

[REDACTED]

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.*

The War in Northern Laos

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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