, 1960-1973* (Richard-Gebaur AFB, Mo., 1976), pp 39-40 [hereafter cited as *Air Traffic Con Ops*].

15. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2201, 120600Z Mar 66.

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secure support from Phoumi. However, when Phoumi fled to Thailand, there was no longer a buffer between Thao Ma and the other generals. The first rumblings of a showdown were heard in early July 1965 when Kouprasith Abhay began circulating rumors that Thao Ma was planning a coup and that he (Kouprasith) intended moving against him. The RLAF leader disavowed any such intentions and told Ambassador Sullivan he would fight if attacked. He said Kouprasith, Ouane Rathikone, and Oudone Sananikone were after him because he would not use the three C-47s based in Vientiane for opium and gold smuggling. He further charged the "Vientiane clique" with wanting to fly the transports on personal trips and to use them as a fee-charging cargo/passenger airline.¹⁶

To head off trouble, Col. Clarke T. Baldwin, Jr., USA, met with Ouane Rathikone, the FAR Commander in Chief, on July 28, 1965. The Army attaché reminded Ouane that without Thao Ma's loyalty in the February Phoumi/Siho coup, the General Staff might have been deposed. Baldwin added that the RLAF chief was an excellent pilot and an aggressive leader commanding the loyalty of his men. (This could not be said for many Laotian officers.) Moreover, the Americans knew that Thao Ma was being treated as a GM commander and that, despite the RLAF's increasingly important role, he was not getting proper General Staff recognition. Baldwin agreed that Thao Ma had faults, noting that for the past three years, Colonel Tyrrell, air attaché, had tried to bring the RLAF commander to a better understanding of General Staff problems. Only it was not a one-way street—the Army attaché urged Ouane to promote some RLAF personnel (there had been no promotions in the air arm for over a year) and to bring the RLAF into General Staff planning.¹⁷

Ouane conceded Thao Ma was an outstanding pilot, but he claimed the airman was so deeply immersed in the T-28s that logistic airlift planning had been neglected. He had decided, after much thought, to give Thao Ma two deputies, one for tactics and the other for logistics. Ouane expected the new logistics branch to work on all airlift planning and to "be responsive to the wider requirements of the FAR, or as desired by the General Staff." However, Souvanna Phouma shelved the reorganization, and Thao Ma's tenuous hold on the C-47s continued.¹⁸

Vang Pao, also on the outs with the General Staff, was very unhappy about the treatment the General Staff had given his former superior, Maj. Gen. Khamkong Vongnarath. He was said to be sympathetic to southern officers who disliked the power wielded by the Sananikone family in Vientiane, and the Meo general did not hide his agreement with Thao Ma—the FAR generals should get out of politics and concentrate on fighting the Pathet Lao. Ouane, of course, complained that Vang Pao, like Thao Ma, was only interested in fighting. Ouane continued that Vang Pao did not consult with the general staff, although this problem was to be solved by assigning sixty junior officers, all recent graduates of Thai military schools, to the Long Tieng staff. Vang Pao refused to accept these men, citing ethnic differences between his people and them.¹⁹ More than likely, the general and his CAS advisors easily saw through Ouane's backdoor attempt to gain control of the Meo army.

Thao Ma and Vang Pao's discord with the "Vientiane coup mill" (as the Meo general called the General Staff) simmered for the next eight months. During this period, the neutralists floundered on the Plain of Jars, and General Kong Le's name was added to the list of officers the FAR wanted removed. The antagonism toward these leaders came to a head even as the communists were knocking on the gates of Muong Soui. On April 1, the General Staff, Kong Le, Thao Ma, and Souvanna Phouma discussed a reorganization of the neutralist army. The first hour

16. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2626, 051010Z Jun 65, 2779, 061225Z Jul 65.

17. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX-353, 281100Z Jul 65.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX-346, 181100Z Jul 65, CX-353, 281100Z Jul 65.

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was taken up with a long-winded Kong Le discourse on international politics and wound up with the neutralist general reproaching Souvanna for failing to ask Indonesia for troops. (On his own, Kong Le had earlier approached the Indonesian chargé d'affaires for a division to reinforce Muong Soui.) Souvanna was said to have turned livid and finally ordered the ex-paratrooper to sit down and shut up. As the chastised Kong Le slumped in his chair, the FAR generals proposed that the neutralist battalions be rotated off the line one by one to Lop Buri, Thailand, for indoctrination and training. Following this, the units would be given royal commissions and returned to Laos for deployment wherever needed. They would keep their separate identities, but they would be under the control of the FAR military region commanders. Because Kong Le had admitted some of his troops were probably communists or had little will to fight, he had no choice but to accept the proposal. Later, however, neutralist personnel told Colonel Baldwin that Kong Le had merely agreed to discuss the plan with his officers.²⁰

Thao Ma was called on the carpet at this meeting for being too independent of the General Staff. Ouane bluntly told the RLAf chief that his air force was not a separate service like the U. S. Air Force. It was an arm of the General Staff and had been allowed to call itself the Royal Laotian Air Force solely in deference to the U.S. Military Assistance Program structure. He additionally criticized Thao Ma for failing to delegate authority and for "mismanaging" the C-47s. Maj. Gen. Bounpone Maktheparak (Commander, Tactical Headquarters, South Laos) and Maj. Gen. Phasouk Somly (Commander, Military Region IV) administered the coup de grace when they accused Thao Ma of rarely giving them air support, since he was too busy helping the Air Force shoot up the Ho Chi Minh Trail.²¹ These remarks prompted Ouane to insist that the principal mission of the T-28s was close air support, not interdiction.²²

The FAR generals went on to blame direct U.S. support for Thao Ma and Vang Pao as greatly contributing to their independent attitudes. The generals wanted to rein in Vang Pao's "private war" by having Ambassador Sullivan channel all military aid through them. At an April 3 meeting held to resolve these points, Souvanna restated the General Staff's complaints. Sullivan passed the buck back, noting that the FAR had not set up a logistics section in Tactical Headquarters, North Laos; and until this was done, he would not act. He gently reminded Souvanna that Vang Pao's army was "outside" the Laos Military Assistance Program. Concerning the RLAf, the ambassador believed the T-28s and Thao Ma had done a good job and he was sure the Laotians could come up with a suitable solution to the C-47 problem. Souvanna concurred, and the conference adjourned with nothing really settled. Nevertheless, at an April 21 meeting (Souvanna was out of the country) Ouane asserted that Thao Ma was still being obstinate. He intended to replace him with the former RLAf Commander, Brig. Gen. Sourith Don Sasorith, when Sourith returned from the Army's Command and General Staff course at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.²³

The thought of putting Sourith in Thao Ma's job alarmed William C. Hamilton, Far East desk deputy in ASD/ISA. He did not think it a good idea for a ground-oriented officer like Sourith to replace a flyer like Thao Ma just because a few generals could not get along with him. Having an Army officer over the "spirited T-28 jockeys" would, in Hamilton's mind, lower their esprit and military effectiveness. Furthermore, the interdiction effort in Steel Tiger depended on an RLAf contribution—a change of command at this stage solely benefited Ouane, the

20. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 227, 081220Z Apr 66.

21. Phasouk's accusation carried considerable weight since the Americans in Laos recognized he was an able commander willing to fight the Pathet Lao. In fact, most rated Phasouk and Vang Pao as the two top Laotian Generals.

22. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 227, 081220Z Apr 66.

23. *Ibid*; msg, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 301912Z Apr 66.

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Sananikones, and the North Vietnamese Army. Hamilton got in touch with Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. He requested Unger to cable the Defense Department's apprehension to Sullivan and ask the ambassador to speak with Souvanna to "save [Thao Ma] from the rockpile."²⁴

However, the General Staff, in Sullivan's mind, had already maneuvered the RLAF leader into a fairly isolated position, particularly after his relations with Phasouk had gone downhill. Seemingly, Thao Ma had few supporters, except Col. Noupheut Daoheuang, Commander of GM 18, an old friend. In any showdown, Thao Ma would have only the threat of his T-28s. The ambassador predicted there would be a compromise that would either clip Thao Ma's wings rather sharply or tie him closer to the General Staff. Either way, the die was cast; and Sullivan meant to stay out of the squabble but would "continue to show a very close intellectual interest." What the ambassador did not know was that he was soon to be deeply involved "in this fire and boat drill."²⁵

On May 11, Souvanna told Sullivan that Thao Ma was being relieved as RLAF Commander and that he would be sent to the General Staff as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. In this post, he would serve as an army rather than an air force officer and be would directly under Oudone Sananikone—an officer he detested. Sourith would take over the RLAF as soon as he arrived from the United States. Sullivan quickly realized that Thao Ma was finished. Even so, he accepted Souvanna's invitation to attend a meeting the next day in Savannakhet as part of a three-man commission to reach a compromise. The other members would be Ouane and finance minister Sisouk na Champassak (nephew of Boun Oum na Champassak). Sisouk considered Thao Ma honest, patriotic, and a good fighter but admitted that he was a poor administrator and a poorer politician. He agreed that the generals wanted Thao Ma under their thumb so they could use the C-47s for opium and gold smuggling.²⁶

The commission's compromise allowed Thao Ma to remain as RLAF head, but the air arm's headquarters was moved to Vientiane and restructured along lines acceptable to the General Staff (in consultation with the embassy). Control of the transport planes went to a central transportation office (under the General Staff); with the RLAF furnishing personnel and the embassy a "watchful eye." The T-28s were also reorganized—as soon as the Pakse, Savannakhet, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang airfields were prepared to handle all phases of air operations, the forty-odd fighters were to be dispersed into four units, one to each base.²⁷

One of the more interesting aspects of the Savannakhet "inquest" was that, while many RLAF staff officers were critical of Thao Ma and the way he ran the RLAF, all deferred to him as a flyer and fighter and none asked for his replacement.²⁸ They did resent his one-man show and his failure to share responsibility with his senior staff and believed the move to Vientiane would better the situation. "Crestfallen" at the criticism, Thao Ma meekly accepted the reorganization.²⁹

Although this was a solution of sorts, Ambassador Sullivan acknowledged time was needed before harmony returned between the RLAF and the General Staff—and, more particularly, within the RLAF. Thao Ma had doubts about surviving "the shark-infested waters

24. Memo, William C. Hamilton, Dep Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to Leonard Unger, Under Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (through Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA), subj: Prospective Command Change in the RLAF, May 4, 1966.

25. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1165, May 7, 1966, 1170, May 9, 1966.

26. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, May 11, 1966, 1172, May 10, 1966, 1178, May 12, 1966, AIRA Vientiane to DLA, 833, 111600Z May 66.

27. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1180, May 12, 1966, 1320, Jun 13, 1966.

28. There was no mention of the commission interviewing pilots who flew with Thao Ma.

29. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1180, May 12, 1966.

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The Stalemate Continues

of Vientiane," even though Sullivan assured him he had the life preservers handy. It was obvious the ambassador had his fingers crossed, hoping not to get "too big an albatross around our necks" as "we wet nurse this thing along." His well-known sense of humor prevailed through it all. When King Savang Vatthana sided against Thao Ma and asked Sullivan to assist in changing the RLAf Chief's ways, the ambassador quipped: "We have obviously been handed the baby on this one and my lap is already beginning to feel a little damp."³⁰

General Kouprasith—the prime force behind the move to bring Thao Ma to heel—later elaborated the complaints against the RLAf Commander to Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché. The RLAf was under American "control," Kouprasith contended, and the T-28s were being used for American and not Laotian interests. By this, he meant the fighters spent too much time on the trail and not enough in support of FAR ground operations. Kouprasith was also nettled because the RLAf received direct U.S. support and because Thao Ma was not hesitant to say that American training and leadership surpassed the French. Kouprasith's other comments confirmed to Pettigrew that Thao Ma had long been a thorn in the General Staff's side, chiefly because of his independence—as RLAf Commander, Thao Ma had refused to carry out orders he suspected were for a FAR general's personal gain, including illicit use of the C-47s and air support where he thought no enemy existed. Pettigrew was afraid the Thao Ma affair and the RLAf reshuffling would sap the air arm's overall effectiveness. Perhaps more important, if Thao Ma was cashiered (he was already considered a "lost cause" by Ambassador Sullivan), Vang Pao might be the next target of the FAR general staff.³¹

As Colonel Pettigrew had feared, the Thao Ma/General Staff quarrel weakened RLAf operations. During the debate over Thao Ma's situation, T-28 combat sorties [REDACTED] came to a virtual standstill. In early June, the RLAf leader refused, agreed, and again refused to move from Savannakhet to Vientiane. For a few hours, it appeared he would resist Ouane by getting Colonel Nouphe't's GM 18 to lead a coup. Things calmed down only when King Savang let it be known he wanted Thao Ma to command at least the tactical aviation branch; but beneath the calm, hard feelings persisted. Sullivan saw no end to his "cuddling and guidance."³²

During the summer of 1966, the feud between Thao Ma and the generals simmered underground, but things came to a boil on September 27. The RLAf was split into separate tactical and transport branches, and Sourith replaced Thao Ma, who went to the General Staff as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. He was also made Assistant Director of the Combined Operations Center, with control of the T-28s and the four air operations centers. Sourith took over the transports, and both branches were placed under the General Staff. Thao Ma reportedly was "delighted" with his new job. This was fine from the country team's point of view, since the integrity of the tactical air arm was preserved; but Sullivan correctly predicted, "I doubt we've really heard the last of Ma's troubles."³³

In midyear, as the monsoons swept northern Laos and the RLAf reorganization staggered along, the FAR General Staff presented plans for Operation Prasane, which involved Military Region I units, including FAR, Meo ADC, and RLAf (Prasane meant "coordination"). The objective of this three-phase limited offensive was to clear the Pathet Lao from Nam Bac and the Ou River valley in Luang Prabang Province. The nearly complete air operations center at

30. *Ibid*; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1190, May 13, 1966, 1192, 1193, May 14, 1966.

31. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 913, 250244Z May 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1875, Jun 3, 1966.

32. Hist, CINCPAC, 1966, p 665; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1275, Jun 3, 1966, 1320, Jun 13, 1966, 1336, Jun 18, 1966.

33. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 901, Sep 20, 1966, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 600, 271115Z Sep 66.

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Luang Prabang airfield, similar to those jointly operated by the RLA and Water Pump at Vientiane and Savannakhet was crucial to the operation. When the AOC was finished, Thao Ma would transfer six T-28s from Savannakhet to the northern airfield's newly lengthened and resurfaced strip; and Prasane could begin when the pilots knew the terrain. Phase I called for the T-28s to soften up three nearby short takeoff-and-landing sites lost to the communists—Nam Thouam, Nom Lak, and Pha Thong—followed by attacks from the FAR and ADC. Phase II included airlift of 420 men into Nam Thouam and an airlift of two battalions of GM 11 (1,000 men) into Pha Thong. Phase III was a drive by the FAR into Nam Bac from these sites, while other units blocked the enemy's escape to the east (Phase III).³⁴

● The embassy had urged this offensive for some time. If successful, the RLG would regain an important area lost at the time of the Geneva accords, placing the FAR in a favorable position to block the traditional invasion route up the Ou River valley from Dien Bien Phu to Luang Prabang. Since the operation was planned to start around July 18, the monsoon should stifle any enemy reaction: Col. Robert S. Ferrari, USA, the new DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, believed Operation Prasane would get the new RLA/FAR organization off to a good start and be "a common feather in the caps of Ouane and Ma." Unlike Operation Triangle or the numerous assaults on Phou Kout, the United States did not furnish any arms or equipment because the Royal Laotian Government troops were reasonably well trained and equipped. However, the embassy was asked to augment the helicopter airlift of the GM 11 battalions. If Air America was used, ten helicopters would be needed for two days, severely curtailing the airline's resupply missions, already behind because of the rain. For Prasane, Emory C. Swank wanted to enlist four USAF CH-3C helicopters flown by Air Force crews from Nakhon Phanom to staging areas close to Luang Prabang. As soon as the Laotian troops were assembled and the airlift completed, the aircraft would return to Thailand.³⁵

● For this airlift job, Swank had in mind the 20th Helicopter Squadron at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom on temporary duty from the 14th Air Commando Wing at Nha Trang. The 20th's original mission had been assisting in counterinsurgency operations in northern Thailand when requested by Ambassador Martin. Due to the CH-3 shortage, the squadron's role soon evolved into delivering, retrieving, reinforcing, and resupplying clandestine 34-A intelligence and sabotage teams in North Vietnam. It also occasionally ferried MACV guerrilla teams (coded Shining Brass and Prairie Fire) into the panhandle of Laos near the South Vietnamese border. With these special missions, the crews had properly begun to call themselves the Pony Express.³⁶

● On July 15, Thao Ma asked Lt. Gen. William C. Momyer, the new Seventh Air Force Commander, for a three-week loan of two Cricket O-1 aircraft from Nakhon Phanom. The USAF pilots would fly visual reconnaissance and serve as forward air controllers for the RLA and USAF strike aircraft fraged for Operation Prasane, and Thao Ma would supply the Laotian observers. This was the first time the Air Force had operated out of Luang Prabang, and the RLA chief asked that the O-1s have removable insignia—RLA on the ground, USAF in the air. In line with these rules, the FACs would wear civilian clothes on the ground and flying suits while airborne.³⁷

● The State Department was willing to help the FAR with Cricket FACs but had serious doubts about using USAF helicopters. Participation by the 20th Squadron would pass over the

34. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1336, Jun 18, 1966, 4, Jul 1, 1966, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX-471, 140545Z Jul 66.

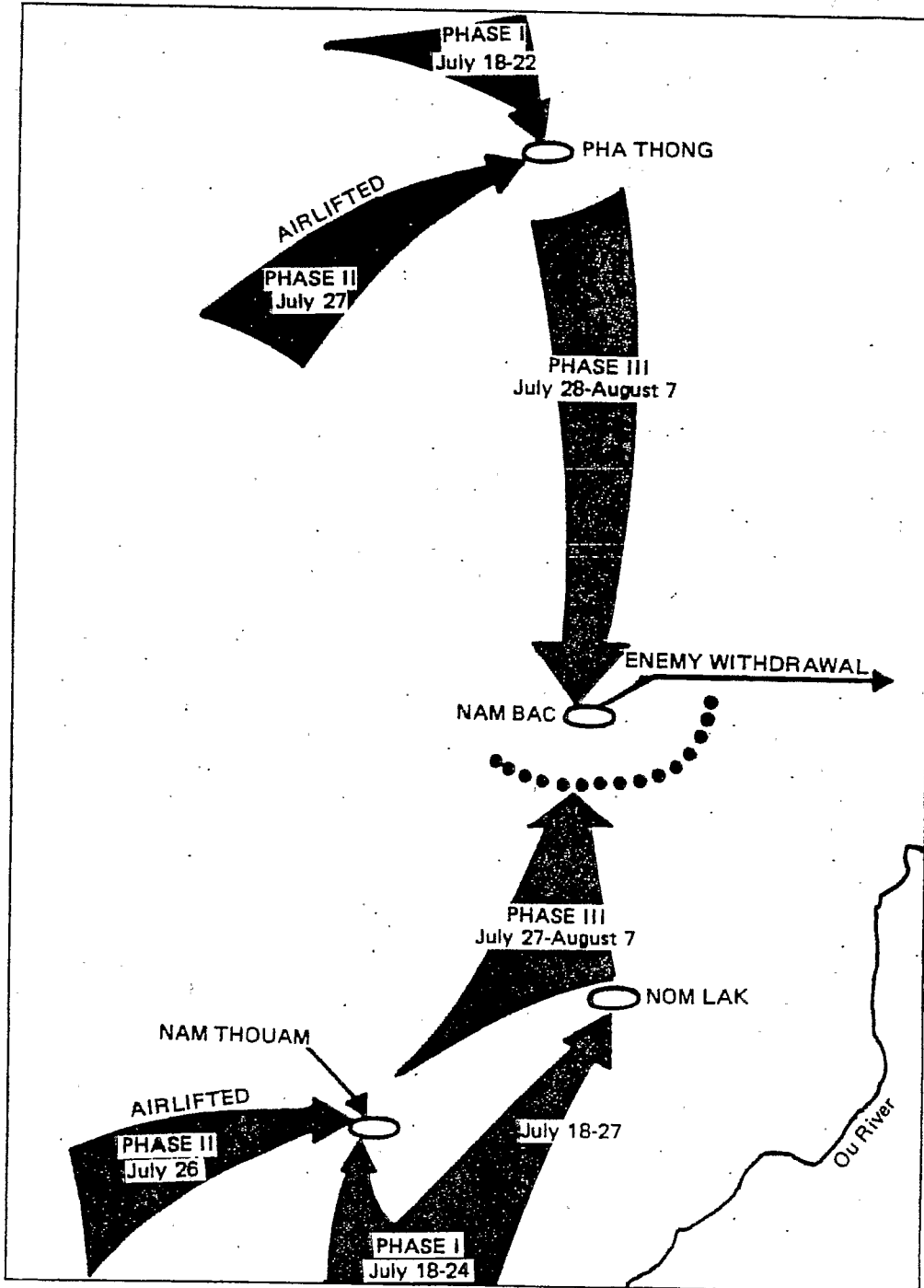
35. ● Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX-471, 140545Z Jul 66, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 150850Z Jul 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 137, Jul 14, 1966.

36. ● Msgs, CINCPACAF to COMUSMAGTHAI, 262145Z Mar 66, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 212320Z May 66.

37. ● Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 150320Z Jul 66.

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Operation Prasane
July-August 1966



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fine line between providing tactical air support and engaging in Laotian ground operations. The magnitude of Prasane also disturbed the State Department, for the operation was in an area just sixty miles from Dien Bien Phu and came at a time when the king and prime minister were out of the country. Consequently, unless Souvanna requested the helicopters, they would not be used in place of Air America, even though this might over task the airline's assets.³⁸

Operation Prasane began on July 18 and met only sporadic enemy resistance. Pha Thong fell on the 22d; and by July 30, all Phase I objectives were in FAR hands. During July 16-29, the RLAf flew 71 sorties from Vientiane and 110 from Luang Prabang.³⁹ Thao Ma claimed the T-28s destroyed sixteen large motorized piroques on the Ou River, each reported to be loaded with twenty to thirty bags of rice weighing 220 pounds. On July 26 and 27, the Air America airlift of GM 11 went off without a hitch. During the airlift, the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron assumed the search and rescue responsibility for all of Laos, and the 20th Helicopter Squadron made a delivery for [REDACTED] on the Bolovens Plateau. Phase II neared completion by July 30, somewhat behind schedule in rain that had become quite heavy. Government forces pushed forward and captured Nam Bac on August 7 with little enemy resistance. The Pathet Lao had apparently melted away.⁴⁰

Except for patrolling and harassment, the monsoon then brought all military operations to a virtual standstill; and the Mekong was approaching flood stage at Vientiane by August 23. Two weeks later, Wattay Airfield was under a foot of water, and Air America and Continental Air Service⁴¹ operations had shifted to Udom. This stretched each northern sortie by seventy-five miles and further decreased rice and commodity airlifts. The weather also hampered RLG efforts to clear the Ou River and Nam Bac valley. The flood waters in the upper Mekong did not begin to recede until September 20.⁴²

After the FAR General Staff clamped down on Thao Ma, it soon turned to another sore spot—General Kong Le. It was no secret in Vientiane that men like Ouane and Kouprasith had for some time wanted to bring the twelve thousand-man neutralist army under their control; the only question was when and how. In early October, while Souvanna was in New York to address the United Nations General Assembly, Sullivan and Baldwin got wind of a conspiracy among the ranking neutralist officers to unseat Kong Le. It was afterwards determined that the FAR General Staff had consented to the ouster but did not interfere. The plot included a reorganization of the neutralist army that retained the staff at Vang Vieng for administrative and disciplinary purposes but gave the FAR operational and logistic control, kept the army intact but divided it into four GMs, and gave each of the three ringleaders (Col. Soulivanh Singhavara, Lt. Col. Sing Chanthakouman, and Col. Somphet Sotsavan) a GM as his reward, (the fourth commander was named later). The General Staff agreed to accept all neutralist officers into the FAR, with their present ranks retained until confirmed by royal decree. With Souvanna's absent, Sullivan instantly adopted a "hands off" policy for the country team. The State Department supported the ambassador's stand and sent word of the impending coup to the prime minister in New York. It was too late—on October 16, Kong Le received a "forced invitation" from Colonel Somphet to

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38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 126, Jul 16, 1966, JCS to CINCPAC, 701, 190001Z Jul 66.

39. References to Air Force strikes in support of Operation Prasane are not found in any source. PACAF Intelligence Bulletin 31, Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, July 1-July 31, 1966, notes only that the Air Force flew 310 Barrel Roll and 96 Bango/Whiplash sorties.

40. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 497, 230515Z Jul 66, 516, 300550Z Jul 66, DIA to AJG 7011, 240433Z Jul 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 300626Z Jul 66; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Aug 66.

41. Successor to Bird and Sons contract airline.

42. Msgs, CINCPAC to DIA, 231933Z Aug 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1140, Aug 25, 1966, JCS, SECSTATE, 734, Sep 7, 1966, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 100715Z Sep 66, CINCPAC to DIA, 200510Z Sep 66.

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leave Laos. The next day, Kong Le was aboard an RLAf C-47 bound for Udon. The coup had been swift and bloodless.⁴³

● In analyzing Kong Le's ouster, several points seemed clear to Sullivan. Following a series of personal and military failures over two years, the general's once enthusiastic drive had withered to apathy and his men had turned against him. It was significant that Kong Le's own lieutenants led the coup and that all had been members of his old outfit, the 2d Paratroop Battalion. This unit had launched the paratrooper captain onto the world stage in 1960 and was a symbol of his authority over the neutralist forces. Through his own inadequacies and weaknesses, Kong Le had lost control of the 2d Battalion, and its members had played key roles in the conspiracy.⁴⁴

● It was likewise obvious that before he left for the United Nations, Souvanna thought Kong Le had outlived his usefulness. Hearing of the impending coup from the State Department, the prime minister merely requested reports on the situation. He carefully avoided any instruction to counter or even calm the actions against Kong Le, thus showing tacit acceptance of the coup.⁴⁵

● Kong Le's precipitous ouster from Laos was just four days old when sudden and dramatic events ensued. Around five in the morning on October 21, Thao Ma and Col. Bounleut Saycocie (an old coup plotter), seized Savannakhet airfield in what was Thao Ma's last-ditch attempt to resolve his long-standing feud with the FAR General Staff. By half-past eight, the Savannakhet-based T-28s were over Vientiane and started bombing and strafing FAR headquarters and Chinaimo Barracks. The artillery site and communications center at Wattay were hardest hit, resulting in twenty-three killed and sixty-five wounded. As the attacks proceeded, Thao Ma phoned Sullivan asking for his aid in pressuring Generals Kouprasith, Bounpone, and Oudone to resign. Instead, the ambassador put Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Insiengmay on the phone. After speaking with Leuam, Thao Ma agreed to accept a mediation delegation and to allow Colonel Pettigrew's aircraft to land at Savannakhet. He further promised to keep his "eagles" grounded until the situation could be resolved. Nevertheless, the Thai, whose air space had been violated by the RLAf T-28s, began arming their own fighters for possible intercepts. At this point, General Momyer wisely suspended all USAF missions over Laos.⁴⁶

● Boun Oum, then in Vientiane, consented to head the peace delegation if the king approved. However, the king left the decision to Leuam. Sullivan persuaded the acting prime minister to treat this as a positive response and to ask the prince to make the trip. At this point, Boun Oum was at a loss about what he could reasonably be expected to accomplish in Savannakhet. So he, Leuam, Kouprasith, and Sourith decided to dig into a big Laotian lunch before settling on their next step. Meantime, Sullivan placed Wattay under aerial surveillance by an Air America aircraft that had radio contact with the Udon tower. In addition, the Thai T-28s stood alert in case Thao Ma's planes came back across Thailand for another try.⁴⁷

● On the afternoon of October 21, the British ambassador, Boun Oum, and Sullivan flew to Savannakhet to talk with Thao Ma. Although acutely aware that he had failed, Thao Ma was adamant. Apparently, the former RLAf chief had counted on his friend, Colonel Noupheut, to arrest Generals Ouane and Bounpone while the T-28s got Kouprasith and Oudone. As Colonel Baldwin noted, "Had this worked out, he would have slain all his dragons at once." It had failed

43. ● Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX-765, 071610Z Oct 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 150338Z Oct 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1262, Oct 15, 1966, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1091, Oct 15, 1966, DIA to AIG 7010, 160506Z Oct 66, 190602Z Oct 66.

44. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1286, Oct 18, 1966.

45. ● *Ibid.*

46. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2424, 2425, Oct 21, 1966, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 210712Z Oct 66.

47. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2432, Oct 21, 1966.

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because Noupheet decided to back out and Thao Ma made the critical mistake of telling the assistant air attaché at Savannakhet of his intention. The latter at once phoned Colonel Pettigrew who quickly alerted Oudone and Kouprasith. These officers had no sooner left FAR headquarters than the T-28s peeled off on their strafing runs.⁴⁸

After returning to Vientiane, the ambassadors, the FAR General Staff, and RLG officials gathered at Leuam's house. After much discussion, Kouprasith induced Ouane to request Brig. Gen. La Pathammavong at regimental headquarters in Savannakhet to do whatever was necessary to restore order. La had earlier told Sullivan that he wanted to avoid force and would try persuasion. The next morning, his men walked in without resistance. Apparently, Thao Ma had realized the game was over (no other FAR officer had pledged support for the coup), and he and ten of his disenchanted pilots had flown their fully armed T-28s to Udon during the night.⁴⁹

The short flight from Savannakhet by Thao Ma's "Revolutionary Air Force" was not uneventful. As soon as the planes took off, the USAF radar at Mukdahan, Thailand, began tracking them. When "RLAF 315" requested a landing for twenty-five T-28s, the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force TACC ordered all six F-102s to five-minute alert. Two of the jets were dispatched when Thao Ma's flight was about eighty miles south of Udon with no radio contact. Another two F-102s followed twenty-five minutes later. These interceptors were orbiting the field when the tower gave the T-28s permission to land. One pilot who could not understand English touched down without any tower instructions whatsoever. A second T-28 ran off the end of the runway and was slightly damaged.⁵⁰

According to Col. John E. Bridge, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force Director of Intelligence, the T-28s taxied smartly to their assigned parking spaces. Once out of the cockpit, the pilots sat around staring at the ground and looking like the losers they were. Under the glaring floodlights, Thao Ma seemed a badly shaken and very sick man. Two-time loser Bounleut was the least gloomy of the lot—he had been through it all before.⁵¹

By the afternoon of October 22, Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn issued orders treating Thao Ma and his pilots as political refugees. Just the same, at a meeting of the Laotian cabinet and the General Staff, Kouprasith vigorously demanded the extradition of the airmen. There was the feeling that by being together in Thailand, Thao Ma, Kong Le, and Phoumi would hatch another coup. The Royal Thailand Government did not honor the request and released Thao Ma and his pilots, saying their attack on Vientiane was a political and not a criminal act.⁵²

In retrospect, Thao Ma's attempt to bring down the FAR General Staff did not ever have a chance of succeeding. The one military figure allied with him was Bounleut; and the two infantry companies that took part merely occupied Savannakhet airfield. Thao Ma must have believed he had backing in some areas. Without this, his lashing out at his rivals never would have occurred, and he would not have been able to talk ten of his pilots into striking Vientiane. In the end, Thao Ma's downfall and exile were a real tragedy—he was an aggressive, anticommunist military leader in a country where aggressiveness of any type was in short supply. On the other hand, his ouster eliminated another maverick and removed an obstacle to

48. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2433, Oct 21, 1966, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX-751, 211600Z Oct 66.

49. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2449, Oct 21, 1966, 2452, Oct 22, 1966, DIA to AIG 7010, 220108Z Oct 66, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX-754, 220445Z Oct 66. Another pilot flew to Udon. Nine T-28s stayed at Savannakhet. [Msg, USARMA Vientiane to DIA, 754, 220445Z Oct 66.]

50. Msg, AFSSO Udon to AFSSO 7th AF, 220925Z Oct 66.

51. Msg, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, Oct 23, 1966.

52. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2457, Oct 22, 1966; Trest and Hammons, p 52.

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the FAR General Staff. Vang Pao aptly summed up the situation, saying that Thao Ma had acted stupidly and dangerously, but the basic fault lay with Ouane and Kouprasith, who had backed him into a corner where he ended up in a senseless struggle for his life and career.⁵³

During the 1966 rainy season, the fighting in Military Region II was light and scattered. When the weather improved in mid-September, there were signs that action was about to accelerate. On September 17, the communists seized San Tiau (Lima Site 2), a major Meo base south of Ban Ban. Vang Pao counterattacked, and five days later it was back in his hands. The enemy did not let up—during the last two weeks of September, roadwatch teams spotted over seventy-five trucks westbound on Route 7, the prelude of a dry season assault on the neutralists at Muong Soui. RLAFT-28s were fraged against the trucks but could not find them, and most observers believed the North Vietnamese had probably switched to moving only at night. This was confirmed on October 8, when a roadwatch team caught thirty-two trucks driving west on Route 7 at dusk and spotted twenty-eight more the next night. This led Colonel Pettigrew to ask the Seventh Air Force to schedule a special Barrel Roll strike, using, for the first time, the Douglas A-26K Counter Invader, an aircraft that had proved itself in Steel Tiger interdiction.⁵⁴

Under the nickname Big Eagle, the Air Force had sent eight of these light bombers to Nakhon Phanom from England Air Force Base, Louisiana, for 179 days in early June. Since the Royal Thailand Government did not want B-26s on Thai soil because the designation "B" denoted offensive aircraft, the plane's designation was changed to A-26.⁵⁵ These were not the aircraft that had flown in World War II or Korea. They had been completely refurbished by the On Mark Engineering Company, Van Nuys, California. The aircraft—so new the Federal Aviation Administration certified it as a zero-time aircraft⁵⁶—mounted fourteen fixed .50-caliber machineguns, three in each wing (later removed) and two rows of four in the nose. The eight external pylons could carry four thousand pounds of armament, and the strengthened wings allowed for added fuel. Bigger and more reliable engines replaced the older powerplants.⁵⁷

The Seventh Air Force evaluated the Big Eagle A-26s in the Cricket area of the panhandle as part of its intensified night armed reconnaissance and interdiction. They flew in blacked-out single-ship sorties, randomly covering the various lines of communication to surprise the enemy and to prevent prediction of the next air strike. Normal tactics called for the crew to open fire with guns and rockets on unsuspecting targets, then pull up, drop flares, and continue the attack. Depending on the size and type of target, other strike and flare aircraft working in the area could be brought in, with the A-26 (call sign Nimrod) marking the target. The bombers had two crewmen, both FAC-qualified (Sullivan especially liked this feature). Thus, the A-26Ks not only made ideal hunter-killers but could control additional strikes if needed.⁵⁸

The Big Eagle evaluation started on June 20, 1966. In the first four days, twenty-six daylight armed reconnaissance sorties were flown with the O-1 Cricket forward air controllers riding along to aid in area familiarization. During the second week of operations, thirty A-26

53. Trest and Hammons, pp 54-55; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Oct 66.

54. (S) Msgs, DIA to AIG 925, 220320Z Sep 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 654, 240700Z Sep 66, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp, 040400Z Oct 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 080456Z Oct 66.

55. The WW II Douglas A-26 Invader was given the B-26 designation in 1948 when the Air Force dropped the attack category. After extensive modification for counterinsurgency operations, the aircraft was designated B-26K. Because the "B" for "bomber" signified to Thai authorities an offensive-type aircraft, Air Force Secretary Harold Brown ordered the aircraft to be redesignated A-26K. The "A" designation, along with "O" and "F" on other USAF aircraft, all signified defensive operations. [Melvin F. Porter, *Interdiction in SEA, 1965-1966* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), 58.]

56. An aircraft that had not logged any flying time.

57. Anthony, pp 97-98.

58. Ltr, Det 1, 603d ACS, to 7th AF, subj: Concept of Operations, A-26 A/C, Jun 12, 1966.

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sorties were completed, six at night. Over this period, 15 tons of bombs, over 30,000 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition, and 107 flares were expended; but two bombers were damaged and another shot down. The Nimrods then assumed their prescribed role in night interdiction.⁵⁹

● No sooner had the A-26 night missions begun than the monsoons broke. From July 29 to August 12, forty-six sorties were canceled due to bad weather. A more thorough appraisal of the aircraft was required, and the evaluation period was extended through October 31. If the plane was determined to be a valuable addition to the Seventh Air Force⁶⁰ inventory by that date or sooner, General Harris planned to deploy follow-on aircraft in November.⁶¹

● In early September, the Big Eagle commander, Col. Domenico A. Curto, suggested that his planes be used in areas other than Cricket, say Barrel Roll. The armed reconnaissance and loiter aspects of the A-26s enabled them to relieve other aircraft and supplement the entire interdiction effort. In Cricket, for example, six jets having an average loiter time of forty minutes were needed to fly the same target coverage as a single A-26. With twelve hours of darkness, thirty-six jets would have to be committed, but they could be released to other areas if A-26s were substituted. Moreover, since the Nimrods had gone to night operations, not one bomber had been lost.⁶²

● The Barrel Roll A-26 strike requested by Pettigrew was conducted on October 10. The roadwatch team that had served as forward air guide for the Nimrod reported ten trucks destroyed, the road heavily cratered just west of Ban Ban, and about fifty enemy killed by air in this strike.⁶³

● The success of the A-26s had a direct bearing on the cancellation of eight AC-47 gunships that were being programmed for Laos. For several months, General Momyer and his staff had been reevaluating Sullivan's request for AC-47s in night interdiction. Since December 1965, the gunships had been supplied by units in South Vietnam, and four had been lost along the trail. In fact, with the growth of enemy antiaircraft guns, the Seventh Air Force commander did not deem Laos a good place for any propeller driven plane. Propeller aircraft could be better used in areas of light or no defensive fire. Momyer judged it better to divert the promised AC-47s to South Vietnam and replace them with more suitable aircraft, preferably jet fighters.⁶⁴

● Ambassador Sullivan was enthusiastic about the A-26. On October 15, Colonel Pettigrew wired General Harris that the ambassador wanted serious consideration given to the early deployment of eight more Nimrods to capitalize on the expected uptum in enemy night traffic during the dry season. The air attaché additionally noted that Sullivan was agreeable to substituting these planes for the programmed AC-47s. General Momyer, however, did not believe the test results were sufficiently conclusive to warrant more A-26s, at least not until another sixty-day evaluation had taken place. Admiral Sharp went along with Sullivan, asking the JCS on October 22 to divert the AC-47s earmarked for Laos to South Vietnam. Although he admitted a detailed test evaluation on the A-26 had not been accomplished, Sharp thought the preliminary data justified the extra bombers. Delighted with the news from the "rug weavers" at the "Honolulu Bazaar," the ambassador at once released the eight AC-47s to South Vietnam.⁶⁵

59. ● Msg, CINCPACAF to 7th AF/13th AF, Aug 19, 1966.

60. ● All Thailand-based USAF aircraft belonged to the Thirteenth Air Force, not the Seventh, which retained operational control only. The rule of thumb was, "When they're in the air, they belong to Seventh; when they're on the ground, they belong to Thirteenth." [Personal recollections of the author.]

61. ● Weekly Activities Reports, Det 1, 603d ACS (Jun 18-24, 1966), Jun 25, 1966, (Jun 25-Jul 1, 1966), Jul 1, 1966; Warren A. Trest, *Lucky Tiger Combat Operations* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), p 7.

62. ● Debriefing rpt, Col Domenico A. Curto, Comdr, Det 1, 603d ACS, Sep 6, 1966.

63. ● Msgs, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 111507Z Oct 66, 7th AF to CINCPACAF, 170930Z Oct 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 731, 150620Z Oct 66.

64. ● Msg, 7th AF to CINCPACAF, Sep 5, 1966.

65. ● Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPACAF, 150843Z Oct 66; Trest, pp 13-14.

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● Sullivan had earlier proposed a conference at Udom to draw up air plans for Barrel Roll during the dry season. At this October 25 meeting, General Momyer said the Seventh Air Force's ability to divert sorties on a moment's notice was superior to what it had been when the Bango/Whiplash alert was started by his predecessor. With the onset of bad weather in North Vietnam, there would be many diverted Rolling Thunder sorties that could be controlled by the improved ground tactical air control system and the airborne battlefield command and control center. He accordingly advocated (and Sullivan concurred) that Bango/Whiplash be discontinued on November 1. Preplanned sorties were still a must; and to take up the slack caused by the cancellation, northern Laos was allocated twelve A-1, eighteen F-104, and four A-26 sorties daily. Finally, procedures were adopted for meeting requests for emergency strikes.⁶⁶

● The A-26s were to be closely linked to the Meo roadwatch teams. Two of the English-speaking team commanders (Tall Man and Red Man) were very experienced in spotting moving trucks, porters, troops, and camouflaged truck parks and in passing this information to aircraft. [REDACTED] Tall Man was qualified as a FAG and had directed numerous USAF air strikes in northern Laos during the preceding year. Each of these team leaders commanded a system of radio-equipped Meo spotters concealed throughout the Samneua area along Routes 6 and 65. The spotters fed target locations and bomb damage assessment to their commanders or contacted Lima Site 36 to have the intelligence relayed. At times, friendly villagers functioned as part of the informant network passing (frequently exaggerated) target information or bomb damage assessment to the teams.⁶⁷

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● The A-26 roadwatch team combination began auspiciously. On November 2, a team near Route 65 contacted an A-26 and furnished the crew a target of five trucks on the road about eight miles east of Samneua. The pilot flew to the area, located the trucks, and destroyed four of them. He continued down the road and chalked up four more truck kills. After A-1s were called in, the final score totaled fourteen vehicles. During the rest of the week, an additional fifty-three trucks, a bulldozer, and four gun positions were knocked out and three hundred enemy troops were killed. Bomb damage assessment was reported by the ground teams, and it correlated closely with results provided from the aircrews. By November 10, few trucks were running on Routes 6 and 65, most having moved to Route 7. From November 9 to November 17, a team on this road reported 258 westbound trucks. In response, a ground network like that used on Routes 6 and 65 was set up along Route 7.⁶⁸

● For the remainder of the month, bad weather hindered Barrel Roll interdiction. Several times, ground teams reported lucrative truck targets but the aircrews could not find them due to the low-hanging clouds. Thus shielded, the communists could truck enough supplies through to keep up their harassment of government positions, including the dawn attack by two or three Pathet Lao battalions against Tha Thom on November 24. The town changed hands twice during the day, winding up under communist control. General Kouprasith⁶⁹ immediately flew in reinforcements, and the RLAF⁷⁰ began hitting the enemy troops. Four days later, three FAR battalions retook Tha Thom following light resistance and found thirty-seven bodies, most of them killed by the air strikes. The 75-mm pack howitzers left by GM 17 were intact, but

66. ● Msg, 7th AF to COMUSMACV, 020900Z Nov 66; Weekly Activities Report (Oct 31-Nov 6, 1966), Det 1, 603d ACS, Nov 7, 1966.

67. ● Rprt, 7th AF/13th AF, Results of A-26 Air Strikes, Nov 15, 1966.

68. ● Msgs, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 031555Z Nov 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 816, 120600Z Nov 66, 7th AF to CINCPAC, 150900Z Nov 66; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Nov 66.

69. ● Although Tha Thom was in Military Region II, General Ouane gave Kouprasith the responsibility for retaking the town since Military Region V was closer and offered better logistic support.

70. ● Operations out of Wattay Airfield were resumed on November 10 after a twenty-day lull following Thao Ma's abortive coup.

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seventeen cases of hand grenades and an undetermined amount of M-1 ammunition were missing. For some unknown reason, recently harvested rice had been left untouched in the fields. The only other significant military action in November occurred at Muong Soui where the neutralist 85th Paratroop Battalion mounted a limited attack on November 16 and seized Phou Douk.⁷¹

Activity in northern Laos stayed at a low level during December. When several Meo ADC positions in northwest Luang Prabang Province were threatened, General Vang Pao struck first, occupying Muong Het (Lima Site 13) on December 18 without opposition. This extended the government's influence to within seven miles of the North Vietnamese border, but disturbing reports indicated the communists were dispersing troops into positions from which to launch major offensive operations in 1967. The Nam Bac region showed signs of becoming active once more, and buildups around Na Khang (Lima Site 36) and Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85) seemed ominous.⁷²

At the end of 1966, [redacted] in Vientiane estimated there were 101 Pathet Lao, 18 Vietnamese, 12 dissident neutralist, and two Chinese battalions operating in Laos. The North Vietnamese Army had about twenty-eight thousand engineer personnel (including coolies) working on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The presence of nearly seventy-five hundred NVA infantrymen and another five thousand attached as "stiffeners" or advisors to the Pathet Lao were more important to northern Laos, since the Pathet Lao would probably have withered on the vine had it not been for this outside cadre. In fact, a captured North Vietnamese captain who had worked with the Pathet Lao characterized them as lazy, untrained, without basic military knowledge, and unwilling to learn. Whenever the North Vietnamese really wanted to secure an objective, they did the job themselves, demonstrating this on January 6 when their force of between six hundred and eight hundred men attacked Lima Site 36.⁷³

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Site 36 was a key Meo position, equally valuable to the Royal Laotian Government, the U.S. Air Force, and the North Vietnamese Army. It controlled Route 6, was a jumpoff point for friendly guerrillas and 34-A teams, and served the HH-3 Jolly Green Giants as a forward operation location. A very low overcast had covered the region for much of December, and the communists may have believed tactical air could not support the defenders. The NVA infiltrated the site's perimeter on the night of January 5/6, 1967, seeking to assault the main command post without engaging any of the Meo ADC outposts. The garrison was alert; and when the infiltrators were discovered, the main enemy body lay down a heavy mortar barrage. Around six in the morning, the major drive on the five hundred defenders began. The command post was pummeled from three sides, and the Meo were cut off from their chief withdrawal routes. At the time, the weather was precisely what the communists had hoped for—a solid overcast with many of the surrounding peaks spearing the clouds.⁷⁴

The North Vietnamese first struck from north of the runway, then charged in from the south. Firing mortars and small arms into the site's quarters and operating area, they pushed to within one hundred yards of the main compound; and the hard-pressed defenders called for air support. Eight F-105s diverted from armed reconnaissance in Steel Tiger were first on the scene. After making radio contact with the remaining [redacted] the planes tried in vain to get down through the layers of clouds. Finally, Lt. Col. Eugene O. Conley found a small break in the clouds some distance from the site. Flying nearly blind, he snaked his way

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71. Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, Nov 66; JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 853, 260600Z Nov 66, 874, 030550Z Dec 66, DIA to AIG 7010, 300507Z Nov 66.

72. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 925, 240550Z Dec 66, 942, 210610Z Dec 66.

73. Msgs, AmEmb/ARMA/CAS Vientiane to CINCPAC, 1447, Sep 11, 1966, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 310332Z Dec 66, 280240Z Jan 67.

74. Msgs, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 060930Z Jan 67, 355th TFW to Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, 160835Z Jan 67.

[REDACTED]

The Stalemate Continues

between the peaks toward the camp. When the two-hundred-foot ceiling kept him from lining up and delivering his ordnance, Conley buzzed the area trying to make the communists break off the attack. His repeated passes seemed to tell as the enemy assault slowed.⁷⁵

Dragonfly 21 (Maj. Robert E. Turner) and Dragonfly 22 (Capt. John D. Haney, Jr.), from the 602d Fighter Squadron Commando at Udorn, had just unloaded on a bridge in Steel Tiger when they were ordered to Lima Site 36. It took the A-1s almost an hour to get back to Barrel Roll, where they faced the weather that had stymied the F-105s. Turner made contact with the [REDACTED] who, with shotgun in hand, was about to make an Alamo-like last stand. Leaving Haney at eight thousand feet, Turner spiraled down through the clouds and broke out squarely over the site.⁷⁶

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Major Turner saw that the situation was grave. The enemy clung to both sides of the runway, the POL storage area, and the trees encircling the west side of the short landing strip. He knew the low ceiling ruled out jet strikes and that he would have to wait until other A-1s from Udorn or Nakhon Phanom relieved him. He not only had to deliver his ordnance effectively, but he also had to buy time as well. A USAF Butterfly forward air controller was now on the scene, and he told Turner anything outside the compound was fair game.⁷⁷

The Skyraider pilot flew several passes, triggering rockets singly and firing short bursts from his 20-mm cannon to save ammunition. Slowly, he forced the enemy down from the compound hill and back across the dirt runway. His pattern of attack, confined by ceiling and terrain, was so low he often had to pull up off his run and into the clouds to avoid the trees and hilltops. When the Butterfly asked Turner to pin down troops among the POL barrels without igniting the gasoline, he strafed with 20-mm fire up to and around the barrels, and then resumed on the other side. Later, five enemy bodies were counted with just two of the fifteen barrels dented by ricochets. It was a remarkable one-man show.⁷⁸

When Major Turner ran out of ammunition, he climbed back on top of the weather and led Captain Haney down to the site. The wingman recalled that, after circling down to where the weather was clear, he found it incredible that Turner had worked so low (the ceiling was still at two hundred feet) and under those conditions. What stuck in Haney's mind most was

trying to shoot a man with 20-mm. There were two of them standing there shooting at me with their rifles. I put the piper on one and squeezed the trigger and missed him. I was firing rockets at the time and the rocket hit the man directly behind him. It exploded on impact . . . and he just kind of disappeared.⁷⁹

The two Skyraiders' crucial hour over the target spelled the difference between saving and losing the site during the initial assault. The pilots expended sixteen hundred rounds of 20-mm ammunition, four 100-pound white-phosphorous bombs, and fifty 2.75-inch rockets. Heavy and accurate ground fire scored hits on both planes, but not sufficiently serious to force them to break off the attacks.⁸⁰

The ceiling began to lift and Butterfly 44⁸¹ directed the incoming flights through the clearing weather. Firefly 11 and Firefly 12 (two A-1Es) swept in on the tail of the departing

75. Msg, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 355th TFW, 060510Z Jan 67; Capt Melvin F. Porter, *Second Defense of Lima Site 36* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), pp 3-4.

76. Intvw, Proj CHECO hist, with Capt John D. Haney, Jr., 602d FSC, Feb 15, 1967.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*; msg, 432d TRW to AIG 913, 060345Z Jan 67.

81. The numbers "22," "33," and "44," added to the Butterfly call sign identified the particular geographic area the FAC worked, the high numbers being used farther north. For example, Butterfly 22 was used chiefly in the Muong Soui area and west of the Plain of Jars, while Butterfly 44 was employed north of the plain.

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Turner and Haney, working over the drainage ditches and tree lines near the runway. They were followed throughout the day by overlapping flights of F-105s (the weather cleared completely by noon), A-1s, F-104s, and T-28s

This steady air support and the regrouped Meo defenders beat back the communists from the perimeter, allowing the slightly damaged airstrip to be reopened. Even though forty of the enemy had been killed by air (most of them attributed to Turner and Haney), the North Vietnamese Army remained in force around the camp. Vang Pao arrived during the day, but the Meo general could not put out patrols due to enemy snipers. The immediate threat to the site had subsided, but the fight was not over.⁸²

The night passed without incident, and the morning was clear enough for the Air Force to sweep the surrounding area. An English-speaking Meo forward air guide (Blue Boy) directed several A-1s against the nearby woods and other likely hiding places. The day's most striking event was the discovery of a detailed map of the area on a dead body. After studying the map, General Vang Pao surmised that the North Vietnamese were new in the area and had used the map's carefully drawn entry routes to guide their infiltration. If true, the enemy soldiers had most likely retraced their steps while trying to regroup. Accordingly, Vang Pao put a Meo observer in the backseat of a Butterfly's plane and instructed them to comb and recomb the suspected pathways to locate the communist force. The enemy troops, apparently lost, were soon found in a depression not far from one of the lines on the captured map. The FAC called in two A-1s that hit the area with white-phosphorous bombs, leaving it a smoldering blaze. The battle for Lima Site 36 was over, and it had been saved again by air power.⁸³

The final tally was sixty-three enemy dead, with numerous bodies disintegrated. Two North Vietnamese soldiers were captured along with twenty assorted weapons, and interrogation of one of the prisoners showed how intuitive Vang Pao had been. The prisoner disclosed he belonged to the North Vietnamese Army 174th Regiment that had entered Laos ten days before, traveling by truck at night to avoid being spotted by air. The prisoner said he had traveled the last eight miles to Na Khang on foot using just the annotated maps.⁸⁴

The Butterfly forward air controller that controlled the Na Khang air strikes was one of a group of FACs that had evolved from the handful of men that Ambassador Leonard Unger had pressed into service in 1964 for Operation Triangle. Like their predecessors, the Butterflies were air commandos and graduates of the combat controller school of the Special Air Warfare Center. They worked for the embassy, meaning they were outside the Seventh Air Force or Thirteenth Air Force chain of command. Unlike the Cricket FACs, Butterflies were enlisted men and nonrated officers who did not fly their own planes. They were flown in planes owned and operated by Air America and Continental Air Service. They sat either in the right front seat or the backseat and worked strike aircraft using a backpack radio with the antenna poked out the plane's window. When direct contact with friendly ground troops was impossible, the Butterfly often relied on conversations with RLG personnel before takeoff or the local Laotian/Meo commander riding with him to control the strike. The principal reason for developing the Butterfly program was to have Americans control USAF Barrel Roll sorties and avoid the short rounds that had intermittently plagued Steel Tiger. The program also gave the FACs a chance to live in the field with RLG personnel and become intimately familiar with the changing friendly and enemy positions in northern Laos.⁸⁵

82. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 1-67, 070432Z Jan 67; intvw, Capt Henry S. Shields, Proj CHECO hist, with Lt Col John G. Garrity, Jr., AIRA MR II Intel Off (1966), Dec 3, 1971.

83. Intvw, Proj CHECO hist, with Capt John G. Roberts, 602d FSC, Feb 15, 1967; msg, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 080735Z Jan 67.

84. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 4-67, 280610Z Jan 67, DIA to AIG 7010, 310210Z Jan 67.

85. Capt Henry S. Shields, *USAF Control of Airstrikes in Support of Indigenous Lao Ground Forces* (Proj

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Butterfly targets were developed rather informally. When a government outpost had target information, word was passed to Vang Pao at his Long Tieng headquarters by radio, Air America supply plane, or foot runner. The next day, a request went out for a Butterfly FAC; and the FAC, with a contract pilot and Thai interpreter, would fly to the outpost for a briefing. After landing, the Thai usually talked to the site commander, who might be a Meo and, pointing off into the distance, might say something like: "See smoke? Bad mans there. Go hit." Everyone piled back into the plane and headed for the smoke. En route, the FAC called for a strike aircraft. In the target area, the Thai again translated for the FAC who relayed the information to the strike pilots. All of this needed to be done before the jets ran out of fuel and returned home. Lt. Col. John J. Garrity, Jr., recalled this experience several years later.⁸⁶

After each ordnance pass, the whole translation interpreter problem started all over again as we tried to refine the target's location and get the idea across to the strike aircraft. To completely complicate matters, Butterflies couldn't use marker rounds and had to do the whole job by radio.⁸⁷

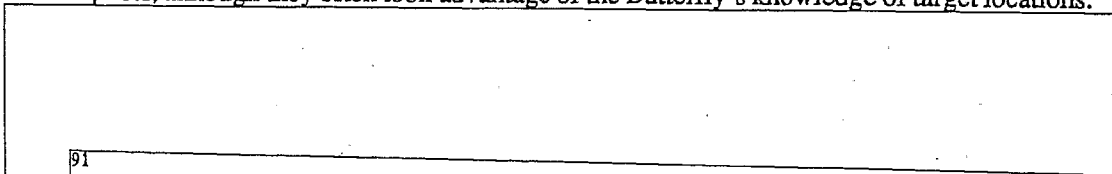
This procedure was repeated at the next site. On days devoid of specific air support requests, the Butterfly would find his own targets by general visual reconnaissance. These included entrenchments, foxholes, suspected troop concentrations, bridges, and military structures.⁸⁸

Marking rockets were prohibited because the FACs, while directing strikes, flew in planes that were owned by Air America and Continental Air Service. The only practical solution was for the FAC to talk to the pilots in very descriptive language. The FAC, after he was sure the lead knew where to bomb, asked him to put down a bomb as a marker. The rest of the flight then used that bomb as a guide. This method was not used when supporting ground forces, since short rounds were possible.⁸⁹

Beginning in mid-1966, Ambassador Sullivan allowed the Butterflies to drop smoke grenades and canisters over the side of contract aircraft, but the altitudes flown by the Air America or Continental pilots precluded accuracy. Finally, in October 1966, Colonel Pettigrew was given a U-6 fitted with radios and rocket rails to serve as a FAC ship. This plane was flown in Military Region II by a rated assistant air attaché who also used the Butterfly call sign, but it could not work from the short-takeoff-and-landing strips where it was still necessary to stop to confer with or pick up the local military observer. This made the use of contract aircraft mandatory, even though they could not mark the targets.⁹⁰

Most of a Butterfly's time was spent controlling USAF aircraft, but he would now and then work with the RLAF [redacted] Since the RLAF pilots were striking in their own country, they did not have the stringent validation and control requirements imposed on USAF pilots, although they often took advantage of the Butterfly's knowledge of target locations.

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CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972), pp 25-26.

86. As a major, Garrity served as a Butterfly from February to June 1966 while an air attaché intelligence officer with Vang Pao's forces.

87. Garrity Intvw, Dec 3, 1971.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Shields, p 30.

91. Garrity intvw, Dec 3, 1971.

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The Butterflies often would have no strike aircraft to control. However, the next night, with virtually no warning, they might be deluged by Rolling Thunder divers (who were usually short of fuel and needed an immediate target) and by Bango/Whiplash jets dropping in at the same time. This situation improved in April 1966 when the specially configured Dogpatch RC-47 was sent to Barrel Roll to act as an ABCCC. This plane carried a SSB radio to alert the Butterfly forward air controller on the ground that divers were on the way. This enabled him to round up his interpreter/validation team, get airborne, and have his target ready by the time the jets got there. The RC-47 was shot down by North Vietnamese MiGs on July 29 when it wandered into North Vietnam, but another aircraft from South Vietnam quickly took its place.⁹²

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the program was the work of the Butterfly noncommissioned officers who managed to log many missions, often as many as eight a day. It was not unusual for an enlisted Butterfly to have five hundred missions to his credit after a six-month tour. CMSgt Charlie Jones flew between seven hundred and one thousand Butterfly sorties and acquired the handle "Super FAC" from the pilots he controlled. Chief Jones and his team always tried to be aloft in their Pilatus Porter and tuned to the proper radio frequency. This gave them the earliest possible notice of fighters diverted to their area and saved valuable time and jet fuel.⁹³

No precise figures are available about the number of Butterfly FACs that operated in Laos in these early days. Garrity recalled that, during his February to June 1966 association with the program, never more than one Butterfly was on station. Depending on his location, this FAC used other call signs; and Cricket FACs sent to work in Barrel Roll also called themselves Butterflies, further clouding the picture. Despite the slight increase in the number of controllers after mid-1966, there were probably no more than three at any one time.⁹⁴

Though repulsed at Lima Site 36, the North Vietnamese did not halt their attacks against the Royal Laotian Government. On the night of January 22/23, two NVA battalions hit the FAR/Meo redoubt at Nong Khang (Lima Site 52) fifteen miles north of Samneua. An 82-mm mortar barrage announced the assault around three in the morning, followed by an infantry charge marked by bloody hand-to-hand fighting. The communists did not break off until dawn when RLAf T-28s and USAF A-1s swooped in. By ten they had withdrawn, leaving behind sixty-five dead.⁹⁵

Undaunted by the losses, the North Vietnamese struck again. On February 2, a thirty-man unit staged a swift, early morning, surprise assault on Luang Prabang airfield using 40-mm rockets and automatic weapons. The commando raid, obviously preplanned in detail and well executed, lasted just twenty minutes but destroyed six T-28s, damaging three others, and put three H-34 helicopters out of action. Five FAR soldiers were killed and six wounded. The air operations center was 75 percent destroyed, but there were no American casualties. The debris was rapidly swept off the field, and the FAR searched in vain for the attackers. The next day, five T-28s were transferred from Wattay to Luang Prabang and flying resumed. In retrospect, the raid was significant, not for the RLAf losses incurred, but because it was the first time the communists struck in the vicinity of the royal capital. The communists may have attacked at this particular time since the king was in Vientiane for the opening of the new National Assembly, the election boycotted (as usual) by the Pathet Lao.⁹⁶

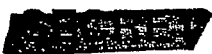
92. *Ibid*; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 577, Jul 29, 1966, 7th AF to NMCC, 300001Z Jul 66, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 18604, Jul 30, 1966.

93. Shields, p 31.

94. Garrity intvw, Dec 3, 1971.

95. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 4-67, 280610Z Jan 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 280240Z Jan 67, DIA to AIG 7010, 310210Z Jan 67.

96. (S) Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 040700Z Feb 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 042304Z Feb 67;



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Three days after the airfield raid, the North Vietnamese infiltrated near the [redacted] 155-mm howitzer position at Muong Soui and opened up with rockets, automatic weapons, and 60-mm mortars. The artillery suffered only slight damage.

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The communists withdrew, only to bring up PT-76 tanks later [redacted] with another sixty rounds. While there was no general attack, the enemy probed the neutralist outposts on the town's perimeter.⁹⁷

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During the rest of February, the enemy took advantage of an unseasonably heavy overcast that blanketed most of northern Laos. On the night of February 12/13, Lima Site 36's defenses were again tested, and over a hundred 82-mm recoilless rifle rounds peppered the defenders during a twenty-minute period on February 21. The shelling continued until an A-26 appeared and dropped flares and bombs. Although the Meo suffered no casualties, their barracks (rebuilt after the January 6 raid) were totally destroyed.⁹⁸

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When the bad weather ran over into March, the RLG decided to try and turn the tables. Tactical Headquarters, North Laos, positioned troops in the Nam Hieng area to prepare for Operation Ban Kao (Old Village). The objective was to seize Ban Mok Plai (Lima Site 193), which would choke off enemy infiltration routes eastward toward Nam Bac and provide much-needed security for the villages and valleys leading to the Mekong River and Luang Prabang. Additionally, Ban Mok Plai would serve as a stepping stone for retaking Muong Sai, which King Savang Vatthana wanted returned to RLG control before the dry season ended. Previous tries for Ban Mok Plai had fizzled due to insufficient forces. This time, the FAR would use five Meo infantry and ADC battalions and a 105-mm howitzer section. With enemy strength estimated at three battalions, prospects for capturing the village seemed excellent.⁹⁹

The North Vietnamese struck first, disrupting the government's offensive. During the night of March 10/11, a force of two or three North Vietnamese companies attacked GM 11's defenses on the high ground north of Nam Bac's airstrip. This was followed by an assault against the artillery sites to the southeast. The communists managed to take the high ground near the strip but were repulsed in the other area. A counterattack drove them off the next day; but the airstrip was threatened by several small elements that remained, restricting it to helicopters and STOL aircraft. A body count confirmed forty-four enemy dead, apart from the number killed by 180 T-28 and 37 F-105 sorties flown in the site's defense. By the afternoon of March 12, the enemy had withdrawn and the airstrip was opened to fixed-wing aircraft.¹⁰⁰

With Nam Bac still secure, Operation Ban Kao began on March 12, resisted by only one dug-in enemy company south of Ban Mok Plai. This resistance was adequate, however, to stall the FAR drive at the outskirts of the village. The next day, the 40th Paratroop Battalion circled the airstrip from the northeast, and the isolated communists had to retreat. Considering the substantial depth now added to Nam Bac's defense, Ban Mok Plai was seen as the springboard for retaking Muong Sai. The FAR victory had been achieved with few casualties, but the government's success was short lived.¹⁰¹

Over the next week, the North Vietnamese beefed up their troops with two new infantry battalions and, in the early hours of March 20, slammed into Ban Mok Plai's northernmost defenses. In spite of ninety-eight T-28 sorties, the situation worsened as enemy pressure increased.

1r. Col Robert S. Ferrari, USA, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, subj: Historical Summary, Deputy Chief JUSMAG Thailand for the Period (June 1966-April 1968), May 11, 1968; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968.

97. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 118, 061045Z Feb 67.

98. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 161, 180605Z Feb 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 040304Z Mar 67.

99. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 219, 110815Z Mar 67.

100. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 238, 180550Z Mar 67.

101. Ibid.



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When an unidentified unit was rumored to be behind the site's forward outposts, the Meo thought encirclement was under way. Several units panicked and abandoned Ban Mok Plai, leaving behind numerous weapons and supplies. The retreating troops were ambushed on the way back to Nam Bac, the final toll showing forty-three Meo killed and sixty-four wounded. To head off the capture of Nam Bac, the FAR quickly airlifted a GM 17 battalion from Paksane; and the northern campaign ended in a draw.¹⁰²

Having forced the RLG to abandon its offensive in Luang Prabang Province, the NVA tried once more to capture Nong Khang (Lima Site 52). Since the earlier attack on January 22, many reports depicted enemy buildups in the area. The bad weather of February and March had precluded air raids on these concentrations, and the NVA action on the night of April 3/4 was no surprise.¹⁰³

At first the Meo defenders held on, but the bad weather, haze, and smoke prevented resupply and close air support. By the afternoon of April 4, the defenders ran low on ammunition and withdrew to the southwest. As at Ban Mok Plai, the communists left a single escape route open and set up a number of ambushes along the way. Demoralized by this tactic, the Meo soldiers chose to leave the area instead of regrouping as guerrillas. The loss of Lima Site 52 dealt a sharp blow to Vang Pao, diluting his harassment and intelligence capabilities in the Samneua area.¹⁰⁴

Even with this setback, the Meo general decided to attack Chik Mok Lok, a four thousand-foot hill overlooking the nearby town of Muong Peun and Route 6. An assault of the hill on March 15 had failed when the North Vietnamese counterattacked and drove the Meo off the summit. On March 28 and 29 attempts were made—the latter time with A-1 support—but each fell short. The Meo tried again on April 9, bolstered by twelve A-1Es and ten F-105s dispensing napalm and antipersonnel bomblets. By noon, they had reached the summit after bitter hand-to-hand fighting. The communists fled down the hill but began lobbing mortar rounds on the tribesmen that afternoon. Air strikes destroyed two 82-mm mortars, but the Meo commander was wounded by the shelling. The NVA counterattacked, and the Meo gave up the hill, moving back to Phou Phathi by March 10. Both sides had about twenty dead.¹⁰⁵

Indications had appeared that the North Vietnamese might be planning to attack the neutralists at Muong Soui. Between March 27 and April 4, roadwatch teams detected more than 820 trucks westbound on Route 7 from North Vietnam, compared to an average of 30 trucks a day moving over this road. The Americans believed the vehicles were swiftly dispersing into the numerous and often hidden truck parks and depots off the road and in the Plain of Jars. Additionally, vehicle traffic from Ban Ban to Khangkhai had risen in March to an average of 20 a day, with 16 a day the average for the same month in 1966. A high-ranking Laotian officer, present at an April 7 meeting at Muong Soui between Souvanna and neutralist officers, reported the prime minister was about to ask Sullivan to loose an all-out air campaign against these truck parks. However, the chances were slim that such an air effort could succeed. Severe smoke and haze during the first week of April had held down air support for Nong Khang, and the lima site had been lost. Prospects were dim, but the enemy did not attack, as an unseasonable outbreak of rain temporarily halted operations. When the weather cleared in the last week of April, the communists had already chosen to terminate the dry-season campaign.¹⁰⁶

102. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 255, 250600Z Mar 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 250330Z Mar 67.

103. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 295, 080535Z Apr 67; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Apr 67.

104. See note above.

105. Msgs, DOD/PRO to CINCPAC, 111630Z Apr 67, DIA to AIG 7011, 130510Z Apr 67.

106. Msgs, DIA to AIG 925, 062220Z Apr 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 080320Z Apr 67, DIA to AIG 925, 131030Z Apr 67, DOD/PRO to CINCPAC, 111648Z Apr 67, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 295, 080535Z Apr 67.

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Chapter IX

The Wet Season Offensive Sputters: 1967 (U)

1. The rainy season came late to Laos in 1967. After a false start in April, the rains began in earnest during July. Rain was as welcome to the communists as it was to the government forces, for both sides were exhausted from the bitter fighting of the recent campaign.

2. The military outlook in Laos at the close of the dry season was about the same as at the beginning of the campaign. For the first time in years, the foe had failed to score a major victory or to seize any territory (except Nong Khang (Lima Site 52) and a few isolated lima sites). To be sure, the neutralists stayed at Muong Soui only because they had not been attacked. Elsewhere, however, the Royal Laotian Government had retained its salients at Nam Bac and Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85) and had actually extended its holdings around Lao Ngam in southern Laos. Although exposed and rather tenuously held, the three positions for the moment appeared secure.¹

3. One reason for the relative success of the government forces lay in the increased effectiveness of USAF air strikes. Air power had taken a greater toll of enemy trucks and had been the difference in the battle at Lima Site 36. This effectiveness was the result of improved intelligence from roadwatch teams, better exploitation of prisoner and refugee interrogation, more reliable air-ground communications, and the introduction of the A-26.² On the other hand, the North Vietnamese had stepped up their truck movements; and so far, air power had been able only to hamper them. To cut down on truck traffic, the Air Force was beefing up its strength in Thailand, but serious differences persisted over how these resources could best be employed. The Air Force wanted to concentrate on interdiction, while Ambassador Sullivan wanted more support for the Laotian ground forces.

4. Laotian government troops had improved somewhat in fighting capabilities. The Meo was still the best fighting force, but the FAR was making slow progress. The high command continued to be riddled with corruption and deeply enmeshed in political machinations, and too many troops were tied down to static defenses. However, training and equipment had been improved, a group of young officers who rejected the "blockhouse mentality" began to emerge, and a long overdue reorganization of the armed forces was under way. The neutralist army, the FAN, was a mere shadow of its former self, but the ouster of Kong Le had paved the way for closer cooperation with the FAR, the right wing component of the Royal Laotian Army. The Royal Laotian Air Force had also begun to pull itself together in the aftermath of the Thao Ma coup and had performed well during the fighting around Nam Bac.

5. The fall of Thao Ma and Kong Le had removed disruptive elements from the political scene, and the elections in January 1967 further strengthened Souvanna's hand. In the wake of these elections, the principal political events centered around the issue of a successor to Souvanna should he decide to step down. The generals continued to maneuver for control of the armed forces but seemed to have settled into a semblance of stability. Essentially, each of the principal commanders recognized the ambitions of the others and moved to subvert them. Each sought to sidestep a showdown (either verbally or with arms) and refrained from direct interference in the

1. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180033Z Jul 67, subj: Dry Season Wrap-up.
2. *Ibid.*

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illicit activities of the others. Now and then they would work together to eliminate a common rival (such as Thao Ma or Kong Le) or to block one of their number who was becoming too powerful.³

④ The composition of U.S. aircraft deployed to Thailand changed markedly in 1967. Early in the year, the Air Force had a total of 459 aircraft at seven bases in Thailand. The main mission of these aircraft was to conduct operations in North Vietnam and Steel Tiger, but they also furnished the bulk of U.S. air support in Barrel Roll. Consequently, any change in this posture inevitably affected the campaign in northern Laos. In February, Washington notified PACAF that ten F-4D squadrons would be available for the Pacific theater. (The F-4D was more flexible than either the F-4C or the F-105—it exceeded the F-4C in air-to-air capability and surpassed the F-105 in bomb-carrying capacity.) Four of these F-4D units were earmarked for Southeast Asia—three in Thailand and one in South Vietnam.⁴

④ Gen. John D. Ryan, CINCPACAF, was pleased with this news, but he wanted to deploy all ten squadrons to Southeast Asia—seven to Thailand and three to South Vietnam. Under the PACAF plan, one squadron would replace the F-104s at Udom, three would replace the F-105s at Takhli, and three would replace the F-4Cs at Ubon. The other three squadrons would replace a like number of F-4Cs at Da Nang in South Vietnam. This would do away with the problems of maintaining two different types of jet fighters at any of the bases.⁵

④ Washington's plan was finally approved after lengthy discussion, even though it entailed shifting units between bases. The 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Ubon (with F-4Cs) received F-4Ds in May. Two months later, the 435th Tactical Fighter Squadron moved from Udom to Ubon and exchanged F-104s for the newer aircraft. To make room for the 435th, the EC-121 aircraft were sent first to Udom, then to Korat, where they dislodged the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron in October. The 13th went to Udom and traded its F-105s for F-4Ds.⁶

④ The move of the 13th to Udom was noteworthy because it meant that jet aircraft, for the first time, could strike in northern Laos without refueling. It was also the first time that a fighter squadron was assigned to a reconnaissance wing. Although a departure from Air Force policy, this arrangement eased the flow of information between reconnaissance and fighter crews.

④ The introduction of the F-4Ds was not without its problems. Crews from the United States accompanied the new aircraft, and the wholesale exchange of squadrons resulted in a sharp loss of combat-experienced crews. The new crews quickly acquired the requisite combat experience, but the temporary decrease in effectiveness fueled a growing controversy between prop planes and jets. In October, the 1st Air Commando Squadron (ACS), with nineteen A-1s and combat-experienced crews, moved from South Vietnam to Nakhon Phanom. The Seventh Air Force had intended to use the prop-driven A-1s to drop electronic sensors in Steel Tiger to monitor truck traffic, but the Skyraiders proved unsuited to the task. This job was given to the jets that could better survive the heavier antiaircraft fire along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The A-1s then joined the 602d ACS at Udom, flying interdiction and close support in the more lightly defended areas of Laos. (This strengthening of USAF air power in Thailand did not escape the keen eye of Ambassador Sullivan, who was determined to get his "fair share" for northern Laos.) In October 1967, the 14th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (RF-4Cs) replaced the RF-101s at Udom, giving the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing two squadrons of RF-4Cs and one fighter squadron of F-4Ds.⁷

3. Msgs, CAS FIRs, 121200Z Mar 67, 041445Z Oct 67.

4. Hist, PACAF, Jan 1-Dec 31, 1967, pp 27-28.

5. Msg, CINCPACAF to CSAF, 222344Z, subj: F-4C Replacements with F-4D.

6. Hist, PACAF, Jan 1-Dec 31, 1967, pp 28-31.

7. 7th AF Comd Status Rpt, Dec 31, 1967; EOIR, Col Victor N. Cabas, Comdr, 432 TRW (Sep 19, 1967-Sep 3, 1968), Sep 5, 1968, p 6.

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In early 1967, EC-130s out of Da Nang Air Base provided ABCCC coverage for Steel Tiger while three RC-47s served similar duty in Barrel Roll; but the RC-47 operation had never been totally satisfactory. Initially intended as radio relay points for CIA roadwatch teams, these planes had been pressed into service as airborne command posts during 1966. The absence of oxygen equipment limited the aircraft to relatively low altitudes, hampering their communication capabilities over long distances. Low speed and modest power rendered them vulnerable if they ventured into the heavily defended areas where most strikes took place, and they had neither proper radio equipment nor sufficient space for the controllers. In April 1967, an EC-130 based in Da Nang took over the daytime orbit in Barrel Roll; and in June, three EC-130s were assigned to Udom and the RC-47s returned to their radio relay role. A Viet Cong rocket attack on Da Nang in July caused Seventh Air Force to put the remaining four EC-130s at Udom. To make room for them, the search and rescue HC-130s were moved from Udom to Tuy Hoa, South Vietnam. The move of the ABCCC operation to Udom was seen as a temporary one (until the security of Da Nang could be assured), but the EC-130s were destined to stay at Udom for the rest of the war.⁸

Other changes dealt with helicopters and observation aircraft. Apart from search and rescue, the primary helicopter support for northern Laos came from twelve H-34s of Air America and five CH-3 Pony Express helicopters of the 20th Helicopter Squadron operating out of Udom. To augment this force, the 21st Helicopter Squadron with six CH-3s was dispatched to Nakhon Phanom in late 1967. The 21st was originally intended to support the sensor fields being set up in Steel Tiger. This mission soon proved too hazardous, and the unit joined the Pony Express

The principal forward air control aircraft for Laos was the O-1; twenty-two of these planes were assigned to the 23d Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) at Nakhon Phanom.¹⁰ Besides controlling USAF strikes in southern Laos, the planes and pilots of the 23d occasionally bolstered the air attaché's Butterfly FAC network in northern Laos. In February 1967, the Air Force decided to replace these aircraft with the faster twin-engine O-2. Thirty O-2s were scheduled to be delivered during June, July, and August; and the O-1 pilots were scheduled to convert to the newer aircraft "in place." A few O-1s were to remain at Nakhon Phanom until the end of the year for pilots whose remaining tour was too brief to warrant checkout in the O-2.¹¹ However, aircraft deliveries fell behind; and by the end of the year, the 23d TASS was still operating a mix of O-1s and O-2s, with the remaining O-2s due for delivery in early 1968.¹²

While the O-2 improved effectiveness of the FAC's, it complicated the picture for Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché at Vientiane. It was fairly easy to disguise the O-1s as Laotian aircraft since the RLAFF possessed some of them. This was not true for the O-2, and Pettigrew searched for a new way to meet his FAC needs.

On a visit to Nakhon Phanom in March 1967, General Momyer was briefed on the Butterfly program. He was shocked to hear that enlisted men and nonrated officers controlled air strikes since Air Force policy required all forward air controllers to be seasoned jet fighters who had completed a course in FAC procedures. A shortage of qualified jet fighter pilots in Vietnam had already forced the Air Force to compromise this policy and allow nonfighter pilots to become forward air controllers. This moved the Army to question the quality of air support it could get

8. Cabas EOTR, pp 12-14. For a more detailed discussion of ABCCC operations, see Maj Robert M. Burch, *The ABCCC in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969).

9. Capt Edward Vallentyne, *USAF Posture in Thailand, January-December 1967* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969), pp 39-41. See also Capt Donald W. Nelson, *The USAF Helicopter in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, 1968).

10. Under certain conditions A-1s, A-26s, and C-123s could also serve as FACs.

11. Msg, CINCPACAF to 7th AF/13th AF, 212125Z Feb 67, subj: Deployment of O-2 Aircraft.

12. 7th AF Comd Status Rpt, Dec 31, 1967; Cabas EOTR, p 6.

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from the Air Force, and General Momyer had just assured General Westmoreland that all FACs assigned to U.S. Army units would be jet fighter pilots. The nonfighter pilots in Vietnam would be confined to controlling aircraft engaged in interdiction or support of Vietnamese forces. In spite of the proven success of the Butterfly program, General Momyer directed that the Butterfly program be discontinued. The continued use of nonrated and enlisted FACs would have given the appearance that the Air Force was further diluting its standards and would have strengthened the Army's case for establishing its own forward air controllers.

Colonel Pettigrew protested that the program had grown out of a need for a strike control system, and the increased use of jet fighters in northern Laos dictated the continuation of a viable FAC program. General Momyer agreed and ordered the 23d TASS to supply six FACs for ninety days while a permanent solution was sought. The permanent solution proved elusive, and the squadron furnished FACs on successive ninety-day rotations for the next year.¹³

As the new program gathered momentum, Pettigrew felt a new name was in order; and in September 1967, the Butterflies became Ravens. However, the conversion to O-2 aircraft forced the 23d TASS to advise, on October 31, that its support for the Raven program would have to end. This prompted Pettigrew to request that CINCPAC have the 504th Tactical Air Support Group (the parent unit of the 23d) support Raven permanently. The issue lingered in limbo until the following March, and the dwindling pool of O-1 pilots at Nakhon Phanom continued to operate the FAC network in northern Laos.¹⁴

When the rains began in mid-1967, the country team had grounds for cautious optimism. The government forces outnumbered the enemy and had come through the dry season without a major defeat, the CIA had expanded its intelligence network to the north and east, the recent elections promised a degree of political stability, and the USAF buildup in Thailand suggested that more sorties might be available for Barrel Roll operations. Although Ambassador Sullivan warned that "the costly war of attrition in Laos is far from over," he felt that perhaps a turning point had been reached and that it was time for the allies to seize the initiative.¹⁵

Souvanna had said as early as April 7 that it would be perfectly legal for the neutralists to retake the Plain of Jars since they had held it at the time of the 1962 Geneva accords.¹⁶ General Ouane was even more specific on April 26—he wanted to occupy Muong Sai during the rainy season to widen the salient at Nam Bac and give Luang Prabang greater protection. He then planned for combined air and ground operations to cut the main enemy supply lines into northern Laos—Route 19 from Dien Bien Phu towards Nam Bac, Route 6 from Samneua to Na Khang, and Route 7 from the "fish's mouth"¹⁷ to Ban Ban. With these objectives secure, Ouane wanted "massive American airstrikes" to destroy enemy armor on the Plain of Jars and permit a combined Meo/neutralist force to retake the area. The FAR would then occupy the hills north and east of the plain to protect refugees (mostly lowland Lao) who would be resettled on the plain.¹⁸

13. Intvw, Capt Henry S. Shields, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Harry C. Aderholt, Comdr 56th SOW, Col Paul A. Pettigrew, AIRA Vientiane, and Lt Col Jerome W. Klingaman, AOC Vientiane, Jan 7, 1972; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969. See also Capt Henry S. Shields, *USAF Control of Airstrikes in Support of Indigenous Lao Ground Forces* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972), and Lt Col Ralph A. Rowley, *FAC Operations, 1965-1970* [The Air Force in Southeast Asia] (Washington, 1975).

14. See note above; memo, Col Paul A. Pettigrew, AIRA Vientiane, to [redacted] subj: Recommendation FAC Mission, Sep 18, 1967; msgs, 504th TASS to 7th AF, 311030Z Sep 67, subj: TDY FACs and O-1 Aircraft, AIRA to CINCPAC, 220530Z Nov 67, subj: FAC Support.

15. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180033Z Jul 67, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 281327Z May 67, subj: Udorn Conference.

16. Msg, DOD/PRO to CINCPAC, 111648Z Apr 67.

17. The area on the eastern border of Laos near Barthelemy Pass on Route 7 where North Vietnam juts sharply into Laos.

18. Msg, [redacted] subj: FAR Plans for Operations in Northern Laos during the Coming Rainy Season, Apr 27, 1967.

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● This was a very ambitious plan and projected the FAR into a traditional Meo stronghold. It was also typical that Ouane's plan called for the Meo and neutralists to do most of the fighting while the FAR reaped the benefits. General Vang Pao was not enthusiastic about either prospect. He had consistently resisted efforts by the Laotian General Staff to extend its influence into Military Region II or to gain control over his guerrilla forces.¹⁹ Vang Pao's own plans were far less ambitious. He intended to reoccupy the lost lima sites and await developments while continuing to harass the enemy's lines of communication.²⁰ Farther to the south, General Bounpone in Military Region III planned to secure Route 13 by eliminating the communist forces south of Thakhet. At the same time, General Phasouk in Military Region IV expected to push out from Lao Ngam to relieve pressure on Saravane and Attapeu.²¹

● The view was more restrained inside the embassy. The country team recognized the need to expand government holdings but doubted if the government forces could carry out anything as ambitious as Ouane's plan—even with increased air support. The ambassador deemed it unwise to undertake any venture that would deepen U.S. involvement in the war or provoke a strong communist reaction. The embassy favored a more modest plan to seize key terrain features that would add depth and control the approaches to government held territory. Even this would hinge to a great extent on the air support available from the RLAF and the USAF.²²

● Despite these optimistic projections of early summer, none of the planned offensives came to pass, the government forces satisfying themselves with minor probes and inconclusive skirmishes. This permitted the communists to consolidate their positions around Nam Bac and Lima Site 85, improve their logistic base, and even conduct limited operations of their own. The first of these occurred during the predawn hours of July 16 when a twelve-man sapper team penetrated the Luang Prabang airfield. Working swiftly and efficiently, the raiders used hand grenades and satchel charges to destroy nine of the eleven RLAF T-28s parked on the field. Another T-28 was damaged, a helicopter and part of the bomb dump destroyed, and the operations building damaged. Three FAR soldiers were killed and eight injured, and the raiders withdrew without the base defenders seeing them.²³

● This second attack in six months was in some ways a testimony to the effectiveness of the RLAF. It suggested that the new fighter squadron was truly a thorn in the side of the communist forces around Nam Bac. The loss of nearly a quarter of its combat aircraft was of course a serious—although temporary—setback for the RLAF. Souvanna sacked Brig. Gen. Kane Insiengmay, the Military Region I commander, for failing to tighten security after the earlier attack. However, since Kane was a nephew of Leuam Insiengmay, deputy prime minister, he soon emerged as deputy commander in Military Region IV under General Phasouk. Kane's replacement in Luang Prabang was Brig. Gen. Tiao Sayavong, who happened to be a half brother to the king.²⁴

● As soon as the wreckage was cleared, the Laotian squadron flew its remaining T-28 two and even three times a day. The [] pilots did what they could to fill the gap while continuing to support Vang Pao. The communists took advantage of the reduced sorties to bring in reinforcements (including three North Vietnamese battalions) and begin a piecemeal attrition of

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19. ● The previous year, the General Staff had announced plans to assign a number of Laotian officers to Vang Pao's staff at Long Tieng, but the Meo general had refused to let the officers take their posts.

20. ● Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: 21st Joint Weekly Recommendation, date indistinct [ca Jul 67].

21. ● Msg, [] subj: FAR Plans for Operations in Northern Laos during the Coming Rainy Season, Apr 27, 1967.

22. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180033Z Jul 67; memo, AmEmb Vientiane, subj: U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos, Nov 14, 1967, pp 6-10.

23. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 160645Z Jul 67.

24. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220430Z Jul 67.

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the garrison of Nam Bac.²⁵ Ambassador Sullivan assured Phouma that replacement planes would be furnished from Military Assistance Program assets. The ambassador insisted the aircraft stay at Vientiane overnight, staging out of Luang Prabang during the day until airfield security was adequate.²⁶ The replacement planes arrived at a rate of three a month; and the Luang Prabang squadron was back to full strength by October. The rains had ceased by then, and every available aircraft was needed to save Nam Bac.

In Military Region II, things were only slightly better. During the last week of July, Vang Pao got off a weak offensive that was abruptly stopped by the sudden appearance of two North Vietnamese Army battalions. This was a rude surprise for the Meo, for NVA units generally withdrew during the wet season, leaving just advisors and cadre personnel to buttress the Pathet Lao. That they were able to remain in Laos during the rainy season boded ill for the forthcoming dry season.²⁷

The following week, a more successful operation was launched when four Pathet Lao defectors reported that the Muong Ngan Valley had been virtually abandoned by the communists. Vang Pao moved into the valley and surrounding hilltops at once, using the defectors to direct air strikes against their former comrades. This action netted the richest valley in northern Laos and secured its rice harvest for the government.²⁸

While the government forces marked time, the only significant military action was the comic opera "Opium War." This erupted when a group of Burmese bandits tried to get their opium caravan through northern Thailand without paying the accustomed tribute to the local Chinese renegades.²⁹ Finding their way blocked by the Chinese, the Burmese crossed into Laos near the village of Ban Kueung on July 26, 1967, and took up positions around a sawmill belonging to General Ouane. The Burmese contacted Ouane and offered to sell him the opium. Before the negotiations could be completed, the Chinese crossed into Laos, surrounded the Burmese, and demanded the surrender of the opium. Ouane ordered both sides to get out of Laos leaving their arms and opium behind. The Burmese were willing but wanted payment for their opium. The Chinese refused outright unless they got the arms and opium as well as twenty-five hundred dollars from the Laotians. At this point, Ouane played the part of the outraged defender of his nation's honor. On July 30, at about noon, six T-28s swept up the Mekong River to bomb and strafe the Burmese and Chinese. While the planes wreaked havoc among the intruders, two infantry battalions took up blocking positions north of the village and another advanced from the south. General Ouane assumed personal command of the operation, bringing in reinforcements from as far away as southern Laos. Even the minuscule navy was ordered into action. The ensuing battle lasted two days, with the outcome never in doubt. Field reports revealed that over two hundred of the intruders were killed during the fighting and another one hundred drowned trying to cross the Mekong. Laotian casualties totaled only two killed and four wounded, but Ouane's sawmill was burned to the ground.

The loss of the sawmill was more than offset by the capture of the intruders' weapons and sixteen tons of raw opium left behind by the Burmese. Ouane shared the proceeds from the sale of this opium with those who had fought at Ban Kueung. One source said each man was able to buy a house in Vientiane with his share. For his determined action against the intruders, Ouane was awarded the Order of the Million Elephants and White Parasol.³⁰

25. () Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 190845Z Aug 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 32-67.

26. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170430Z Jul 67.

27. () Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 26-Aug 2, 1967.

28. () Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Aug 2-Aug 9, 1967.

29. () The Chinese were remnants of the nationalist forces that had retreated from China in 1949. They survived in Thailand by opium smuggling and preying upon local merchants.

30. () Msgs, [redacted] Aug 67, 041610Z Aug 67, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 070404Z

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While Ouane was looking after his opium interests, the situation at Nam Bac was becoming more chaotic each day. To beef up the defenses and prepare for the long-awaited offensive, the General Staff sent twelve battalions to Nam Bac, enlarging the garrison to over forty-five hundred men. The idea was to concentrate a strong force at Nam Bac, then strike out to the east to link up with Vang Pao's forces advancing from the west. This would seal off the Ou River valley from the north and permit the FAR to sweep down the valley toward Luang Prabang, thus securing the approaches to the royal capital.³¹

Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché, thought the plan "reckless" and "very tempting" to the enemy, reminiscent of the kind of thinking that preceded the fall of Nam Tha in 1962. With no overall commander of the operation, each battalion reported separately to Tactical Headquarters, North Laos. The resulting probes, uncoordinated with air strikes and often beyond the range of supporting artillery fire, produced only friendly casualties. Nam Bac had no overall defense plan, patrolling was inadequate, and many of the troops from southern Laos were unhappy about being sent to fight in the north. Finally, an impossible demand on goods existed because of the new troops and the several thousand refugees from the surrounding area. The local merchants were quick to exploit the situation, and it was widely believed the high command was receiving kickbacks. As one Laotian pilot put it, "the cost of living is very high and the profits go to Tactique Nord."³²

Despite these problems, Col. Bounchanh Savadphayphane (Chief of Staff, Tactical Headquarters, North Laos) resolved to carry out the operation. However, the first of a series of delays occurred almost at once. Bad weather prevented aerial resupply (the roads back to Luang Prabang were insecure); and when the weather cleared, morale and maintenance problems caused a virtual collapse of the RLAF helicopter operations that carried most of the supplies. This led to charges that the RLAF was "malingering," since it could fly but two missions a day compared with ten or twelve for Air America. However, Colonel Pettigrew felt the blame lay elsewhere.

The fault really rests with TAC North which has failed to brief green pilots on the vagaries of landing and operating in the rugged Nam Bac area and on a maintenance system which places priority on development of a Lao maintenance capability—a worthy objective but one which in this case is in opposition to operational necessity in that three of the birds had only six hours flying time left on arrival Luang Prabang. Following the "Lao do it" maintenance system, the birds must return to Savannakhet where Lao maintenance shops are instead of staying in Luang Prabang where Air America support can be provided.³³

On August 31, the FAR suffered a further setback when a T-28 mistakenly bombed a friendly position. The government troops fled back toward Nam Bac, leaving a gap in the defensive perimeter. At first, the communists made no attempt to exploit matters; but when the FAR failed to reoccupy the position, the Pathet Lao moved in to take over by default. Subsequent efforts to dislodge them were unsuccessful, rendering the whole situation at Nam Bac hopeless, although neither side appeared to realize it at the time.³⁴

On September 24, Souvanna turned to the embassy for suggestions. He also asked for an increase in arms delivery and the assistance of a "senior army officer" at Tactical Headquarters, North Laos. This task fell to the assistant Army attaché in Luang Prabang, a major whose junior rank precluded his wielding much influence. The one available Air Force advisor was Maj. Karl

Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 40-67.

31. Weekly Laotian SITREPS, 7th AF/13th AF, Aug 7-Oct 31, 1967.

32. See note above; memo, AIRA Vientiane, subj: Conversation with Thongphanh, Aug 23, 1967.

33. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 261340Z Aug 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 33-67.

34. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 090500Z Sep 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 36-67.

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W. Leuschner, who was in charge of the air operations center at Luang Prabang, but he had no more success than his Army counterpart. Weapons deliveries were speeded up, and by end of the year all of the units in Nam Bac had been fully equipped.³⁵

● The embassy also recommended that the FAR abandon its offensive plans, go on the defensive, and release unneeded units for operations elsewhere. After a meeting on October 7, the Laotians accepted the American proposal. Colonel Bounchanh was ordered to take personal command at Nam Bac and to prepare plans for a static defense. At the same time, he was to conduct aggressive patrolling to gather intelligence for air strikes and to deter the enemy from massing for an attack. General Vang Pao agreed to deploy some of his forces westward to relieve pressure on Nam Bac, and the CIA assured the Laotians that its tribal guerrillas would continue to supply screening support. The country team felt if the General Staff implemented this plan promptly, there was no reason why Nam Bac could not be held against the communist forces, estimated at fifteen hundred men.³⁶

● The embassy likewise knew that to save Nam Bac would require a large measure of effective air support—both American and Laotian. Unfortunately, no tactical air control system existed in northern Laos to ensure that support. Requests for air support went from battalion to GM, to Tactical Headquarters, North, to RLAF headquarters in Vientiane, and finally to the air operations center at either Luang Prabang or Vientiane. Since the RLAF was under FAR control, it could not challenge the validity of these requests or develop its own targets.³⁷

● Like their American counterparts, Laotian pilots favored attacking fixed targets in lieu of "tree busting" for troops who were not engaging the enemy. Yet, most of the ground commanders liked to see the planes overhead and hear the comforting thud of bombs, even though they had no concept of proper targeting. According to Major Leuschner,

The feeling appears to be that air power can work miracles in the battle for Nam Bac and the T-28s are still not being properly targeted. . . . attempts to remedy the situation have failed. The few times the O-1F has been utilized to check on suspected targets, the targets proved valueless.³⁸

● Regardless of these handicaps, the RLAF did what it could. For example, during the first week in October, the T-28s flew sixty-seven sorties against "suspected enemy troop concentrations." Target coverage was described as "excellent" although the jungle foliage ruled out accurate assessment, and patrols dispatched to the area could not measure results. This pattern recurred over the weeks that followed, always with reports of "excellent coverage" but scant concrete evidence to show other than an occasional secondary explosion.³⁹

● With the RLAF tied directly to Nam Bac, the communists could resupply and build up their forces at leisure. Only now and then did a USAF sortie disturb this activity (thirty-eight between October 15, 1967, and January 15, 1968). Most of these sorties were linked to CIA roadwatch teams, so targeting and bomb damage assessment were generally better than for the RLAF. Still, they were not good enough to convince the Seventh Air Force that a greater effort was justified. On October 16, for example, two F-105s struck a storage area on Route 19 and reported three secondary fires. Later the same day, eight A-1s hit a suspected troop concentration

35. ● Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 301030Z Sep 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 38-67, 070404Z Oct 67; subj: Joint Operational Summary 40-67.

36. ● Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 070404Z Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 40-67.

37. ● Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Karl W. Leuschner, Comdr, AOC, Luang Prabang, Jun 3, 1970.

38. ● Msg, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 130230Z Jan 68.

39. ● See note 37.

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five miles south of Nam Bac with no observed results. On the 30th, eight F-105s returning from North Vietnam attacked a military complex. The pilots claimed twelve structures destroyed and fourteen secondary explosions. Two weeks later, four A-1s and four F-4s bombed a headquarters and bivouac area but reported just one secondary explosion. The communists continued to tighten the noose on Nam Bac; and by the close of the rainy season, the perimeter had shrunk to the village, the airfield, and a few of the surrounding hills. Everything else was in enemy hands.⁴⁰

● In many respects, the problems of Nam Bac reflected those within the Laotian air force. After General Thao Ma departed, the RLAF drifted aimlessly in its day-to-day operations. Colonel Pettigrew, the air attaché, sized up the situation.

The RLAF is divided into four basic groups which are mutually antagonistic: 1. The T-28 pilots who fight and die for their country; 2. the transport pilots who steal and traffic and make a great deal of money; 3. the base personnel who get next to nothing and resent it; 4. the General Staff . . . of the air force which merely jabbars and accomplishes nothing. Sourith has really not gotten hold of the problem and has not even begun to think of how to handle these four divergent forces and weld them into an organization which works. . . [He] has certainly shown himself incapable of handling the RLAF.⁴¹

● In Pettigrew's eyes, one of Sourith's weaknesses was his selection of key subordinates.

The RLAF Commander has established a policy of filling his general staff positions with officers of field grade rank replacing many of the company grade officers previously in the positions. Country team members view this policy with apprehension. Junior officers are mostly CONUS trained and familiar with MAP procedures. Senior officers are mostly French trained and not generally as knowledgeable. . . Generally, the outlook is for the RLAF to operate more autonomously than ever with practically no central control.⁴²

● As if organizational troubles were not enough, superstition plagued the air force. For example, a Laotian pilot grounded his aircraft on July 25 because it was possessed by an "evil spirit." The American maintenance men at Udom checked the plane out and found no mechanical problem, but the pilot still refused to fly. At last the air commandos hit upon a solution—for some cigarettes, toothpaste, and soap they persuaded a Buddhist monk to exorcise the evil spirit. After the ceremony, the delighted pilot got back in the aircraft and flew it home. The total cost to the Americans was \$7.62, a small price for the continued use of a \$180,000 airplane.⁴³

● While the Laotian army foundered at Nam Bac and the RLAF tried to pull itself together, the U.S. Air Force focused on disrupting the enemy's logistic network to forestall an early resumption of his offensive. Specific targets were selected at the weekly Udom targeting meetings, the CIA nominating most of them. The targets were forwarded to the Seventh Air Force, which approved as many as possible, based on other priorities and commitments. For example, over the week of August 29 to September 4, the Udom group nominated fifty-three fixed targets and nine road segments. The Seventh Air Force scheduled seven of the road segments and thirty-two of the fixed targets, including seventeen military complexes, five storage areas, five chokepoints, three truck parks, one bivouac area, and one transshipment point. An average of thirteen sorties were used each day to strike these targets—six for armed day reconnaissance, one for armed night reconnaissance, five for fixed targets, and one for close air support. In the same period, the RLAF flew an average of eighteen sorties per day, mostly close air support.⁴⁴

40. ● *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, 109 vols (Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1965-1973), XXXIX, 2-5, XL, 2-3 thru 2-6.

41. ● Memo, AIRA Vientiane, subj: Conversation with Thongphanh, Aug 23, 1967.

42. ● Military Assistance Program Report (USAF) RCS: AF V-12, Oct 27, 1967.

43. ● Military Assistance Program Report (USAF) RCS: AF V-12, Jul 25, 1967.

44. ● Msg, 7th AF to CINCPAC, 191150Z Sep 67, subj: Status and Analysis Report, RT/BR/SL, Aug 28-Sep 17, 1967.

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Even though truck traffic was light during the rainy season, the need to keep the roads under constant surveillance resulted in the stress on armed reconnaissance. However, the strikes on fixed targets produced the most spectacular results. On July 30, two A-1s struck a storage area, leaving it engulfed in flame and smoke that rose three thousand feet, with secondary explosions that went on for more than an hour. Sometimes, A-1s would team up with F-105s (the A-1 acting as FAC) to hit a fixed target or to provide close air support. On July 29, eight A-1s and eight F-105s were called to repel an enemy attack on Na Khang (Lima Site 36); on August 21, six A-1s and six F-105s went to the aid of Vang Pao on the Plain of Jars; and on August 22, two A-1s and six F-105s struck a North Vietnamese probe at Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85). However, these operations were not all without opposition—the communists could be counted on to put up a spirited resistance to almost any strike from the impressive array of antiaircraft sites maintained around their fixed installations and along the major roads. Hits were fairly common, even though only one attack was actually driven off by antiaircraft fire and just two A-26s and a single A-1 were lost. Barrel Roll may have been a secondary theater for both the Air Force and the North Vietnamese, but it was still a very deadly game.⁴⁵

Without a large-scale effort from the Laotian forces, the Air Forces concentrated on keeping pressure on enemy lines of communication. To increase this pressure, Operation Knight Watch began in late July 1967. The plan specified that A-1s be used to direct the entire North Vietnam strike package⁴⁶ against a single target in Barrel Roll when bad weather prevented strikes against the primary target in North Vietnam. The Seventh Air Force and the embassy approved the concept, and the main enemy headquarters complex near Samneua was chosen as the target.⁴⁷

The Seventh Air Force command and control center in Saigon (Blue Chip) executed and directed the operations. When the launch of the scheduled sorties could not be justified because of bad weather forecast for North Vietnam, the Seventh Air Force alerted the strike force to the new mission. The code words "Knight Watch Alpha" or "Knight Watch Bravo" were transmitted for a morning or afternoon mission, respectively, along with an adjusted time over target. After receiving the code word, the 602d ACS dispatched eight A-1s. Armament was at the discretion of the individual pilots, but usually included a mixed load of marking rockets, general purpose bombs, white phosphorous bombs, and cluster bombs. After a prestrike refueling, the aircraft flew to a designated holding point and contacted the ABCCC for transfer to the forward air controller. While four of the A-1s set up a rescue orbit, two others controlled the incoming fighters, and the last two made the final target selection, marked the target, and controlled the actual strikes. Aircraft with ordnance remaining after the raid were free to conduct armed reconnaissance along Route 7 or to strike any validated target while under the control of a FAC.⁴⁸

The first Knight Watch mission was flown on the afternoon of July 30 when forty-seven aircraft (F-4s and F-105s) struck the headquarters complex. Extremely heavy 37-mm and 57-mm antiaircraft fire forced the A-1s to modify their usual tactics. By using double roll-ins, simultaneous marking, firing from twice the normal range, and jinking, they avoided battle damage and accurately marked the target.⁴⁹ Poststrike results were not immediately available, but both the

45. Weekly Activity Reports, 56th ACW, Jul 1-Sep 30, 1967.

46. A strike package usually included sixteen F-105s loaded with bombs. Four to eight F-4s provided fighter escort, while another four to eight F-105 Iron Hand aircraft were assigned to suppress antiaircraft defenses. (Iron Hand aircraft were F-105s specially equipped for SAM and AAA suppression.) Two to four EB-66s normally accompanied the strike to jam enemy radar and occasionally to serve as Pathfinders (aircraft with LORAN) for the bombers. Supporting the entire package were an array of tankers to provide aerial refueling, EC-121s to afford early warning of enemy MiGs, prestrike and poststrike photo reconnaissance aircraft, and a variety of search and rescue aircraft.

47. Hist, 56th ACW, Jul-Sep 67, p 8.

48. Msgs, 7th AF to all Bravo addressees, 260910Z Jul 67, subj: Operation Knight Watch, 7th AF to 7th AF/13th AF, 070955Z Aug 67, subj: Knight Watch Armed Recce.

49. Weekly Activity Report, 56th ACW, Aug 4, 1967.

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embassy and the Seventh Air Force felt continuing the program was worthwhile. Even though the bomb damage assessment confirmed this impression, a month passed before weather conditions permitted the next Knight Watch strike.⁵⁰ Between August 30 and September 1, with three days of bad weather over North Vietnam, more than two hundred aircraft flew against the complex. On the August 31 mission, Maj. Robert P. Gould of the 602d ACS employed a new marking technique—dropping a string of white phosphorous bombs to mark a line toward the target. Antiaircraft fire was again intense but sheer numbers ultimately overwhelmed it.⁵¹

● The communists had a two-week respite before forty fighters returned on September 18. This time, the enemy directed most of the antiaircraft fire at the A-1s, apparently figuring out which planes were controlling the missions. The final mission of the series took place three days later, when fifty aircraft hit the site, touching off ten secondary explosions and a fireball two hundred feet high. After this, the target complex had no residual military value and was deleted from the list of active targets. Against no losses, the Air Force was credited with destroying sixty 57-mm and seventy-one 37-mm antiaircraft guns, fifty-six trucks, four storage depots, two POL farms, two ammunition depots, two caves, and five buildings. Over eighteen hundred communists were killed, including three battalion commanders.⁵² The commander of the 602d ACS said a great deal of the success of Operation Knight Watch was due to the maintenance crews, who responded to frequent changes in takeoff times and ordnance loads.

The hard back-breaking work done without error while attempting to meet pushed TOTs [times over target] coupled with efforts to satisfy the individual armament load desires of the pilots speaks for itself.⁵³

● Pleased with the success of the first series of Knight Watch missions, Headquarters Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force on October 16 proposed a followup program. Under the new plan, the headquarters would nominate a single lucrative target in each of the three Barrel Roll sectors. The A-1 crews would be briefed in detail on these targets, and constantly updated target folders would be kept.⁵⁴ However, the rains had ended, USAF attention shifted back to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the most successful air operation to that time was never renewed.

50. ● On August 25, a Knight Watch mission was scheduled and took off. However, because of poor weather in the target area, all but eight sorties were diverted to other targets.

51. ● Weekly Activity Report, 56th ACW, Sep 6, 1967.

52. ● Hist, 56th ACW, Jul-Sep 67, pp 10-11.

53. ● *Ibid*, p 10.

54. ● Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: Knight Watch, Oct 16, 1967; memo, Maj Allison to Dir/Ops, 7th AF, subj: Knight Watch Frag, n.d. [ca Oct 67].

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Chapter X

**The Enemy Advances
and the Embassy Wants an Air Force (U)**

By October 1967, the rain had ended and the roads throughout Laos began to dry. Government prospects that looked so bright in the wet season now seemed dark. Except for General Vang Pao's success at Muang Ngan, the government had very little to show for its effort; and in some areas, notably Nam Bac, its position had deteriorated. This was due in part to the unusually short and light rainy season that had enabled the enemy to maintain stronger forward positions than before. However, vacillation and dissension within the government ranks hamstrung any meaningful action.

As the rains diminished, heavy road construction began on all of the major communist lines of communication; and [REDACTED] adwatch teams reported more heavy equipment than had ever been seen in Laos. Especially threatening was the progress along Route 19 leading toward Nam Bac and on Route 6 in the vicinity of Phou Phathi. With that level of activity, the Seventh Air Force estimated that the North Vietnamese could start their resupply effort by November.¹ (b)(1)

To meet this threat, Ambassador Sullivan, Generals Westmoreland and Momyer, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Philip C. Habib met at Udon on October 21. The conferees settled on a Seventh Air Force plan for a three-phase air campaign focusing on Steel Tiger. During Phase I, the Air Force would concentrate on enemy supplies stockpiled near the passes leading into Laos. Then, as the North Vietnamese began moving this materiel down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the action would shift to harassment of trucks using the network. Last, the attacks would center on the passes leading into South Vietnam.

In various forms, this pattern was destined to be the basis for Commando Hunt interdiction campaigns over the next several years. The objective of each was to reduce the flow of North Vietnamese men and supplies into the south. To do this, Seventh Air Force planned to use about 170 fighter sorties a day. Twenty-four (fourteen percent) were to be flown in northern Laos, half against fixed targets and half on armed reconnaissance missions.

Air support for Laotian ground operations had been piecemeal, and the Seventh Air Force plan also provided for the first systematic support for ground operations in northern Laos. A Seventh Air Force operation order specified that

the Royal Laotian Government ground forces will be provided with close air support on a recurring basis, [REDACTED] American Air Attaché (AIRA), Vientiane, and 7/13AF will provide coordination for these operations.² (b)(1)

Unfortunately, the term "recurring basis" was not clearly defined and the mechanism to achieve the coordination envisioned in the plan did not exist.

The weekly Udon targeting meetings dealt primarily with interdiction targets. Planning for ground operations was conducted separately by the Laotian General Staff, the regional military commanders [REDACTED] with coordination accomplished on an (b)(1)

1. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2275, 220559Z Oct 67; 7th AF OpOrd 433-68, Sep 15, 1967.
2. 7th AF OpOrd 433-68, Sep 15, 1967.

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ad hoc basis or—more commonly—not at all. Although many elements of a tactical air control system existed in Laos, they had never been integrated into a single system like the system that existed in South Vietnam. Instead, the Central Intelligence Agency, the air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force did their planning in isolation, without coordination and often in conflict with one another. The absence of coherent planning and coordination not only frustrated everyone involved, it also led to a waste of resources. As long as operations were limited and little support was required, this was not a serious problem. However, when air and ground operations expanded in 1968, it had severe consequences and became a major bone of contention between the embassy and the Air Force.

● Part of the problem lay in the split responsibility between the Seventh Air Force and the embassy, but a larger part stemmed from the lack of overall policy guidance for the conduct of military operations in Laos. As late as 1970, an Air Staff analysis noted that “no administration has submitted a clearly defined policy on Laos.”³ In the absence of such guidance, policy was largely established by acceptance. That is, an agency would propose a course of action that, if approved, became accepted as part of the policy in Laos without reference to any wider consideration.⁴

● When Ambassador Sullivan was appointed in 1964, he was told to “take charge” and set his own policy within broad guidelines established by Washington. In subsequent testimony before the Senate foreign relations committee, the ambassador claimed he could not recall receiving more than half a dozen instructions from the State Department in over four years in Laos.⁵ The nature of the embassy further complicated his task—in spite of President Kennedy’s “country team” directive, the embassy still consisted of a number of independent agencies, each doing its best to keep Laos afloat but each jealous of its own prerogatives and programs. This led an exasperated air attaché to complain “The country team in Laos is a facade. . . . It consists of a group of uncoordinated agencies each pursuing its own desires with little coordinating as a group.”⁶

● Recognizing that a common objective was not a common plan of action, the embassy in November 1967 developed a position paper to afford overall guidance to the various agencies by defining the limits of U.S. involvement.⁷ The paper was titled “U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos” and took note of Laotian ambitions. It concluded that American interests could best be served by “limited” military operations in which it could be shown that the war in Vietnam would be substantially helped; that the security of Thailand and territory held in North Laos would be significantly enhanced; or that relations with the Laotian Government would either be significantly enhanced with support of an operation or substantially deteriorated if expansion in North Laos were not supported.⁸ The country team felt that most of the territory in enemy hands to be of slight economic or political worth and that recovery of this terrain would entail a greatly expanded AID program. On the other hand, the paper warned that “our imagination and alertness

3. ● Air Staff Comment on EOTR, Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, AIRA Vientiane, Sep 22, 1970, p 25.

4. ● Blaufarb, p 98.

5. ● *Laos Hearings*, p 517. The ambassador was exaggerating. The authors found numerous instructions from the State Department, but they addressed specific issues and were at times contradictory. Thus the ambassador’s point is well taken, if somewhat over drawn.

6. ● Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 16.

7. ● Internal evidence suggests that this paper was prompted by a dispute between the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Agency for International Development over support of refugees and other AID projects, rather than by military necessity. However, just the military aspects of the paper are covered here.

8. ● Memo, AmEmb Vientiane, U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos, Nov 28, 1967. The Royal Laotian Government’s agreement to the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and using Laotian territory for navigation aids and helicopter staging bases to support the bombing in North Vietnam made both of these operations easier. Still, there is no indication that the United States would have terminated either activity merely to mollify Laotian objections.

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to opportunities . . . must not be dulled by penury."⁹ In any event, the embassy believed political and military considerations would confine any friendly expansion to a line roughly connecting Muong Sing, Nam Bac, and Phou Phathi. Even this would depend largely on the level of U.S. air support and might be impossible if the North Vietnamese greatly enlarged their forces in northern Laos.¹⁰

● With the recognized weakness of the Laotian army and the onset of the dry season, the embassy plan would seem to have been overly ambitious. Indeed, the massive NVA intervention that the Americans feared was already under way, and the entire scheme would be overtaken by events before it could be implemented. Survival—not expansion—would be the issue by the end of the 1967–68 dry season.

● Even without North Vietnamese intervention, it seems doubtful that the paper would have served its original purpose. By the time it emerged from coordination, it was less of a directive than a philosophical treatise. The guidelines were so broad and specific criteria so conspicuously absent that each agency still had virtually a free hand to pursue its own programs, and the paper did not provide any new means to resolve differences among agencies.

● Yet, the paper stands as the only attempt in nearly two decades of U.S. involvement in Laos to set down a coherent policy. Its failure simply reflects the bureaucratic facts of life in Laos, not an absence of dedication on the part of the persons involved. In any event, "policy" in Laos was about to be hammered out on the battlefield and not in the embassy.

● By November, all the major roads in northern Laos were passable; and enemy traffic surged to new heights, with the heaviest reported on Route 7 leading to the Plain of Jars. This route accounted for 27 percent of all trucks seen in Laos over the dry season (7,084 of 26,281), but these figures must be viewed with caution.¹¹ As the most closely monitored highway in Laos, Route 7 was observed by roadwatch teams on all but one of the 183 days between October 1, 1967, and March 31, 1968. These teams maintained surveillance for an average of five hours during daylight and twelve hours at night. In contrast, Route 6 was monitored for 116 days (one hour during daylight and six hours at night), while Route 19 was covered on only 82 days, with an average of only two hours during the day and four hours at night. Multiple counting presented an additional problem. Since most of the traffic consisted of trucks shuttling between transshipment points, a truck was likely to be counted twice on each shuttle. Similarly, trucks passing two or more observation points were reported by each team. Aircraft and electronic sensors also furnished truck sightings, many duplicating the count of roadwatch teams. On the other hand, many trucks no doubt went undetected because none of the routes were constantly covered. Later attempts to refine the reporting and analysis only generated greater confusion and disagreement over numbers and their significance. While allowing for these vagaries, it was obvious to most American authorities that the North Vietnamese had embarked on a major resupply effort. The full significance of this effort, however, did not become clear until the Tet offensive of early 1968.

● As communist traffic increased, so did USAF sorties, with A-1s and F-105s flying the bulk (77 percent) of the missions. As specified in the October plan, about half of the 2,181 sorties between October and December 1967 were devoted to armed reconnaissance (1,140). Of the others, 954 were flown at fixed targets and 87 provided escort for search and rescue or infiltration/extraction of roadwatch teams.¹² Typically, two A-1s would depart from Udom each morning to conduct armed reconnaissance. If no trucks were seen and they were not diverted to some other mission, the pilots were free to hit any validated target before returning to Udom

9. Memo, AmEmb Vientiane, U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos, Nov 28, 1967.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, XL–XLVI, Sec 2.*

12. *Ibid., XXXIX–XLI, Sec 2.*

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around noon. In the afternoon, a second pair of A-1s repeated this process. Weather, maintenance, and higher priority missions forced frequent changes in this pattern, eliciting a steady stream of protest from Ambassador Sullivan. Night operations were far more stable, with one or two A-26s patrolling the supply routes.

● Aircraft returning from North Vietnam with unused ordnance (mainly F-105s and F-4s) would carry out armed reconnaissance or attack a fixed target if a forward air controller was available. Aircraft were occasionally diverted from Steel Tiger or other missions to strike in Barrel Roll, although the reverse was more common. As a result, the actual number of missions fluctuated widely from day to day, leading to frequent accusations that northern Laos was simply a dumping ground for sorties that could not find targets elsewhere. On November 7, for example, 124 planes struck targets in Barrel Roll; but between November 12 and 16, no sorties at all were flown in northern Laos.

● During the last three months of 1967, 212 trucks were located (2.8 percent of the 7,367 reported by roadwatch teams) and 187 were attacked, with 27 destroyed and 13 damaged. Enemy reaction to these pinpricks was usually light and sporadic. Only thirteen percent of the missions came under fire, generally small arms and automatic weapons, but occasionally 23-mm or 37-mm. Several aircraft were hit, but none were lost to enemy ground fire.¹³

● The limited results stemmed from several factors. First, the number of truck "sightings" (mainly by CIA roadwatch teams) must be viewed with suspicion due to inherent deficiencies in the reporting system. In addition, ninety-two percent of the traffic moved at night when only the A-26s were flying. The Air Force directed thirty-five percent of its strike sorties in Laos (mostly in Steel Tiger) against this predominate movement at night, producing a day rate of forty-six sorties for every five trucks and a night rate of two sorties per five trucks. However, most of the day sorties were devoted to fixed targets, road cuts, and seeding. The cumulative effect was to force the trucks off the roads during the day and into the waiting arms of the night hunters. Results were also hampered by the time needed for a plane to arrive after the sighting was reported—if a plane was even in the area. When the plane did arrive, it was one thing for a ground observer to see a truck and quite another for a pilot to spot the same truck from several thousand feet through a jungle canopy at night. (At the sound of approaching planes, the trucks turned off their lights and tried to pull off the road into the cover of trees. About the only chance for a pilot to see—much less attack—a truck was in the daytime when the vehicle was in an open area and the aircraft already near at hand.

● Finally, the majority of Barrel Roll sorties were flown by jets diverted from North Vietnam. These planes were armed for strikes on fixed targets (with general purpose bombs) and not for armed reconnaissance (with cluster bomb units, napalm, and high-drag bombs). Furthermore, jet crews were oriented toward operations in a high-threat environment that required high-altitude delivery and were usually not as proficient in the low-level delivery techniques of armed reconnaissance and close air support. The A-1s and A-26s were configured for armed reconnaissance, their crews were more familiar with that type of operation, and the prop planes generally did better than the jets.

● In Seventh Air Force eyes, these meager results were hardly worth the effort. Some aircrews considered being scheduled into Barrel Roll a form of administrative punishment. More spectacular and perhaps more significant achievements (including promotions and decorations) were to be had in Steel Tiger since South Vietnam—not northern Laos—was the principal theater. However, Ambassador Sullivan thought otherwise. While Seventh Air Force saw its role in Laos primarily as interdiction, the ambassador's foremost concern was close air support for the Meo. With the RLAf engrossed in the support of FAR operations, support for the Meo was left to the

13. *Ibid.*

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[REDACTED] sorties Sullivan could wring out of the Seventh Air Force. To him, armed reconnaissance was little more than an airborne alert that could be, and often was, diverted to support the Meo. Many times these divers saved a friendly position or opened up an advance, although rarely was the outcome reported.

● This also explains in part the few night sorties in Barrel Roll (three percent versus thirty-five percent in Steel Tiger). Quite simply, the ambassador did not request more. Even then, he viewed the A-26s as night support for the isolated lima sites rather than as truck killers. Nevertheless, he was always careful to justify his request on the basis of truck kills because this was more likely to strike a responsive chord at the Seventh Air Force.

● Attacks on fixed targets were generally more successful than armed reconnaissance. The Seventh Air Force selected specific targets based on intelligence, priorities, and nominations from the Udom targeting meetings. During November 1-15, for instance, twenty-eight targets were picked (ten supply/storage areas, eight military complexes, five interdiction points, three cave/storage sites, and two truck parks). Sorties against these targets averaged thirty-four a day.¹⁴

● As with armed reconnaissance, the actual sortie levels varied from day to day, but all twenty-eight targets were hit at least once, often with spectacular results. On November 4, for example, eight F-105s struck a troop concentration just east of the Plain of Jars. Poststrike photographs showed two hundred enemy killed by air. Later that same day, sixteen planes diverted from North Vietnam assaulted a nearby truck park and storage area. A ground observer reported another forty communists killed and all supplies destroyed.

● An even more successful raid resulted from the interrogation of an NVA prisoner who pinpointed the location of the 924th Engineer Regiment near the southern edge of the plain. Since the target was outside the normal Barrel Roll area, Ambassador Sullivan gave special permission for a single strike. Fifteen aircraft swept over the area on the morning of November 7 and the NVA position was engulfed in smoke and flame within minutes. Later reports revealed that the enemy unit had been severely mauled by this strike, apparently caught completely by surprise. The target was less than a mile from a heavy antiaircraft artillery concentration, but no aircraft were hit by the sporadic ground fire that was received only toward the end of the strike.

● Other major attacks took place on November 20, 22, and 30, when F-105s and A-1s added forty-three structures, nineteen secondary explosions, nine road cuts, and 150 troops to their score. The pace continued during December, with seven major raids on truck parks, storage areas, and military complexes. Enemy reaction to the attacks on fixed targets was more intense than to the armed reconnaissance missions (47 percent drew enemy fire), but again no aircraft were lost.¹⁵

● In fact, the only USAF loss occurred on December 5 when an F-105 pilot apparently lost control of his plane. According to the forward air controller

Lead started his roll in with, what I thought, an unusually high G maneuver. . . . From my position it appeared that the aircraft rolled inverted then entered a seventy to eighty degree nose low spin. . . . From that point the aircraft continued to spin on down . . . to the ground with no visible attempt at spin recovery, no ordnance jettisoned and no visible attempt at ejection.¹⁶

The burning wreckage, including numerous secondary explosions, was strewn over an area about seventy-five yards in diameter. Rescue aircraft arrived within five minutes but, with no sign of

14. ● Msg 7th AF to CINCPAC, 111101Z Nov 67, subj: Status and Analysis Report, RT/BR/SL, Nov 1-15, 1967.

15. ● *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, XL, 2-4 thru 2-6.*

16. ● Ltr, James F. Lamon, Raven 49, to AIRA Vientiane, subj: Aircraft Accident, Wildcat Lead, Dec 7, 1967.

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life from the wreckage, the forward air controller moved off to direct the remaining fighters onto their target.

Aircrews operating in Barrel Roll faced hazards other than ground fire and aircraft accidents. On January 7, 1968, the first air-to-air engagement ensued when two MiG-21s jumped a pair of A-1s.¹⁷ The A-1s were flying a search and rescue orbit just north of Samneua when the enemy planes attacked. One of the A-1s at once broke into the sun while the other dove for the ground. The MiGs chose to chase the latter aircraft, firing a missile that narrowly missed the violently maneuvering A-1. Several more passes were made but no more missiles were fired as the American dodged and jinked out of the way. The MiGs eventually gave up and returned to North Vietnam. The A-1s headed back to Udom. As they checked out with the airborne battlefield command and control center, one of the controllers wished them a hearty "good day." One of the A-1 pilots replied, "It may have been good for you; it sure wasn't much fun for us."¹⁸

Although the USAF sorties were drawing blood, they did not seriously impede the enemy buildup. In particular, the situation around Nam Bac was becoming critical. Having failed to carry out their planned offensive, the Laotians sat huddled in the valley while the communists built their strength up around the perimeter, "preparing the battlefield" by whistling away at the defenders. Inside the perimeter were elements of GMs 11, 12, and 15 that totaled forty-five hundred men (the largest concentration of the war), supported by eight artillery pieces and ten T-28s stationed at Luang Prabang. Outside the perimeter, friendly guerrillas, mainly Yao and Lu tribesmen, furnished a screening force to harass the enemy and to collect intelligence.

Communist forces in the immediate vicinity numbered just fourteen hundred men. These consisted of a North Vietnamese Army battalion, two mixed NVA/PL battalions, and a single Pathet Lao battalion with North Vietnamese advisors. Three more NVA/PL battalions with twelve hundred men were within three days march, and three battalions from the NVA 335th Regiment at Dien Bien Phu were also available. A fourth communist battalion, located between Nam Tha and Muong Sai, was largely tied down by Lao-Theng guerrillas.

Despite an edge in numbers, the government forces were in a perilous position. With the communists controlling the roads between Nam Bac and Luang Prabang, the garrison's principal link with the outside world was a 2,600-foot dirt airstrip. As long as it stayed open, a trickle of supplies could reach the trapped garrison and the wounded could be evacuated. In spite of maintenance problems and harassment from enemy mortar fire, the RLAf C-47s and H-34s continued daily shuttles to Nam Bac, supplemented by an occasional Air America C-123.

Outside the perimeter, government guerrillas did what they could to slow the enemy buildup. Raids on Muong Sing (October 21), Nam Tha (December 24), and Muong Sai (January 10) were especially effective in drawing off communist forces. To the east, General Vang Pao began moving three hundred Meo toward Muong Ngoi on November 6. This force was within fifteen miles of its destination by the end of the month, when Vang Pao ordered a halt. Unless there was a corresponding thrust out of Nam Bac, he felt any further advance would bring a strong riposte from the enemy.

Inside Nam Bac, Colonel Bounchanh had not yet come up with an overall defense plan; and he would not sanction a breakout until he was sure the defenses were strong enough to be held by the troops left behind. With no coherent action by the FAR, the communists filtered into the valley; and a few small units actually set up positions inside the perimeter. Unless something were done quickly, the entire defensive position would crumble.¹⁹

17. MiGs had been active briefly in Laos during early 1967, but no engagements had taken place.

18. Hist, 56th ACW, Jan-Mar 68, I, 32.

19. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 210630Z Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 41-67, 280830Z Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 42-67, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131106Z Jan 68, subj: Nam Bac; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, pp 235-36.

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Finally on December 15, the Laotian General Staff met with American officials to discuss plans for a breakout. They agreed that GM 15 would be lifted by helicopters to Muong Ngoi and connect with Vang Pao's troops. GM 12 would close the gap left by GM 15, and the remaining battalions would clean out the enemy pockets in the valley. Ostensibly, this plan would permit the FAR to hold Nam Bac while releasing GM 15 to act as a general reserve.²⁰ In fact, the FAR had decided to abandon Nam Bac—and the defenders knew it.

The breakout was set to begin on December 20, 1967, but on the twenty-second, Major Leuschner notified Colonel Pettigrew

Col Bounchanh still apparently has no concrete plans for his part in the operation. I have continued [to try] to obtain specific information on what their airpower needs are and continue to receive no specific targeting information. Col Bounchanh will only say he wants air support, but he refuses to get specific on what targets he wants hit, when he wants them hit and how he intends to coordinate his ground movements with air support. I asked specifically if he wanted fighter cover in the area for the GM 15 movement and was told "No."²¹

Even without air support, the first part of the operation came off smoothly on December 23. In one of the most spectacular airlifts of the war, all 880 men of GM 15 were moved by RLAFF and Air America helicopters to Muong Ngoi where they were joined by Vang Pao. The communists countered with a heavy mortar barrage on the airfield. The RLAFF replied with a maximum effort (fourteen sorties with seven aircraft) against the suspected mortar positions.

Realizing they had been abandoned, the troops remaining inside the perimeter did not try to carry out their part of the plan. They simply retreated farther into the valley, allowing the foe's company-size units to slip through the gaps left by GM 15. Sensing it was time for the coup de grace, the North Vietnamese Army committed the 335th Regiment and ten battalions (four NVA, one PL, and five NVA/PL). These troops began to close in on the thirty-five hundred men trapped in the valley. Although the defenders still outnumbered their assailants, all cohesion was gone. Units milled about aimlessly, waiting for the inevitable end.²²

Only Major Leuschner's T-28s and the helicopter supply stood in the way of the communist victory. During an inspection visit to the air operations center, General Ouane told Leuschner that the king had ordered Nam Bac "held at all cost" and that the RLAFF was expected to do the job. Generals Sourith and Kouprasith also paid visits to the AOC. While the RLAFF commander appeared more interested in parachute inspections than in operations, Kouprasith had the decency to give each of the pilots a bonus of thirty thousand kip (about sixty dollars).²³

In the week following the airlift, the T-28s flew sixty-six sorties, dropped 131 500-pound bombs, 153 250-pound bombs, 32 cluster bomb units, and fired 30,000 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition. These sorties afforded some relief for the defenders, but Major Leuschner reported a growing sense of frustration among the pilots due to the persistent absence of proper targeting. In truth, a typical mission order to the air operations center would now simply direct "all T-28 go Nam Bac all day."²⁴

Now and then the strikes produced impressive results. For example, the T-28 commander devised an ingenious method for silencing a mortar and machinegun that were harassing the airfield. While the RLAFF was not authorized to carry napalm, a number of empty canisters were stored at Luang Prabang. These were filled with jet petroleum (JP-4) and loaded on the nine

20. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220849Z Dec 67.

21. () Msg, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 220140Z Dec 67.

22. () Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, p 236.

23. () Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, date illegible [ca Jan 12, 1968], 140410Z Jan 68.

24. () Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 290220Z Dec 67, 130230Z Jan 68.

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available aircraft. The T-28s soaked down the hillside and ignited it with white phosphorous rockets. According to Major Leuschner, "We couldn't confirm whether we got the guns, but they didn't shoot from there for a long time."²⁵

The U.S. Air Force also kept up its interdiction. On December 24, two A-1s hit a truck park and storage area, with reports of two trucks damaged, two secondary explosions, and a secondary fire. Two days later, an A-26 spotted a five-truck convoy on Route 19. The pilot attacked with 500-pound bombs and CBU's that destroyed two trucks, triggered a secondary explosion, and touched off two secondary fires. On December 29, a pair of A-1s hit a truck park causing seven secondary explosions and six fires.²⁶

As the communists closed in on the doomed garrison, they moved in more antiaircraft guns to drive off the fighters and resupply aircraft. The T-28s kept attacking and the helicopters shuttled in and out of the airfield until January 1, 1968, when a heavy mortar barrage permanently shut down the field. This sealed the last hatch, but airdrops sustained the beleaguered defenders for two weeks more.

With Nam Bac in its death throes, the RLAF accelerated its efforts, flying ten sorties a day with an average of seven operational aircraft. During the first week of January, the T-28s logged seventy-eight missions and in the final week of the campaign added another seventy-two, dropping sixty-three tons of bombs and firing sixty thousand rounds of ammunition. A USAF A-26 also heartened the defenders on January 7 when it struck a storage area, setting off twenty explosions and six fires.²⁷

Much of the credit for the continuing performance of the RLAF must go to the American enlisted men at Luang Prabang who worked alongside their Laotian counterparts to repair damaged aircraft and ready them for the next day's mission. This yeoman service, however, could not keep pace with attrition. Over the first two weeks of January, the RLAF lost six aircraft including a flight of three that just disappeared. Another seven T-28s were so damaged they required major repair. Replacement planes were flown into Luang Prabang, but Major Leuschner was down to four operational aircraft at the time Nam Bac fell.²⁸

Back in Vientiane the embassy staff watched with dismay as the situation at Nam Bac collapsed. Finally, after mulling over the latest reports from Major Leuschner, Colonel Pettigrew decided that direct intervention was in order. He wired his air operations center commander

General Sourith, General Oudone, and perhaps others are at Luang Prabang. If you can get to Sourith and Oudone, see if you can sell them on the following:

- Forget T-28 close support around Nam Bac itself, except when specific targets are identified from the ground.
- Use T-28s in maximum effort east of Nam Bac, up Nam Ou, Route 19, on military structures and other targets as you can get them.
- You and your boys select the targets, not TAC North. Use CAS [close air support] maximum.
- See if generals will let you more or less take command, fly them when and as often as you want.²⁹

Unfortunately it was too late—Nam Bac had fallen. On January 14, 1968, the North Vietnamese had mounted a four battalion assault from their positions within the perimeter. The

25. Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Concy, DCS/Ops, RLAF, Jan 15-16, 1970; Leuschner intvw, Jan 3, 1970.

26. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLI, 2-5.

27. Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 050200Z Jan 68, 130230Z Jan 68; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLII, 2-3.

28. Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, date illegible [ca Jan 12, 1968], 140410Z Jan 68.

29. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to AOC Luang Prabang, 141015Z Jan 68.

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defenders might have been able to fight their way out, but morale had sunk to the point that resistance ceased. At two in the afternoon, all contact with Nam Bac was lost and a search by RLAf aircraft showed no signs of survivors. Major Leuschner reported that the entire Nam Bac complex appeared to be deserted. He directed the T-28s to destroy the 105-mm howitzers left behind by the FAR. Later in the month, three F-105s flew the final sorties of the campaign to destroy the remaining supplies.³⁰

For several months, stragglers drifted into Muong Ngoi; but by April, only fifteen hundred of the men had been accounted for. Equipment losses were likewise staggering. Nearly \$1.3 million in Military Assistance Program supplies were abandoned. Among them were seven howitzers, fifty-two mortars, forty-nine recoilless rifles, over a million rounds of small-arms ammunition, and thirty-three thousand artillery shells. According to Ambassador Sullivan, "This, therefore, is the largest military disaster in the history of Laos."³¹ The king had a few choice words for his generals. He told Souvanna and the General Staff he considered the whole affair a "disgrace" and that the sole solution seemed to be to fire the whole General Staff.³² In typical Laotian fashion, however, nothing was done. Indeed, the generals tried to place the blame on the RLAf for failure to resupply and to furnish adequate air support. A CIA analysis was probably closer to the mark: "This defeat did not need to happen. It did happen . . . primarily because of poor leadership and poor tactical implementation of basic plans and concepts by officers of the Royal Laotian government."³³

As the Americans had feared, the loss of Nam Bac shattered FAR morale and virtually erased these forces as a factor in the war. The loss of three thousand men not only represented 6 percent of the total army strength, it also meant the depletion of a third of the mobile field force. After Nam Bac, the army rarely ventured outside the major towns. Thus a single battle overturned almost four years of American military assistance. Although the Army attaché and the deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI set about at once to rebuild the army, three years passed before it again emerged as an effective military force.

The fall of Nam Bac also crippled CIA intelligence collection in northwestern Laos. The communists methodically mopped up progovernment guerrillas in the area, compelling the CIA to withdraw its roadwatch teams from Route 19. More ominous, the demise of Nam Bac spurred Chinese activity in northern Laos. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had agreed in 1962 to let the Chinese construct a road from Mengla in China to Pak Beng on the Mekong River. By the time of the Geneva accords, the road had been completed to Phong Saly when construction was halted. Then, after the fall of Nam Bac, work suddenly resumed. Eventually, the Chinese had as many as ten thousand men working on the road. At first, both Laotian and U.S. aircraft bombed the road. The Chinese responded by bringing in antiaircraft guns that drove off the T-28s and made it most hazardous for the jets. Shortly after President Nixon took office, the Air Force was barred from bombing the road or conducting reconnaissance flights in the area except for U-2 aircraft (controlled by the National Security Agency but flown by Air Force crews).

American intelligence analysts puzzled over the Chinese objectives. Some felt the Chinese wished to open an infiltration route to support the communist insurgency in northeastern Thailand. Others figured the Chinese wanted to counter the enlarged North Vietnamese influence in northwestern Laos. Whatever the case, it was clear China had in effect annexed the area between the road and their border. As one CIA analyst commented, "Northern Laos has a new border."³⁴

30. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 4243, 031105Z Feb 68, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 140410Z Jan 68, 141050Z Jan 68.

31. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 4243, 031105Z Feb 68; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, p 235.

32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 4675, 231135Z Jan 68.

33. Msg, [redacted] Mar 15, 1968.

34. Msg, PACAF to DIA, U10215Z Jul 71, subj: Chicom Objectives in Northwestern Laos.

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With the FAR out of combat, the continued survival of the Laotian government hinged more and more on the Meo guerrillas of General Vang Pao and the support of the U.S. Air Force. Of course, Ambassador Sullivan had been concerned about the level of air support—and his control over it—ever since he arrived in Laos. In theory, President Johnson's March 11, 1966, directive had resolved this issue. It gave the Joint Chiefs of Staff/National Security Council direct control of Rolling Thunder, MACV responsibility for South Vietnam and the infiltration routes through southern Laos, and the Vientiane embassy control of operations in northern Laos. Ambassador Sullivan additionally retained some influence over operations in southern Laos through his control of the rules of engagement. Over the years, however, General Westmoreland had basically tucked this area into his domain.

The Seventh Air Force was tasked to support all three areas, with first priority going to General Westmoreland's command and second priority to Rolling Thunder.³⁵ Therefore, the majority of the air strikes in northern Laos were weather diverts from North Vietnam or Steel Tiger.

In effect, the ambassador had the responsibility but not the resources. The Seventh Air Force had the resources but not the responsibility (beyond the fuzzy stricture to support the Royal Laotian Government on a "recurring basis"). The air attaché and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force had neither the resources nor the responsibility, but were thrust in between the other two. All parties considered this a completely unworkable arrangement, but they could not come up with an acceptable alternative.

Consequently, Seventh Air Force resisted providing a higher level of air support without having a say in its use. This was something the embassy, and more so the CIA, were never willing to grant. For "security reasons" the CIA refused to share its plans with the Air Force. The agency thought it possessed the expertise to plan and direct air operations and expected the Air Force to simply furnish the planes and crews to be used (misused in the view of the Seventh Air Force) as the CIA saw fit.

The Seventh Air Force questioned the need for "security" and challenged the agency's expertise in air operations. In the Air Force view, the CIA was too parochial, centering on events in northern Laos and disregarding theater-wide commitments; and the airmen felt the CIA could not adequately plan and direct air operations in support of Laotian ground forces. What the Air Force wanted was consultation during initial planning, allowing the Air Force to determine where, when, and how many planes were needed. In the words of Maj. Gen. Louis T. Seith, deputy commander of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force: "We have been pressing CAS [CIA] for ten months to bring us in on their planning when it is originally conceived. Conversations did no good and written requests were initiated."³⁶

This conflict simmered beneath the surface throughout the war, emerging from time to time in various forms (Bango/Whiplash, rules of engagement, sortie allocation, etc.). In all of these, the core issue was close air support for the Meo, though it was usually couched in terms of interdiction. In late 1967, this clash spilled over into the prop versus jet controversy.

In September, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis prepared a study comparing the relative effectiveness of propeller and jet aircraft in destroying trucks. Based on the first eight months of 1967, the study showed prop aircraft to be nearly ten times as effective as jets, but with a loss rate four times greater. The analysis revealed that jet aircraft flew 74 percent of the attack sorties in Laos but accounted for only 25 percent of the destroyed or damaged (366 vehicles destroyed/damaged for 22,599 sorties or 1.4 trucks per 100 sorties at

³⁵ In practice, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff/National Security Council released a target in North Vietnam, General Momyer threw everything he had against it, regardless of the situation in the south.

³⁶ EOTR, Maj Gen Louis T. Seith, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 27, 1969.

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a cost of seven hundred thousand dollars per truck). Prop aircraft, on the other hand, flew 25 percent of the sorties (7,810), yet destroyed or damaged 72 percent of the trucks (966) or 12.3 per 100 sorties at a cost of fifty-five thousand dollars per truck.³⁷ During these operations, eight jet and twelve prop planes were lost, giving a loss rate of 0.37 per 1,000 sorties for the jets and 1.25 per 1,000 sorties for the prop aircraft.³⁸

Weighing the alternative courses of action, the study concluded that substitution of two A-1 squadrons for a like number of F-4s would result in an increase of one thousand trucks per year destroyed or damaged against an additional loss of eight aircraft a year. The study noted, however, that the scarcity of prop planes in the USAF inventory would restrict further deployments to Southeast Asia. As of June 30, 1967, the Air Force had twenty-seven T-28s with twelve already deployed to Southeast Asia and eight to Panama. Twelve of thirty-one A-26s were also in Southeast Asia, as were fifty of the eighty-nine A-1s in the USAF inventory. Transfers from the U.S. Navy and the Vietnamese Air Force could add another one hundred fifty A-1s to the pot. The study considered the A-1 the sole viable candidate for additional deployments, but warned that if all these planes were made available, there would not be sufficient replacement aircraft to maintain a viable prop force beyond 1970. Indeed, any buildup in enemy defenses—which the study judged likely—would boost the projected loss rate and dictate an earlier conversion to jets.

As the U.S. improved its capability to impede infiltration and supply in the Laotian corridor (either with propeller aircraft or other means) the North Vietnamese are likely to increase their AAA defenses in the area . . . the use of propeller aircraft in such a heavily defended environment will increase the attrition rates and might degrade their effectiveness. . . . As the AAA density increases, we might be forced to replace the propeller aircraft with jets or sustain very high loss rates.³⁹

In other words, the Air Force would ultimately have to go to an all jet force.

Copies of the study were sent to both Saigon and Vientiane with a cover letter that warned "In view of the above and 7th Air Force judgment that jets are more flexible operationally, I doubt that further action on this matter is worthwhile."⁴⁰ Apparently the Saigon embassy opted to pursue the subject anyway. A memo to Eugene M. Locke, the deputy ambassador, bearing the initials "EB" (Ellsworth Bunker?) said, "It seems to me that if, as the attached report indicated, propeller aircraft are approximately ten times as effective as jet aircraft, the logic is inescapable that we ought to secure as many as we can for the Laos operation."⁴¹

Ambassador Sullivan also pursued the issue—on November 15, during a visit by Lt. Gen. Glen W. Martin, Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans and Operations, USAF, he cited the study to support his bid for more sorties in northern Laos. The present sorties, he said, were doing a good job but there were too few of them. He further recognized that many of the targets were more political than military, but argued the necessity to show the Royal Laotian Government that the United States was interested in the flow of supplies westward as well as southward.

37. The study did not account for the remaining 3 percent of the trucks destroyed or damaged. Presumably they were destroyed by ground action, that is, roadwatch teams, Shining Brass, etc.

38. Study, ASD/SA, Analysis of the Use of Propeller vs Jet Aircraft in Laos, Sep 29, 1967. Five tables of statistics accompanied this study. Comparing these figures with the conclusions in the narrative, the author found numerous discrepancies. No explanation for these discrepancies can be offered.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Ltr, Victor K. Heymand, Dir/SEA Prgrms Div, ASD/SA, to Honorable Eugene M. Locke, Dep Amb, Saigon, Oct 2, 1967.

41. Memo, Ofc/Amb to Dep Amb Eugene M. Locke, Saigon, Oct 27, 1967.

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Apparently General Martin was not impressed, as Sullivan apprised the State Department,

My quotation of these statistics, as usual, seemed to raise the normal Maxwell Field suspicions that I have a conflict of interest stockholding situation in the Sopwith Camel Manufacturing Company and perhaps even a surreptitious membership in the propeller club.⁴²

Martin did sense the ambassador's underlying motive. On his return to Washington he advised General McConnell, Air Force chief of staff, that Sullivan's principal interest in props was that their use would not extend much beyond Laos due to their vulnerability, "thus they are likely to remain in effect under his control full time."⁴³

A copy of the Defense Department study found its way to General Momyer, who penned a note to Maj. Gen. Gordon F. Blood, his director of operations: "Hold this close. Would like an analysis as soon as we can get it completed. Draft a memo to General Westmoreland of my analysis. Also a draft memo from him to Ambassador Locke."⁴⁴

General Blood had his operations analysis people turn out a study challenging the Defense Department findings. This study noted that flak suppression, escort, and attacks against fixed targets were included in the jet sorties. On the other hand, fixed targets, search and rescue, and helicopter escort were included in the prop figures. Excluding these factors and confining the analysis to a permissive environment, the overall superiority of prop aircraft was reduced to two to one. In addition, jets were scheduled and configured primarily for hard targets, while prop planes were armed and employed mainly for armed reconnaissance, search and rescue, and close air support. Thus, the Defense Department study was comparing apples and oranges. The Seventh Air Force study concluded that if the analysis were expanded to take in North Vietnam (where the A-1s rarely operated) and compared the same number of aircraft on the same mission, the jet force actually had better results.⁴⁵

Back in Washington, the issue also received attention. Despite the admonition that further action was not worthwhile, Secretary McNamara presented the Defense Department study to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on December 19. With but ten days to prepare a reply, the JCS passed a request for comments down the command chain with progressively shortened suspense dates.⁴⁶

Fortunately Momyer was ready. The Seventh Air Force reply conceded that the A-1 was relatively more effective at destroying trucks in a slightly defended environment, but that was just a small part of the problem. The proper way to cut down on infiltration, Momyer contended, was to strike the supplies as close to the source as possible and not wait until they were dispersed throughout the trail network in Laos. This called for a force that could penetrate the highly defended Hanoi/Haiphong area. Since weather was often unpredictable, the maximum force—armed for hard targets—had to be on hand to capitalize on any opportunity. Second, it was necessary to attack the supplies throughout the lines of communication all the way from the ports to South Vietnam. Only the jet force could do this. Thus, Seventh Air Force felt it could not afford the luxury of a highly specialized aircraft that could strike just a portion of the lines of communication. General Momyer also asserted that most jet strikes on trucks were diverted from fixed targets in North Vietnam. He accepted the reduced effectiveness inherent in this secondary role.

42. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171030Z Nov 67.

43. Ltr, Lt Gen Glen W. Martin, DCS/Plans & Ops, USAF, to Gen John P. McConnell, CSAF, subj: Preliminary Trip Report—SEA, Nov 21, 1967.

44. Memo, Comdr, 7th AF, to DCS/Ops, 7th AF, Nov 4, 1967.

45. Working Paper 67/16, Dir/Ops Analys, 7th AF, Comparative Analysis of Propeller and Jet Aircraft, Dec 18, 1967.

46. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 5606, 201740Z Dec 67, subj: The Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.

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● The Seventh Air Force commander added that in Laos enemy defenses were steadily improving. The A-1 was already restricted from operating in some areas of eastern Laos, and it was but a matter of time before the aircraft would be confined to the lightly defended areas of northern Laos (a fact Ambassador Sullivan was well aware of). From an operational standpoint, General Momyer considered the tradeoff undesirable. In addition, the introduction of AC-130 gunships and electronic sensors was expected to increase truck attrition far beyond anything possible with additional A-1s.⁴⁷

● General Westmoreland lined up behind his air commander. The MACV reply (drafted by Seventh Air Force) concluded

To consider substituting propeller aircraft for F-4 capability is to deny the air component commander much needed flexibility and versatility in optimizing the out-of-country air campaign. . . . This Headquarters supports the 7AF rationale.⁴⁸

General Ryan, CINCPACAF, also supported the Seventh Air Force, but he took a slightly different tack. Since an increase in A-1s would strengthen the truck-killing program, PACAF proposed that the two A-1 squadrons be deployed in addition to the F-4s. This would enhance overall efficiency without compromising the jet force. If a tradeoff was needed, Ryan suggested the T-28s and A-26s rather than F-4s.⁴⁹

● CINCPAC did not have time to digest these replies and meet the suspense date to the JCS. To get some breathing room, Admiral Sharp informed the Joint Chiefs that the Defense Department study was too narrow to be a basis for aircraft substitution. A more comprehensive analysis embracing overall aircraft needs of Southeast Asia was required. Such a study was under way, Sharp said, and its findings along with his recommendations would be forwarded on March 1.⁵⁰

● Meanwhile, Sullivan opened a new front. He put his case before the State Department on December 27, saying, "There is much opinion among my experts here that any propeller-driven plane can do more than those Mach 2 monsters which can't see the trees for the blur of the forest."⁵¹ The experts the ambassador referred to were his air attaché staff. One member of this staff (Capt. Arthur B. Cornelius) had prepared a study revealing the real concerns of the embassy and air attaché staff. Cornelius opened by stating categorically, "The air support requirements in Barrel Roll stem primarily from the needs of the forces commanded by General Vang Pao." Jet aircraft, he said, were suitable for interdiction of fixed targets. However, in close air support (and armed reconnaissance) the margin of error was reduced as much as seventy-five percent. One miss in the wrong direction was unacceptable. For these missions the jet aircraft normally available (F-4s and F-105s) were unsuitable. They did not carry the proper ordnance and their crews were unfamiliar with low-level delivery techniques. In contrast, the A-1s usually carried antipersonnel ordnance and the crews knew how to deliver it, having honed their skills in search and rescue and helicopter escort duties. Moreover, the A-1 was slow enough to pick up friendly and enemy positions, had sufficient endurance to stay around for hours, and could go as low as needed to support friendly troops. It was not a matter of willingness, Cornelius said, but a question of aircraft capability and aircrew familiarity.

● Summing up, Cornelius said the A-1 was indispensable. If jets had to be used, they should be suitably equipped with cluster bomb units, napalm, and high-drag bombs; and their crews would require a series of training missions to requalify in low-level bombing. As an alternative, Cornelius

47. See note 45.

48. Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 240815Z Dec 67, subj: Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.

49. Msg, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 232343Z Dec 67, subj: Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.

50. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 262003Z Dec 67, subj: Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.

51. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 687, 272729Z Dec 67.

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suggested that F-100s from South Vietnam be aurally refueled and employed in Barrel Roll. After all, they were familiar with and configured for the close air support mission. The study's conclusion articulated the feeling that lay behind Ambassador Sullivan's efforts: "We have few enough allies in this area who are willing to fight for themselves. General Yang Pao deserves all the support we can provide."⁵²

The State Department decided not to get involved at this point. On January 4, 1968, the JCS briefed Defense Secretary McNamara on CINCPAC's request for more time. Approving the extension, McNamara directed that the new study include an analysis of day versus night sortie effectiveness in Laos, the reasons for so many day sorties in view of the efficacy of night ones, and the degree that prop versus jet efficiency reflected the differences in mission rather than aircraft design and the impact of enemy defenses.⁵³

The study turned out to be a refinement of the early Seventh Air Force paper. Forwarded to the JCS on February 17, 1968, it strongly recommended against any aircraft substitution; but no mention was made of adding A-1s to the existing force. The Joint Chiefs endorsed CINCPAC's recommendations and sent the study to the Secretary of Defense on February 29. McNamara accepted the JCS position and the matter appeared to be closed—at least for a while.⁵⁴

Ambassador Sullivan was not yet ready to drop the issue. He came out in the open for close air support and his control of that support (the real issue behind all of the earlier sparring). Citing the dearth of air support, he told the State Department

I have been troubled particularly by the problem of obtaining sufficient airstrike support directed on key targets in Laos at the time such air support is required. Taking into consideration our own requirement for tactical air support in combating the enemy threat in Laos and priorities that 7th AF must fulfill, I would suggest that "high level" consideration be given to a fundamental re-ordering of our air support resources. . . . This proposal is not new but given current tactical pressures in Laos, I believe it merits serious reconsideration.⁵⁵

Sullivan's action was impelled by a sharp decline in Barrel Roll sorties due to the Tet offensive in South Vietnam. During January, northern Laos had received only eight A-1/A-26 sorties, and even these were withdrawn during February to support Khe Sanh.⁵⁶ Sullivan made the "fundamental re-ordering" he had in mind clear in a message to the Seventh Air Force:

We have for some years now been attempting to conduct a counter-insurgency program in Laos with an absolute minimum of U.S. involvement. . . . The most striking and conspicuous, as well as the most effective U.S. input, has been . . . the USAF.

During these past three years, we have tried several variations of administrative control to match these air resources with our guerrilla operations. . . . However, no matter what we have done, the result has always . . . been makeshift and patchwork.

The fact is that our "air resources" for Laos have been those which, on any given day, Seventh Air Force has been able to spare from other operations. Except for Steel Tiger/Tiger Hound . . . Laos air operations have been the step-children of circumstances.

I fully appreciate . . . what management problems you have faced in . . . other parts of your parish. . . . I am not sure that you, in Saigon, are able to appreciate just how impossible this situation renders our task. . . .

52. Ltr, Capt Arthur B. Cornelius, AIRA Ofc/Vientiane to AIRA Vientiane, subj: Effectiveness of Various Types of Aircraft in Barrel Roll, MR-2, n.d. [ca late 1967].

53. JCSM 2344/134-1, Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in Laos, Jan 4, 1968.

54. JCSM-129-68, Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in Laos, Feb 29, 1968.

55. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220755Z Feb 68, subj: Tactical Air Support.

56. *Ibid.*

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For various reasons, . . . we are a separate operational entity here in Laos. As such, it would be logical for us to have at least one air unit which could be a known quantity in our operations and which we could task. . . . I wish to stress that I am not, repeat not, talking about operational control or frag responsibility. . . . I guess the word that I want is "dedication."⁵⁷

Specifically, the ambassador wanted the 56th Air Commando Wing that was located at Nakhon Phanom, since it was ideally suited to support counterinsurgency operations.⁵⁸ He went on to explain that he would task the 56th for sixteen A-1 and four T-28 sorties per day plus seven A-26 sorties per night for Barrel Roll. Steel Tiger would be allotted six A-1s and two A-26s

In addition, the Seventh Air Force could schedule as many jet sorties as it needed against USAF targets in Steel Tiger in accordance with the rules of engagement. Sullivan further expected to still receive diverts from North Vietnam and that Seventh Air Force would contribute extra sorties or "air packages" to support certain operations. But the ambassador—who was always conscious of his prerogatives—showed no willingness to give the Seventh Air Force a part in planning operations it was counted on to support.⁵⁹

At first glance, Sullivan's request for what amounted to over eleven hundred sorties a month (besides diverts and special air packages) would indeed seem to be a "fundamental re-ordering" of priorities.⁶⁰ However, since only the 56th Air Commando Wing was involved, most of the increase would be at the expense of Steel Tiger. The ambassador felt sorties in Steel Tiger "were fraged in more or less automatically in order to make a sortie total for the day, when we had good targets 'a-wasting' up in the north."⁶¹ (Of course, Sullivan's proposal would schedule sorties into the north "more or less automatically" while, in the Seventh Air Force's view, good targets were "a-wasting" in the south.)

Ambassador Sullivan went on to complain that it was impossible to plan operations when he did not know from one day to the next what his air support would be.⁶² On the other hand, the Seventh Air Force argued it could not schedule sorties when it did not know from one day to the next what operations were being planned.⁶³ The ambassador contended that a certain number of aircraft were needed with crews who knew the terrain, could meet daily with Meo [redacted] and could "appreciate the predicament the little guys were in"—not someone who "sort or casually drops in on this war once every month or so."⁶⁴

Sullivan's bid for control of the 56th Air Commando Wing was strongly supported by Colonel Pettigrew and many of the younger officers associated with the war in northern Laos. These officers, in general, felt that Barrel Roll operations needed to be placed on a more systematic basis to assure adequate air support. However, there was no doubt that such control would also have enhanced the air attaché's role.⁶⁵

57. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 4584, 200754Z Feb 68.

58. (S) By February 1968, the 56th Air Commando Wing possessed the following aircraft in seven squadrons: forty-three A-1s, twelve U-10s, twelve T-28s, six C-123s, twelve A-26s, thirteen CH-3s, and forty-three O-1s/O-2s. [USAF Management Summary, Feb 2, 1968, SEA 21.]

59. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 4584, 200754Z Feb 68.

60. (S) During 1967, Barrel Roll received roughly 250 scheduled sorties plus 500 diverts a month. North Vietnam received 2,500 scheduled sorties; Steel Tiger, 4,500; and South Vietnam, 10,000.

61. (S) Intvw, Majs Samuel E. Riddlebarger and Richard B. Clement, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Amb William H. Sullivan, Asst SECSTATE/FE Affairs, Apr 15, 1970.

62. (S) *Ibid.*

63. (S) Intvw, Maj Richard B. Clement and Capt Ralph G. Swenston, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Gen George S. Brown, Comdr, 7th AF, Oct 19-20, 1970.

64. (S) Intvw, Majs Samuel E. Riddlebarger and Richard B. Clement, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Amb William H. Sullivan, Asst SECSTATE/FE Affairs, Apr 15, 1970.

65. (S) Intvw, Capt Roger Lewis, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Col Paul A. Pettigrew, AIRA Vientiane, Dec 16, 1969.

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④ The issue raised went beyond the familiarity of crews with the terrain, aircraft suitability, or sortie allocation. At the heart of the matter was the issue of centralized control of air power. Even though Ambassador Sullivan claimed that he did not want to "control" the wing (in the administrative sense), "dedication" would have given him operational control because the "dedicated" aircraft could not be used elsewhere without his approval. With control of the A-1/A-26 strikes in Steel Tiger, he could have influenced the interdiction campaign there (he already had some indirect sway through his control of the rules of engagement); and by controlling the helicopters and their escorts, he could have throttled Westmoreland's Shining Brass operations that vied with the CIA roadwatch teams. Since the A-1s provided search and rescue escort for operations against North Vietnam, Sullivan could have injected himself into CINCPAC's domain. With the 56th also engaged in the [redacted] program, the ambassador's proposal would also have taken him into Ambassador Graham A. Martin's bailiwick. These intrusions would surely have drawn fire from CINCPAC, Westmoreland, and Martin. Finally, had Ambassador Sullivan controlled the 56th Air Commando Wing at the time of the Tet offensive and Khe Sanh, he would have been able to influence those battles as well. All of this was anathema to the Air Force high command.

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④ Col. Roland K. McCoskrie, commander of the 56th ACW, expressed this feeling:

④ Everybody wanted his own private air force. . . . They all thought they had the biggest job in Southeast Asia and they wanted the whole damn thing dedicated to them. There just wasn't any reason for that. They got everything they wanted—they just didn't get to run it—which is what they really wanted. Had they been given control . . . they wouldn't have come out any better, probably worse.

④ They weren't able to see the big picture. There were lots of times—like Khe Sanh—when we devoted our entire effort to that one battle. . . . If we had to go through the Embassy to get permission to pull off all strikes we would have lost a lot of time.

④ The politicians, the State Department folks, really don't know how a military operation has to work. You take a decision and get at it rather than sit down and worry about whether you are going to offend Vang Pao if you take all those airplanes and put them down south. That kind of stuff isn't really germane but they would have done that if they controlled the wing.⁶⁶

④ General Momyer viewed the issue from a theater-wide perspective:

④ During the 1965-1967 time period, Ambassador Sullivan never felt there was enough airpower devoted to the war in Laos. He raised his issue through diplomatic and military channels on a number of occasions. The argument advanced by the Embassy was one most frequently used by an organization that wanted sole control of airpower to support its mission. . . . In effect the Embassy was sealing off a geographic area and requesting that airpower be fragmented for that area. . . .

④ As Seventh Air Force Commander I vigorously resisted this effort for a number of fundamental reasons. The most significant was that it robbed the commander of the flexibility to employ the forces where there was the greatest potential for decisive action. . . . If airpower had been divided up . . . there would have been insufficient forces to support the war in South Vietnam, Laos, and the strikes in North Vietnam. . . .

④ CINCPAC considered the war in North Vietnam a priority commitment; COMUSMACV considered his mission in South Vietnam to be the dominant consideration and the Ambassador in Laos was of the unshakable conviction that preservation of the status quo in Laos was the most important requirement for the utilization of airpower. . . .

66. ④ Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Roland K. McCoskrie, Comdr, 56th ACW, Jul 14, 1975.

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The only way these conflicting requirements could be resolved was through the centralized control of airpower by Seventh Air Force. The decision to satisfy one demand over another finally had to be made by the commander depending on the criticality of the situation at that particular time. . . .

When the JCS released a target in North Vietnam for attack, there was intense pressure to eliminate that target and priority was given to that task. This often meant reducing the support for Barrel Roll or Steel Tiger. It was the same thing during the Tet offensive and the battle of Khe Sanh. We pulled everything off to stabilize the situation there. . . .

Regardless of the decision, the shift of support from one area to another was bound to and did provoke an energetic response from the activity suffering the temporary loss of sorties. . . . [However,] anytime a situation developed that constituted a grave threat to the security of forces or facilities, Seventh Air Force diverted whatever airpower was required to help stabilize the situation.⁶⁷

Gen. George S. Brown, successor to General Momyer as Seventh Air Force commander, was even more blunt:

Sullivan didn't know what the hell he was talking about. He always dealt in terms of "X" sorties, a guaranteed level of effort, when he should have dealt in terms of targets and let us determine the weight of effort needed. . . . It could be they needed more than they thought. Most of the time that probably wasn't true.

The ideal thing would have been . . . to plan their campaigns as they were in the south [SVN]. When they had an operation coming up, they should have come to 7/13th headquarters with an outline plan, saying, "This is what we propose to do, let's get our planners together and work up an air plan to support the ground campaign." But they didn't do that. . . . people up there would sit down and work this whole thing out with the Attachés, who didn't influence them very much, and then they'd come and want "X" sorties. They just didn't know what the hell they were talking about.⁶⁸

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Actually, Sullivan's case was not without merit, but his timing could not have been worse. On the very day the ambassador sent his message to Seventh Air Force, General Momyer was meeting with Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, to resolve their differences over control of Marine aviation. General Cushman advanced basically the same argument as Ambassador Sullivan; and if Momyer had approved the ambassador's request, his concept for a single manager for air in Vietnam would have been doomed. Consequently, there was no way he could accede to Sullivan's wishes, even if he had been inclined to.

The Tet offensive was now in full swing, and the Seventh Air Force had pulled virtually everything out of Laos and North Vietnam to stop the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army. This swift decisive response to the enemy move was probably Momyer's strongest argument for flexible centralized control. Sullivan deemed the Seventh Air Force reply completely unacceptable and answered with another broadside:

Your message . . . set forth the position which I frankly expected you to take. . . . It is the fulfillment of our daily, constructive, but essential operations, rather than response to crises that I have made my dedication proposal for the 56th ACW. I have repeated that proposal to Washington in the hope that authorities there would be disposed to relieve you of some of your priority obligations in other fields in order to aid us in these rather dry pastures.⁶⁹

67. Gen William W. Momyer, USAF, Ret, "Air Power in Three Wars WW II, Korea, Vietnam," manuscript, pp 188-192. In the final published version (Washington, 1978), pp 84-88, Momyer softened his wording.

68. See note 63.

69. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 4647, 221051Z Feb 68.

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● This time the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency came to Ambassador Sullivan's aid. Taking note of his problems in obtaining air support, Assistant Secretary Bundy informed the ambassador, "This larger item of course raises more fundamental questions and will require resolutions at high level. . . . We have meanwhile weighed in with Defense and will follow the matter closely."⁷⁰ Citing the critical conditions at Lima Site 85, the CIA argued for an instant increase in air support for the defenders.⁷¹

● The military, however, closed ranks against the outsiders. General Westmoreland, COMUSMACV, backed his air component commander, but Admiral Sharp, CINCPAC, was caught on the horns of a dilemma. In the past, he had leaned toward the Marine position on control of air power and had blocked several bids by Momyer and Westmoreland to gain control of Marine aviation. Yet, he was unwilling to extend this logic to the ambassador. Consequently he threw his weight behind Momyer. On February 28, 1968, Sharp advised the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "The position [Momyer's] is sound and basic to the principle of effective use of air resources. The necessity for maintaining flexibility . . . precludes the dedication of any portion of TACAIR resources to a specific area or mission."⁷²

● The Joint Chiefs were of like mind. A memo, signed by General McConnell as acting chairman, set forth their support for centralized control.⁷³ It now remained for the final scene to be played out in Saigon. On March 8, Westmoreland designated Momyer "single manager for air" and ordered the Marines to assign all fixed-wing aircraft to the operational control of the Seventh Air Force.⁷⁴ Although this decision applied solely to South Vietnam, it also ended any hope for Sullivan's bid.

● In the face of this stone wall, the ambassador backpedaled. At a SEACoord meeting on March 9, Sullivan alleged he had been "misunderstood" on "dedication" and that people were "obfuscating" the issue by continually drawing attention to the total sorties flown in Barrel Roll. He conceded the number was impressive and often exceeded his requests; but, he contended, northern Laos had become a "dumping ground" for divers from North Vietnam that had but a few minutes in the target area due to low fuel. It was not uncommon, he said, for a forward air controller to suddenly receive fifty or sixty sorties all screaming for a target before they ran out of fuel. Under these circumstances, the FAC had to put them in on whatever target was available at the moment regardless of its value. At other times, the FACs might go for several days with no strike sorties whatever while the enemy poured in men and supplies. While there were a lot of aircraft striking in Laos, none seemed to be available to work with the Laotians on a replanned basis.⁷⁵

● Sullivan then repeated his basic thesis. What he had sought in his original proposal was assurance that we could have reliable, dependable programmed air sorties which could be directed to support specific ground operations at a given hour and on a given day. This is a far cry from the random receipt of a couple of dozen jet missions which were unable to find a hole near Hanoi and hence can drop a wing load of bombs on a road segment in North Laos before lunch on some rainy weekday.⁷⁶

70. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 20863, 261537Z Feb 68.

71. ● *Ibid.*

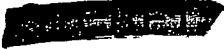
72. ● Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 280150Z Feb 68, subj: Tactical Air Support in Laos.

73. ● CM-3060-68 to SECDEF, Tactical Air Support in Laos, Feb 27, 1968. Attached to this memorandum was a letter from Secretary of Defense McNamara to Secretary of State Rusk setting forth the JCS position. However, it was unsigned and had a red line drawn through it; so apparently it was never sent.

74. ● Directive, COMUSMACV to Dep Comdr/Air Ops, Single Manager of Strike and Reconnaissance Assets, Mar 8, 1968.

75. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 090903Z Mar 68.

76. ● *Ibid.*


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The generals listened politely and assured the ambassador they would do their best; but with Tet and the battle for Khe Sanh, there was very little left over for Laos. Clearly, Ambassador Sullivan had lost another round. Within a matter of days, however, the North Vietnamese would gain for him much of what he had failed to gain on his own by focusing their attention on a remote mountain called Phou Phathi.

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Chapter XI

The End of the Quiet War (U)

The mountain of Phou Phathi was located twenty miles west of the Pathet Lao capital of Samneua and just fifteen miles from the North Vietnamese border. Towering fifty-eight hundred feet, it was one of the highest and most isolated outposts in northern Laos. Sheer cliffs rising sixteen hundred feet above the valley floor made the site inaccessible from three sides. The fourth side was steep and heavily wooded but could be conquered by the agile Meo. Long a Meo stronghold, it had become a symbol of their power and influence in Samneua Province. Except for a period in 1959 when it was occupied briefly by the communists, Phou Phathi had successfully resisted all attacks. From there the Meo had been conducting forays to harass the Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese and to gather intelligence.

In the early 1960s, a seven-hundred-foot dirt landing strip had been constructed in the valley, along with a smaller helicopter pad right below the summit. Known as Lima Site 85, the airfield was used chiefly by Air America to bring in supplies and give the defenders a link to the outside world. Air Force helicopters also used the site from time to time during search and rescue operations, and in mid-1966, the Air Force set up a tacan station atop the mountain. Its periodic maintenance was taken care of by a sheep-dipped USAF circuit rider team from the 1st Mobile Communications Group; but, [REDACTED] were permanently stationed at the site.

Soon after the tacan was in place, USAF planners considered a radar site in northern Laos to provide an all-weather bombing capability over North Vietnam for Rolling Thunder strikes. Analysis showed that, between October 1966 and February 1967, bad weather resulted in less than twenty-five percent of the sorties scheduled against the Hanoi/Haiphong area reaching their targets. Existing radar sites furnished all-weather coverage of South Vietnam, southern Laos, and southern North Vietnam, but none of these sites could reach into the vital Red River delta. Having a radar at Lima Site 85 would cover the entire Hanoi/Haiphong complex and, as a side benefit, cover Barrel Roll as well. Several locations other than Phou Phathi were rejected due to distance or terrain masking.¹

Ambassador Sullivan reacted negatively to the proposal. He said a tacan was a passive, unmanned facility that could be explained as a general navigation aid. A radar site, however, was a positive control system that would enmesh U.S. ground personnel in offensive operations against North Vietnam. Because this would engender major political risks for the Laotian government, the ambassador expressed "grave doubts" that the prime minister would approve. He warned it was "not the intention or tactic" of the Meo to commit forces to a prolonged defense of any particular spot. Consequently, the North Vietnamese could overrun Lima Site 85 if they mounted a determined attack. Under such a circumstance, the Meo defenders could be counted on for a brief holding action to permit the destruction of the equipment and evacuation of U.S. personnel.²

Feeling that the benefits outweighed the risks, the Air Force proceeded with the proposal and on April 25, 1967, the JCS recommended that the Secretary of Defense approve it.³

1. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 250002Z Feb 67, subj: MSQ-77 in Northern Laos.
 2. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPACAF, 050329Z Dec 66, SECSTATE, 130930Z Mar 67.
 3. Ltr, CSAF to SAF, subj: MSQ-77 at Site 85 in Laos, Apr 17, 1967; JCSM-231-67 to SECDEF, Installation of MSQ-77 in Northern Laos, Apr 25, 1967.

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Subsequent meetings between the ambassador and officials of the Air Force, Defense Department, and State Department settled most of the details and on June 13 Sullivan discussed the matter with Souvanna Phouma. The prime minister said he had no objection to the site, so long as he was not "officially" informed. In other words, if the United States got caught he would claim it was done "without his knowledge." He also insisted the ground personnel wear civilian clothes and carry suitable civilian identification.⁴

Though pleased with the prime minister's response, officials back in Washington were concerned over the "apparent contradiction" between his approval and desire "not to be informed." In reply, Sullivan said this concern

reflects acute occidental strabismus. Essentially, what Souvanna is saying is this. If we get caught . . . he will not admit that he ever heard of it. He will insist that we put it in there without his knowledge. . . .

(S) This is the key element of the transaction and . . . I want to be absolutely sure that it has fully penetrated all Presbyterian consciences in Washington. . . .

(S) In short, please assure me that all the little George Washingtons will bury their hatchets and not try to shake the cherry tree if the fruit hits the fan.⁵

In a later message, the ambassador went on to suggest that if the site's cover was "blown" the United States would simply remain silent or refuse comment. "This should bring all of us angels together on the head of the same pin."⁶

With this hurdle out of the way, actual work on the site could begin. The entire project was given the code name Commando Club. During August-October helicopters flew in construction crews and equipment to build crew quarters and a control bunker, as well as to level an area for the radar vans. Since the standard radar vans were too heavy to be lifted by helicopter, a light-weight version (TSQ-81) was deployed to the site. The tacan had to be moved about twenty-feet to prevent interference from the radar antenna. To reduce the risk of compromise, all USAF markings were removed from the equipment and demolition charges were attached. Efforts were made to camouflage the nature of the installation when seen from the air.⁷ A pool of forty-four USAF technicians from Nakhon Phanom manned the site (designated Operating Location 28). Normally, no more than twelve of these men would be at the site at any one time and they would be rotated every twenty-four hours. In keeping with their "civilian" cover, personnel were permitted no weapons at the site and they were nominally discharged from the Air Force. Ostensibly, they were employed by Lockheed Aircraft Corporation under a United States Agency for International Development contract to repair communications facilities in Laos. They continued to draw their regular USAF pay, receive all normal benefits, and accrue seniority. After completing their tours, they were reinstated in the Air Force with no break in service.⁸

The site became fully operational in early November 1967, and the first Commando Club strike against North Vietnam was flown on the tenth. Thereafter, the number of TSQ strikes on North Vietnam steadily grew—from thirteen percent in November 1967 to fifty-five percent in February 1968. With Barrel Roll strikes in Laos added to the list of TSQ strikes in December

4. Ltr, CSAF to SAF, May 10, 1967; memo, SAF Harold Brown to Richard C. Steadman, DEPSECDEF/FE Affairs, subj: MSQ-77 at Site 85, May 12, 1967; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 207815, 121413Z Jun 67, AmEmb to SECSTATE, 7712, 140900Z Jun 67.

5. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 218801, 291043Z Jun 67, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 010617Z Jul 67.

6. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 060830Z Jul 67.

7. Hist, 1st CEG (SAC), 1967, Annex.

8. Memo, Lt Col Gerald H. Britten, USA, Asst/Laos, ASD/ISA, to Stewart French, ASD/ISA, Clifford Strathern, CIA, et al, subj: Information for Symington Hearings, Oct 9, 1969.

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1967, again there was a constant but less dramatic rise from twenty percent to thirty-eight percent in February 1968. Since Commando Club was confined to periods when bad weather ruled out visual bombing, immediate results were never known; but poststrike photography revealed Commando Club strikes to be as accurate as visual bombing of area targets.⁹

The upsurge in activity at Lima Site 85 during summer 1967 did not pass unnoticed by the Pathet Lao in Samneua. There is no proof, however, they associated this bustle with the subsequent all-weather bombing of North Vietnam. Phou Phathi was nevertheless very much on the enemy's mind. Both sides considered it the key to Samneua Province. So long as it stayed in friendly hands, the communist supply lines to the Plain of Jars were fair game to the Meo guerrillas. If Phou Phathi fell, General Vang Pao believed all of Samneua Province would follow. Hence, the stakes were high even without the radar site.

According to a CIA estimate, the communists had decided the time had come to end the Meo menace once and for all. Over the 1967-68 dry season, they planned to clear out all Meo enclaves in the northeast—the main blow falling on Lima Site 85. The embassy cautioned that a combined air/ground attack could be in the works, because the North Vietnamese were known to be training for ordnance delivery with an AN-2 Colt at an airfield near Hanoi.¹⁰ Even so, the site was the strongest defensive position in northeastern Laos. It was reasonably secure although the CIA knew it could be taken either by a major commitment of enemy troops or by a small commando team that could slip through the defenses.¹¹

In November and December 1967, the North Vietnamese started clearing operations around Lima Site 85 and construction of a road (Route 602) from Samneua towards Phou Den Din, a Meo outpost seven miles east of Phou Phathi. Ambushes and air strikes (67 in November and 128 in December) slowed but did not stop this enemy activity. As communist intentions became clear, reinforcements were flown into Lima Site 85. Eight hundred men formed a main defense line at the base of the mountain, with another two hundred men located at the helipad. Smaller units were scattered around a seven-mile arc to warn of the foe's approach. A rather cumbersome plan was readied to integrate the TSQ radar into the site's defense. The plan assumed the Meo would have at least twenty-four hours warning of an impending attack, and could pinpoint the enemy assembly areas. At that time, the local commander [redacted]

[redacted] would radio the embassy for approval to call in air strikes. The embassy in turn would alert Seventh Air Force. When the assault was imminent, the local commander would obtain final approval from the embassy and then notify the TSQ commander of the targets to be struck. Finally, the TSQ commander would call for whatever aircraft were available.¹²

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The attack on the site began on January 12, 1968, when AN-2s appeared out of North Vietnam. While two of the planes orbited near the border, the other two bombed and strafed the base. According to one observer: "It was just wacky. We saw these four incredibly slow-moving old planes coming out of North Vietnam. It was like something out of the First World War. Everybody saw them coming. . . . It was like a joke."¹³ The bombing and strafing left no

9. Vallentyne, *The Fall of Site 85*, pp 2-3.

10. The AN-2, a fabric and metal-covered biplane of 1948 vintage, was still used widely throughout the communist world as a utility transport and crop duster. The North Vietnamese had modified four of these aircraft to carry two sixteen-shot 57-mm rocket pods and a 500-pound bomb. Inside, they had mounted twenty tubes to accommodate 120-mm mortar rounds fitted with bomb fuzes. In this configuration, the AN-2 had range of 750 nautical miles at a speed of one hundred knots. The North Vietnamese first used these modified Colts in 1966 in an unsuccessful effort to bomb 34-Alpha PT boats in the Gulf of Tonkin.

11. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF, 260837Z Dec 67, subj: Site 85, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 030332Z Jan 68, subj: Security of TACAN Sites in Laos.

12. 7th AF OpOrd 439-68, Sup II to Annex B, App III, Dec 27, 1967.

13. T. D. Allman, "12 Americans Died in Loss of Secret Laotian Outpost," *The Washington Post*, Mar 16, 1970, p A-18.

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serious damage, and both aircraft were shot down by the defenders. One plane crashed and burned near the site; the other came down about twelve miles away and was recovered fairly intact. The two orbiting AN-2s flew back to North Vietnam without taking part in the action. A more colorful account was given [redacted]. He claimed that when the Colts were first spotted, an Air America helicopter loaded with security forces took off to engage them. Being faster than the AN-2, the copter pulled alongside while security men poured machinegun fire into the ancient biplanes. Even so, evidence from the crash sites showed that both planes had been downed by ground fire.¹⁴

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Following the air assault, five PL/NVA battalions with three artillery pieces departed Samneua for Phou Phathi. One battalion swung north and a second circled to the south. The other three took Phou Den Din and brought their artillery to bear on the defenders at Lima Site 85. The Air Force responded to these moves by quickening the tempo of air strikes, 165 being flown during January. Typically, the two A-1s usually scheduled for armed reconnaissance were sent to Phou Phathi in the morning. After expending their ordnance, they remained in the area to control any divers that might turn up. In the afternoon this procedure was repeated. At night a single A-26 patrolled the area. As usual, the communists made excellent use of weather, camouflage, and dispersion to minimize the effect of these strikes. The targeting was not as precise as had been hoped; and as at Nam Bac, ground forces failed to follow up any of the air strikes.¹⁵

Air operations peaked on January 30 when forty-five planes hit enemy positions around Lima Site 85. The next day, however, the communists launched their Tet offensive and all sorties were diverted to South Vietnam. Nevertheless, Seventh Air Force kept a watchful eye on the situation in northern Laos. On February 7, Seventh queried the embassy: "Do you have targets in area of Site 85 on which you desire strikes? 7AF will attempt to provide whatever assistance deemed necessary to insure safety of LS-85."¹⁶ The embassy responded by nominating nine area targets but added that "we have no special targets requiring special assistance."¹⁷ By the middle of the month, pressure had eased a bit in South Vietnam and Seventh Air Force was able to hit all nine of the recommended targets.

On February 21, four fresh North Vietnamese Army battalions arrived at Phou Den Din and took up attack positions. A Meo ambush killed several of the communists including an NVA officer who was carrying detailed plans for the upcoming attack. Under this plan, three North Vietnamese battalions and one Pathet Lao battalion were the main striking force. Final battlefield reconnaissance was to be conducted on February 22, and D-day was set for the twenty-third. To draw the attention of the defenders, one battalion was to attack from the northeast while three battalions stormed the main approach to the mountain. The document further pinpointed the Meo defensive positions and the original location of the tacan but disclosed no awareness of the TSQ site or of the relocated tacan.¹⁸

Armed with this information, the defenders and Seventh Air Force prepared a warm welcome. During the final week of February, the Air Force threw in an unprecedented 342 sorties (46 percent under Commando Club) that broke up the bulk of the attacks before they could form. The communists nonetheless started their main assault on schedule, and positions within the seven-mile perimeter changed hands several times. The weight of air power and the Meo's determined defense was too much; however, and by the end of the month, the North Vietnamese Army pulled back to lick its wounds and to plan the next move.¹⁹

14. 7th AF Weekly Air Intelligence Summary, Jan 14, 1968.

15. Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, XLII, 2-6.

16. Msg, 7th AF to AIRA Vientiane, 071943Z Feb 68, subj: Air Support for LS-85.

17. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF, 080409Z Feb 68, subj: Air Support for LS-85.

18. DOV 13468, Feb 27, 1968.

19. Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, XLIII, 2-4.

SECRET

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Despite this initial rebuff, the enemy was significantly superior in numbers and the CIA felt the site could not be held beyond March 10. The embassy therefore began to firm up an evacuation plan. It called for sufficient helicopters (three Air Force and two Air America) to lift out 155 personnel, with first priority given to evacuation of the TSQ/tacan personnel and destruction of the equipment. The ambassador would say when to evacuate and would notify Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force to launch the helicopters. Weather permitting, Seventh Air Force would also supply A-1 escort. When ordered to evacuate, the USAF personnel were to destroy their equipment and proceed to the helipad for pickup. If this was impossible, pickup would be made from the TSQ site itself.²⁰ About this same time, five more men were sent in to enable twenty-four-hour operation, and the technicians began to carry small arms to the site, although this was formally forbidden. In addition, they rigged several slings from the edge of the cliff to a narrow ledge just below. From there they could work their way around to the helipad.²¹

The weather turned bad on March 2 and the communists resumed their attack. This time, they were better dispersed and used their artillery more effectively to reduce the Meo strongpoints one after the other. Though the weather severely restricted visual strikes, air activity remained high. During March 1-10, crews flew 314 sorties in support of Lima Site 85 (76 percent under TSQ control). Unfortunately, the results of these strikes were minimal due to the foe's dispersion and the inability of the defenders (who were pinned down by artillery) to fix the enemy's location.²²

As the PL/NVA closed in, alarm was felt as far away as Honolulu. On March 5, General Ryan cabled Seventh Air Force/ Thirteenth Air Force:

Receiving daily reports concerning growing threat to Site 85. Difficult to evaluate situation from here. . . . You are authorized to direct evacuation of the site and destruction of the equipment when, in your judgment, such action is necessary. Your Oplan 439-68 is approved for this purpose.²³

General Momyer, however, wished to keep the site operational as long as possible to facilitate the bombing of North Vietnam. Ambassador Sullivan concurred—for the moment at least.

By the tenth, enemy patrols had reached the base of the mountain and the decision could not be put off much longer. At six in the evening, the communists opened a heavy artillery barrage that temporarily drove the Air Force technicians into their bunker. When the barrage lifted two hours later, the defenders braced for an attack while the radar operators returned to their posts. The assault did not come, but intermittent shelling persisted through the night. Nevertheless, the embassy decided on a partial evacuation at first light on March 11. Meanwhile, three A-26s and five F-4s under TSQ control flew night support for the defenders, the last aircraft departing shortly after three in the morning. Finally at a quarter past five, the ambassador ordered complete evacuation of the site with pickup set for two hours later. The embassy was unaware the site had already fallen.²⁴

Under cover of the artillery barrage, twenty procommunist Meo (possibly from the same group that took the site in 1959) had worked their way through the defenses and approached the summit undetected. Shortly after the last plane departed, these raiders opened fire on the TSQ site. As the Americans poured out of their vans, they were met by a hail of fire that killed three, including the TSQ commander. Their path to the helipad blocked by the attackers, the remaining

20. Memo, CAS to DCS/Ops, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Emergency Evacuation Plan for Site 85, Feb 24, 1968; 7th AF/13th AF Oplan 439-68, Feb 26, 1968.

21. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Richard V. Secord, Dec 18, 1974.

22. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLIV, 2-3.

23. Msg, CINCPACAF (Gen Ryan) to 7th AF/13th AF (Maj Gen Lindley), 052114Z Mar 68.

24. Msg, JANAF Attaches Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, Joint Operational Summary 42-68, Mar 11, 1968.

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personnel had no choice but to go over the cliff. Unfortunately they were spotted by the foe who tried to follow. Now it was the Americans' turn to open fire, killing five or six of the enemy. The communists quickly pulled back from the line of fire and lobbed grenades down onto the ledge. These killed eight more Americans (three bodies were blown completely off the ledge and never recovered); of the six wounded, one died on the way to Udom.²⁵

Hearing this commotion, the helipad defenders hurried up the trail to investigate. As they came upon the communists, a sharp firefight ensued and all of the attackers were killed. At dawn, the helicopters whirled in to evacuate the survivors. The Meo, having no further reason to defend the site, faded away to regroup at various lima sites farther west.

The tacan and TSQ were knocked off the air during the attack, but because the technician did not have time to detonate the demolition charges, neither facility was destroyed. The communists, however, did not immediately occupy the site so they did not realize what a prize had fallen into their hands. Indeed, Lima Site 85 was but one step in the enemy's drive to control all of Samneua. In the weeks that followed they swept on, as General Vang Pao had feared, overrunning site after site. By mid-April five more sites were in communist hands, and only Lima Site 36 stood between the North Vietnamese and the Plain of Jars.²⁶

The immediate tasks for the Americans were to inform the prime minister and to destroy the equipment on Lima Site 85. The first of these fell to Ambassador Sullivan who personally broke the bad news to Souvanna Phouma. When told the equipment had not been destroyed, the prime minister visibly winced but made no reply. Since the communists had made no announcement, it was agreed to sit tight and await developments.²⁷ As it turned out, there was never a need for a public statement. The communists mentioned that American "advisors" had been killed, but were silent on the radar site until the story appeared in the American press nearly two years later. By then, the war had escalated to the point that the whole issue had become moot.

The second task, destroying the TSQ and tacan, was left to the Air Force. Between March 12 and 18, ninety-five jet sorties were flown against the site, one using a Bullpup guided missile. The strikes wiped out almost everything on the mountain except the abandoned facilities. Finally, on March 19, two A-1s from the 56th Air Commando Wing completely leveled the site in a single pass.²⁸

Even before the loss of Phou Phathi, Seventh Air Force and the embassy had been seeking several alternate sites for the TSQ, including Lima Site 36. None afforded the desired coverage, and in the wake of the communist offensive none could be considered secure. Then on March 31, President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th parallel, thereby negating the need for such a site. General Momyer and Ambassador Sullivan agreed to reexamine the site problem should bombing resume.²⁹

The consequences of the battle were even more severe for the Meo. According to the embassy:

The fall of Phou Phathi . . . opens a new time of troubles for Vang Pao and the Meos of Military Region II. The size of the attacking forces and their heavy supporting weapons are greater than anything friendly troops can muster in the immediate vicinity. Therefore, there is no alternative but to evacuate friendly troop units and their dependents in order to maintain them intact to counterattack activities in the rainy season.³⁰

25. Debriefing rpt, [redacted] at Site 85, n.d. [ca Mar 12, 1968].
26. *Ibid.*
27. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130750Z Mar 68.
28. Hist, 56th ACW, Jan-Jun 68, p 37.
29. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 7592, 031030Z Jul 68.
30. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 5136, 140841Z Mar 68.

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Before this, the communists were content to drive off the Meo soldiers, take over the area for a while, then withdraw to their own bases. The size of the 1968 offensive, however, made it clear the North Vietnamese Army meant to control the area. Because the Meo would not fight without their families, the embassy had no choice but to evacuate.

Many of the Meo were able to walk out with a few meager possessions. Thousands more were flown out by a fleet of Air America helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. This vast uprooting of humanity placed a tremendous strain on the United States Agency for International Development. By June, over 150,000 refugees choked the relief centers set up around the Plain of Jars. Eventually most of these families were resettled around Long Tieng. This exodus of Meo families denied the enemy a source of recruits and laborers, but it also dried up the Meo "ocean" in the northeast in which the progovernment guerrillas could "swim." Henceforth, they would have to operate on far more conventional lines, an ill-suited role that rendered them more independent than ever on USAF support.

The fall of Lima Site 85 further engendered rather bitter recriminations between the embassy/CIA and Seventh Air Force. General Momyer wrote Sullivan on March 14 regarding "the need for a postmortem analysis." Precisely, the general wanted to know "how a relatively small force was able to take such an allegedly well-defended installation." Clearly implied was criticism of the embassy's intelligence, planning, and targeting.³¹

The ambassador naturally resented these charges. He averred it had never been the intent to hold the site against a major attack. He said total PL/NVA forces in the area outnumbered the defenders and that embassy estimates of enemy capabilities and intentions proved correct. When it came to showing what the embassy had done in response to these indications, however, the ambassador's arguments fell somewhat flat. Ground defense was the Meo's responsibility, he noted, ignoring the fact that the Meo were under embassy/CIA control. Sullivan tried to turn the tables by putting the blame on the Air Force which, he contended, had not furnished adequate and timely air support.³²

Seventh Air Force reminded Sullivan that over a thousand sorties had been flown in defense of the site. Every target nominated by the embassy had been hit, though not necessarily at the time or in the strength desired. Moreover, these targets often proved to be of marginal value, and the embassy had neglected to bring USAF planners into its confidence as the battle unfolded.³³ This controversy smoldered through the spring of 1968 without any real resolution.

Meantime, the Lima Site 85 survivors voiced their own complaint. They claimed that neither the embassy nor the Air Force had properly looked after their safety. These allegations reached all the way back to Washington and prompted a USAF investigation of the details surrounding the loss of Site 85. The investigators found no negligence on the part of the embassy or Seventh Air Force. They did conclude, however, that the entire episode clearly demonstrated that both had a long way to go in forging an effective air/ground team in Laos. As General Momyer observed during a farewell visit to the ambassador, "We ought to be able to do better."³⁴

On the positive side, the Site 85 controversy focused high-level attention on the need for air support in northern Laos. The Joint Chiefs of Staff directed Admiral Sharp on May 15 to get with Sullivan and "determine the requirements for U.S. Air Force support of RLG counterinsurgency operations." In reply, CINCPAC dusted off the earlier USAF proposal to add two A-1 squadrons of twenty-five aircraft each, increase the A-26s from twelve to sixteen and

31. Msg, 7th AF (Gen Momyer) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), 141245Z Mar 68.

32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 161100Z Mar 68.

33. Msg, 7th AF to AmEmb Vientiane, 141246Z Mar 68; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLIV, 2-4.

34. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 7592, 031020Z Jul 68; see note 20; intvw, author with Lt Col Edward Vallenty, Sep 15, 1967; testimony, Maj Stanley J. Sliz, in JCS Laos File 52-70.

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the C-123s from six to ten, and to eliminate the T-28s. The JCS endorsed this proposal on June 17 and on August 21 Secretary McNamara approved these forces for inclusion in the fiscal year 1969 deployment package.³⁵ At last Sullivan was getting the aircraft, if not the control he desired.

● The twin disasters of Nam Bac and Phou Phathi fostered a degree of "togetherness" among the Laotian generals. As Ambassador Sullivan saw it:

There was no panic . . . , more an air of worry, perhaps even fatalism. . . . In this extreme crisis the generals have agreed to bury the hatchet and there is an apparent willingness to work together—at least for right now.³⁶

During the week of March 11-16, 1968, the generals met several times with Souvanna. Between the sessions, the prime minister consulted frequently with the ambassador. At the final meeting, attended by Sullivan and key members of his staff, the Laotians consented to implement their long awaited reorganization. They also asked that the army be reequipped and assented to an expanded bombing campaign in Samneua Province.³⁷

● Special details of the bombing campaign were left to be worked out between the embassy and Seventh Air Force. For their part, the Laotians opened up a number of targets and areas previously off limits. The rules of engagement were changed accordingly, and both the army and Meo said they would improve their targeting. Reequipping the FAR was turned over to the deputy chief, and to assist him the FAR general staff standardized all battalions at 666 men.³⁸

● More important was the internal army reorganization, directed by Souvanna Phouma on May 4. The principal effect of this action was the emergence of the young American-trained colonels and the decline of the "troika" that had run the FAR since the overthrow of Phoumi Nosavan. The general staff was taken out from under Ouane Rathikone and integrated into the defense ministry, giving Souvanna more control over military operations. Ouane kept his position as commander in chief, but with no real influence. The deputy commander in chief positions were abolished as were the tactical headquarters for north and south Laos. This drew the military region commanders directly under FAR headquarters in Vientiane. Several older generals were shifted to positions of prestige, but little real power, while direct control of the troops passed to younger men such as Col. (Thao) Ly Liddhuluja and the "fighting generals," Vang Pao and Phasouk Somly.³⁹

● In spite of its efforts at Nam Bac, the first part of 1968 had not been auspicious for the RLAF. Besides military defeats, the series of internal problems buffeting the air force caused the sortie rate to dip to its lowest point since the Thao Ma coup. On January 1, the air force had undergone another reorganization, further decentralizing control. Major changes included abolishing the Tactical Air Command and Air Transport Command and establishing composite squadrons at each of the four main airfields (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse). Under this setup, the squadron commander reported to the base commander, who in turn reported to the military region commander rather than to the RLAF.⁴⁰ In consequence, each military region (except Vang Pao's Military Region II) had its own private air force, command was diffused, and promotion came from political patronage instead of military competence. The

35. ● Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 152301Z May 68, subj: Tactical Air Support in Laos, CINCPAC to JCS, 020247Z Apr 68, subj: Air Support in Laos; hist, CINCPAC, 1968, p 199.

36. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 161100Z Mar 68.

37. ● Ltr, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: The Week of the Generals in Vientiane, Mar 24, 1968.

38. ● *Ibid.*

39. ● *Journal of Military Assistance*, Jun 68, p 105.

40. ● DDIIR 1 856 0001 68, Jan 5, 1968, p 2.

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army wanted to make sure no officer, not even the docile General Sourith, would be able to exercise control over the entire force. In the words of one officer: "After Ma left, we tried to divide the T-28s so they would not be one group. One group was too powerful."⁴¹

One outcome of the reorganization was that each of the squadrons took on individual characteristics. In Military Region I, for example, the role of the squadron was primarily defensive, assisting the army to hold established positions. At Vientiane the Laotian squadron, [redacted] gave offensive and defensive support to Vang Pao's guerrillas. The squadron at Savannakhet worked with both guerrilla and regular army units. At Pakse the squadron's operation was much the same as in Military Region I—defensive support for ground troops in a static position.⁴²

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The reorganization presented few problems to the young pilots. On the other hand, many senior officers had their families and private interests in one location and they were not about to move without a struggle. One RLAF commander said the main reason these officers refused to move was that "they were involved in corruption at their present locations."⁴³ Inasmuch as assignments hinged largely on political patronage, there was little Sourith could do. Commenting on this problem, Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché, added:

Some of the conversation with General Sourith is quoted directly, even though it appears rather elementary, to show how little authority, control and power he really exerts over RLAF personnel. Note that he uses the term "ask" instead of "tell" or "order."⁴⁴

Part of the problem was the general reluctance of Laotians, at all levels and in all elements of society, to give direct orders. An air operations center commander explained: "One thing the Laotians won't do is to tell anyone to do something. They consider it bad manners."⁴⁵ Ultimately, most of these senior officers did assume their new posts, but several were to make trouble for Sourith and the Americans.

The reorganization had its positive aspects. If a base commander turned out to be a competent officer, the new arrangement yielded greater efficiency; if not, the effects could be disastrous. For example, at Luang Prabang the base commander was Maj. (Prince) Mangkhala Souvanna Phouma, eldest son of the prime minister. Mangkhala worked closely with Major Leuschner, the AOC commander, enabling the squadron to perform outstandingly during the battle for Nam Bac. In contrast, the base commanders at Vientiane and Savannakhet were deeply involved in smuggling, a situation that was to have international repercussions.

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Another potentially disruptive event occurred on January 22, 1968, when the first two Meo completed pilot training at Udom. For some time, Vang Pao had been dissatisfied with RLAF support. For one thing, the pilots were not inclined to assist the Meo, whom they looked upon as mere savages. Nor were the other military region commanders willing to share their resources with a possible rival. [redacted] pilots continued to fly but their performance declined in direct proportion to the stiffening of enemy air defenses.

ALL
CIA

Shortly after the Thao Ma coup of October 1966 Vang Pao started pushing for his own squadron—after all, every other military region commander had one. Colonel Pettigrew opposed the idea as did the RLAF, but with strong CIA backing Vang Pao prevailed. The first three pilot candidates received six months of English language training, then 150 hours of instruction

41. Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Lt Col Khouang, RLAF, Wg Comdr, Pakse, Jun 12, 1970.

42. DDIIR 1 856 0001 68, Jan 5, 1968, p 2.

43. DDIIR 1 856 0005 68, Jan 22, 1968, p 2.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Norman D. Munsey and 1st Lt Stephen H. Reich, AOC Luang Prabang, Jul 17, 1970.

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in a [redacted] Piper PA-18. When the three arrived at Water Pump, they were far ahead of the others. Still, only two completed the T-28 transition course and one of these crashed soon after graduation. The sole survivor, Ly Lee (one of Vang Pao's many sons-in-law), was given a provisional commission in the RLAF to become permanent in one year. He was assigned to Luang Prabang but shortly secured a transfer to the newly formed squadron at Vientiane where he was subsequently joined by six more Meo. Before long, Ly Lee was the de facto commander of a Meo squadron that staged out of Long Tieng, taking orders straight from Vang Pao.⁴⁶

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● The debut of the Meo created a good deal of dismay within the air force. While conceding the Meo's flying skill, they still looked down on them as social inferiors. "Personally, I like to fly with them," one pilot said, "but you must understand that they are different from us."⁴⁷ A second problem was that the Meo were never truly under RLAF control. They worked for and were paid by General Vang Pao.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, they were a vital asset in the coming campaigns.

● Military defeats and internal upheaval in the early months of 1968 eroded RLAF morale. Having lost six aircraft in the futile action to save Nam Bac, many of the pilots wondered if it was worth it. Why push themselves and their aircraft? All around them inefficiency and corruption flourished, while no one in authority seemed to suffer. Colonel Pettigrew pointed out:

These aircrews are now believed to be among those supporting top military leaders engaged in illegal drug traffic. They are not subject to being exposed to enemy fire and are very likely becoming richer for their effort.⁴⁹

● As if to punctuate Pettigrew's words, an RLAF C-47 took off from Savannakhet on March 21 ostensibly bound for Vientiane. Aboard were the base commanders from Vientiane and Savannakhet along with Captain Chathasone, the U.S. trained T-28 commander at Savannakhet. Inside was a cargo of gold and opium, its destination—Saigon.⁵⁰

● Just before takeoff, General Sourith asked Col. Eugene P. Sonnenberg, the assistant air attaché, to give the pilot a letter addressed to the Laotian attaché in Saigon. Suspecting something was afoot, Sonnenberg had the letter steamed open. Inside was a full description of the cargo and instructions for its disposition. Sonnenberg revealed the letter, delivered it to the pilot, and notified American authorities in Vientiane and Saigon.⁵¹

● When the plane touched down in Saigon, it was met by South Vietnamese officials who impounded the aircraft, cargo, and crew. Diplomatic negotiations secured the release of the plane and crew, but the matter acutely embarrassed the Laotian government.⁵²

● The two base commanders were reduced in rank but neither was relieved of his command. Captain Chathasone was grounded but resumed flying in time to distinguish himself during the Houei Mun campaign. He later confided to Colonel Pettigrew that the incident was his first mistake and he did not intend to repeat it. In Pettigrew's words, "When he stated that this was his first big error, I am not certain what he really meant—getting involved or getting caught!"⁵³

● As if these troubles were not enough, even the elements seemed to conspire against the RLAF. On March 24 a freak tornado struck Vientiane (a symbol of Buddha's displeasure, in the eyes of the local bonzes), destroying three T-28s. Fortunately, replacement aircraft were already

46. DDIIR 1 856 0020 68, Feb 23, 1968; intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Eugene P. Sonnenberg, Asst AIRA Vientiane, May 28, 1970.

47. Concy intvw, Jun 15-16, 1970.

48. DDIIR 1 856 0020 68, Feb 23, 1968.

49. DDIIR 1 856 0032 68, Mar 20, 1968.

50. DDIIR 1 856 0040 68, Apr 5, 1968.

51. Sonnenberg intvw, May 28, 1970.

52. DDIIR 1 856 0040 68, Apr 5, 1968.

53. DDIIR 1 856 0070 68, Jun 6, 1968.

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on the way. As the result of Nam Bac, Ambassador Sullivan had asked on February 27 for the immediate delivery of twelve T-28s. CINCPAC and Air Force headquarters approved the request, the first four planes arriving at Udom on March 11 and the remaining eight on April 10. An amazingly swift reaction.⁵⁴

The first part of 1968 also saw the Raven forward air controller program put on a solid footing. In March, the 504th Tactical Air Support Group was tasked to furnish twelve pilots on a regular basis for duty as Ravens. Pilots picked for the program were supposed to be volunteers, show sixty days experience as a FAC in South Vietnam, and have at least six months left on their tours in Southeast Asia.⁵⁵ In practice, the sole requirement was to be a volunteer and be willing to spend six months in Laos.⁵⁶

The selected pilots were assigned to the Water Pump detachment, where they received a cursory briefing before departing for Vientiane. As a rule, about half the Ravens were stationed at Long Tieng with one or two in each of the other military regions. Even so, the Ravens were often shifted from one base to another depending on where the heaviest fighting was.⁵⁷

In Laos, the Ravens came under the nominal control of the air attaché and used the same cover story as other American military personnel.⁵⁸ The control from Vientiane turned out to be tenuous. The Ravens lived in the field with the troops they assisted and soon came to identify with them. In particular, the Ravens at Long Tieng identified with General Vang Pao. It was not uncommon for the Meo general to invite one or two of the Ravens to his house for dinner each night. There, they talked over the day's events and planned the next day's activities. The close rapport between FAC and ground commander greatly enhanced the quality of close air support. At the same time, it led to frequent charges that the Long Tieng Ravens worked for Vang Pao and not the Air Force.⁵⁹

Flying three or four missions a day in the same area, the Ravens quickly achieved a reputation as the best FACs in Laos. But their disregard for paperwork, military protocol, and standardized procedures was notorious. General Brown, Seventh Air Force commander, said, "The Ravens are our best FACs, but command and control is loose."⁶⁰ There were numerous attempts to "regularize" the Ravens over the years, but they were successfully resisted by a succession of air attachés, who felt the fluid situation in Laos dictated the highest in individual initiative and the least centralized control.⁶¹

Having resolved the personnel problem, the question of finding a suitable aircraft remained. The Ravens were flying a variety of planes borrowed from the RLAF, owned by the air attaché or in some cases by Air America, or on loan from the 23d Tactical Air Support Squadron at Nakhon Phanom. When Colonel Pettigrew requested permanent manning for the Raven program, he also stated a requirement for ten or eleven aircraft properly configured for FAC operations. He had in mind either the U-10 or U-17, for both were high wing, carried four passengers, and had the power to operate from the short Laotian airstrips.⁶² Neither plane was

54. *Journal of Military Assistance*, Apr 68, p 109.

55. Msg, CINCPACAF to AIRA Vientiane, 202158Z Mar 68, subj: FAC Support; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.

56. Intw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Capt Karl L. Polifka, Jr., Dec 17, 1974, p 6.

57. *Ibid*; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.

58. The cover story changed from time to time but fooled no one. In October 1970, cover stories were dropped completely after the United States government officially acknowledged the presence of American military personnel in Laos.

59. Intw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Capt Karl L. Polifka, Jr., Dec 17, 1974, p 6; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.

60. Transcript, Udom Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 37.

61. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 22.

62. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 220530Z Nov 67, subj: FAC Support.

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readily available through the Military Assistance Program. As a substitute, the Air Force offered the O-1s excess to the USAF units that had converted to the O-2 and OV-10. Pettigrew was not eager to have O-1s because they lacked the requisite power and endurance. In the end he accepted them, since they were available and properly configured.⁶³

Many of these O-1 castoffs were barely flyable. Pettigrew therefore arranged with Air America to recondition and in some instances to rebuild the O-1s. Air America was also awarded a contract to perform periodic maintenance after every hundred hours of flying time. However, the strict limitation on American military personnel in Laos precluded assignment of maintenance men to the forward bases where they could do routine maintenance between trips to the Air America facility at Udom. Hence, the Ravens took care of their own planes with little more than a wrench and a screwdriver. This procedure proved inadequate and the failure to afford routine maintenance was to have serious consequences before the close of 1968.⁶⁴

The defeats in early 1968 imposed new strains on Laos' fragile government. With the regular forces in disarray, the government's survival rested more than ever on the Meo and U.S. Air Force. They had to hold off the North Vietnamese who were even then knocking on the door of Na Khang (Lima Site 36), a major Meo salient.

Situated on a low plateau about three hundred feet above sea level, Na Khang was far more exposed than Lima Site 85. The plateau dropped abruptly on the west; but to the east, a gentle slope allowed easy access. Since August 1965, USAF helicopters had used the site's 2,200-foot dirt strip as a forward staging area for search and rescue operations in North Vietnam and Barrel Roll. The enemy's seizure of the site in February 1966 turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory; and a year later, the communists suffered a bloody repulse due in large measure to timely USAF support. By the final week in April 1968, an estimated eight or nine enemy battalions had arrived in the vicinity with four or five of them poised for a third try. Vang Pao had accordingly reinforced the garrison to fifteen hundred men (about the size of the attacking force), while the Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency firmed up a joint contingency plan for its defense. Unlike Lima Site 85 preparations, the Air Force was brought in on the initial planning stages; and perhaps as a result of the criticism over Site 85, there was close contact throughout the ensuing battle.

One sign of USAF sensitivity was the meticulous record kept of every exchange [redacted] and every sortie flown in support of the site. For its part, [redacted] also seemed to be bending over backward to keep the Air Force informed and to meet every objection or suggestion. Both parties were apparently determined that if the site should fall, no blame could be attached to them.

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From April 24 to May 4, action was limited to preliminary skirmishing as each side felt out the other's strengths and weaknesses. Air Force operations were likewise low, ten sorties a day being flown. Targeting, however, was noticeably improved as both forward air controllers and ground forces actively sought out enemy positions. Even so, the communists were ready to mount a major assault on May 5. An excerpt from the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force tactical air control center log gives a vivid account of the opening of that attack, and is indicative of the type of coordination that characterized the complete battle:

05/0216 [redacted] advises undetermined number of enemy attacking two outposts east of [redacted]. Checked on resources, all Nimrods [A-26] airborne. Passed info to Lt Col Morrow [7AF] to approve sending flare ship. He will wake Gen officer for Nimrod divert.

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05/0235 [redacted] advises one outpost lost. Vang Pao counters with 105mm howitzer fire. Needs support wx 80 0 DZL.

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63. Working Paper, AIRA Vientiane, n.d. [ca Nov 67]; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.
64. Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.

ALL CIA

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05/0237 Bluechip [7AF Command Post] approved divert of Lamplighter 02. [C-123] and Nimrod 40 to L-36.

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05/0340 Nimrod 40 RTB—low fuel. Lamp 02 still flaring.

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05/0400 [redacted] says second outpost fallen. Talked to Morrow. Will try to divert two flights of F-4s to LS-36 [sic]. Also entire BR package will be diverted to L-36.

(b) (3)

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05/0540 B/Chip delay L-36 strike package due to forecast weather. (7007) Got permission for Firefly 11/12 [2 A-1s] to launch ASAP and 13/14 as originally scheduled.

05/0715 Gen Vang Pao requests max air at L-36 this PM. He specifically requests napalm. He has spotted enemy troops who are dug in near L-36 and feels we could do real good. Relayed to Lt Col Park [7AF] recommendation for eight A-1s as divert. He requests target validation and request from Laotian ambassador so he can sell it to Gen Sweat. Could not get AirA. Passed to Gen Lindley [7/13 AF Commander] and Col Boles [7/13 AF DO].

05/1230 Validation received from AirA. Strike package laid on. Following added resources provided, two F-4 TOT 1315, two F-105 TOT 1330.⁶⁵

That afternoon, seventeen A-1s (plus the F-4s and F-105s) struck seven targets furnished by General Vang Pao with "excellent" results. At five in the evening, [redacted] the enemy apparently massing for another attack, and asked for a strike package for the next day like that just provided. Seventh Air Force replied it would schedule thirty-five sorties a day as long as necessary. Since this was the whole Barrel Roll package, Seventh Air Force requested and received confirmation that this requirement took priority over all other strikes in northern Laos.⁶⁶

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The aircraft arrived at first light on May 6 and worked all day. During much of this time, Vang Pao was airborne with a Raven FAC, personally directing strikes and coordinating ground operations. The general later reported he was elated with USAF support and the air strikes were among the finest he had witnessed. Especially notable was a napalm run against one group of enemy soldiers. Following the strike, Vang Pao saw several of the communists rolling on the ground with their clothes on fire. Afterwards, a patrol found the charred remains of seventeen bodies. On May 7, the story was much the same with the PL/NVA unable to make any headway. By that evening, it appeared that the tide had begun to turn. [redacted] passed a "well done" to Seventh Air Force, the 56th Air Commando Wing, and the 602d Fighter Squadron Commando, adding that "the A-1 A/C [aircraft] in particular have demonstrated TACAIR at its best in defense of LS-36 on 6 and 7 May."⁶⁷ There was no letup in air activity. During May 5-13 the Air Force flew 276 sorties, virtually wiping out the attacking force.

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Taking advantage of these air strikes, the Meo on May 10 began pushing out to the north and east. As they advanced, they uncovered more targets that were promptly hit. Instead of waiting hours or days before following up these strikes, the Meo moved in at once before the enemy had a chance to recover. Thus, they swiftly retook all of their outposts and forced the communists back some four to five miles by May 13. Here both sides paused for breath. By agreement [redacted] sorties were cut back to ten A-1s a day and one A-26 at night, this being deemed sufficient to keep the present balance. If conditions worsened, Seventh Air Force stood ready to enlarge the sorties as needed.⁶⁸

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The allies had won the first round but the communists still posed a threat to Lima Site 36. Ambassador Sullivan figured it was but a matter of time before they resumed their attack and proposed using B-52s to smash the enemy's staging areas.⁶⁹ A few days later, Souvanna

ALL CIA

65. Log, TACC 7th AF/13th AF, May 5, 1969.

66. Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 051030Z May 68, subj: Lima Site 36 Sitrep and Air Strike Request, 7th AF to AIRA Vientiane, 051100Z May 68, subj: Air Strike Request.

67. Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Additional LS-36 BDA, May 7, 1968.

68. Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: LS-36, May 13, 1968.

69. In January 1968, during the battle of Lima Site 85, Sullivan had opposed a similar suggestion by General

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broached the subject himself and was assured by the ambassador that Washington was weighing the matter. Actually, the authorities in Washington had already made up their minds. Either they did not share Sullivan's appreciation of the situation or felt introducing B-52s might jeopardize the Paris peace talks. On May 16, they firmly thumbed down the idea and advised the ambassador he would have to make do with the tactical air support at hand. However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff did direct Admiral Sharp to provide all other tactical air sorties Sullivan needed.⁷⁰

Indeed, the additional sorties would soon be demanded. Although four enemy battalions had been badly mauled in the first attack on Lima Site 36, at least four more in reserve had been committed to the battle. The CIA thought the attack would begin on May 20, and plans made accordingly, with a list compiled of twenty-four first-priority and twenty-three second-priority targets. Sixty sorties a day were scheduled on these targets for three days starting on May 20, drawing down Seventh Air Force operations in other areas. Seventh insisted the sorties be used solely against the designated targets or more lucrative ones nearby.⁷¹ In the face of this blitz, the foe mustered only a weak thrust on the twentieth. This assault rapidly ran down, and by the twenty-fourth the attackers had been forced back to their starting positions. On May 27, the communists abandoned the siege and a jubilant ambassador cabled Seventh Air Force, "Wish to express my deep appreciation to you and your organization for your excellent response . . . in the defense of Site 36."⁷² As the foe withdrew, Vang Pao began a cautious advance back towards Lima Site 85, but his own troops were too tired to do more than harass the retreating enemy.

Meanwhile, the raging Tet offensive on the other side of the border in South Vietnam was being felt in southern Laos. For years, ground operations in southern Laos had been limited. The North Vietnamese seemed content to secure their hold on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the FAR was not inclined to interfere. Elsewhere the Pathet Lao and FAR sparred inconclusively, neither side seriously challenging the other; but in early 1968, the war heated up. This may have been due in part to North Vietnamese efforts to expand the trail network farther to the west to reduce the effect of U.S. bombing. However, the intense and widespread enemy actions suggest it was also part of the general Tet offensive.

Communist operations in the south had gotten under way on December 11, 1967. A mixed Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese force, variously estimated as between fifty men and two battalions, attacked the village of Lao Ngam. The defenders, consisting of two companies and four howitzers, withdrew about a half mile while the enemy occupied the northern end of the airfield for around twenty-four hours before withdrawing.⁷³

On December 12, two North Vietnamese battalions and several Pathet Lao companies overran a government position only ten miles north of Saravane. At about the same time, another enemy force virtually surrounded Attopeu but made no move to take the town.⁷⁴

Then, during the early morning hours of Christmas Day, two Pathet Lao battalions (the 14th and 18th) swept over the tacan site at Muong Phalane. They achieved complete surprise, chasing the partially clad FAR commander into the woods. Two USAF technicians along with one Philippine and three Thai employees of Air America were killed and the tacan was

Westmoreland as "unwarranted escalation." The ambassador's turnabout may have mirrored the profound effect of the PL/NVA offensive on the war.

70. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130640Z May 68, subj: Site 36—Arclight, 161106Z May 68, subj: Arclight, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 161223Z May 68, subj: Additional Air Support for Site 36, JCS to CINCPAC, 162303Z May 68, subj: Air Support Site 36.

71. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF, 180505Z May 68, subj: Special Strike Package, Site 36, 7th AF to AIRA Vientiane, subj: Special Strike Package, Site 36, May 19, 1968.

72. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to 7th AF (Gen Momyer), 6770, 271150Z May 68.

73. Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Dec 14, 1967. That the PL/NVA did not try to occupy the entire site suggests the lower estimate of the number of attackers is probably closer to the mark.

74. Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Dec 14, 1967.

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demolished. The charred remains of one of the Americans was later found inside the tacan facility. The Air America radio station was also damaged and an Agency for International Development building was burned to the ground. Later that morning, an Air America helicopter seeking to reconnoiter the area was shot down but its crew was recovered. On December 29, a hastily assembled force led personally by Brig. Gen. Kot Venevongsos, Military Region III commander, reoccupied the site with no resistance.

④ The tacan's loss dealt a serious blow to USAF operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, since the set was expected to play a key role in the recently established Muscle Shoals program.⁷⁵ A team from the 1st Mobile Communications Group was hurriedly flown to the site to see if the tacan could be reestablished. They found, however, that the tacan and most of its supporting equipment had been damaged beyond repair. Inasmuch as Muong Phalane was no longer secure, a new location had to be chosen for the replacement set. After reviewing several locations, it was decided to put the new site at Mukdahan, Thailand, right across the river from Savannakhet. By January 10, 1968, this new set was in place and operating.⁷⁶

④ A month later, the North Vietnamese eliminated the last vestige of RLG presence along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a single battalion that had been holed up in the nearby village of Ban Houei Sane since the fall of Tchepone in the early 1960s. They stayed in relative peace, periodically resupplied by Air America helicopters, observing enemy actions but making no move to interfere. Finally the North Vietnamese decided to remove even this minor annoyance. On January 23, 1968, three battalions supported by seven tanks hit the outpost. The North Vietnamese were en route to Khe Sanh, and Ban Houei Sane just happened to be in the way.

④ When helicopter evacuation failed, the Laotians beat a hasty retreat across the border into South Vietnam. The NVA pursued and more fighting flared around the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei, South Vietnam. Eventually, 113 men were lifted by helicopter to Da Nang and returned afterward to Savannakhet. The rest of the defenders split up and tried to make their way back on foot, but a mere handful ultimately reached friendly territory in February and March.⁷⁷

④ To counter this burgeoning enemy activity, the Air Force in February began an air campaign against PL/NVA staging areas near Mahaxay. Although nominally a part of the interdiction campaign, it appears this particular operation was pointed more toward boosting FAR morale that had been badly shaken by the communist offensive.⁷⁸ The campaign lifted morale but FAR and CIA reports revealed it did little real damage to the enemy.

④ Indeed, the communists in late February renewed their attacks on Saravane, Lao Ngam, Attopeu, and Muong Phalane. Lao Ngam held but Muong Phalane fell. The Saravane defenders were driven into the town and it was doubtful they could withstand a sizable assault. Reinforcements were flown into Attopeu but the town remained surrounded and subject to capture almost at will.

④ In Vientiane, the prime minister voiced fears that the communists were making a long-expected bid to control all of southern Laos. Recognizing his military impotence, Souvanna made a desperate plea to the International Control Commission. The demarche was led by the RLG deputy foreign minister who presented a North Vietnamese defector as proof of the communist aggression. Over the objections of the Poles, the ICC consented to send a team to Saravane, but the Indian chairman advised Souvanna that the Poles were bearing down on the Indian government to forestall any permanent ICC pressure in southern Laos. The chairman said he favored an enlarged role for the ICC but under the circumstances he hoped Souvanna would "understand" his

75. ④ An air-supported antivehicular and antipersonnel system using acoustic and seismic sensors. Later renamed Igloo White.

76. ④ Hist, 1st Mbl Comm Gp, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1968, pp 42-44.

77. ④ Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, pp 31-33.

78. ④ Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 200546Z Jan 68.

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position and not push too hard. Souvanna responded by issuing a public warning that, if the communists captured a major city (Saravane or Attapeu), he would have to ask for outside intervention. At about the same time, the Thai government warned that any communist advance to the Mekong River would draw regular Thai forces into the war.⁷⁹

Whether these diplomatic moves did any good is difficult to determine, but in any case, the communists did not press their attacks. They did mount a minor probe against Thakhek on March 11, doing scarcely more than panicking the civilian population. The FAR commander who ordered an indiscriminate artillery bombardment damaged the civilians more than the enemy. He apparently wanted the communists to know he had artillery on hand.⁸⁰

By early May, the enemy had eased up enough to allow a small FAR offensive at Houei Mun northwest of Saravane. The operation's outcome was modest and probably of less importance than the method used. Past failures to take the area were due chiefly to the same absence of planning and coordination that distinguished the Nam Bac debacle. This time the operation was turned over to Ly Liddhiluja, commander of GM 21 and one of the young American-trained colonels. Ly's selection was most fortunate because he possessed the ability and charisma to get the most from his men and resources.

On May 18, Ly called a meeting at his headquarters to plan the operation. Attending were his own staff, the air attaché, the Army attaché, and, for the first time, the T-28 commander, Captain Chathasone, who had just recently been restored to flying status. During this meeting every aspect of the forthcoming operation was worked out in detail, including logistics, communications, and a tactical air support plan. In previous operations, this attention to detail had been sorely missing. Each unit received a code name and air/ground radios. To identify friendly units, alternating colored flares were to be used on different days, backed up by a colored panel system. Colonel Ly personally briefed the participating units and the T-28s pilots on their roles, engendering a team spirit and sense of commitment that were sustained through the offensive.

The general scheme of maneuver was to have the ground forces locate, fix, and identify enemy forces to be destroyed by air strikes. The ground troops would then rush in at once before the enemy had a chance to recover. A significant departure from the prior FAR "blockhouse" approach to war, the Meo had successfully employed this tactic at Lima Site 36 earlier in May. It was, in fact, the standard tactic of the PL/NVA, but they used artillery in lieu of aircraft to soften up strongpoints.

During the operation (May 19-28), Ly set up his command post in the Savannakhet air operations center where he was in constant touch with his American advisors and could keep continuously abreast of the air/ground battle. He personally briefed and debriefed every RLAFF mission and visited each of his units by helicopter daily, giving praise or criticism as deserved. This attention and concern by the senior commander marked one more departure from former FAR procedures. The individual soldiers responded with more aggressiveness than Laotian troops usually displayed.

The RLAFF flew four missions a day, with planes taking off at eight and ten in the morning and one and three in the afternoon. These missions afforded air cover for the advancing troops until enemy targets were identified. Then the T-28s would swoop in to deliver their ordnance ahead of the friendly units. This was one of the few times the RLAFF performed a true close air support role, adding to the motivation of the ground units and imparting a sense of worthwhile participation to the pilots. Besides their daylight resupply duties, the Laotian C-47s acted as fleaships at night. In all the RLAFF flew eighty-three sorties during the operation, with results

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80. Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, pp 31-33; hist sum, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, Jun 66-Apr 68, pp 42-43.

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described as "outstanding" by all participants. The Air Force flew an additional sixteen sorties against targets in the foe's rear areas.

Enemy resistance throughout the operation was slight, the friendly forces losing only seven men killed. Communist losses were also light although there was ample evidence of hasty withdrawals. The major credit for these was given to the excellent T-28 coverage, for the communists chose to withdraw rather than stand and fight against the coordinated air/ground attack. The Laotians captured a number of arms caches and documents dealing with Pathet Lao units, leading to the arrest of several communist sympathizers. In lieu of punishing the sympathizers, Captain Chathasone ordered them "briefed on proper conduct" and released.

On May 29, the government forces entered Houei Mun and were welcomed as liberating heroes. The air attaché described the scene:

During the victory celebration, they were waited on hand and foot by beautiful Laotian maidens who even held their glasses to their lips while they drank. Colonel Ly stated that the enemy ran from airstrikes and that the Pathet Lao had told local villagers that Americans were flying strike aircraft. Colonel Ly told villagers to look at Chathasone—a Laotian T-28 pilot—it was Laotian pilots that made the enemy run, not Americans.⁸¹

For his part in the operation, Ly was promoted to chief of staff of Military Region III; but Captain Chathasone was not promoted, due to his recent involvement in the opium smuggling incident.

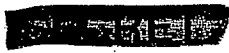
The success at Houei Mun was a welcome relief to the earlier disasters of 1968. Its wider import, however, lay in the demonstration of how an effective mix of planning, targeting, coordination, and charismatic leadership could produce a successful air and ground operation. Unfortunately, this one example was lost in the sea of change that was engulfing the war in northern Laos.

By the summer of 1968, the four-year pattern of war in northern Laos was disrupted—permanently, as events were to prove. Since 1964, the conflict had featured a seasonal ebb and flow, marked by minor skirmishes and a minimum of direct USAF involvement. United States participation in this "quiet war" was normally confined to aid, clandestine activities, and indirect air support through the Royal Laotian Air Force. American policy sought no military victory but to prevent defeat until a solution could be reached in South Vietnam.

Among the many factors changing the complexion of the war in 1968 was the large infusion of North Vietnamese troops. By July, thirty thousand NVA soldiers were in the country, compared to twenty thousand Pathet Lao, a reversal of the figures of two years earlier. Formerly, regular North Vietnamese units had entered Laos for specific operations and had gone home. However, those that arrived in 1968 stayed. Fueled by this influx, the communist offensive erased many of the government's gains. The salients at Nam Bac and Phou Phathi were wiped out, major defeats were inflicted on the FAR and Meo, and the communists consolidated their control over the provinces of Phong Saly and Samneua. Between October 1967 and June 1968, government forces lost over three thousand men. The fall of Nam Bac virtually eliminated the FAR as an effective force, and the permanent loss of many lima sites severely curtailed the scope of General Vang Pao's operations. Finally, the rains were no longer an ally of the Royal Laotian Government because the North Vietnamese had built all-weather roads permitting them and their allies to carry on their offensive year-round.

The losses of 1968 generated pressures within the Laotian military, which passed to the government and from the prime minister to the American ambassador, then to Seventh Air Force. With the FAR supine and the Meo reduced to conventional operations, the United States again faced the dilemma of shoring up the Laotian government without openly abandoning the Geneva accords. The war in Laos was swiftly becoming a war for Laos.

81. DDIIIR 1 856 0068, Jun 4, 1968.



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■ Within that country the "quiet war" had ended, while the war for survival had begun. Under these changed conditions, institutions and arrangements evolving during the early period no longer sufficed. New relationships were about to emerge—a rather painful process as it proved to be.

Chapter XII

The Final Phase Begins (U)

The year 1968 had opened disastrously for government forces in Laos. In particular, the defeats of Nam Bac and Lima Site 85 were severe physical and psychological blows. The loss of Nam Bac along with eleven battalions and \$2.5 million worth of equipment had crippled the FAR and virtually wiped out government influence in the northwest. The fall of Site 85 eliminated a major USAF radar installation, removed the chief Meo stronghold in the northeast, and freed communist forces for operations against the Plain of Jars. Farther to the south, Muong Phalane had fallen, Saravane and Attoupeu were isolated, and Thateng threatened. The successful defense of Lima Site 36 and the Houei Mun operation finally checked the enemy advance, but friendly forces were too exhausted for any counteroffensive. "Rainy season victories," Ambassador Sullivan noted, "are no bargain if the price is dry season defeats."¹

The RLAF, which had fought well, was likewise exhausted and demoralized, its top leadership riddled with inefficiency and corruption. Though personally honest, General Sourith had so far been unable—or unwilling—to curb the illicit traffic in gold and opium, and he had not furnished the dynamic leadership required to weld the RLAF into an effective fighting force.

Conversely, communist forces held the strongest position they had attained since 1964. Their program of all-weather road construction let them resupply forward units even after the rains halted offensive operations. This and the government's inactivity during the summer of 1968 permitted the communists to keep all of the forward positions they had won during the dry season. They were, therefore, in an excellent position to press their advantage when major operations resumed in November. Hence the 1968 dry-season campaign, described by Ambassador Sullivan as "the worst I have seen in the four years I've been here," erased all of the government gains since 1964, upset the seasonal ebb and flow of fighting, and spelled the end of "the quiet war."²

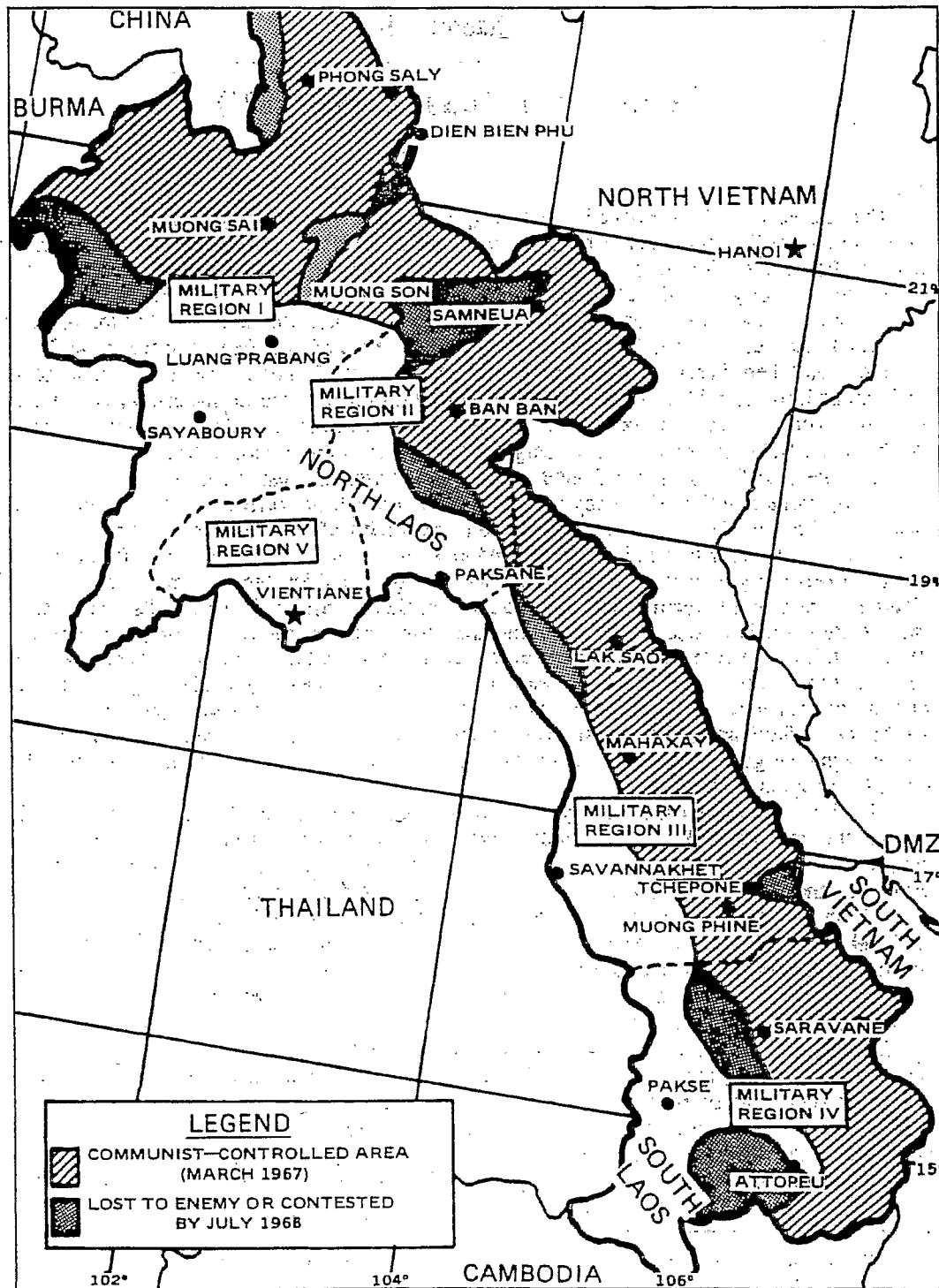
The first half of 1968 was equally traumatic for the Air Force. The USAF force structure that existed in June 1968 had been built primarily to bomb North Vietnam and to give close air support to American troops in South Vietnam. Operations in Laos were purely secondary. However, the Air Force was wrenched into a new posture and strategy in Southeast Asia by the Tet offensive and subsequent bombing halt over North Vietnam, and by the decision to disengage in South Vietnam and turn the bulk of the fighting over to the South Vietnamese. Henceforth, the Air Force would concentrate on interdicting the communist supply routes through southern Laos. This shift in focus inevitably affected operations in northern Laos and forced a reassessment of the USAF role there as well.

For the embassy, too, the summer of 1968 was a time of sorting out, a time of reassessing its own programs. The communist offensive had completely upset plans, and new programs needed to be prepared to cope with the situation. Then, too, the annual rotation of U.S. personnel meant that a whole new set of relationships and responses would have to be developed. Out of this turmoil a partnership was finally forged that, however imperfect, culminated in the successful Operation About Face in August 1969. Although the results of

1. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 210541Z Jun 68, subj: Dry Season Wrap-Up.
2. Transcript, Udorn Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 14.

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About Face were transitory, they demonstrated how American air power could be combined with well-led indigenous forces to defeat a larger and better equipped enemy. On the other hand, the end of About Face also showed the limits that could be expected from such operations. (In the spring of 1970, the defense of Long Tieng would again prove the potency of air power in a defensive battle and set the pattern for the rest of the war.)

In June 1968, Col. Robert L. F. Tyrrell returned to Laos for his second tour as air attaché. He found there had been dramatic changes in Laos during the three years he had been away. The RLAF had degenerated into four minuscule air forces devoid of central direction, riddled with inefficiency and corruption, and flying fewer sorties than before. The attaché's office, which had grown in size and scope as the war expanded, was a hodgepodge of accredited attachés and augmentees on temporary duty from several different agencies. It was not always clear who was working for whom.³

Within the embassy, the widening role of the Central Intelligence Agency, in air as well as ground operations, inevitably drew it into conflict with the regular attachés. This had reached the point that Colonel Pettigrew's parting remark to Tyrrell was, "Don't buck the CIA or you will end up floating face down in the Mekong river."⁴ Even though Pettigrew's warning was meant figuratively, it plumbed the depth of the problem. There was also a strain emerging between the Army and Air Force attachés. Colonel Law had gotten along well with both Tyrrell and Pettigrew, but his successor, Lt. Col. Edgar W. Duskin, almost at once crossed swords with Tyrrell over what Tyrrell felt was the Army attaché's efforts to expand his own role into the realm of air operations.⁵

The greatest change, however, was in the role of the United States Air Force. As the "quiet war" gave way to bigger and more conventional operations, USAF bombing came to be the salient characteristic of American involvement in northern Laos. It was bombing unlike that carried out elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In lieu of a separate air campaign or support of U.S. ground forces, USAF operations in northern Laos grew more and more wedded to support of an indigenous ground force—in this case the Meo—who were organized, equipped, and controlled outside the regular military establishment of either their own country or the United States. The novel setup severely strained the rather nebulous command structure in Laos, and in the end led Tyrrell into conflict with his own service.

In June 1968, all this lay in the future, and Tyrrell's immediate problem was rebuilding the RLAF. Ambassador Sullivan instructed the air attaché "to shape the RLAF into some type of cohesive fighting unit and establish a control system to prevent the use of transport aircraft for illicit traffic." Until this was done, the ambassador would not entertain any further expansion or procurement of additional aircraft.⁶

A few weeks later, Sullivan made the same point to the Laotian generals. Using Colonel Law's retirement party as a springboard, he informed his audience, consisting mostly of the Laotian high command, that he was shocked at the corruption among senior officers. Peace would come to Laos, he said, only after long and arduous negotiations and would most likely see a return to the old tripartite government. Under these conditions, he was concerned about the current government's ability to compete with the communists for the support of the people:

To succeed, the government will have to make the sacrifices necessary to win the loyalties not only of the Lao elite but also of the simple peasants. In this struggle the role of the army will be critical. If the army, as a national institution, is respected and

3. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 7-14.

4. *Ibid*, pp 18-22; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, May 12, 1975, p 58.

5. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 18.

6. *Ibid*, p 7.

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admired by the population, the forces of nationalism will benefit. If the army is considered a source of abuse, corruption and exploitation, the communists will benefit.⁷

Brig. Gen. Oudone Sananikone, FAR Chief of Staff, cited the writings of Prof. Samuel Phillips Huntington of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard in his reply. Oudone (who had undergone U.S. Army staff training at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas) pointed out that the armed forces reflected Laotian society as a whole and was subject to the same clan and regional pressures. Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, Military Region V Commander, then took the floor and in a rambling forty-five-minute discourse traced the history of Laos back to 1946 and dwelt on the many sacrifices that had been made. Sullivan responded calmly that as far as he could see, the sacrifices were all coming from the GIs and not the generals; and in the future, he hoped to see more from the generals. At this point, the ambassador unlimbered his big guns. He said he had discussed the matter with both the king and the prime minister, who shared his alarm over corruption in high places and had asked his assistance in instituting tighter controls. As a first step, five C-47s scheduled for delivery to the RLAF would be held in Bangkok until the ambassador was assured the aircraft would be used solely for valid military requirements. Colonel Tyrrell would be personally responsible for setting up a control system.⁸

The audience was stunned. Never before had an ambassador intervened so directly in domestic affairs; but for the moment, Sullivan held most of the cards—or specifically, most of the airplanes.

Tyrrell unveiled his plan a week later. He would realign USAF personnel at RLAF bases to staff "a modified tactical air control system." Next, scheduling of all transports would be centralized in a combined operations center (COC). Lastly, a C-47 mobile training team would be formed to "upgrade" (i.e., supervise) transport pilots, mechanics, and radio operators. The ambassador enthusiastically—and the FAR reluctantly—approved the plan.⁹

To support the air control system, each AOC had to expand from four to about fourteen men: commander (T-28 instructor pilot, major or lieutenant colonel, with background in counterinsurgency operations); paramedic (cross trained in personal equipment as a radio operator);¹⁰ radio operator (qualified in radio maintenance); flight-line chief; intelligence officer; aircraft radio technician; ground equipment specialist; munitions specialist; weapons mechanic; two aircraft engine mechanics; and one or more Raven forward air controllers, as necessary.¹¹

Manning for the enlarged air operations centers would be furnished by the Special Air Warfare Center at Hurlburt Field, Florida. During his first tour, Colonel Tyrrell had developed a deep respect for the initiative and good judgment of the air commandos and their ability to adjust to the unconventional environment of Laos. He felt that SAWC would do a better job of screening personnel than the Military Personnel Center, and that the commandos were better suited by training and temperament to "endure the frustrations of this unique work" than regular pipeline replacements.¹²

7. Memo, AmEmb Vientiane, subj: Dinner at Ambassador's with Senior Army Officers, Jul 17, 1968, in ltr, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Corruption of the Lao Armed Forces, Jul 22, 1968.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 250120Z Jul 68, subj: Request for Special Air Warfare Specialists; Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 14-55.

10. The medic assigned to Vientiane was a flight surgeon, but all others were enlisted men. The flight surgeon also served as air attaché medical officer. All medical personnel were expected to take part in military civic action programs among the Laotians as well as caring for the Americans.

11. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 250120Z Jul 68.

12. *Ibid.*; msg, 7th AF to PACAF, 130750Z Nov 70, subj: Status of US Personnel in Laos; Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, p 128; intvw, Lt Col Vaughan H. Gallacher and Hugh N. Ahmarm with Maj Jesse E. Scott, AOC Comdr, Vientiane, Apr 6, 1973, pp 47-49.

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Headquarters USAF accepted Tyrrell's rationale and established Operation Palace Dog. Under this program SAWC, eager to enhance its declining role in Southeast Asia, provided the AOC commander, paramedic, radio operator, and flight-line chief on six months rotation. The intelligence officer continued to be assigned for one year, and the mechanics came for six months at a time from the Water Pump detachment at Udon.¹³

The bulk of the personnel picked under Palace Dog were [Water Pump] veterans. Even so, all received a three-week course covering conditions in Laos, their duties, and problems they were likely to encounter. Eventually, Palace Dog teams returning from Laos briefed those preparing to go over. Continuity was further enhanced by the number of commandos who came back for second and third tours, rotating between Hurlburt, Palace Dog, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force.

As with other American military personnel in Laos (save the accredited attachés), the AOC personnel wore civilian clothes, carried embassy identification cards, and were addressed as "mister." The AOC commanders were forbidden to fly in combat. However, administrative and "proficiency" flights were permitted, and the air commandos were not above stretching a point to get the job done. Colonel Tyrrell knew what was going on but chose to ignore it so long as it was not officially brought to his attention. He felt that the commandos operated best with the least supervision.¹⁴

With the first contingent of air commandos in place by November, the results began to show. At Pakse, for example, [Maj. Jerome W. Klingaman], one of the [Water Pump] veterans, found that every T-28 pilot had a venereal disease. Operations were at a complete standstill and Colonel Tyrrell had just fired the previous AOC commander for incompetence. Circumstances were so bad that Tyrrell was considering closing the AOC. [Major Klingaman] turned things completely around in a few weeks. Learning that the men had not been given medical treatment because they had no money, he had his medic administer the necessary pills and shots. He improved their living and working conditions, gave on-the-job-training to ground personnel, and personally supervised proficiency training for the pilots. Under his leadership the squadron began flying again and, more important, putting their bombs on target. When [Klingaman] wound up his six-month tour, the Pakse Air Operations Center was generally judged the best in the country.¹⁵

To refine coordination between Laotian air and ground forces, a joint operations center (JOC) was created in each military region. Here the regional commander and his staff could meet with air and ground commanders, the AOC commander (who additionally served as air liaison officer), an assistant air attaché, and representatives from the [CIA and the] requirements office of the embassy AID section. This "regional country team" would review and coordinate forthcoming operations. After the JOC meeting, the airmen would return to the air operations center (usually located at the airfield) to work out the precise details. Formerly, air support requests had gone from the military region commander to FAR headquarters in Vientiane, then to RLAFF headquarters, and finally back down to the AOC. With the advent of the JOCs, coordination could be carried out at the regional level. Information copies of plans and proposed flight mission orders were sent to Vientiane, which could veto or alter the plans but was not otherwise engaged in day-to-day operations. This let the general staff focus on administration, organization, equipment, training, and policy.

The one missing ingredient was an air request net. Neither the Royal Laotian Air Force nor the air attaché had sufficiently skilled people to man tactical air control parties in the various

13. Scott Intvw, Apr 6, 1973, p 50; Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 86.

14. Msg, 7th AF to PACAF, 130750Z Nov 70; Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, p 128; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, pp 47-49.

15. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Lt Col Howard K. Hartley, COC advisor, Jul 14, 1974, pp 18-19.

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field units. In consequence, air support requests traveled from the ground commander back to the JOC and from there to the AOC. Once airborne, the fighters simply flew their assigned missions unless the ground commander happened to have a radio with frequencies matching those of the aircraft radios. (In the case of guerrilla units, USAF aircraft could talk to the [redacted] English-speaking forward air guides, or Raven forward air controllers whose backseater could talk to the local ground commander.)¹⁶

● Rounding out the tactical air control system was a combined operations center in Vientiane. The COC was supposed to allocate resources and coordinate operations between the military regions and serve as a centralized point for scheduling and control of airlift operations. The nucleus of a COC had been functioning since 1966 but had lacked the personnel, communications, and (most of all) direction to be effective. To correct these shortcomings, Colonel Tyrrell asked the Special Air Warfare Center for an "airlift expert" to act as advisor to the combined operations center. Under the guise of improving management, his real purpose was to curtail smuggling by taking the C-47 scheduling away from the military region commanders and centralizing it in the COC under the watchful eye of an American "advisor."

● In response to Tyrrell's request, SAWC sent its director of operations, Lt. Col. Howard K. Hartley, to Vientiane. Together, Tyrrell and Hartley firmed up the details of the operation. The FAR general staff members were surprisingly receptive to the idea since it would give them a direct hand in the C-47 operations. The military region commanders were less enthusiastic but went along.

● At first, Hartley ran the operation virtually by himself, but gradually he worked the Laotians into the system. Smuggling fell off sharply, but not because the general staff was any more honest than the military region commanders. The decrease was achieved, as the advisor had hoped, by scheduling everything out in the open. There were too many fingers in the pot for anyone to get away with much. Still, as Hartley pointed out to the ambassador, "Any Military Region commander can simply dispatch one of his crews and not report it. If the pilot is brazen enough to question his activities he would be relieved or reassigned."¹⁷ Although smuggling was not entirely stopped, it was pared to the point where it did not interfere with combat operations.

● The combined operations center was less successful at coordinating operations between the military regions. Each military commander remained a satrap, controlling his own resources and running his own war with scant regard for other military regions or directions from Vientiane. In November 1968, T-28s from both Savannakhet and Pakse had combined to halt the communist drive when the communist threatened Saravane, but such cooperation was the exception rather than the rule.¹⁸

● To complement the tactical air control system, Colonel Tyrrell proposed the introduction of a C-47 mobile training team to give the RLAF night and all-weather, maintenance, and transport capabilities and to develop a cadre of Laotians to continue the in-country program. At the same time, it would provide an American-oriented core of transport personnel more interested in prosecuting the war than in lining their pockets. Based on [Water Pump's] experience with the T-28 pilots, the program looked promising.¹⁹

● The original plan included six instructor pilots, six flight engineers, and six mechanics to be in place at Udom by December 15 and a six-month training period to upgrade two Laotian pilots to instructors and four others to aircraft commanders. The plan also included training for twelve maintenance men, six as flight engineers and six others as crewchiefs. The air attaché was

16. () Background Paper, DCS/Plans, 7th AF, subj: USAF Operations in Laos, Jan 21, 1971.

17. () Hartley intvw, Jul 14, 1974, p 15.

18. () Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 041756Z Jun 69, subj: Dry Season Wrap-Up.

19. () Rprt, Comdr, C-47 MTT, to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, C-47 MTT Final Report, Aug 10, 1969.

(b) (1)
(b) (3)
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to have operational control through the [Water Pump] detachment, with actual flight training conducted at Nam Phong, Thailand, due to the combat airspace over Udom. (Water Pump was already using Nam Phong, about sixty miles southeast of Udom, for T-28 training. A detachment of F-111s also operated out of the base.)²⁰

● On August 1, 1968, Ambassador Sullivan asked the deputy chief of the military advisory group at Bangkok to obtain Thai approval for stationing the mobile training team at Udom. The Royal Thai Air Force gave informal approval but suggested Phitsanulok in northwest Thailand as the site. The Thai wanted Phitsanulok developed to support their own counterinsurgency program, and they were aware of the American penchant for improving facilities at any base they occupied. Because Udom was overdeveloped and construction at Nam Phong was under way, building up Phitsanulok (at American expense) would enhance Thai counterinsurgency objectives.²¹

● Feeling this was a fair trade, the deputy chief sent the proposal to CINCPAC with the recommendation that the mobile training team be put under his operational control. Colonel Tyrrell and the ambassador accepted the choice of Phitsanulok but demurred on the question of control. Headquarters USAF endorsed the plan and instructed the Special Air Warfare Center to form the mobile training team. However, the date slipped to March 1969 and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force assigned operational control, but exercised through the [Water Pump] detachment. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force then suggested the site be changed back to Udom, a change the Thais approved on February 19, 1969. The approval came none too soon since the mobile training team was on its way, the first contingent arriving on February 24 and the remainder on March 2.²²

● The team comprised twenty-four people—five pilots and nineteen enlisted men. On March 8 the first class of eighteen students started eleven days of ground training. Flying training (transition and instrument flying) began on March 19 and ended on June 8. Midway through this phase, Colonel Tyrrell expanded the training to add assault operations, aerial resupply, psychological operations, and, with Laos scheduled for gunships, AC-47 familiarization. During the gunship training phase (June 9–July 31), two loadmasters and two gunners augmented the mobile training team, while the RLAF sent additional students. Gunship orientation took place on one of the four USAF AC-47s that had been operating out of Udom since March.²³

● As training went on, it became apparent that follow-on teams were needed to make the Laotians self-sufficient. The second training team arrived on August 9, only two days before the first group headed home. It and subsequent mobile training teams were reduced to eight men (two instructor pilots, two loadmasters, two gunners, one engineer, and one crewchief) because two Laotian pilots, two engineers, and two crewchiefs from the first group of students stayed to help train their own people.²⁴

● Though the American role shrunk to that of supervision and evaluation, one team followed another until 1970. Like the original [Water Pump] program, which was also meant to be a one-time affair, the mobile training team became a semipermanent fixture in the USAF Military Assistance Program.

● This being the case, the deputy chief of the military advisory group suggested on November 21 that the team be converted to permanent change of station and placed under his

20. ● *Ibid.*

21. ● DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI AF Div Hist Sum, Apr 1–Sep 30, 1968, in DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI Hist Sum (Jun 66–Apr 68), May 11, 1968, Annex A [hereafter cited as AF Div Hist Sum with appropriate dates].

22. ● AF Div Hist Sum, Oct 1–Dec 31, 1968; see note 19; hist rpt, Dir/Comd Relations, DCS/Plans, PACAF, in hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 68, Vol III.

23. ● See note 19.

24. ● See note 19.

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operational control.²⁵ Colonel Tyrrell objected on several points. Inasmuch as the idea was to make the Laotians self-sufficient, a permanent mobile training team would signal an abandonment of this principle.²⁶ Then, too, the air attaché preferred the air commandos to regular Air Force personnel. Finally, he, the ambassador, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force balked at the deputy chief's bid to carve out an operational role for himself in Laos.²⁷ CINCPAC supported the ambassador, killing the deputy chief's proposal. Afterwards, the ambassador and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, ostensibly on the grounds of limiting the American presence in the country, blocked Tyrrell's attempt to move the mobile training team into Laos under his own control.²⁸

The results of the mobile training team were somewhat less than hoped for. The Laotian pilots proved capable enough, but the radio operators, flight engineers, and loadmasters never fully mastered the technical aspects of their jobs. Nonetheless, overall operations improved somewhat and the C-47s' tactical support began to be effective.

While Tyrrell worked to strengthen RLAFF operations, he did not ignore administration and supply—both notably weak points with the Laotians. A December 1968 manpower survey contained the initial comprehensive listing of RLAFF personnel and their duties. It further afforded Laotian airmen the first real look at their own unit, the skills needed, and the manpower available. The survey prompted administrative and organizational changes that enhanced personnel assignment and reduced payroll padding.²⁹

In spite of several years of U.S. assistance, maintenance in the Royal Laotian Air Force was far from self-sufficient. The RLAFF had plenty of trained mechanics, but supervision was weak and morale shaky due to low pay and poor facilities. One report said the Laotians could do less than half of the phase maintenance on their T-28s, and performed aircraft inspections more in theory than in fact. Another report depicted one Laotian aircraft as "a flying accident going someplace to happen."³⁰

The supply system likewise operated with little sense of direction. Deficiencies included excessive stocks, funds spent on "goodie" items, random distribution, rampant theft and pilferage, and nonexistent accounting. To tighten supervision, Tyrrell called on Col. Ralph Newman, retired USAF and head of the requirements office of the embassy AID section. In October 1968, Newman directed weapons systems liaison officers to monitor the principal supply accounts at the main RLAFF depot at Savannakhet. This improved operations some, but this depot had grown too large for the Laotians to manage. In February 1969, the embassy shaved Laotian responsibility to minor maintenance such as changing tires and replacing spark plugs. Major inspections and maintenance of the C-47s was done under contract with Thai-Am, a joint Thai-U.S. company operating out of Bangkok. Air America and Water Pump did major maintenance on the rest of the Laotian air fleet. The depot at Savannakhet was accordingly diminished in size and moved to Vientiane where the requirements office could furnish supervision. At the same time, forward supply points were set up at the main bases to stock a few high-consumption items.³¹

25. (U) Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 9490, 210221Z Nov 69.

26. (U) Actually, the principle had long since been abandoned in the case of the T-28, due to the high attrition rate and constant demands of combat that precluded the release of experienced pilots to serve as instructors.

27. (U) Msg, Amb Sullivan to Gen McConnell, subj: C-47 Mobile Assistance Team, n.d. [ca Nov 69].

28. (U) Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 24.

29. (U) Ltr, George W. Nathan to Ralph Newman, subj: RLAFF Organization, Training and Manpower Assignments, Dec 15, 1969.

30. (U) AF Div Hist Sum, Jun 66-Apr 68, p iv; Seith EOTR, Mar 27, 1969, p 3.

31. (U) AF Div Hist Sum, Oct 1, 1968-Jun 30, 1969; intvw, Lt Col Richard R. Sexton with Col Ralph Newman, USAF, Ret, Jun 21, 1978; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, pp 18-19.

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In addition, the embassy came up with a new pay scale for the RLAF. Pay for a common airman went from \$4 to \$5 a month while a staff sergeant with over twenty years service got \$10.50. Officer pay ranged from \$13.15 a month for a second lieutenant to \$24.78 for a major with over six years service. Besides, married personnel received an allowance of \$1 per child each month and crewmembers were paid a bonus of \$2 for every mission flown. However, 6 percent of this pay was withheld to finance a retirement plan and forty cents a mission was taken out to provide a bonus for ground crews.

To augment this meager pay, the Laotians were allowed to sell brass shell casings, the brass shipping rings and scrap lumber from bomb cases, and their used cluster bomb unit dispensers. Pilots received 60 percent of the profits, the ground crews 25 percent, and the air operations center commander received 15 percent for the general welfare of Laotian personnel. By regulating the sale of these items, the AOC commanders cut down on some of the pilferage and ensured a more equitable distribution of the proceeds.³² As a sidelight, the system encouraged the Laotians to fly as many missions as possible.

The upshot of these combined actions was dramatic. Smuggling and pilferage declined, morale rose, and the RLAF once more became an efficient military force. From a low of 235 T-28 sorties in August 1968, the rate climbed to 750 in September, to nearly 1,000 in October, and ended the year with just under 1,400. Sorties rates for the C-47, helicopters, and O-1s showed a similar upturn.

While Tyrrell and company rebuilt the RLAF, Seventh Air Force weighed its own future operations. The bombing halt above the 19th parallel had deprived the Air Force of most industrial and fixed military targets in North Vietnam and allowed the enemy to step up the flow of men and matériel southward. To disrupt this flow, Seventh Air Force launched a new interdiction program called Operation Turnpike. Between April 19 and October 31, 1968, tactical fighters and B-52s (using laser guided bombs for the first time) waged an around-the-clock campaign against all known truck parks and storage areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in Route Package I in southern North Vietnam. Meantime, Seventh Air Force planned an even more ambitious assault on the trail. Designated Commando Hunt and due to begin on November 1, this operation drew on the lessons learned during Turnpike and capitalized on the latest developments in technology, especially the use of sensors and gunships.³³

As this planning progressed, General Brown, Seventh Air Force commander, felt that the rules of engagement needed changing and sent proposed changes to Ambassador Sullivan on July 6.³⁴ The ambassador pointed out "we currently hold no persuasive evidence to indicate that present rules of engagement are inadequate to cope with enemy infiltration into South Vietnam." Nonetheless, he welcomed a meeting with General Brown to review the overall air situation in Laos, especially in view of the prospects for a complete bombing halt over North Vietnam, and suggested Udom as the meeting site.³⁵ Actually, Sullivan was less concerned with the rules of engagement in the south than with the prospects of the forthcoming campaign scaling down operations in northern Laos. Thus, he wanted an overall perusal of air operations and was set to use his approval of changes to the rules of engagement in the south as a club to ensure continued support in the north.

For his part, General Brown was no more interested in northern Laos than General Momyer had been. However, being more politic than his predecessor, he read between the lines of the ambassador's reply and agreed to the expanded scope of the meeting.

32. Ltr, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Source of Income for RLAF Personnel, Jul 24, 1971.

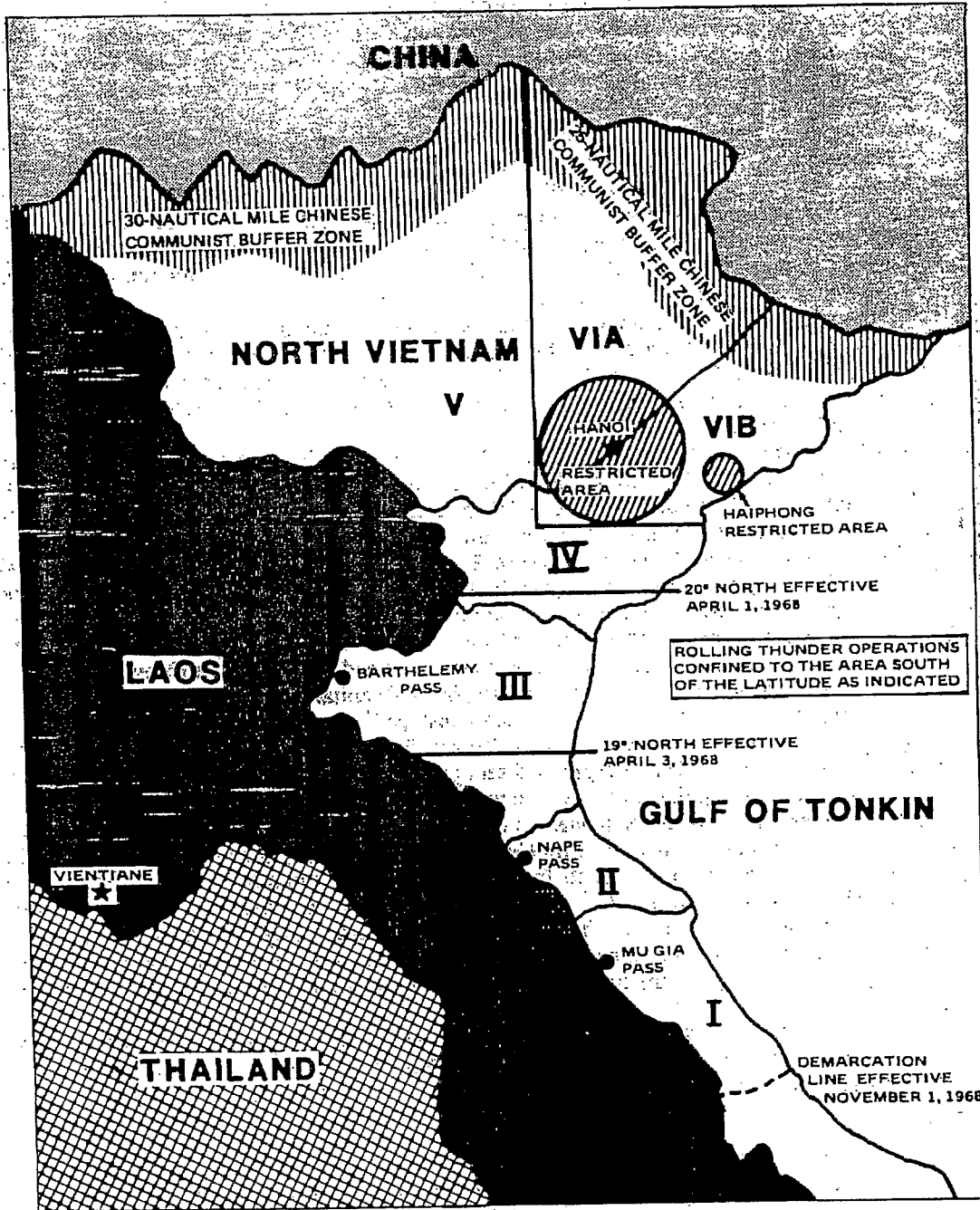
33. Hist, CINCPAC, 1968, III, 291-92; *Air Traffic Con Ops*, pp 47-51.

34. Msg, MACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 060756Z Jul 68, subj: Rules of Engagement.

35. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to MACV, 7695, 091005Z Jul 68.

UNCLASSIFIED

Restricted Areas over North Vietnam



The Final Phase Begins

Held on September 9, the conference made a comprehensive review of the war in Laos and produced the most significant change in the pattern of air operations since April 1966. Besides Ambassadors Unger and Sullivan, the conferees included General Brown; Brig. Gen. George J. Keegan, Jr., Deputy Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Seventh Air Force; Brig. Gen. Robert J. Holbury, Director of Combat Operations, Seventh Air Force; Maj. Gen. Louis T. Seith, Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force; Brig. Gen. John W. Baer, Deputy Commander MACTHAI; and Colonel Tyrrell and his assistant, Colonel Sonnenberg. Adm. John S. McCain, Jr., CINCPAC, was represented by his deputy chief of staff for plans and operations, Maj. Gen. Chesley G. Peterson. Also in attendance were the CIA station chief in Laos and his deputy, and the political-military advisors from Vientiane and Bangkok.

The conference focused on the forthcoming Commando Hunt campaign, and discussion did not turn to northern Laos until mid-afternoon. At this point, Ambassador Sullivan made it clear that his and Souvanna's approval of expanded air operations in southern Laos would be contingent upon greater air support of northern operations.

Souvanna has agreed with me that in the event a complete halt of the bombing of North Vietnam is ordered, the USAF can spend any amount of sorties it wants to in Laos, providing it is within the ROE [rules of engagement].

I don't think he quite realizes yet just how much pressure will be on him when this happens. The press and the Soviets are going to become aware and any cover stories that we have for Laos are going to be pretty thin. But he assures me he is going to stand firm under this pressure and continue the operation as long as he gets something in the north. It's so they don't feel that they are giving us carte blanche in the south without getting any return which is more central to their interests.³⁶

Sullivan then brought up the issue of sortie allocation. "Over the past year," he said, "we've been up and down with Spike [General Momyer] on how many sorties we get per day. It's not so much a question of the daily sortie rate, it's a question of having assurance that we will have the sorties when we need them, where we need them."³⁷ To underscore this point, the ambassador recalled a recent incident:

For example, the Muong Peun operation depends on a Lt Ba Kri. Now Ba Kri is not the most aggressive of people but this time he and his men are in a hell of a good mood and he has decided that his troops can take Muong Peun. So we kick off the operation. It's not that Ba Kri has refused to go in the past. He merely regrets that his troops are sick, he doesn't have enough supplies, etc, etc.

This, of course, complicates our air support. When Vang Pao decides that today is the day for beginning the movement against Muong Peun, we can't wait to come up with air support. If we don't have the air [support] then either the operation can't go or we suffer heavier losses.³⁸

In reply, General Brown assured Ambassador Sullivan that he was "not the man to lose Laos." His instructions from Washington, however, were to "minimize U.S. casualties" and this could best be done by massing American air power against the flow of enemy men and supplies into South Vietnam. "Nevertheless," he said, pounding the table for emphasis, "if we make a commitment to northern Laos, we'll meet it." He then played a few cards of his own. In the past, he noted:

There has not been any intimate coordinated work in preparation and planning. In other words, you all cook up a scheme and get these guys all aroused and then come to us at

36. Transcript, Udom Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 54.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, p 55.

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the last minute and ask for air support and we don't have time to properly evaluate the request.³⁹

Henceforth any "commitment" would be based on joint planning and evaluation:

In the future, I would hope that when we get a request from you, I would have some control over it. I would want to be assured if we got a requirement for "X" sorties on these dates, for this operation, that this was really, in our combined judgment, what is needed. As it is, we sort of take things on good faith, you know. Unless we get photography and scrub it down [i.e. analyze it] and see that, yes, there is a requirement for so many sorties, we can't act on it.⁴⁰

Subsequent discussion made it clear that the coordination Brown had in mind was not "a guy who tags along and attends staff meetings and that sort of thing," but real joint planning. The proper agency for this, Brown said, was Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. Its commander, General Seith, said he was ready to undertake the task. Surprisingly Ambassador Sullivan, who had steadfastly rejected similar proposals in the past, agreed. "Fine," he said, "that is exactly what we want." However, Sullivan remained silent and Colonel Tyrrell, who saw himself as "odd man out" made some minor remonstrance but appeared assuaged when he was assured that he would be kept "in the loop."⁴¹ The discussion next returned to various logistic and administrative problems associated with Commando Hunt.

In terms of concrete decisions concerning northern Laos, the conference did not achieve much. There was even some disagreement over what had been decided. In his summary message to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Sullivan said General Brown had consented to "relax command control arrangements in Barrel Roll," allowing him to "execute operations requiring USAF support."⁴² Brown's report to General McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, was silent on relaxing control or delegating authority. Instead, he claimed that command control would be strengthened since the ambassador had "agreed" to give the Air Force a voice in planning future operations.⁴³ This difference of interpretation would hamper cooperation between the embassy and the Air Force for quite a while.

Nor were the respective roles of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force or Colonel Tyrrell's office clarified. This was left to be worked out as operations progressed. As it turned out, neither developed into anything more than a cipher for Seventh Air Force and the CIA, respectively. The conference nonetheless served to clear the air and bring into the open problems that had been festering for years. It also spelled out the views of the participants and set in motion a series of actions that paved the way for an effective, though short-lived, partnership between General Vang Pao and the Air Force over the next year.

One immediate outcome of the conference was the establishment of a photo-interpretation section within Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force that allowed Colonel Tyrrell and General Seith to independently assess CIA and USAF photography. In addition, the targeting procedure changed, with a Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force list replacing the old RLAF target list. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force prepared its list from intelligence reports, photo reconnaissance, airborne radio direction finding, and visual recce by Raven and jet forward air controllers. Especially lucrative or perishable targets were sent out to the Ravens at six each morning for possible strikes during the day. Since the air attaché still had to validate all fixed targets, Tyrrell stationed one of his men at Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force to speed up

39. ^{(b)(1)} Ibid.

40. ^{(b)(1)} Ibid.

41. ^{(b)(1)} Ibid, pp 56-57.

42. ^{(b)(1)} Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 100620Z Sep 68.

43. ^{(b)(1)} Msg, 7th AF (Gen Brown) to CSAF (Gen McConnell), 120918Z Sep 68.

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this procedure. Nonperishable targets, accompanied by appropriate photography, were dispatched to Vientiane once a week and, when validated, were filed in a "data bank" at Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. By August 1969, this list included approximately 550 targets, but nearly 500 of these targets were "lifted" from the old RLAF list, with only about 50 being truly "new" targets. Each day, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force selected about 30 targets and sent them to Saigon. Targeteers at Seventh Air Force picked about 15 of these as primary targets to be hit two days later and passed the others to the ABCCC and to FACs as alternate targets. The whole process consumed anywhere from three to ten days, even more if ambassadorial approval was required. Thus, the chief emphasis was on perishable targets that could be struck within six to twelve hours.⁴⁴

● The new targeting procedure surpassed but shared one weakness with the RLAF list. That is, priorities were not established nor targets grouped into "target systems" associated with a specific operation that could be destroyed in a coherent manner. Instead, the targets were struck on a piecemeal, random basis. Hence, individual targets often yielded impressive results, but the whole never equaled the sum of the parts, nor did it have any measurable effect on enemy operations. Small wonder, then, that targeteers in Saigon gave little credence to and placed a low priority on targets in northern Laos. It continued to be regarded as a "dumping ground" for sorties that could not find targets elsewhere.

● Formation of photo-interpretation and targeting sections within Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force likewise led to differences with the CIA, which continued its own targeting, with frequent (occasionally acrimonious) disputes over who had the best photo interpreters or did the best job of targeting. At higher levels, these disagreements tended to reflect institutional considerations; but at the working level, the clashes were more of a technical nature arising from different training and special interests. The CIA stressed ground targets, while the Air Force sought targets that could be hit from the air.⁴⁵

● To resolve some of these problems and to upgrade coordination between the Air Force and CIA, the Udon Targeting Group expanded into the Barrel Roll Working Group. Besides Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, the air attaché, the CIA, and Seventh Air Force, the group included representatives from the ABCCC and various tactical units participating in northern Laos. While the working group had no planning or decisionmaking function, its participants met twice a month to review the entire spectrum of current and planned operations, to exchange information informally, and to gain a deeper insight into one another's capabilities and limitations. This in itself was a major improvement over the void of the past.⁴⁶

● Meanwhile, developments in Laos concerned planners in Washington. On October 17, 1968, Mr. Walt W. Rostow, national security adviser to President Johnson, asked Mr. Paul C. Warnke, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, for an appraisal of the situation in Laos and possible responses. Warnke in turn asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for recommendations in the event the North Vietnamese (1) remain in Laos but not engage in any overt act against the Laotian government, remaining merely a threat to Laos and for possible reentry into South Vietnam; (2) afford enough additional support to the Pathet Lao "to create a threat of overrunning Laos, gradually, measuring our response as they go"; or (3) supply sufficient support to the Pathet Lao to actually overrun the country.⁴⁷

● The Joint Chiefs pointed out that the third postulate already existed—the North Vietnamese had the forces in Laos to overrun the country at their pleasure. That they had not

44. (S) Seith EOTR, Mar 27, 1969, pp 23-24.

45. (S) *Ibid*; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, p 43.

46. (S) Seith EOTR, Mar 27, 1969, p 46.

47. (S) Memo, ASD/ISA to JCS, subj: Contingency Planning for Enemy Action in Laos, Oct 17, 1968.

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done so was ascribed to political restraint, not the lack of capability. As to U.S. responses, the JCS felt as long as the enemy showed restraint there should be no overt American intervention, save for "close air support of RLG forces by U.S. air elements consistent with the priority of other requirements." If the North Vietnamese renewed their offensive, it would reveal their participation in the Paris peace talks as fraudulent and their expansionist policies changed only in direction. In this case, stepped-up air operations would slow the communist advance but would not be decisive by themselves and might wind up competing for resources needed elsewhere. On the other hand, a major commitment of ground forces could hold the Mekong Valley but would create another large logistic problem. Moreover, it would "enmesh major U.S. forces in a situation which would be prolonged and from which they could not be readily extricated." The Joint Chiefs also reminded Mr. Warnke that without a request from Souvanna, there would be no legal basis for introducing American ground forces.

In short, the chiefs concluded that the communists could not be prevented from overrunning Laos without a major campaign against their forces in Laos, "a campaign which would be costly and uncertain of success unless accompanied by the defeat of North Vietnam." To do this would demand air and naval operations against North Vietnam "without militarily confining restraints." The JCS believed these measures would unmistakably show our resolve and, if prosecuted vigorously, would "destroy the capability and will of North Vietnam to persist in aggression." However, such actions would contravene expressed U.S. policy, would endanger third-country shipping, risk adverse domestic and world reaction, and might invite Chinese intervention.

In conclusion, the military chiefs recommended continued air support at roughly the current level. They realized such limited support was no substitute for effective ground forces and would not lead to a military defeat of the communists. Yet it would supplement friendly ground troops, bolstering their firepower and mobility to offset in part the lopsided balance of numbers enjoyed by the enemy. This would make further communist encroachments costly and might even assist the Laotian government to regain some of its territory. Still, in the final analysis, the fate of Laos lay in the hands of the North Vietnamese and in the actions taking place in South Vietnam.⁴⁸

The decisions in Udom and Washington set the general direction of the American response, but events inside Laos shaped the specific details. Despite Sullivan's stricture against any wet-season offensive, General Vang Pao was bent on retaking Lima Site 85—his reputation and standing among the Meo depended on it. When the ambassador threatened to withhold the needed helicopter support, the fiery Meo general replied, "Very well, we will walk!" In the end he got his helicopters, and on June 27 moved 750 guerrillas to Lima Site 184, about thirty miles southwest of Site 85. From there, he planned to strike overland to seize the airfield at Muong Son some fifteen miles closer to his final objective. With Muong Son secure, more men would be brought in for the main assault.⁴⁹

As usual, there was no advance coordination with the Air Force and no air support plan other than a request for 20 extra sorties a day.⁵⁰ Seventh Air Force turned down this request but diverted fifteen aircraft from the normal Barrel Roll schedule to support the operation. Though the initial landing was unopposed, the attack soon bogged down due to weather and unexpected enemy resistance. Unlike previous years, the communists were obviously prepared to hold onto and fight for their newly won territory. To break this impasse, the Air Force launched 292 sorties between July 5 and 20 against enemy positions blocking Vang Pao's advance. The foe gradually

48. JCSM-650-68 to SECDEF, Contingency Planning for Enemy Action in Laos, Oct 30, 1968.

49. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220742Z Oct 68, subj: Muong Son Operation.

50. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 260130Z Jun 68; subj: Air Support Request.

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gave ground. On July 22, the Meo finally reached Muong Son, but the offensive was already three weeks behind schedule. During the next three weeks, the communists, now fully alerted and aware of Vang Pao's objective, mounted a series of counterattacks on Muong Son that were beaten off with the help of air strikes. However, enemy gunners prevented the airfield from being used to bring in reinforcements and supplies or to evacuate the wounded.⁵¹

With the ground battle deadlocked, there were few worthwhile targets in the Muong Son area. The Air Force went back to disrupting the North Vietnamese logistic system but cut Barrel Roll sorties from 32 a day in August to 26 in September and 22 in October. The CIA objected to both these actions. Noting that success to date had been "largely due to excellent support rendered by USAF tactical airstrikes," the CIA felt "anything less than our austere request for 35 sorties daily would significantly handicap Vang Pao."⁵² At the September 9 conference at Udon, the CIA station chief went even further. Up to 120 sorties a day could be absorbed, he said, but if 65 were not forthcoming "the entire wet season offensive will be in jeopardy."⁵³

Actually, the offensive had shot its bolt. While the Meo sat at Muong Son wasting away from disease and enemy harassment, the North Vietnamese began building up their own forces in anticipation of the approaching dry season. Intelligence sources disclosed that as many as sixteen North Vietnamese battalions were massing in the Samneua area while three more held Site 85 itself. According to Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force this was "the largest concentration of men, equipment, and material on the Indochina Peninsula."⁵⁴ Seeing his position as untenable, General Vang Pao conceived a bold plan to strike directly at Phou Phathi. Even though it was late in the season, he felt he could pull it off and was prepared to commit fifteen hundred men to the venture. The embassy was not so sure. Not only did Sullivan doubt that a direct attack would succeed, but he saw no point in seizing a mountain that had lost its strategic significance (for the Americans at least). He did think that a sudden assault might catch the enemy off-balance and upset his timetable for the dry-season offensive. So he was prepared to support the plan.⁵⁵

Sullivan discussed the idea on November 4, 1968, with General McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, who was visiting Udon at the time. The ambassador reported that "arrangements for increasing air support from thirty to one hundred sorties per day" were worked out. Controlled American Source, the air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force would handle the details.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, we do not have General McConnell's account of this meeting; Seventh Air Force records do not shed any light; and, as seen earlier, Sullivan's interpretation of what was agreed to sometimes differed from that of the Air Force.

Long-standing differences could not be resolved overnight, and this first attempt to implement the Udon decisions was not completely successful. Nevertheless, valuable experience was gained and a joint air support plan was drawn up. Initially, the Central Intelligence Agency was reluctant to share its plans with the Air Force. This stemmed in part from the vagueness of Vang Pao's own plans. He was basically an opportunist who fixed on broad objectives, taking advantage of tactical situations that developed. Then, too, there were differences in strategic and operational precepts. Vang Pao's chief interest was in retaking Lima Site 85 to restore his prestige. The Americans were principally concerned with disrupting the impending communist offensive, with General Seith stating

51. ● Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: Muong Son Sitrep Summary, Jul 22, 1968; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLIX, 2-4.

52. ● Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Barrel Roll AC-130 Operations, Sep 2, 1968.

53. ● Transcript, Udon Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 52.

54. ● Msg, 7th AF/13th AF, 271120Z Nov 68, subj: Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1-4, 1968.

55. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 040950Z Nov 68.

56. ● *Ibid.*

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There appears to be genuine agreement (between 7AF/13AF officials, CAS representatives, and 7AF officials) that stopping the enemy dry season offensive in northern Laos is a worthwhile and desirable objective. Achieving this will directly support overall U.S. objectives in Laos.⁵⁷

● The CIA presumed this could best be achieved by having a more or less continuous stream of aircraft over the battlefield, much as the Marines did for their forces, destroying enemy units as they sought to engage Vang Pao. The Air Force, however, held that the major thrust should be against Samneua before the communists had a chance to deploy.

An effective strike in strength on the Sam Neua military complex would destroy or render ineffective the 16 battalions inside the area and a large number of weapons, vehicles, equipment, and supplies. It would also disorganize the command structure and reduce the number of supplies and replacements available to units operating in Sam Neua and northern Xieng Khouang Province, thus reducing the enemy's capability to launch a sustained consolidated offensive during this dry season.⁵⁸

In essence, the Air Force preferred to attack fixed targets, which it could hit, rather than individuals hiding in the jungle, which it could not.

● Disagreement likewise existed over numbers, ordnance, and timing. The CIA, air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force wanted a hundred sorties a day in addition to the normal Barrel Roll allocation. Seventh Air Force, already engaged in Commando Hunt (officially begun on November 15), felt that fifty sorties drawn mostly from the regular Barrel Roll schedule would suffice. Vang Pao and the Central Intelligence Agency also wanted napalm and cluster bomb units for use against troops in contact and one thousand-pound laser-guided bombs for use against caves, bunkers, and gun positions. The Air Force representatives said such weapons were desirable but in short supply. Instead, Seventh Air Force suggested five-hundred-pound general purpose bombs, which were plentiful and, in any case, would be more destructive against targets in the Samneua area. Lastly, the CIA wanted the air campaign to coincide with the ground offensive (Operation Pig Fat), but the Air Force contended that the air strikes, especially those against Samneua, should precede any ground movement to achieve maximum surprise.

If successful, tactical air will prevent the enemy from resupplying and reinforcing effectively in reaction to Operation Pig Fat. It will also seriously limit the enemy's capability to launch sustained coordinated dry season offensive.⁵⁹

● The compromise reached had the Air Force furnishing eighty sorties a day for four days beginning December 1. Fifty aircraft carrying general purpose bombs would strike targets in the Samneua area, while thirty, armed with a mixed load of general purpose bombs, napalm, and cluster bomb units would directly support General Vang Pao. This special strike package would be over and above the regular Barrel Roll sorties. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force further requested AC-130s and A-26s for night support, but received none because they were fully committed to Commando Hunt.⁶⁰

● As so frequently happened in Laos, nothing worked out quite the way it was planned. An unseasonable outbreak of rain delayed the strike package until December 7; and Vang Pao

57. ● Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 291045Z Nov 68, subj: Recommended Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1-4, 1968.

58. ● Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7 AF, 260932Z Nov 68, subj: Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1-4, 1968.

59. ● Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 271416Z Nov 68, subj: Additional Justification for Recommended Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1-4, 1968.

60. ● Memos, 7th AF to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Recommended Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 3, 1968, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: Nimrod Support in Barrel Roll, Dec 3, 1968; msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 300240Z Nov 68, subj: AC-130 Gunship Support in Barrel Roll.

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moved three days early, the Meo kicking off a four-pronged attack on November 28. Seventh Air Force diverted scheduled Barrel Roll missions to support the advance. As with the Muong Son offensive, the North Vietnamese were caught flatfooted. One after another, the lima sites around Phou Phathi fell to the Meo. By December 6, they had reached Lima Site 107 on the main approach to Site 85 and emplaced a 105-mm howitzer there to pound the mountain. The weather cleared sufficiently the next day for the air package to go in, but the North Vietnamese had recovered from their surprise. They had dispatched the 148th Regiment (three battalions) to reinforce Phou Phathi and had dispersed or placed other units on full alert. Consequently, the strikes on Samneua did less damage than had been hoped for. Enemy antiaircraft fire downed one of the attacking F-105s, and the pilot was not recovered.⁶¹

■ Air strikes on Phou Phathi itself fared better. Meo, Laotian, and Thai pilots joined the Air Force in plastering the mountain with rockets, bombs, napalm, and cluster bomb units. Under this umbrella the Meo made steady progress, but the enemy contested every foot of ground. One prisoner said the communist leaders in Samneua instructed their force to cling to Phou Phathi, but warned nearby villagers that if the air strikes continued the site had to be abandoned.

■ On December 8, an A-1 was shot down while another A-1 and two helicopters were lost in the rescue effort. Only one pilot was rescued. Two days later, another A-1 was lost and the pilot was not recovered. Still the friendly advance pressed on. On December 18, the Meo managed to reach the helipad and abandoned radar sites on the summit. Elsewhere, however, the enemy clung tenaciously to the mountain and the Meo assault slowly lost momentum. Three days later, an enemy attack on Lima Site 107 destroyed the howitzer and killed the Meo commander, one of Vang Pao's nephews. A series of counterattacks on Christmas Day showed that Vang Pao had lost the initiative. More air strikes were called for on January 1-2, 1969, in preparation for a renewed assault the following day. Before the assault got under way, the North Vietnamese 148th Regiment overran Lima Site 107 on January 3, breaking the back of the Meo attack. As enemy pressure built, Vang Pao began to pull his men back from the mountain. On January 7, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force signaled "enemy now appears on offensive in entire area." Pig Fat had ended.⁶²

■ Although failing to retake Site 85, Pig Fat delayed the North Vietnamese Army offensive at relatively small cost. Besides the aircrews, the Meo suffered 40 killed and 131 wounded; but enemy losses, due chiefly to air strikes, were much higher. One prisoner said over half of his battalion had been killed by air strikes, and less than 400 men had survived from the three battalions defending Site 85. The 148th Regiment was also hit hard, losing an estimated 128 killed and 250 wounded.⁶³ Perhaps the most striking aspect of the operation was that the allies were finally beginning to work as a single unit.

■ As the communists mopped up the lima sites around Phou Phathi, Vang Pao fell back on Lima Site 36 to await the main enemy thrust. The first blow, however, came far to the south in Military Region IV.

■ On December 13, 1968, three North Vietnamese battalions slammed into the town of Thateng on the northern edge of the Bolovens Plateau. The 250 defenders promptly retreated to a small fort on the fringe of the town, where they were surrounded by the enemy. Air strikes by Laotian and USAF fighters saved the fort that night, but there seemed no way it could

61. Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LIII, 2-8 thru 2-9; Daily SITREPS, 7th AF/13th AF, Nov 28, 1968-Jan 8, 1969.

62. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 071430Z Jan 69, subj: Operation Pig Fat.

63. Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Operation Pig Fat, Dec 30, 1968; rpt, "Result of Airstrikes on or Near 148th NVA Regiment," Interrogation of NVA Officer, Rallied (May 1, 1969), May 8, 1969.

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withstand a prolonged siege. Yet that is just what took place—the defense of a fixed installation carried out almost completely from the air.

During the following week, the communists tried repeatedly to seize the fort. First, they used mortar fire to blast a path through the minefields and barbed wire surrounding the fort. Then came massed infantry attacks. Laotian T-28s, USAF fighters, and gunships strafed and bombed while the defenders sat huddled inside the fort, taking no active part in their own defense. The air strikes killed an estimated five hundred attackers and virtually leveled Thateng.

For the next month, the foe refrained from further frontal assaults but kept up intermittent mortar fire that closed the airfield and generally demoralized the defenders. Airdrops, however, kept the garrison adequately supplied. On the night of February 1/2, 1969, the North Vietnamese returned to the attack. Human wave assaults after a mortar barrage demolished most of the perimeter defenses and came very close to reaching the fort itself. The timely arrival of USAF fighters and RLAf flareships again drove the communists back, killing several hundred before daylight ended the fighting.⁶⁴

Since the defenders were clearly in jeopardy, the CIA and USAF planners readied a comprehensive air support plan. First priority went to replacing the perimeter minefields and barbed wire. Because the Laotians were loathe to venture outside the fort, the job had to be done from the air. Air America C-123s delivered the barbed wire. A crewman cut the binding as the bundles left the aircraft, and the coils expanded in the slipstream. Though unevenly distributed, the jumble of wire proved a serious obstacle to infantry attacks. The Air Force followed up by seeding wide area antipersonnel mines directly into the wire to further discourage the enemy. As fast as the communists removed the wire and exploded the mines, fresh sorties replaced them. To improve night communication between aircraft and the ground, Nail forward air controllers from Nakhon Phanom carrying Laotian observers supplemented the Ravens (Raven aircraft were not equipped for night flying), and Laotian observers were placed aboard the USAF gunships. The FACs and strike aircraft made a concerted effort to destroy the enemy mortar positions. The FACs very quickly became adept at spotting muzzle flashes from the mortars and directing air strikes on them. So successful was this tactic that the communist gunners grew reluctant to expose themselves. The Air Force also kept an almost continuous cover of gunships over the fort.⁶⁵

This effort totally stymied the North Vietnamese. By the end of the month, the garrison's morale had lifted while that of the communists sagged. Agents infiltrating behind the enemy reported that some units had been virtually wiped out, while others were unwilling to expose themselves to the mines, barbed wire, and air strikes. Hence, seeding of wide area antipersonnel mines was stopped on March 6 to permit friendly patrols to move out of the fort. A few days later, reinforcements whisked in by RLAf and Air America helicopters set up a fire support base on a nearby hill to push the enemy farther away. This in turn let the Laotians reopen the airstrip for flying in fresh supplies and evacuating the wounded. After the North Vietnamese's final half-hearted stab on March 9, the siege of all intents and purposes was broken.⁶⁶

The battle for Thateng had an ironic denouement. On April 4 the FAR inexplicably abandoned the fort. The communists were still in the area and resupply was difficult, but there was no immediate threat. The defenders simply walked out. Nonetheless, Thateng's successful defense convinced American planners that a well-planned air campaign could prevent the capture of any position in Laos. The key ingredients were antipersonnel mines, gunships, air-ground communication, mortar suppression, and availability of tactical fighters.⁶⁷

64.) Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 191715Z Mar 69, subj: Tha Theng Summary.

65.) *Ibid*; memo, DS/Ops, 7th AF/13th AF, to Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Tha Theng Situation, Feb 6, 1969.

66.) Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 191715Z Mar 69.

67.) Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 010750Z Mar 69, subj: Site 36 Sitrep.

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● In northern Laos, Pig Fat had delayed the communist offensive, but once under way the offensive accelerated rapidly in spite of constant harassment from air strikes. Thirty-four sites had fallen by the end of February (fifteen others remained in friendly hands), and the North Vietnamese were poised before Na Khang (Lima Site 36). This site had withstood major attacks in 1967 and 1968, and Vang Pao was confident it could be held again. Even though the permanent garrison comprised but three hundred men, he believed the North Vietnamese would have to mass seven or eight battalions for an attack. Since such a large concentration could not go undetected, he thought he would have adequate time to move in reinforcements. The North Vietnamese, however, had learned their lesson about massing troops in the face of air power. Later reports revealed that no more than two or three communist battalions engaged in the attack, and these were well dispersed in concealed positions around the site.⁶⁸

● In the afternoon of February 28, 1969, the communists launched their assault. They caught the normally alert Meo by surprise, overrunning the outposts. Seventh Air Force responded to an immediate call for air support by diverting other Barrel Roll strikes to assist the site, with two F-4 flights and a Raven FAC the first to arrive. Later, two F-105 flights replaced the F-4s, and the FAC directed these flights into suspected enemy positions around the site. An accurate assessment of strike results were impossible, but enemy fire slackened and the situation seemed to stabilize. Flareships stayed overhead during the night but no attack occurred. The next day, Seventh Air Force ordered all aircraft scheduled for Barrel Roll to be diverted to Site 36. The first of these (four F-4s) arrived shortly before nine in the morning, but they could not expend their ordnance because the Raven FAC had not yet come. Instead, they flew several low passes over the area to show their presence.

● Shortly after their departure, the FAC arrived along with a pair of A-1s. One was shot down, killing the pilot, but the other silenced two enemy machineguns. By midmorning, the main strike force assembled, and the FACs soon found they could not handle all the fighters on hand. Five flights were therefore diverted back to their original missions. The remaining aircraft struck all around the site but did little damage to the well-dispersed enemy—in fact, a defector later reported that during the entire battle the attackers lost only twenty-six men.⁶⁹

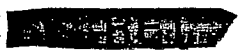
● Regardless of the enemy's success in avoiding air strikes, General Vang Pao judged that the defense was proceeding "routinely" and was prepared to dispatch 350 reinforcements the following day. Meanwhile, CIA, air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force officials were putting together an air support package based on the Thateng model. The plan called for a ten to fourteen-day operation consisting of aerial-delivered mines, gunships, forward air controllers, and tactical fighters. Seventh Air Force approved the plan, set to begin the next day. Unfortunately, on the night of March 1/2, a chance mortar round hit the Meo's command post, killing all of the officers. Deprived of effective leadership, the rest of the defenders slipped out of the camp under cover of darkness and made their way through the enemy lines. When the aircraft arrived the next morning, instead of defending the site, they destroyed the supplies left behind.⁷⁰

● The collapse of Lima Site 36 stunned the allies. With almost two months left in the dry season, the road to the Plain of Jars and Long Tieng beyond was wide open. To the west of Site 36, just the lightly held crescent formed by Lima Sites 50, 6, and 32 blocked the way to Muong Soui, behind the defense line of Long Tieng. The communists appeared to have ample time and

68. ● Rprt, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Site 36, May 1, 1969.

69. ● *Ibid*; msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 011125Z Mar 69, subj: Site 36 Sitrep; Weekly Laotian Report for the Period Feb 26-Mar 4, 1969, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 6, 1969; Cricket ABCCC Mission Report, Mar 1, 1969.


70. ● Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 011125Z Mar 69; Weekly Laotian Report for the Period Feb 26-Mar 4, 1969, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 6, 1969.



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resources to advance along either axis, with little that the allies could interpose in their way. On March 18 a disheartened Ambassador Sullivan noted in his farewell message:

As I leave Laos, I wish I could say that I am leaving it in much better condition than I found it in 1964. Unfortunately, that is far from true. There have been some improvements in political stability, in the spread of economic benefits, and in the provision of social service. But the fundamental overriding problem of the war has not repeat not been resolved. Until it is, the survival of Laos as a sovereign and independent nation remains in peril. . . . Therefore, in my view, the period between now and next November is critical. . . .⁷¹

71.  Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1714, 180430Z Mar 69.