

[REDACTED]

Into the Shadow of Vietnam

The alert aircraft worked almost daily over the next two weeks. On May 22, three F-4s from Ubon flew close support for FAR troops trying to hold Muong Nga in northern Luang Prabang Province. During the melee that afternoon, a liaison plane was shot down. The next day, four F-105s from Takhli rendezvoused with Victor control as part of the search and rescue effort to locate the pilot. The jets flew high combat air patrol and were to drop ordnance only to protect the SAR H-34s and T-28 low combat air patrol. However, the Victor forward air controller called in the F-105s to destroy a cluster of shacks and "to strike fear into the enemy." The Thunderchiefs unloaded 20-mm cannon fire and fifteen 2.75-inch rockets at what turned out to be friendly villagers and FAR soldiers huddled within. The final toll was thirteen dead and nineteen wounded. Since the jets were under positive control, Sullivan took full blame for the incident; but needless to say, the Air America C-123 pilot was on his way back to the United States within forty-eight hours. It was ironic that, after his considerable doubt over the HU-16 control ships and their procedures, Sullivan suffered his most serious short round at the hands of personnel he believed better suited for SAR work in northern Laos than the Air Force.¹³⁹

In mid-July, the alert jet force was enlarged. At least two, but no more than four, F-105s and F-4s each would be on fifteen-minute alert from sunrise to thirty minutes before sunset. They could be used in Barrel Roll, Steel Tiger, or for SAR rescue combat air patrol missions. The Vientiane embassy made most Bango/Whiplash requests, but airborne aircraft could ask for strikes on targets detected along approved armed reconnaissance routes. (Later, preplanned targets would be added to improve the use of the Bango/Whiplash force.) The Udom ASOC scrambled the fighters, and gave them the mission's radio frequency, rendezvous instructions, and target information. It also sent CINCPAC and the Bangkok embassy a modified OP-01 report whenever the fighters were launched. No ordnance was dropped in close air support strikes unless a target was marked or the fighters were cleared by the T-28 forward air controllers. Communication between T-28 FACs [REDACTED] and strike pilots would be via the HU-16 or Victor C-123. Since the Muong Nga incident, the C-123 had to have an RLAf interpreter on board for all missions. T-28s were not needed if the target was on an approved armed reconnaissance route or if the air attaché at Vientiane said forward air controllers were unavailable.¹⁴⁰

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

This Bango/Whiplash expansion came just in time to support a small RLG wet-season offensive in Military Region II to retake the positions around Samneua lost during January and February 1965. Vang Pao's command post and the starting point for this operation was Na Khang (Lima Site 36). Between it and Lima Site 58 lay Keo Fa Mut, a key hill some six thousand feet high. Recognizing the area's importance, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had set up strong defenses. When the Meo met stiff resistance, more than forty T-28 sorties were flown against this position beginning July 21. These strikes—chiefly with white phosphorous bombs—were controlled by a USAF [REDACTED] air liaison officer team, headed by Capt. Keith R. Grimes. Bango/Whiplash aircraft also hit the hilltop with 750-pound bombs. On July 22, the FAR and Meo seized the south slope. Since monitored radio communications indicated that the two North Vietnamese companies on the summit had been ordered to hold to the last man despite acute shortages of food and ammunition, the T-28s and F-4s continued to pound the hill. On one occasion Captain Grimes used four Navy A-6s that were "wandering around" seeking a suitable target. On July 28, RLG forces took Keo Fa Mut without further resistance. The cost to the Laotians were four dead and thirty-three wounded. On the other hand, eighty-three enemy bodies were found, with about forty more still in

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

139. (S) Msgs, 2d AD to AIG 914, 221752Z May 65, 231404Z May 65, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2558, 231245Z May 65, SECSTATE, 1919, May 25, 1965.
140. (S) Msgs, 2d AD to 23d ABG, et al, 130915Z Jul 65; Fact Sheet, MACV, Bango/Whiplash, Aug 16, 1965.