

Air Power Backs Up the New U.S. Strategy

clearances allowing RLAf planes to land in Thailand applied solely to maintenance flights. Ambassador Martin suggested an Air America C-47 be sent to Udorn to pick up the bombs and hoists, returning them to Wattay where the ordnance would be loaded. Unger concurred and, to speed the arming, sanctioned the move of five USAF technicians to Wattay. Because this violated the Geneva accords, the five were given civilian identification and thoroughly briefed on the need to keep that cover.⁶⁶

On May 18, Thao Ma and his flyers arrived at Udorn to take over the four T-28s, much to the disappointment of the USAF air commandos who had anticipated combat in Laos. That afternoon, the RLAf T-28s flew four missions of three aircraft against enemy positions on the Plain of Jars. Twenty-four one-hundred-pound and twelve five-hundred-pound bombs were dropped, mostly on the supplies and material left behind by Kong Le's soldiers. In spite of the air attaché's suggestion that the T-28s strafe after each bombing run, only one pass was made on each target.⁶⁷

Late that evening, a transpacific telephone conference was held between high-ranking administration officials and Ambassador Unger. The Washington participants included Bundy and Sullivan of the State Department; John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA; William E. Colby, CIA; and Brig. Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Dir/J-3 (Ops), JCS. While it was late evening in Vientiane, it was midmorning in Washington. Such conference calls were rare, underlining the urgency these officials viewed the topics discussed. Speaking for the group, Bundy again stated that U.S. military personnel were not permitted to fly RLAf T-28s in combat—it was too risky. If there were enough T-28 qualified Air America pilots, thought should be given to using them. Though skeptical over the difference a handful of T-28s would make, Washington was willing to turn the four Water Pump planes over to the RLAf. If needed, more fighters could be procured from the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), currently converting from the T-28 to the A-1. Lastly, Washington was willing to weigh a shift of USAF personnel to Vientiane to assist in ordnance loading.⁶⁸

Unger replied that the four Water Pump T-28s were now in Laotian hands and had flown several missions that day. He told them he had earlier dispatched five USAF armament specialists to Wattay under civilian cover. Seven Air America pilots had previous T-28 experience, and three more could be provided by Bird and Sons, another civilian contract airline.⁶⁹ All needed minor refresher training and checkouts that could easily be handled by Water Pump. If this road were taken, ten additional T-28s would have to be shipped in. Still, Unger did not see how this choice was "any more secure or gets us any less dirty vis-a-vis the Geneva Accords" than using USAF personnel. However, if Washington wanted to substitute Air America pilots, he believed Souvanna would go along.⁷⁰

Turning to reconnaissance, the group wanted Unger to press Souvanna to authorize continuing low-level jet flights. Such missions would pinpoint potential RLAf targets along the Paksane-Plain of Jars axis. Then, too, they would uplift FAR morale, particularly when flown in partnership with the T-28s as Unger had proposed. The prime minister should be reminded

66. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1338, May 17, 1964, 1350, May 18, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok to AmEmb Vientiane, 308, May 17, 1964.

67. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1350, May 18, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 181800Z May 64.

68. Msg, Washington to Vientiane (telecon), 181600Z May 64.

69. Bird and Sons' contract was with the Royal Laotian Government, not with the Agency for International Development that had Air America's. Bird did not possess cargo carriers like the C-46 or C-47. It relied on the smaller Helio Courier and Pilatus Porter aircraft that were better suited for short-takeoff-and-landing airfields. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011237Z Aug 63.]

70. Msg, Washington to Vientiane (telecon), 181600Z May 64.; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1362, May 19, 1964.

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that aerial reconnaissance was a noncombat operation that could furnish him facts he could no longer get through the ICC. Unger should be aware—but not tell Souvanna—that this afforded a golden opportunity to route the planes over the Ho Chi Minh Trail on their way north. The need for pictures of the infiltration net into South Vietnam was termed acute. Bundy also wanted to know if it mattered whether Air Force RF-101s or Navy AD-3s did the job.⁷¹

Unger was still unenthusiastic about the aerial reconnaissance proposal, yet was willing to give it another try with Souvanna. Since the chief motive for this reconnaissance was to photograph the Ho Chi Minh Trail, not to detect enemy forces on the Plain of Jars, Unger stressed that these aircraft would have no real value for the prime minister and could have severe repercussions for him if the Pathet Lao publicly protested. He promised to do his best, asserting that even if Souvanna acquiesced, “he won’t like it.” As far as aircraft went, the ambassador had no preference.⁷²

To save time, the Joint Chiefs directed Admiral Felt to transfer five T-28s and five RT-28s, with full armament and camera systems, from South Vietnam to Udom. The former VNAF aircraft were to be repainted with Laotian markings, but Cochran would not turn them over to the RLG until told to do so by Ambassador Unger. Checkouts of Air America pilots in the T-28s were also authorized. In addition, Able Mable at Tan Son Nhut and U.S. naval units operating off Vietnam were alerted to be prepared to fly reconnaissance missions over Laos the following day.⁷³

Early the next morning (May 19, 1964), Unger again broached the jet reconnaissance question to Souvanna. As instructed, he made no mention of flights in the Laotian corridor. He later reported that the prime minister “looked somewhat troubled” but after some thought said, “If they insist, I would not oppose, but they must take full responsibility.” Souvanna did not comment on the point that these aircraft, albeit American, would not be engaged in combat. He expressed little enthusiasm for U.S. civilian pilots in T-28s and vetoed outright the proposal that Thai pilots with civilian Laotian papers fly the planes. Consequently, Unger asked Washington to hold up the reconnaissance until he could assess T-28 results and the possibility of using the RT-28s coming from South Vietnam.⁷⁴

The flights were not held up—once Souvanna’s permission was in hand, Washington wasted no time in launching the alerted reconnaissance aircraft. That same day, Able Mable RF-101s flew low-level “show of force” missions along the Laotian panhandle (reconnaissance over North Vietnam or west of 105° E was forbidden). The State Department announced that the flights were justified because of the long-standing refusal of the communists to permit ICC inspection of their territory. The photos, however, did not disclose any targets worth striking.⁷⁵

That evening, Unger and chargé Chadboum dined with Souvanna and other Western diplomats. To their surprise, Souvanna began speaking “in stinging terms” of a Pathet Lao betrayal and the losses recently suffered by neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars. Apparently, he had just received a message from Souphanouvong denying any Pathet Lao role whatsoever in the recent fighting, and his other diplomatic undertakings had not borne fruit. Earlier in the day, the Soviet ambassador had told him that his country was washing its hands of Laos and would not

71. See note 68.

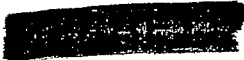
72. See note 68.

73. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 6379, May 19, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269.

74. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1355, May 19, 1964.

75. Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269; 1st Lt Robert L. McNaughton, *Yankee Team, May 1964–June 1965* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 2. Apparently these pictures were of so little value that COMUSMACV neglected to send them to Vientiane. Unger quickly made it known that he expected all prints to be sent to the embassy for interpretation. [Msg, retransmitted by JCS to White House and SECSTATE, 210819Z May 64.]

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pressure the Pathet Lao to return to Vientiane or to their former positions on the plain. Several times Souvanna said it seemed to him that force was all that was left. He became so distraught that he pointedly asked Unger what was the United States waiting for. Why didn't it bomb North Vietnam and communist China? The ambassador countered with the proposal to augment the RLAF with additional T-28s flown by American [redacted] pilots. Souvanna unhesitatingly approved.⁷⁶

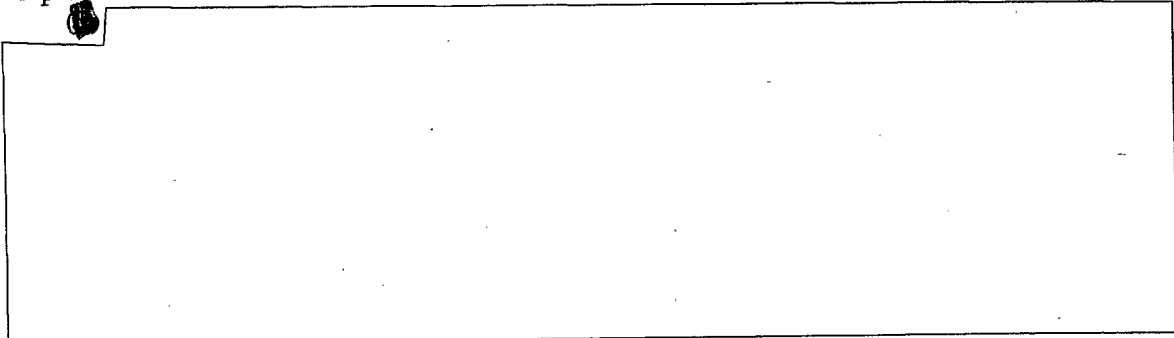
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Owing to the prime minister's attitude change and his own conviction that it would take a concrete show of force to dissuade the communists, Unger now withdrew any previous reservations or objections to low-level jet reconnaissance. In fact, embassy attachés would soon forward to CINCPAC priority areas to be photographed. Until the T-28s could mount follow-up strikes, however, Unger wanted no reconnaissance. Washington did not heed the ambassador's wishes, and another effort was mounted the next day by Able Mable and U.S. Navy RF-8As from the USS *Kitty Hawk*. Again, there was little significant photography.⁷⁷

By this time, Kong Le's situation was considered so critical that reconnaissance was scheduled for May 21 over the Plain of Jars and the roads leading to it from North Vietnam. Pathet Lao forces were reported west of the new neutralist headquarters at Muong Soui near the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. If Muong Soui were lost, the neutralist army for all practical purposes would disappear and the neutralist political party would probably end as well. The Pathet Lao would likely wind up controlling all of northern Laos. The ambassador saw the small T-28 force as the one effective deterrent to a communist takeover of the area.⁷⁸

Time was now urgent. Almost from the minute the first group of former VNAF T-28s touched down at Udon on May 20, Water Pump personnel began training the five Air America pilots Unger selected. In light of their past experience in fighters (all were former U.S. servicemen), just a minimum checkout in the T-28 and a few passes over the practice bombing range were given. By May 23, the pilots were judged operationally capable but with varying degrees of proficiency in ordnance delivery. To reduce exposure, the crews and aircraft would stay overnight at Udon in place of Vientiane. Each morning, the unarmed T-28s would fly to Wattay for refueling and ordnance loading by Water Pump specialists. A rudimentary air operations center (AOC) was set up in a rice warehouse belonging to Air America to provide centralized control of the augmented air resources. The pilots were briefed at the AOC by the air commandos on the targets furnished by the air attaché and the Controlled American Source representative.⁷⁹



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76. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1368, 1369, May 20, 1964.

77. Msgs, AmEmb to SECSTATE, 1370, 1373, May 20, 1964; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269; McNaughton, p

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78. Kenneth Sams, *Escalation of the War in Southeast Asia, July-December 1964* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1965), p 3; msg, CJCS to CINCPAC, 201653Z May 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 211314Z May 64.

79. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1034, May 20, 1964.

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On May 21 and 22, reconnaissance was flown over the Plain of Jars, apparently with good results. Kong Le commented on the upsurge in morale when his troops first detected the RF-101s dipping low over their positions. A U.S. observer at the scene said the neutralists literally jumped up and down with joy when they saw the USAF planes. The battlefield reverted to calm the next day, but on the 24th the Pathet Lao resumed pressuring Kong Le. The neutralist general was rumored ready to abandon Muong Soui and retreat into the surrounding hills. With two T-28s down for maintenance, the RLAf only had four available. Souvanna phoned Ambassador Unger, seeking to help Kong Le with air strikes. Unger explained that [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to do anything quickly, he would have to use Air America personnel. Souvanna hesitated. After his dinner with Unger on May 19, he began to have doubts about letting these pilots fly Laotian T-28s. Even so, the desperate conditions at Muong Soui impelled him to approve the use of American pilots.⁸¹

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The following day, the Air America pilots flew ten sorties, mostly armed reconnaissance along Route 7 in the Plain of Jars. The road was cratered in several spots, but attempts to create rock slides and destroy bridges with five-hundred-pound bombs proved fruitless. Unger, present at Wattay when the afternoon sorties touched down, was distressed when he saw the numerous bullet holes in the T-28s. Antiaircraft fire, apparently unknown to the crews, had spattered several of the planes during their bombing/strafing runs. This led Unger to stop the use of Air America pilots. He feared not only the loss of T-28s and crews but exposure of such combat operations to the press, ICC, and other embassies. From his Wattay visit, the ambassador concluded that in the long run it would be most difficult to keep these activities secret.⁸² He also temporarily closed the AOC.⁸³

Now, and apparently without touching base with Colonel Law, his Army attaché, Ambassador Unger called for limited U.S. Army intervention to restore conditions on the Plain of Jars to what they were before May 16. The ambassador envisioned a short campaign; once the neutralists were back in control of the area, the U.S. troops would withdraw. He likened this action to that taken by President Eisenhower in Lebanon during 1958. Unger frankly admitted that the enemy could escalate or hit another area; Souvanna might not see it through; and the enemy would reoccupy the Plain of Jars immediately after the U.S. forces withdrew. Nevertheless, he believed that unless such action took place, neutralism would be destroyed as a force that could stand up to the communists and bring peace to Laos.⁸⁴

80. [REDACTED] Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1971, May 21, 1964, 1998, May 22, 1964; AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1382, May 21, 1964; MSgt Robert T. Helmka and TSgt Beverly Hale, *USAF Operations from Thailand, 1964-1965* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 31.

81. [REDACTED] Msgs, ARMA-Vientiane to DA, CX-233, May 22, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 221207Z May 64, 240956Z May 64; memo, Richard M. Helms, Dep Dir/Plans, CIA, to McGeorge Bundy, Jr., Gen Maxwell D. Taylor, USA, William P. Bundy, John T. McNaughton, and Brig Gen Lucius D. Clay, Jr., subj: [REDACTED] Assessment of Situation in Plain of Jars and Immediate Requirement to Bolster Friendly Forces in Laos, May 23, 1964.

82. [REDACTED] If queried by the press, Unger intended denying U.S. pilots ever took part in such actions. This would follow the desires of Souvanna who, only a few days before, had suggested Unger do as he did: say nothing. In this respect he was merely copying the communists—"They don't say anything or when they do, they lie." [Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1442, Mar 27, 1964, and 221207Z May 64.] The State Department cautioned against issuing a flat denial because someday the facts might be known and embassy credibility would suffer. If it ever became known (and State thought that highly unlikely), Souvanna could issue a statement saying the gravity of the situation on the Plain of Jars forced the RLG to contract temporarily the services of a few civilian pilots. Then, at his discretion, Unger could confirm that the foreigners hired were Americans. [Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1093, May 28, 1964.]

83. [REDACTED] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1442, May 27, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

84. [REDACTED] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1430, May 25, 1964 [retransmitted by SECSTATE to White House (McGeorge Bundy), 260053Z May 64].

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