

The Pace Quickens: Summer 1964

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. [redacted]

(b) (1)
(b) (3)
(S)

CIA &
STATE

(b) (1)
(b) (3)
(S)

CIA

[redacted] 65
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.⁶⁶

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 [redacted]

(b) (1)
(b) (3)
(S)

CIA

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.⁶⁷

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.⁶⁸

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.

(b) (1)
(b) (3)
(S)

CIA