

## The War in Northern Laos

the T-6 operations marginally. There was no reason to think the Thai would be any more enthusiastic about hitting such targets than would the Laotians. In a very prophetic statement, Brown concluded "we must accept the fact that the war is going to be long and conducted under certain limitations imposed by larger considerations."<sup>37</sup>

On the touchy bombs/napalm question, Brown was supported by Dean Rusk, the new Secretary of State, but opposed by Robert S. McNamara, the new Secretary of Defense. At a March 12 meeting of high State, Defense, and CIA officials, McNamara again stated the long-standing Defense position: the T-6 should be allowed to attack any military target and use whatever ordnance the military men on the scene deemed necessary. Seeing that a meeting was set the next day with President Kennedy to discuss the recent downturn of events in Laos, the conferees agreed it was best to leave the decision to him.<sup>38</sup>

The meeting of March 13 was prompted by the disaster suffered that week by Phoumi's forces. A Pathet Lao counteroffensive from the Plain of Jars swept east and wiped out the gains made by the government forces over the two previous months.<sup>39</sup> These startling enemy advances spurred the Joint Chiefs and the Rostow task force into action. Because the chiefs wanted no part of a limited war like that in Korea, only matériel, financial, and perhaps covert advisory/combat assistance could be given. Three days after the enemy offensive began, the service heads suggested five steps to assist the FAL. First, base sixteen "sterile" B-26 light bombers in Thailand to interdict enemy supply lines, dumps, and installations and contract with Air America to maintain these aircraft. Second, turn over sixteen additional H-34 helicopters to Air America at Udorn, Thailand, as well as four C-130s, three DC-4s, and a C-47. Third, augment FAL artillery support by securing four 105-mm howitzer batteries from Marshal Sarit. Fourth, increase the Meo irregulars from three thousand to four thousand by April 1. Finally, augment both the PEO and the Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI) by one hundred officers and men.<sup>40</sup>

At the March 13 meeting—also attended by Felt and Boyle—President Kennedy approved all of these recommendations under the code word Millpond. The Defense Department was tasked with supplying the CIA with sixteen H-34s for bailment to Air America along with the transport aircraft. For the transports' crews, it was suggested the CIA employ U.S. civilians and Chinese nationalist personnel. Defense was to select sixteen helicopter pilots and furnish maintenance support for the aircraft. Admiral Felt wanted to increase the crew ratio from one pilot per helicopter to two. This was turned down, but another CINCPAC proposal—that the pilots be selected from the Marine Corps—was approved. (As it turned out, half the pilots were Marines with the other half coming from the Army and Navy). Before the leathernecks reported to Laos, however, they were to be sheep-dipped, meaning given civilian clothes, civilian identification, and a suitable cover story.<sup>41</sup>

After their return to Honolulu, Boyle asked Felt if the H-34s might be equipped with rockets and machineguns to deliver suppressive fire in support of the FAL. Deeming the suggestion impractical, CINCPAC pointed out the doubtful advantages of such arming would be more than offset by the decreased lift from the extra weight. He added that the B-26s could supply any suppressive fire needed.<sup>42</sup>

37. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1593, Feb 27, 1961.

38. Memo of conversation, reps fr Dept of State, DOD, CIA, USIA, and White House, subj: Situation in Laos, Mar 12, 1961.

39. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p 132; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 76; Futrell, p 127.

40. Stf study for CJCS, Concept for Recapture of the Plaine des Jarres, Mar 10, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 78-80.

41. *Ibid*; msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 991705, Mar 11, 1961, 991727, Mar 13, 1961.

42. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 79-80.

**Civil War and the Emergence of Air Power**

The B-26 deployment presented problems. Eight of these old World War II/Korean War light bombers were already in [redacted] Taiwan. The Air Force was ready to supply the remainder. Yet, the agency could crew just four of the aircraft and figured it would take from four to eight weeks to train volunteer pilots [redacted]

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On the other hand, USAF volunteers could man four of the bombers in about ten days and all sixteen in two to three weeks. President Kennedy directed the use of USAF personnel who, like the marines, would be sanitized or sheep-dipped. (Eventually, the Air Force furnished all sixteen crews and aircraft.) Disagreement arose within the military over the timing of the first B-26 strikes once the planes were in place. The JCS wanted to have at least eight B-26s in Thailand before any targets were struck. Felt argued their use should not be based on numbers of planes but on the availability of targets, which Boyle had in abundance. All agreed that the first priority should be supply dumps, armor, heavy weapons, and enemy transport. Support of ground forces would be secondary.<sup>43</sup>

CIA

The State Department remained reluctant to introduce this new equipment, terming it escalation. Secretary Rusk, in particular, was not as enthusiastic as others over air power's value. Earlier, at a January 23 meeting, he had voiced the view that the Royal Laotian Government controlled the large cities, road junctions, and supply centers; and these offered far better targets for bombing than enemy forces operating in mountainous, jungle terrain. Drawing on his World War II experience in the China-Burma-India theater, he contended that a handful of light bombers operating over such terrain would neither deter Kong Le and the Pathet Lao nor inflict serious damage. If air power failed, it would leave the administration no choice but to introduce U.S. ground forces. Rusk was overruled and deployment planning went forward. In fact, Secretary McNamara was told to start preparing an additional sixteen B-26s using sanitized USAF crews.

All the same, State had an ace in the hole. The B-26 transfer pivoted on the premise that the prohibition against bombs and napalm would soon be lifted. No matter how hard the services tried, it was not until 1963 that these restrictions were removed and then only partially.<sup>44</sup>

Marshal Sarit was not keen about stationing some three hundred H-34 personnel or placing more B-26s in Thailand. Either deployment, he calculated, could elicit a sharp reaction from North Vietnam or China, possibly air strikes against Udom or Takhli. The Thai Army's antiaircraft guns were outmoded, and the only modern air defense planes held by the RTAF were a squadron of F8F Bearcats and one of F-86 Sabres. The latter had just been delivered and the pilots were not yet proficient. In light of the state of the FAL, Sarit wondered whether they could exploit the B-26 strikes. Yet, he hinted to U. Alexis Johnson, Ambassador to Thailand, his willingness to approve the deployment if the United States stationed its antiaircraft batteries and interceptors in Thailand.

Ambassador Johnson knew Washington was not ready for this step. To set Sarit's mind at ease, he underscored the foolhardiness of the North Vietnamese attacking Thailand at the risk of the Seventh Fleet's retaliation. Johnson also assured Sarit (following Rusk's instructions) that if and when the United States sent forces to defend Laos, USAF fighters would be positioned in Thailand. In addition, Sarit would be counseled before any B-26s were launched. Thus satisfied, the Thai general gave his approval a few days later.<sup>45</sup>

43. Unnumbered JCS plan, Concept for the Recapture of the Plaine des Jarres, Mar 9, 1961; msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 991705, Mar 11, 1961, 991727, Mar 13, 1961, 99240, Mar 20, 1961.

44. Rprt, State-Defense-CIA Task Force on Laos, no subj, n.d., atch to memo, Paul H. Nitze, ASD/ISA, to SECDEF, subj: White House Meeting on Laos (January 23, 1961), Jan 23, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 80-81; Hilsman, p 128; MR, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, subj: Discussion of Laos at White House Meeting (from Mr. Nitze's notes), Mar 21, 1961; memo, SECDEF to JCS, Mar 13, 1961.

45. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1647, Mar 16, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1442, Mar 21, 1961, 1531, Apr 4, 1961, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1806, Apr 6, 1961.