

The War in Northern Laos

not want the ordnance used inconsequentially but reserved (as Law recommended) for a time when it would make a deep psychological impression on the communists. Unger thought a renewed Pathet Lao/NVA attack on Muong Soui would be a more opportune time to dispense it, and Souvanna agreed.⁹⁵

The situation at Phou Kout was resolved on August 18 when the neutralists pulled back from all previously won positions amid rumors that considerable North Vietnamese reinforcements were moving up. Despite Kong Le's assertion that the communists would now mount an all-out assault against his headquarters, the military situation stayed static for the rest of the month, except for the periodic artillery exchanges and T-28 sorties whenever the weather permitted.⁹⁶

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As neutralist troops fell back from Phou Kout, enemy gunners on the mountain's western slope began taking a toll of low-flying planes. A T-28 [redacted] was shot down, as was the Air America H-34 rescue helicopter. Both crashes were in rugged, heavily forested, and sparsely populated areas. An F-100 flying rescue combat air patrol was likewise lost—the first USAF jet downed in Laos—but the pilot was rescued after bailing out over Thailand. Ambassador Unger deemed the situation so critical that he ordered the two Air America and four [redacted] T-28 pilots to fly cover during the second attempt to pick up the downed crewmembers. Since the heavy ground cover concealed the hostile guns and rendered normal fire suppression ineffective, Unger decided to use napalm. This momentous decision by the ambassador mirrored discussions with Tyrrell and other pilots. They persuaded him the only hope for rescue lay in placing napalm on part of the enemy-held ridgeline. There was no time for Unger to clear his decision with Washington.⁹⁷

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Nevertheless, napalm was not dispensed. Air Force jets on rescue combat air patrol supplied sufficient suppressive fire, and the airborne rescue commander judged napalm unnecessary. Unfortunately, the search and rescue was only partially successful. The severely wounded and burned H-34 pilot was saved, but his Filipino mechanic was killed in the crash [redacted]. After bailing out, they were last seen taking to the bush, and most observers feared they had been either captured or killed. Unger afterwards canceled the SAR, withdrawing the authorization for napalm and for Air America pilots in T-28s.⁹⁸

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Two days later (August 20), another pair of T-28s were shot down. Unger instantly sought formal State and Defense approval to use Air America T-28 pilots in recovery operations. He argued that, without efficient search and rescue, the morale and effectiveness of aircrews would sag. Few would fly if they believed the embassy was not prepared to take all reasonable measures to rescue them once they were down. In addition, recent experience showed that the two crucial factors making or breaking search and rescue were reaction time—both of the rescue force as well as the enemy—and the coordination of the rescue aircraft. Apart from the professional USAF rescue force, Air America personnel were better suited for the task than [redacted] the Laotians [redacted] because they spoke English and could be properly coordinated by control aircraft. Therefore, Unger wanted discretionary authority to use these men whenever he felt they were indispensable to the rescue. He further promised to seek specific permission from Washington if time and conditions permitted. He also asked for standby authority to utilize napalm as a suppressive ordnance, provided it posed no clear risk to civilians.⁹⁹

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95. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 277, Aug 9, 1964.

96. () Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CS-401, Aug 18, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 381, Aug 30, 1964.

97. () Msgs, 3d TFW ADVON to JCS, 181535Z Aug 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 315, Aug 18, 1964, 325, Aug 19, 1964, 316, 317, Aug 18, 1964.

98. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 316, Aug 18, 1964.

99. () Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 325, Aug 19, 1964, 337, Aug 20, 1964.

The Pace Quickens: Summer 1964

Unger's dual request was staunchly supported by Admiral Sharp, the Joint Chiefs, and (to the surprise of some) the State Department.¹⁰⁰ On August 26, President Johnson assented to the use of Air America pilots if Unger said they were indispensable to the success of search and rescue, with the understanding he would seek advance Washington authorization whenever the situation allowed. No approval was given to employ napalm as a suppressive weapon.¹⁰¹

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At the Secretary of Defense Conference held in Honolulu on June 1-2, McNamara had directed the Air Force to furnish five excess C-47s to the Military Assistance Program, Laos, at no cost. Admiral Felt suggested on June 10 that the transports, based at Tachikawa Air Base, Japan, be transferred to Air America until Laotian pilots and crews could be trained at Savannakhet. Ambassador Unger demurred: Air America's maintenance facilities were saturated and training inside Laos by the special air warfare detachment was forbidden by the Geneva accords. He wanted the aircraft handed over to the RLAF, but he admitted that the air arm could not operate or maintain them. Just the same, Thao Ma had sixteen pilots and fifty-two student mechanics available if training could begin in the next month or two.

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This counterproposal was acceptable to Felt.¹⁰²

Although this base was considered a poor choice because of crowded quarters and messing facilities, tents were a solution.

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¹⁰³ Due to limited manpower, placing pilots in the transportation fleet crimped the T-28 program. At the end of July, the RLAF had just fifteen T-28 pilots, with five more scheduled to complete training mid-September. Another four were undergoing training in the United States but would not finish until August 1965. This mostly exhausted the supply of potential Laotian T-28 candidates.

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At this time, there were eighteen with nine more entering Water Pump training in September. Even so, to keep a pool of twenty pilots, with tours averaging two to three months, a new group had to begin training each month. Moreover, since Water Pump was due to rotate back to Hurlburt in September, its deployment would have to be extended.¹⁰⁴

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100. William P. Bundy was an exception. It was well known he opposed giving Unger standing authority to use Air America pilots. Incredibly, Bundy suggested using RLAF C-47 pilots instead. [Memo, William P. Bundy for SECSTATE, subj: Laos Contingency Action: For Your Luncheon Meeting with the President, n.d.]

101. Memo, John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, to Sp Asst to the Pres for Nat Scty Aff, subj: SAR Operations in Laos, Aug 26, 1964; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 193, Aug 26, 1964.

102. Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 282; msg, CINCPAC to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, 100250Z Jun 64.

103. Msgs, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 270715Z Jun 64, 290830Z Jun 64, JCS to CINCPAC, 262056Z Jun 64, USSTRICOM to CINCPAC, 302325Z Jun 64.

104. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 181054Z Jul 64.

105. [Redacted]

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