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### The Pace Quickens: Summer 1964

● Tyrrell and Cochran knew it would take cooperation and coordination between air and ground units or Operation Triangle would bog down and fail. Cochran, "to educate the ground troops up there on how to control air a little bit," sent two of his USAF pilots to Muong Soui and Vang Vieng to work as Forward Air Controllers (FACs) with the neutralists. They flew O-1s and occasionally a Controlled American Source C-45. Fearing that one of these planes would be shot down and American participation disclosed, Ambassador Unger ordered the Water Pump FACs to orbit away from the strike area when working the T-28s. With this restraint, the commandos had to abandon controlling the air strikes. Thao Ma then reversed himself and asked for a U-17, so the RLAF could furnish forward air control for Kong Le's troops. On June 18, he received such an aircraft equipped with UHF, VHF, and FM radios. Thao Ma would not base the plane at Muong Soui, fearing the neutralists would harm its crew. A compromise was reached with the RLAF FACs (such as they were) operating from Muong Soui during the day but remaining overnight at Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng (Lima Site 98/20A). Thao Ma also agreed to an RLAF pilot/neutralist observer team in a second U-17. After this plane was shipped in, Thao Ma abruptly turned it over to the neutralists (who could not fly it) and again refused to join the FAC effort. To save the program, two neutralist officers were recruited by Kong Le to fly as backseaters in [redacted] T-28s.<sup>56</sup>

● Tyrrell and Law flew to Savannakhet to confer with Phoumi Nosavan, hoping he could pressure Thao Ma to cooperate. Since Sarit Thanarat's death in December 1963, Phoumi's control of the FAR had been slowly slipping away. Even so, he remained the most powerful figure in the army, and the bond between him and Thao Ma was as strong as ever. At the meeting, Tyrrell cited Thao Ma's failure to supply ALOs, FACs, or strike aircraft for the neutralists and the failure to provide air support for the recent probes by the Meo south of Xieng Khouangville. Because Thao Ma's shortsightedness was hamstringing military operations, Phoumi promised to try and convince him to lay aside his fears and petty jealousies. In spite of Phoumi's pronouncements, no RLAF FACs, ALOs, or liaison aircraft were furnished the government ground forces. Thao Ma's sole concession was to let one neutralist or Meo officer fly in the backseat of his second U-17.<sup>57</sup>

● The RLAF chief's intransigence—so similar to Phoumi's prior to Nam Tha—did not deter the FAR General Staff (but they would remember Thao Ma's attitude). On June 23, they firmed up plans for Operation Triangle. The plan envisioned a three-pronged attack to secure Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang and that part of Route 7 running east from the Sala Phou Khoun road junction to Muong Soui. The initial troop deployment would begin on July 1 and the main assault six days later. Ten battalions would be involved, including the three battalions of GM 16 (eighteen hundred men) airlifted from southern Laos. The commitment of southern troops was noteworthy for it marked the first time they had been deployed outside their local military regions since 1962. Opposing them was an enemy force now said to have dwindled to just three battalions, due to logistic troubles brought on by the monsoons. The FAR plan specified prior Yankee Team reconnaissance and considerable airlift, with subsequent resupply by Air America. More important, it included extra USAF armed reconnaissance missions and American pilots in T-28s.<sup>58</sup>

● The State Department opposed Operation Triangle; the troops could be better used defending Attopeu and Muong Soui. In particular, State had little enthusiasm for employing American air and now sensed danger in the Laotians "getting out in front of us [rather] than vice versa." As an alternate to Triangle, it proposed holding the line at Muong Soui. To do this (and

13th AF 220340Z Jun 64, AIRA to Vientiane to DIA, CX-332, Jun 26, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

56. Msg, AIRA Laos to 13th AF, 220340Z Jun 64; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

57. Msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, CSAF, et al, 230700Z Jun 64.

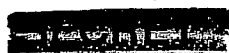
58. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb London, Paris, et al, 7035, Jun 27, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, et al, 231350Z Jun 64.

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The War in Northern Laos

soothe Souvanna's feelings), State suggested giving the RLAF more T-28s.

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Ambassador Unger dissented. After closely examining the general staff's plan, he admitted it was fraught with danger, might not succeed, "and even if it does . . . it may bring on to our heads and those of the Lao leaders bitter criticism." He conceded the plan entailed extensive U.S. airlift that would highlight the American presence and definitely violate the Geneva accords. However, the ambassador contended that Laos could no longer remain free by the FAR holding the line and staying on the defensive. If Washington did not get behind Triangle, Souvanna would take it "as a clear sign we do not mean all the recent strong statements supporting a free Laos against a communist takeover."<sup>60</sup> Unger was saying it was time for everyone to fish or cut bait.

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To ensure the FAR General Staff's definition of armed reconnaissance was the same as his, Unger visited Souvanna on June 26. The prime minister was first asked in general terms if he would approve Yankee Team escorts for purposes beyond retaliation or suppression, for example, cutting Route 7 and supporting Kong Le at Muong Soui. Souvanna said he would prefer to see escorted reconnaissance do whatever it could to cut Route 7 east of Khangkhai or east of Ban Ban. In other words, photo reconnaissance could be used as a cover for armed reconnaissance in certain circumstances. Around Muong Soui, he favored RLAF T-28s, but if a major Pathet Lao/NVA attack erupted, he would welcome the overt support of American jet fighters. Unger observed that, if he judged Souvanna correctly, the prince would let U.S. planes work areas where they were not likely to be seen by many people or where it would be hard for the Pathet Lao to prove U.S. participation.<sup>61</sup> Unger asked if the prime minister would consent to the RLAF dispensing napalm to repel a Pathet Lao assault on Kong Le's headquarters. Souvanna said yes, if genuine military targets were struck. Unger should further confine these missions to the most experienced pilots to avoid short rounds. With Souvanna's approval for napalm, the ambassador again asked Washington for discretionary power to give napalm to the RLAF in case of a sizable new attack by the Pathet Lao, commenting that napalm was the best antipersonnel weapon available. Without it, the T-28s of necessity would resort to high dive angles for bomb release and probably suffer crippling losses from the burgeoning AA fire on the Plain of Jars.<sup>62</sup>

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Previously, Colonel Law had visited Muong Soui and, as usual, found the neutralists incapable of serving their pieces. As a stopgap, he sent three assistant attachés (artillerists) to Muong Soui to train Kong Le's gunners as best they could in gun emplacement, targeting, and fire control. However, Law felt that the best solution was to import [redacted] gunners. Souvanna was lukewarm to [redacted] gunners, favoring the use of the FAR or French Military Mission personnel. When Unger pointed out that FAR gun crews were no better and that General Lancrenon had forbidden his people from engaging in any operation remotely resembling combat,

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While Washington was digesting this flood of information from Unger, Admiral Felt informed the Joint Chiefs that the VNAF A-1 conversion program was proceeding so smoothly (the VNAF now had eighty A-1s)<sup>64</sup> that surplus T-28s could be turned over to the Laotians at

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59. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1250, Jun 24, 1964.  
60. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1694, Jun 25, 1964.  
61. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1704, Jun 26, 1964; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Recce Laos, Jun 29, 1964.  
62. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1709, Jun 26, 1964.  
63. [redacted] Ibid.  
64. [redacted] Apparently, someone suggested using VNAF A-1s on the Plain of Jars. Felt was opposed since it would dilute the South Vietnam air effort and open the door to further charges of U.S. intervention.

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once. Felt wanted to give the RLAF fifteen more T-28s, lifting its number to thirty-five. If these planes were pooled with Water Pump's four, the T-28s totaled thirty-nine. The RLAF had thirteen qualified fighter pilots and Unger had [redacted] six Air America pilots under his control. With a 75 percent in-commission rate, the Laotians would have twenty-nine T-28s matching twenty-nine pilots. Felt warned that parting with Water Pump's four planes would halt the training of the ten Laotian pilots due to graduate on August 9.

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Felt likewise make it plain that if the United States meant to use its air power overtly, "We must not get target fixation in Laos," but be prepared to go against North Vietnam, implement OPlan 32, and "carry it through to the end." CINCPAC correctly noted, "Once the U.S. takes offensive action in Laos in isolation from protecting recon aircraft we have completely and publicly abrogated the Geneva Accords." Because the Laotians had little training in joint air/ground operations, Felt wanted air power used for interdiction against fixed targets rather than for close air support. Last, he repeated that if Washington decided to deal itself into this hand by furnishing air strikes, it must consider North Vietnamese targets and be ready to call any bluff.<sup>66</sup>

The new information from Unger, chiefly Souvanna's comments, and the availability of surplus T-28s provoked second thoughts on Operation Triangle by high U.S. government officials. On June 26, Unger and Felt were advised that President Johnson was reweighing the Laos situation and neither should expect a decision for a couple of days. Yet, it was obvious Johnson was tilting toward Triangle

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Hence, Water Pump's T-28s would not be needed and the training program could continue unimpeded. Further, CINCPAC was to earmark three C-7s and three C-123s for loan to Air America. These transports would move GM 16 from southern Laos to Muong Soui. More significant, Unger was given the long-sought authority to introduce napalm for RLAF employment in case the enemy mounted a new attack. He was told that if Washington decided to back Triangle, it desired the U.S. hand to show as little as possible. Unless there was a major attack on Muong Soui, USAF or Air America pilots in T-28s were ruled out.<sup>67</sup>

The next day, the State Department and the Joint Chiefs addressed the problem of committing American air power at Muong Soui. They believed such air strikes "with or without recon cover" would not save the village and would be hard to control unless reliable FACs and FAGs were brought in. There was concern that Souvanna had put too many of his eggs in the airpower basket. Both State and the Pentagon were reluctant to get into any large-scale U.S. air operation around Muong Soui that might fail to blunt the enemy attack. At best, air strikes could hope to cover just the withdrawal and regrouping of the defenders. "Punitive strikes," meaning armed reconnaissance against Pathet Lao targets along Route 7, was a different story. Such actions would "punish the other side," show American determination, and avoid deploying air in a vain attempt to hold Kong Le's headquarters. If the neutralists became scattered or Triangle's three columns could not link up, more sustained and extensive "penalty bombings" would be weighed.<sup>68</sup>

65. [redacted] Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 260110Z Jun 64 (retransmitted as msg, JCS to White House and SECSTATE, 260532Z Jun 64); memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: T-28s for Laos, Jun 26, 1964.

66. [redacted] Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 260707Z Jun 64.

67. [redacted] Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1265, Jun 26, 1964, JCS to CINCPAC, 7129, Jun 27, 1964; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Logistical Support Laos, Jun 24, 1964.

68. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1267, Jun 27, 1964.

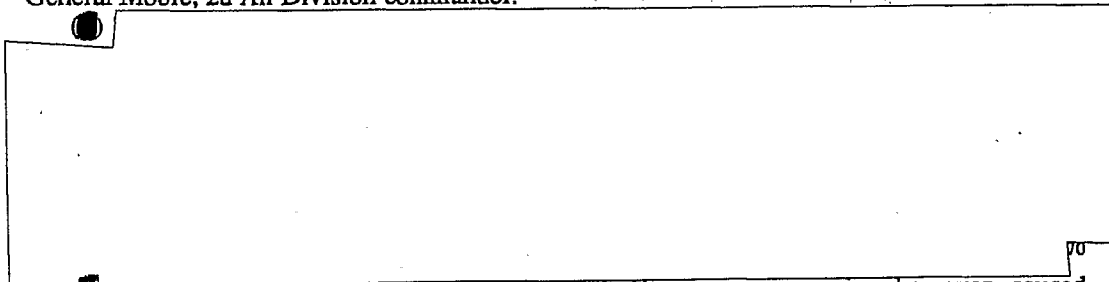
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## The War in Northern Laos

On June 29, 1964, the U.S. government formally endorsed Operation Triangle. Yankee Team missions over the Plain of Jars resumed and included night reconnaissance east of Muong Soui. The escorting fighters were allowed to hit any enemy activity detected during such flights, which opened the door to armed recon missions. U.S. Army and Air Force personnel were also allowed to serve as advisors to the Laotian troops, and the ambassador immediately detailed five artillery officers from DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to neutralist artillery at Muong Soui and Vang Vieng. Three USAF detachment members from Udorn were dispatched to Muong Soui, Vang Vieng, and Luang Prabang as "attachés" to work with the three columns as ALOs controlling air strikes. An air operations officer and an intelligence officer were added to the Vientiane AOC by General Moore, 2d Air Division commander.<sup>69</sup>



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Operation Triangle was set to go on July 6. Heavy monsoon rains, however, caused numerous delays, and only one hundred of the sixteen hundred men from GM 16 could be airlifted from Pakse and Attopeu to Muong Soui. The [redacted] battery, flown in by Air America's new C-7 Caribous, was the last unit to arrive before the field was closed. The weather also hampered other air operations. The RLAF, which had been flying between twenty and thirty T-28 sorties a day in and around the Plain of Jars, was limited to three on July 8 due to the rain and low visibility. In spite of this downturn, the RLAF lost two T-28s to enemy ground fire during the first week of July.<sup>70</sup>

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On July 11, the weather began to clear, and by the 15th, all of GM 16 was positioned at Muong Soui. The next day, a Pathet Lao regiment, supported by 85-mm and 105-mm guns, attacked the headquarters but was beaten back when strafed by the T-28s. Government forces counterattacked on the 19th, aided by [redacted] Laotian artillery that expended nearly twelve hundred 105-mm and 155-mm rounds. Also out in force, twelve T-28s flew thirty-two sorties and dropped sixty-four 500-pound and sixty-four 250-pound bombs. Faced for the first time with a well-planned defense that knitted artillery to heavy T-28 strikes, the enemy fled eastward toward Phou Kout Mountain.<sup>71</sup>

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Densely covered with scrub pine and rising about thirteen hundred feet above the surrounding terrain, Phou Kout dominated the eastern approaches to the Muong Soui valley. Government forces wanted to capture the mountain because it was an ideal observation post for correcting artillery fire and conducting air-ground liaison. Phou Kout was held by two or three companies of dug-in enemy infantry, and its approaches were sowed with antipersonnel mines.<sup>72</sup>

During the next week, two assaults on the hill by government troops were thrown back. A third attack on July 25 was preceded by two days of heavy T-28 strikes. This time the 2d

69. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1270, Jun 29, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 10, Jul 2, 1964.

70. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2244, Jun 29, 1964, 55, Jul 13, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 16, Jul 2, 1964.

71. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 27, 48, Jul 8, 1964.

72. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 91, Jul 14, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-331, Jul 20, 1964; rpt, MACV J-2 (Intel), Monthly Intelligence Summary—Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Aug 16, 1964.

73. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-345, Jul 29, 1964.

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Parachute Battalion carried to the summit but, once there, believed it had fallen into a trap and hastily evacuated. A distraught General Amkha now insisted the hill was occupied by North Vietnamese Army troops on orders to hold to the last man. The neutralist general promised a fourth assault in a few days. If it did not succeed, Amkha predicted to Colonel Law that all would be lost.<sup>74</sup>

Amkha's account was so disjointed that the Army attaché doubted if the 2d Parachute Battalion ever reached the summit, and the general had not adequately explain how his men became entrapped. Apparently, the paratroopers expected the T-28s to kill all the enemy, leaving them only a leisurely walk up the mountainside to the top. Law later discovered that Amkha had turned down artillery support for the advancing infantry, claiming the T-28s would suffice. It was the Army attaché's conclusion that after reaching the top and finding the communists very much alive, the 2d parachute battalion panicked and bolted back down the mountain. This was Amkha's "trap." Just the same, the neutralist general's somber mood could not be discounted. Law warned that one more unsuccessful attack on Phou Kout might spell the end of this phase of Operation Triangle.<sup>75</sup>

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Law and Tyrrell believed a fourth ground assault on Phou Kout could prevail if it came hard on the heels of a T-28 napalm drop. Ambassador Unger was persuaded by their arguments. Dropping napalm might escalate the fighting at Muong Soui, but Unger thought it might deter Pathet Lao attacks in other areas, for example, an attack against one of the columns advancing from Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng. However, once the napalm genie got out of the bottle, Unger knew he would be under intense pressure to employ the ordnance elsewhere. Its use would also be grist for the enemy's propaganda mill—and even America's allies might see it as escalation. There seemed to be no clear-cut solution. Unger could only point out that Phou Kout was a military target and the United States controlled the napalm. Any future decision on its use rested solely with him and Washington. Having obtained Souvanna's assent, Unger meant to have only the most experienced Thai pilots deliver the ordnance. With these considerations, Unger asked for Washington's approval.<sup>76</sup>

Before receiving Washington's confirmation, Unger attended a reception where British Ambassador Donald C. Hopson relayed his Foreign Office's version of a recent conversation on napalm held at the Department of State between Ambassador Denis A. Greenhill and William P. Bundy. At this July 22 meeting, Bundy told Greenhill that discretionary authority to use napalm was going to be given Unger in connection with the fighting at Muong Soui. Bundy stressed that this would not be implemented unless Souvanna said so, although the prime minister had previously agreed it should be used if needed. The targets, Bundy emphasized, would be strictly military with civilian areas avoided.<sup>77</sup>

Ambassador Greenhill said napalm's use would do more harm than good. He recalled that Robert G. K. Thompson, the noted guerrilla warfare expert from Malaysia, had said that, in South Vietnam, it would be better for the Americans to allow the Viet Cong and Viet Minh to escape into the bush, than to take the chance of injuring civilians with napalm. Greenhill underlined that the communists had already cranked up their propaganda machine and napalm had become a "dirty word." He did add that, since there was proper military justification and it was directed against military targets, dispensing napalm was understandable, especially if Souvanna agreed and was aware of its sensitivity. He cautioned that any military advantage must

74. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-334, Jul 28, 1964.

75. *Ibid.*

76. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 145, Jul 23, 1964.

77. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 152, Jul 23, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 73, Jul 22, 1964.

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always be weighed against possible harm to civilians. Bundy concurred—this was the sole basis on which the United States would consider its use.<sup>78</sup>

● Bundy gathered from his conversation with Greenhill that the British did not relish the United States' employing napalm but would not object if the targets were military and Unger had Souvanna's permission. Apparently, this was not the case. To Unger's surprise, Hopson noted that the Foreign Office saw the same meeting as a statement of Unger's disapproval. They asked that their objections be conveyed to Unger because napalm was peculiarly American, and its use would highlight U.S. shipments of arms to Laos. ("This was the one weapon Churchill had always refused to agree to," Hopson said.) Even though USAF forward air guides would direct the strike and [redacted] pilots would fly the T-28s, the British did not believe [redacted] could be trusted to put the ordnance on strictly military targets. Finally, Foreign Secretary Robert A. Butler was on his way to the Soviet Union to try and convince Khrushchev to support another fourteen-nation conference on Laos. When he got to Moscow, the Foreign Office did not want Butler greeted with the news that the United States had dropped napalm. None of this impressed Unger—he was determined to proceed. He left it up to Washington to placate London.<sup>79</sup>

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● Unwilling to do this, the State Department restrained Unger after Ambassador Greenhill again voiced deep concern over the proposed use of napalm at Phou Kout. When State had given its basic approval for napalm a month earlier, it had considered such international repercussions and concluded that this backlash could be tolerated with Souvanna's approval; it acceded to British wishes at this juncture, since Foreign Office support was needed internationally. A recent Polish proposal for the three Laotian factions to consult prior to a new international conference on Laos was in acute danger of falling through. The United States sanctioned this motion; and Souvanna had gone along, provided the Pathet Lao withdrew from captured territory. (This stipulation was rejected by the Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, and communist Chinese.) Nevertheless, Foreign Secretary Butler hoped to revive the Polish suggestion in Moscow, and Washington suspended consideration of napalm until the outcome of Butler's visit was known. Unger's instructions were modified: Napalm could not be dispensed without Washington's approval, except in an emergency or where a specific action already under way would otherwise fail. In any event, Souvanna's consent was also needed.<sup>80</sup>

● Admiral Sharp, who became CINCPAC on June 30, 1964, following Admiral Felt's retirement, was displeased with this decision. From the moment he assumed his new command, Sharp had pushed for napalm and for USAF SAW pilots in combat, but this suggestion was again vetoed (July 24) by the Defense and State Departments. He argued that the T-28s were a deterrent, but they had not produced a decisive impact on Pathet Lao offensive operations. Sharp did not contend that the T-28s alone could defeat the enemy. Instead, he envisioned them tipping the scales toward the government, if allowed to employ the full range of weapons available, meaning napalm. Before bringing in U.S. fighter-bombers to knock out communist artillery and antiaircraft sites, Sharp urged "we give the RLAF a good shot at hacking it." This included dropping napalm on targets that could not be destroyed with iron bombs.<sup>81</sup>

● From Luang Prabang, Souvanna requested on July 26 requested that Unger release napalm to the RLAF so the FAR General Staff could plan its use in the fourth assault against Phou Kout. Citing London's objections and the current discussions in Moscow between Khrushchev and Butler, Unger demurred; and Souvanna withdrew the request.<sup>82</sup>

78. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 73, Jul 22, 1964.

79. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 129, Jul 21, 1964, 152, Jul 23, 1964.

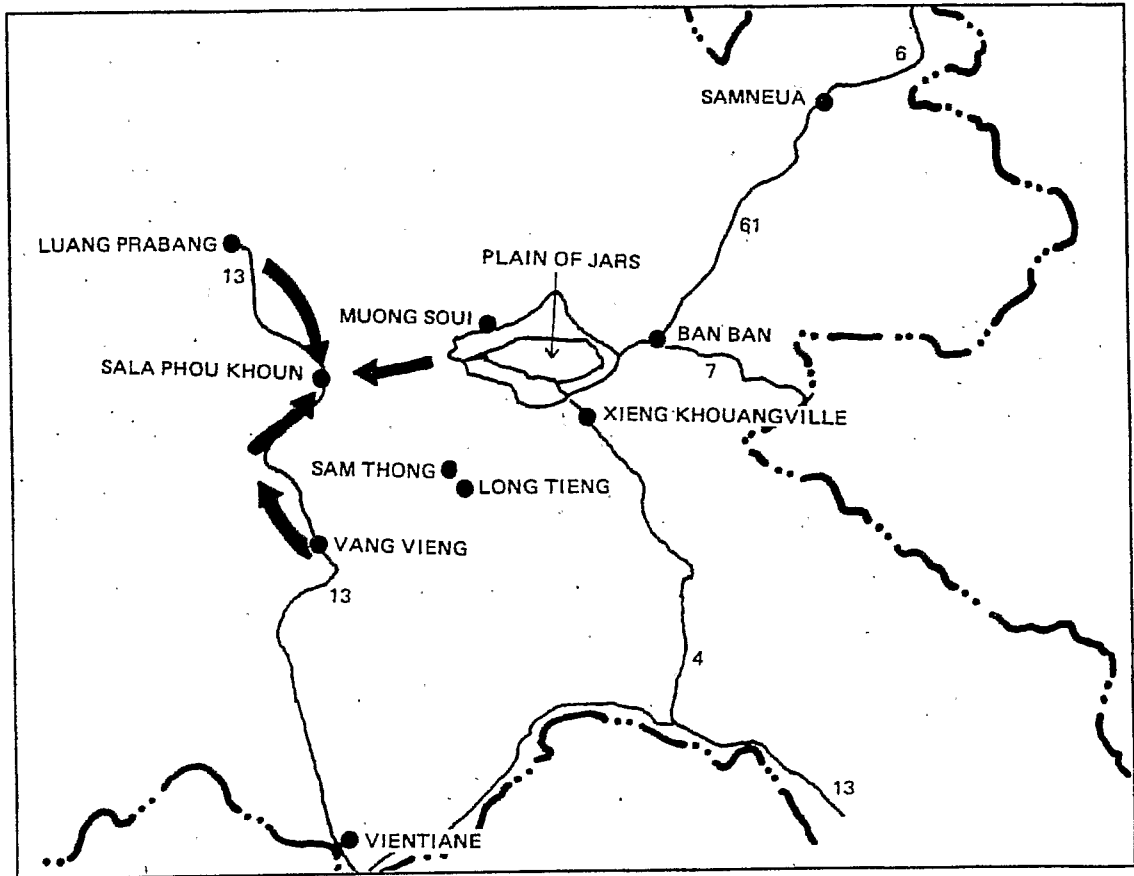
80. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 82, Jul 23, 1964, 92, Jul 27, 1964.

81. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 240215Z Jul 64.

82. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 164, Jul 26, 1964.

Meantime, the three columns of Operation Triangle were slowly and cautiously advancing toward their rendezvous at Sala Phou Koun. The columns were augmented with U.S. Army advisors (furnished by CINCUSARPAC from the 25th Infantry Division), USAF air liaison officer teams from Water Pump, and indigenous forward air controllers. The latter flew two U-17s from Muong Soui and Vang Vieng, carrying ground force observers in the backseats. The

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FACs used ARC-44 and PRC-10 radios for air/ground communication but passed their air support requests back to the USAF ALOs by UHF radio or courier. The ALOs were equipped with vehicles, bilingual radio operators, and appropriate communications equipment. The ALOs accompanied the ground force commanders and relayed strike requests to Colonel Tyrrell by radio. He, in turn, maintained communication with the air operations center in Vientiane via telephone. From the AOC, the T-28s were fragg<sup>83</sup> against the FAC requests.<sup>84</sup>

On July 25, at the height of the monsoon, there was an unexpected break in the weather, and the RLAf flew fifty-nine sorties against preselected targets along Route 13 as far north as

83. That is, fragmentary operations orders were issued for these missions.

84. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to CHJUSMAGTHAI, 291149Z Jun 64, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 55, Jul 16, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 165, Jul 26, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.