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PART I:

A DECADE OF DISTANT SUPPORT (U)

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Chapter I

Early American Involvement (U)

On April 24, 1954, two weeks before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the major powers began meeting in Geneva. The discussions centered on Korea, but at French insistence, Indochina was included on the agenda. On May 8, the day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the French proposed a cease-fire for all of Indochina. Although Dien Bien Phu had only been a battle, Vietnamese control of the Tonkin region and public opinion back home forced the French government to concede. The cease-fire proposal was accepted and political settlements followed.¹

For Laos, the 1954 Geneva accords specified an end to hostilities and the withdrawal of all foreign troops, except for five thousand French defense and training forces. An International Control Commission (ICC) consisting of India, Poland, and Canada, with India as chairman, was to supervise the withdrawal and cease-fire provisions. Integration of all elements of the population "into the national community" was to take place. This provision, aimed at the Pathet Lao, which controlled Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces, was too vague and general to afford a realistic framework for a political settlement. The great powers further agreed that Laos would become a neutral state, a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam. Laos was enjoined from entering into any military alliance and from seeking foreign military aid, materiel, or personnel, except for maintaining territorial defense. These stipulations did not abrogate France's obligation to defend Laos from foreign aggression nor did they affect military and economic agreements negotiated between the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) and the United States in 1950. Under the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with France and the Associated States of Indochina (the "Pentalateral Agreement"), the United States furnished extensive military and financial aid to France during its war against the Viet Minh. Signed at Saigon on December 23, 1950, this pact was between the United States, France, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.²

Officially, the United States refused to sign the Geneva accords. Unofficially, it agreed to respect them if everyone else did. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles placed little faith in communist promises and soon began laying the groundwork for a collective defense treaty for the area. In September 1954, representatives of Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, France, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and the United States met at Manila and formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). One of the treaty's chief provisos was that the signatories would view an armed attack on Laos as an attack upon themselves. Thus Laos—neither represented nor consulted at the conference and forbidden from entering into any alliance by the Geneva agreements—suddenly found itself under SEATO's protection. Following the signing of the SEATO treaty, Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff their views on what size Laotian armed forces the United States could support.³

Prior to Dien Bien Phu, the Royal Laotian Army (RLA) numbered around ten thousand but was trained more along the lines of a constabulary than an army. With French policy that no native officer would lead troops larger than a company, French officers commanded most units.

1. Ernest Gruening and Herbert W. Beaser, *Vietnam Folly* (Washington, 1968), pp 111-14.
2. Toye, pp 97-97; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 62; Marek Thee, "Background Notes on the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Laos and the Vietnam Agreements of 1956-57," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 122-23.
3. Toye, pp 89-101.

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To the French, the Laotians did not have what it takes to make good soldiers. The result was a very small indigenous officer corps. Now, after Geneva, the French presence was reduced, and Laotian officers were suddenly catapulted into command positions for which they had scant preparation or experience. To fill these vacancies, noncommissioned officers were promoted to company grade officers and company-grade officers to field grade, while many of the general-officer billets were filled by commissioning directly from civilian life. These men had little or no competence to command and lacked that mysterious but important military ingredient called esprit de corps. Moreover, most of the overnight promotions and appointments to the general officer ranks were made on the basis of family and political connections. Hence, the allegiance of most of the officer corps was not to the army or constitution, but to the various local political leaders and groups to whom they owed their commissions. Under such circumstances, a Laotian army would be national in name only.⁴ It was hardly an auspicious beginning.

The United States might possibly have begun correcting this condition had it been permitted to place a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in the country. Since the Geneva accords banned such an organization, only France could maintain bases and a military mission in Laos to train the Laotian Army. The U.S. programs and activities would be limited so long as the French retained this responsibility. Consequently, the Defense Department was reluctant to introduce military hardware while unable to carry out the provisions of the Mutual Security Act concerning supervision and maintenance of furnished equipment.⁵

Over and above these restrictions, the Joint Chiefs were confronted with the enormous deficiencies of Laos as a nation. Ninety percent illiterate,⁶ the population was ill prepared for independence. Like the officer corps of the army, it needed the spirit of nationalism, patriotism, loyalty to country, and other ideals accepted by Americans as basic. The loyalty of the Laotian peasants centered on their clans or villages, not Vientiane. They were usually ignorant of, indifferent to, or antagonistic toward a government run by a few aristocratic, French-educated families. To mold an army from such raw material would be a long and arduous task. Under such conditions, it is no wonder the chiefs recommended against any force levels whatever for Laos.⁷

Nevertheless, the State Department wanted to build the Laotian army to 23,500 men, justifying its position on the belief that the army could be a primary force for nation building and modernization and, more important, as a bulwark against Russian or Chinese communism. Considering the makeup of the RLA, such a conclusion seemed far fetched and the Joint Chiefs stuck to their guns. Thus, an early difference of opinion arose over what was militarily feasible and politically expedient.

In January 1955, the Eisenhower administration began supporting the RLA with a direct cash subsidy of \$34 million. This military aid, chiefly increased troop pay, was administered by the legation through the United States Operations Mission (USOM). The chiefs again were asked to approve a force for Laos, but their views remained unchanged. They did note, however, that they would support a standing army should "political considerations be overriding," meaning

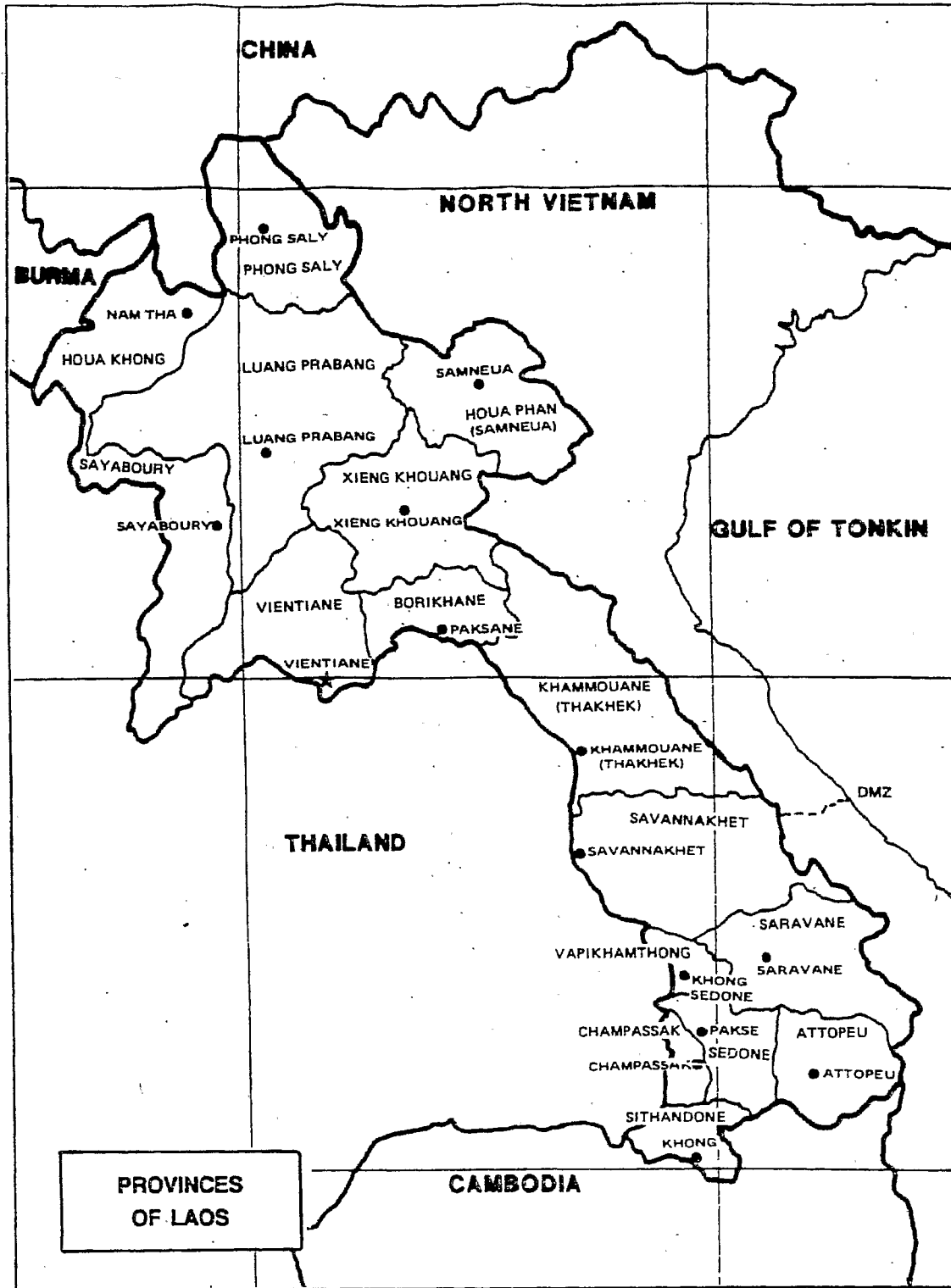
4. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 47-49; Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Military Security Program in Laos, 85th Cong, 2d sess (Washington, 1958), p 8; Ben R. Baldwin, et al, *Case Study of US Counterinsurgency Operations in Laos, 1955-1962* (McLean, Va., 1964), p 49 [hereafter cited as *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*]; Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), p 117.

5. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p A-10; study, PEO, Missions and Functions of Programs Evaluation Office, n.d., atch to ltr, Rothwell H. Brown, CHPEO, to ASD/ISA, subj: Transmittal of Missions and Functions of Programs Evaluation Office, Sep 24, 1957 [hereafter cited as study, Missions and Functions of PEO].

6. When the U.S. Special Forces arrived in mid-1959, they discovered just seven college graduates in the Royal Army—all doctors and lawyers. It was estimated that only five percent of the entire army possessed three or more years of formal schooling. [Baldwin, p C-48.]

7. Hist Sum, Col Jack G. Cornett, USA, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, May 10, 1965.

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if the State Department believed it was in the best interest of the United States. Secretary of State Dulles had already reached that conclusion. Laos must be kept independent and out of the communist camp. Placing the kingdom under SEATO's protective umbrella had been a step in that direction; another would be expansion of the Royal Army, financed by the United States.⁸

Meanwhile, political talks began on January 3, 1955, between the government and the Pathet Lao over Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces. The Geneva accords stipulated that the communist forces were to regroup in these areas, which would then be turned over to the RLG. Elections were to follow that summer. The Pathet Lao were reluctant to negotiate, fearing a diminution of their power in these provinces. They pressed forward with a permanent administration, including building schools and printing textbooks; and military recruiting and training were accelerated.⁹ Despite their required withdrawal from Laos by the Geneva agreements, North Vietnamese military and political cadres stayed to serve as advisors and to fill certain technical posts. Within North Vietnam, a Pathet Lao training center and an officer candidate school were started at Son Tay. With each passing day, integration of the Pathet Lao was made more difficult. The ICC could give Vientiane but meager assistance, since the Pathet Lao rarely cooperated in the necessary inspections set forth in the Geneva accords; and on several occasions, they fired on ICC helicopters. The talks, which had been under way on the Plain of Jars, were temporarily suspended in April. Three months later, the Laotian government concluded a new agreement with the United States for greater aid and army expansion.¹⁰

The United States now embarked on the monumental task of building and supplying an indigenous army of twenty-three thousand men from a rural society whose officers and men were poorly educated and trained and possessed little in the way of a military heritage. Such a program could not be handled by the USOM, and a MAAG was prohibited by the Geneva accords. Some way had to be found to circumvent these obstacles. In December 1955, a semicovert group known as the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) was set up as a section of USOM. In reality, this office was funded by the Defense Department and operated as a separate arm of the U.S. mission. The PEO somewhat resembled a MAAG and was able to meet the requirements of the Mutual Security Act concerning supervision and end use of military equipment furnished the Royal Laotian Government. The chief of the PEO, retired Army Brig. Gen. Rothwell H. Brown, advised the U.S. ambassador¹¹ on military matters and served as a member of the country team just as if he were MAAG chief. He also maintained a direct line of communication to the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) in Honolulu. Training of the RLA, however, continued to be the bailiwick of the fifteen hundred officers and men of the French Military Mission (FMM).¹²

To keep some adherence to the Geneva agreements, the PEO was staffed by twelve retired and reservist U.S. military personnel in civilian status. Although the Royal Laotian Government approved the PEO, it frowned on members exposing themselves to public view. A low profile was adopted, a status that soon became a way of life for every American to serve in Laos.¹³

8. Dommen, pp 98-99; Toye, pp 110-11; Len E. Ackland, "No Place for Neutralism: The Eisenhower Administration and Laos," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, p 143.

9. No reliable intelligence exists on the military strength of the Pathet Lao at this time. Estimates vary from a strength of fifteen hundred in August 1954 to six thousand by November 1957. [Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, pp 31, 34.]

10. Dommen, p 79; Toye, pp 106-110; Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos*, RAND Corporation Research Studies (Cambridge, 1970), pp 62-63.

11. The U.S. legation was upgraded to embassy status in May 1955. Charles W. Yost served as ambassador until June 22, 1956, when he was replaced by J. Graham Parsons.

12. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp 17-18; study, Missions and Functions of PEO.

13. See note above.

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● The Pathet Lao/RLG talks that had been discontinued in April 1955 resumed in July, only to be suspended again in September. The two northeastern provinces remained the stumbling blocks; but in December, the general elections (boycotted by the communists) took place in the ten provinces held by the government.

● No political party gained a majority nor could a coalition be formed with the required two-thirds majority needed to seat a new government. Once more the assembly turned to Souvanna Phouma. Souvanna had first served as prime minister in November 1951 and was holding office when the Viet Minh invaded Laos in 1953. He later negotiated the final independence conventions with France. In March 1956, he pledged himself to bring about a national reconciliation. By August, he had convinced his half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, to return to Vientiane for further negotiations. On December 28, a provisional agreement was hammered out that called for an end to the sporadic fighting between RLA and Pathet Lao units and for a supplementary election to give the Pathet Lao a chance at assembly representation. Meantime, there would be a coalition government.¹⁴

● In November 1957, Prince Souphanouvong agreed to hand over the disputed northeastern provinces, swear allegiance to the king, and enter into a government of "national unity" headed by Souvanna. Included in the agreement was a provision for new elections and the integration of fifteen hundred Pathet Lao troops into the RLA.¹⁵ Unification was to prove a major sticking point, however.

● The new elections were scheduled for May 1958. Prince Souphanouvong, in the interim, organized the Pathet Lao into a new political party called the *Neo Lao Hak Xat* (NLHX—Laotian Patriotic Front). He began campaigning under the banner of national unity and peace, while placing particular emphasis on the need to clean up the graft and corruption in Vientiane. When Phetsarath returned in March 1957, he stunned many Americans by declaring that he did not believe the Pathet Lao were communists and that "the greatest danger of communist subversion came . . . from the bad use of [U.S.] foreign aid." The influx of American aid money (\$202 million during 1955–58) plus an inflated currency had resulted in considerable corruption within the Laotian government. Ambassador J. Graham Parsons became worried that the neglected back country would support Souphanouvong on such a platform, so he inaugurated a crash program of economic aid called Operation Booster Shot. Included among the ninety-odd civic action projects were well digging; irrigation and flood control dams; repairs of schools, temples, roads, and airfields; and construction of rural hospitals. The operations also called for the delivery of sizable amounts of food, medical, and construction supplies, which, because of the primitive nature of the rural road system, had to be airdropped.¹⁶

● The Laotian Army Air Force (LAAF) could not offer the ambassador much help, for it had made only limited progress under French tutelage since its founding in 1955. In fact, "Laotian Army Air Force" was nothing more than a courtesy title accorded a small section (two hundred men) of the Royal Army operating a "fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants" air transport/taxi service. It had no combat aircraft, but only four Douglas C-47 Skytrain transports, nine Morane-Saulnier MS-500 Crickets, two de Havilland L-20 Beavers, and five Sikorsky H-19 Chickasaw helicopters. The Beavers and helicopters were based at Vientiane, Xieng Khouang, Samneua, and

14. ● Toye, pp 111–12.

15. ● *Ibid.*, pp 112–13; Sisouk, pp 52–53; Roger M. Smith, "Laos," in *Government and Politics of Southeast Asia*, 2d ed, ed: George M. Kahin (Ithaca, 1964), p 543.

16. ● Dommen, pp 107–8; Seventh Report by the Committee on Operations, House of Representatives, *United States Aid Operations in Laos*, June 15, 1959, House Report 546, 86th Cong, 1st sess (Washington, 1959), pp 45–46; Judith W. Cousins and Alfred W. McCoy, "Living It Up in Laos: Congressional Testimony on United States Aid to Laos in the 1950s," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 341, 349. The monetary figures on U.S. aid are taken from an Agency for International Development table, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Laos, Fiscal Years 1955–63," in Dommen, p 104.

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Boun Neua, and were used chiefly to ferry the ICC. All ground crews and the six pilots were members of the FMM, although twelve Laotian pilots were then taking training in France and North Africa. When Laotian troops in the field needed air support in excess of the air arm's capability, civilian C-47s flown by Air Laos were chartered to fill the breach.¹⁷

Other than Cambodia's, the airfields of Laos were the poorest in Southeast Asia; none could support jet transports or medium transports. At the height of the Indochina war, the French prepared the Seno runway near Savannakhet to handle light transports and piston-engine fighters by resurfacing it with 5,250 feet of pierced steel planking (PSP). A short 4,000-foot asphalt runway was later constructed at Pakse and a 3,950-foot PSP strip at Xieng Khouangville near the Plain of Jars. United States aid money purchased 3,900 feet of PSP for Vientiane in 1956. The Luang Prabang landing strip remained dirt, however, usable only in dry weather. Of all the airfields, Seno alone had runway lights, a control tower, and radio beacons.¹⁸

Years of French neglect in education took their toll on the recruiting and training of indigenous air personnel. Few Laotians were literate; fewer still could speak French, much less English. With such a bottleneck to overcome, it was no wonder that the Pacific Air Force (PAF) recommended in March 1956 that no attempt be made to develop the LAAF beyond the air transport and liaison missions. The planners envisioned one composite squadron of C-47s, LT-6s, and T-6s. CINCPAC suggested upgrading this force to a C-47 transport squadron, an LT-6 armed reconnaissance squadron, and a composite L-19/H-19 squadron. The Joint Chiefs of Staff chose PAF's plan, authorizing a composite air arm of thirty C-47s and L-19s but no T-6s. The composite squadron arrangement lasted in the Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) for several years.¹⁹

By the time of the 1958 elections, the composite squadron consisted of six C-47s and six L-19s, with only one of the five C-47 crews being combat ready. This dearth of progress was due to several factors: the poor educational background of most Laotians; the absence of adequate classroom facilities, suitable training aids, or aircraft; and the French replacements with the mission spoke no Laotian dialect, while the students spoke no French. Laotian mechanics, which had been recruited since 1955, had received some on-the-job training, yet were described as having an effectiveness close to nil with "skills deteriorating due to lack of tools and equipment." Given such circumstances, it is understandable why the French major commanding the Laotian air arm reported a loss of morale and discipline. In January 1958, a Laotian Army officer with a reputation as a disciplinarian, Col. Sourith Don Sasorith, assumed command as an additional duty to that of inspector of airborne troops. By midyear, many of the ground personnel taking training in France returned, and morale began to improve. Nevertheless, out of 527 men assigned (721 authorized) there was only a single fully qualified Laotian pilot, with 36 still in training.²⁰ The embassy, consequently, turned to the U.S. Air Force to make its Booster Shot deliveries.

The 483d Troop Carrier Wing from Ashiya Air Base, Japan, was assigned the Booster Shot airlift mission. It was originally conceived to last five days, airdropping twenty-three tons and airlifting thirty-seven tons from Bangkok, Thailand, to northern Laos. Three C-119 Flying Boxcars would handle the bulk of the cargo, although two of the wing's recently acquired C-130 Hercules transports were given the specific task of dropping a ten-ton bulldozer at Phong Saly and another at Samneua. To monitor the airlift, the PEO relied on the one-man air section of its

17. AMFPA, Area III MAP Logistics Conference, Nov 14-19, 1956, p 324.

18. *Ibid*, pp 322-23; Annex B to PACAF Intel Sum to AIE, Situation in Non-Communist States in the Far East, Jul 58, App F, p 9; PACAF Curr Intel Sum, Oct 23, 1959, Sup.

19. Hist, PACAF, Jan-Jul 56, III, 527; AMFPA, Area III MAP Logistics Conference, Nov 14-19, 1956, pp 322, 338.

20. *Journal of Mutual Security* XI (Mar 58), 112; *Journal of Mutual Security* XI (Nov 57), 118; PACAF Curr Intel Sum, Oct 23, 1959, Sup; rpt, AIRA Saigon, Air Order of Battle of the Laotian Air Force, Nov 1, 1955.



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logistics branch. Besides arranging Booster Shot shipments, this air transportation officer supervised the receipt, storage, and movement of all PEO and Military Assistance Program (MAP) supplies brought in by air.²¹

① At first, the operation went smoothly. The crews arrived in Bangkok by March 31 and finished their assignment in four days. Then, just as the aircraft were ready to return to Japan, Ambassador Parsons received Washington's permission to levy further requirements on the task force.²²

② The second phase of Booster Shot was less efficient, due chiefly to the many Laotian and American individuals and organizations involved in the operation. There was no airlift center to assign priorities or to act as a clearing house for requests, and the requests either flooded the embassy or merely trickled in. Moreover, mission planning data was often given to aircrews piecemeal and was seldom adequate. Drop zones were chosen by different agencies, none that knew the precise locations. Names of the selected drop points were handed out each afternoon at the scheduling meeting, and the crews then had to begin the time-consuming task of locating them on out-of-date maps.

③ The most fertile source of information for the Booster Shot crews proved to be the pilots flying for Civil Air Transport Corporation (CAT). Founded in China in 1946, this airline was an offshoot of Gen. Claire L. Chennault's Flying Tigers. It flew missions of every type for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and went with him when he fled to Taiwan in 1949. A year later, CAT was reorganized under a CIA proprietary company called the Pacific Corporation. Most of the airline's ground personnel were Chinese nationalists, but nearly all its pilots were Americans, invariably ex-military. The transport crews spent many evenings with these experienced bush pilots (and with Laotian Army officers) poring over the charts to pinpoint drop zones.²³

④ The last-minute decision to extend the airlift beyond its initial span caused other complications. Personnel, aircraft, spare parts, and rigging gear were all tailored to an operation of less than a week. Assigned aircraft posed the thorniest problem. Two had just enough flying time left to complete the original five-day mission before returning to Japan for periodic inspection. To save the few remaining hours, the entire operation was relocated to Wattay Airfield in Vientiane on April 4. This transfer of USAF personnel into Laos violated the Geneva accords, so the men swiftly donned civilian clothes and substituted the term "Mister" for all military titles—an act that was to be repeated many times during the next decade by USAF personnel assigned to Laos.

⑤ The increased American presence in Vientiane lasted just a day as the usable flying time on two of the C-119s ran out. The aircraft departed immediately, leaving a single Flying Boxcar to support the operation. When the flying time of this C-119 was exhausted on April 15, it also returned to Japan. Meantime, Washington approved another extension of the airlift, and on April 19 three more C-119s arrived at Vientiane and Booster Shot resumed. Three transports from a SEATO exercise and two Military Air Transport Service (MATS) C-124 Globemasters operating from Bangkok were also furnished Ambassador Parsons. The operation ended on April 27, and the entire task force returned to its home stations.

⑥ From a military point of view, Booster Shot was a success: the aircraft lifted 1,135 tons of supplies and equipment and airdropped 300 tons into over fifty locations in the Laotian

21. 483d TCW OpOrd 8-58, Mar 27, 1958, in Annex to hist, 483d TCW, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1958; study, Missions and Functions of PEO.

22. Tab 2, Operation Booster Shot, in Annex to hist, 483d TCW, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1958. Unless otherwise noted, Operation Booster Shot is based on this source.

23. Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (New York, 1974), p 137; memo, John J. Czyzak, State Department, to Roger Hilsman, State Department, subj: ICC Investigation of Air America, Apr 8, 1963.

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hinterlands. Among the heavy equipment drops were five bulldozers, several soil-brick machines, an earth roller, nine jeeps, and two prefabricated hospitals. The operation—the first USAF support of civic action in Laos—was deemed to have had a greater impact on the country “than any other aid program which the United States had undertaken to date.” Its cost (\$43 million) was less than one-tenth of the entire 1958 American aid program.

● The solid success of the airlift was somewhat remarkable, considering that many of the C-119 crewmembers had little recent airdrop experience. Pacific Air Forces (PACAF)²⁴ had stressed long, overwater flights for its troop carrier force in preparation for airlandings rather than airdrops. Fortunately, many 483d Wing members assigned to Booster Shot could draw on a previous airdrop background. For newer crewmembers, on-the-job training was necessary. Since the crews flew two missions a day with steady regularity, skill and drop accuracy improved with each flight. In truth, drop accuracy needed to be high because the selected sites were very hard to hit. Elevations of the drop zones varied from the valley floors to the mountain tops. The zone at Phong Saly was located on a high plateau, with the far end abruptly ending in a four thousand-foot plunge to the valley below. The drop points were not marked with white “T’s” or panels nor were smoke flares used to help crews estimate surface wind direction and velocity. Often the receiver would select a schoolyard or some other area surrounded by homes to be the drop point. For the most part, these were extremely difficult to pinpoint, and the groups of curious townspeople and children gathered in the center of the drop zone did not help matters.

● There were other hazards and limitations, chiefly weather and terrain. In the mountainous areas of northern Laos, the cumulus buildup began early in the day and caused severe turbulence. Clouds of all types prevented accurate map reading, the sole means of navigation in 1958 beyond the forty-mile homing distance from Vientiane. Even though Booster Shot was carried out during the last few weeks of the dry season, thunderstorms were frequently encountered, occasionally with hail.

● The most common restriction to visibility was haze, which stemmed from the slash and burn agricultural methods of the mountain tribes and often persisted over wide areas. At times, Booster Shot crews spotted whole mountainsides engulfed in flames. Even in the morning hours before the clouds formed, the haze might rise as high as ten thousand feet, impeding the view at all altitudes up to that level. This condition complicated the problems of navigating in the underdeveloped rural areas and spotting the small drop zones in the mountains.

● Terrain in northern Laos is especially rugged and mountainous, with the limestone peaks soaring to nine thousand feet and the overall average approaching seven thousand feet. Except for the few widely scattered dirt strips, there were no areas in the rugged mountains where an emergency landing could be assured. The C-119 crews usually arrived over the drop zone at altitude, then spiraled down to drop level, always keeping within the valley area. They quickly learned that the winds at release altitude and on the surface varied significantly due to the currents being deflected in different directions through the mountains and interconnecting valleys. In many instances, drifting parachutes indicated radical wind shifts even on drops made just minutes apart.

● Booster Shot also pointed up how vital air transport would be to future military and civil operations in Laos. Recognizing this, General Brown proposed that PEO’s air section be removed from the logistics branch and that a six-man USAF branch be created under an air section chief. Although this officer would have the equivalent of Air Force Specialty Code 6416 (Supply Staff Officer), he would keep all maintenance records and assist in specific airlift projects and would also give technical assistance and counsel to the Laotian air arm, coordinating his efforts with the French Military Mission. This recommendation was approved on October 16, 1958.²⁵

24. ● The Pacific Air Force (PAF) was redesignated Pacific Air Force/Far East Air Forces (rear) on July 1, 1956, which was, in turn, redesignated Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) on July 1, 1957.

25. ● Lt, CHPEO to ASD/ISA, thru CINCPAC, subj: Change in Operations, PEO, Aug 28, 1958; study, Missions

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Although Booster Shot had given USAF aircrews valuable experience, it was too late to influence the election.²⁶ Ambassador Parsons' earlier fears seemed justified when out of the 20 new seats added to the assembly, the NLHX and its allies won 13. Souphanouvong received over thirty-seven thousand votes, the highest for any candidate. While the anticommunists in the legislature still held an overwhelming majority (46 of 59 seats), they became alarmed at the NLHX's sudden show of strength. Several conservative groups now merged with Souvanna's and formed the Laotian People's Rally (RPL). The goal of the new party, led by Souvanna, was to "unite the nationalist forces for the resolute fight against Communism and subversion."²⁷

Such slogans were a bit too late in the view of many Americans, who had long believed Souvanna "too soft" on the NLHX. Washington was not at all enthusiastic over his assuming the premiership nor over an expensive aid program for a country seen flirting with the communists. Then, too, a congressional inquiry into the administration of U.S. aid was uncovering the same mismanagement and corruption in customs, banking, and foreign trade that Souphanouvong had built his campaign around. On July 1, 1958, U.S. aid was suspended pending monetary reform, causing speculation that the suspension was designed to force Souvanna from office.²⁸

During previous governmental crises, the Royal Laotian Army (now known as the *Armée Nationale Laos*) had remained aloof even though its Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Ouane Rathikone, boasted that he could resolve any political problems with military force. Rather than play the role of the man on horseback, Ouane joined forces with a group of young assemblymen, civil servants, and army officers calling themselves the Committee for the Defense of National Interests (or CDIN, after its French title, *Comite pour la Defense des interets Nationaux*). Educated abroad, many of these young men were appalled at the same corruption at which Prince Souphanouvong and the U.S. Congress had pointed the finger. Their motives were not all that puerile, however, for these Young Turks also saw that as long as certain families continued to divide titles and power among themselves, there would be little left for them. It was common knowledge that the CDIN had American backing.²⁹ On July 23, a coalition of the young reformers and other assemblymen denied Souvanna a vote of confidence on the issue of monetary reform. He had no choice but to resign as prime minister.³⁰

Phoui Sananikone formed a new government on August 18, 1958, in which CDIN members received the portfolios of foreign affairs, finance and economic affairs, justice, and that of information, youth, and sports. Not one Pathet Lao was included (there were two under Souvanna), and Souvanna was shipped off to Paris as Ambassador to France.³¹

At first, Phoui's government made some strides in the financial reform required as a condition for resumption of U.S. assistance. The currency was devalued and the graft laden system of export licenses abolished. U.S. aid began flowing again in October. Ideologically,

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26. It may even have backfired. The Pathet Lao told the peasants that the only reason they were getting this sudden influx of aid was because the government wanted their votes, and once the election was over, no further help would be forthcoming. Considering the poor treatment given the rural population by the government over the years, the argument was hard to refute. [Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 86.]

27. Dommen, pp 108-110; *Journal of Mutual Security* XI (May 58), 103; House Report 546, *United States Air Operations in Laos*, p 46; Sisouk, p 62.

28. Toye, pp 118-19; Sisouk, p 62.

29. Ambassador Parsons later admitted that the U.S. government originally supported the CDIN "as a counterweight of young men who could be differentiated from the older, more cynical and grasping politicians who dominated the scene and often wasted our aid." [Memo of conversation between J. Graham Parsons, Asst SECSTATE for FE Affairs and Sir Frederick R. Hoyer-Miller, Perm Under-Secy of (British) Foreign Ofc, subj: Laos and SEATO Contingency Planning, Jan 5, 1960.]

30. Sisouk, pp 63-65; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 92-94; Toye, pp 118-19.

31. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 94; Ackland, "No Place for Neutralism," pp 149-150.

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Phoui favored keeping Laos neutral; but bowing to CDIN pressure, he broke with Souvanna's policy of avoiding relations with either of the governments of divided Vietnam and China. He established consular relations with Saigon and Taipei but not with Hanoi or Peking. Being suspicious of Pathet Lao ties with North Vietnam, he implied he would have no compunction about using the army to clear out their centers of strength.³²

How successful Phoui would have been had he taken military action against the Pathet Lao is debatable. Despite the U.S. government's setting up the Programs Evaluation Office and supporting the entire Laotian military budget (\$44.6 million for fiscal years 1956-59), military progress was at a virtual standstill. The demands of the Algerian war had siphoned off most of the French training/defense force; and by mid-1959, it had fallen from five thousand to five hundred men. Moreover, the French showed slight inclination to work with the PEO or the Laotians, whom they still regarded as inferior soldiers.³³

U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor had long recognized the deficiencies of the Laotian armed forces and was convinced that the American military air program was too slow and cumbersome to be effective. The authorized strength of the PEO had been increased to sixty in 1957, but procurement of qualified retired personnel was difficult and turnover excessive. Peak strength did not surpass thirty until 1959. In November 1958, he persuaded the Joint Chiefs to send Brig. Gen. John A. Heintges, USA, to Laos to survey the situation. After a month in the country, Heintges proposed reorganizing the PEO by staffing it with active duty military personnel and using them for field training of the Laotian armed forces. This training was to be a joint Franco-American venture with special teams working with each of the twelve RLA battalions.³⁴ Particular stress was to be placed on internal security training. Heintges also recommended sending a logistics team to inventory equipment and speed delivery of needed items. The plan was later approved by the new CINCPAC, Adm. Harry D. Felt, USN, who urged that an active duty general officer be designated chief of the Programs Evaluation Office. Heintges was subsequently appointed. The plan was also approved by the new U.S. Ambassador to Laos (Horace H. Smith), by Laotian civil and military officials, and by the French embassy and French Military Mission.³⁵

Events in Laos now moved quite rapidly and became inextricably intertwined with those occurring in North and South Vietnam. In December 1958, the North Vietnamese made a final attempt to discuss unification with South Vietnam's government. When their overtures were greeted with cold silence, Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap decided to take matters into their own hands. North Vietnamese cadres in the south were alerted that an all-out guerrilla war against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime was imminent. Although caches of arms and ammunition had been left in the south when the Viet Minh withdrew, they would need replenishing once open conflict resumed. Then, too, the North Vietnamese had to continue infiltrating trained cadres as well as receiving couriers and recruits back from the south. The key to their plan was a World War II footpath/trail network that began in North Vietnam but quickly branched out into the mountainous Samneua and Thakhek Provinces of Laos. It then meandered southward through the panhandle of Laos into Cambodia and South Vietnam. This rudimentary trail system was later improved and enlarged, becoming famous as the Ho Chi Minh Trail; but in 1959, it was still

32. Dommen, pp 111, 114.

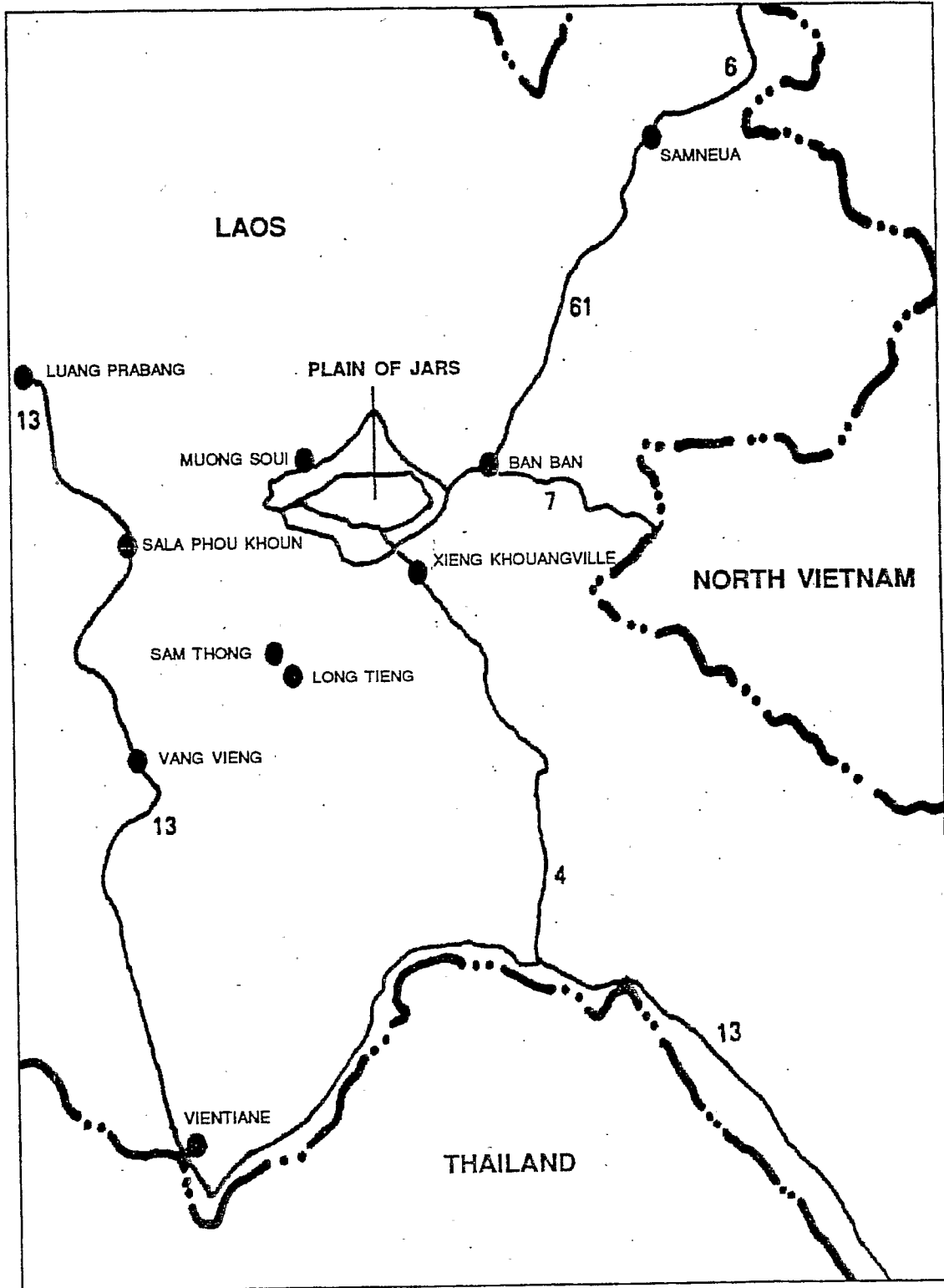
33. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp 18-19; *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Mar 59), 132-33; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61.

34. The authorized strength of a Laotian army battalion was 789 officers and men, which made up a headquarters company and four rifle companies. The parachute battalion was authorized 850 personnel, organized along the same lines as a standard infantry battalion. [Annex B to PACAF Intel Sum to AIE, 'Situation in Non-Communist States Far East, Jul 1958, App F, 12.]

35. See note 33.

UNCLASSIFIED

Plain of Jars Area



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somewhat elementary. Nevertheless, when Phoui Sananikone announced he was willing to use the Royal Army to clean out the Pathet Lao, there was a distinct possibility that Laotian troops would be patrolling right up to the borders of North Vietnam and interfering with the North Vietnamese and use of the trail.³⁶

On January 13, 1959, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the Heintges plan. However, the Laotians and French were still concerned about potential Pathet Lao/Viet Minh reaction to a sudden scattering of large groups of U.S. instructors throughout the countryside, an act tantamount to openly abrogating the Geneva accords. Consequently, the two-phase Franco-American effort was to be conducted at a training center in each of the four military regions, rather than unit training on the line. In the first phase, American and French teams would qualify cadres from the infantry, paratroop, and volunteer battalions. During the second phase, this indigenous cadre, still supervised and assisted by Franco-American teams, would direct local training at battalion and company levels. Instruction of the first Laotian troops was set for September 1. However, as early as July, twelve U.S. Army Special Forces "A" detachments and one "C" (control) detachment, known collectively as Lao Training Advisory Groups, were covertly in Laos for six months temporary duty as "civilian specialists." The use of these Green Berets seemed appropriate since they were organized along team lines and had the highly specialized skills needed in working with native troops in remote and underdeveloped areas and because the situation in Laos paralleled in several respects the training conditions that might be expected in unconventional or guerrilla warfare operations. The language problem that had plagued earlier French training efforts was overcome by using Thai-English interpreters at the field training team (FTT) level.³⁷

The Air Force, meantime, had been trying to secure two C-47s and three L-20s requested earlier by Ambassador Smith (October 1958). The Joint Chiefs had approved the deployment but, in January, decided no USAF C-47s were available. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ASD/ISA) requested funds to purchase the transports from commercial sources. Footdragging followed, however, and the money was not allocated until May 29. When the Air Force coordinated a procurement directive with the Bureau of the Budget, its director said he believed the aircraft should come from USAF resources. By then, it was early August; and in faraway Laos, a new and serious crisis was brewing between the government and the Pathet Lao, making it imperative that the C-47s and L-20s be sent as soon as possible.³⁸

The Laotian government had earlier decided to settle once and for all the question of integrating the two Pathet Lao battalions. The communists had been demanding since mid-May a higher proportion of officer positions within the merged army. Vientiane finally issued an ultimatum: accept integration within twenty-four hours on the government's terms or surrender and resign. The Pathet Lao 1st Battalion, located north of Luang Prabang, agreed to the conditions; the 2d Battalion, bivouacked under the supposedly watchful eye of the Royal Army on the Plain of Jars, refused. On the cold and foggy night of May 18/19, the entire seven-hundred-man group complete with families, chickens, pigs, and household possessions, stole out of camp and began trekking to an isolated valley forty-five miles away near the North Vietnamese border. General Ouane immediately ordered paratroopers dropped to block the escape, but the wily Pathet Lao commander slipped his troops past them. Phoui then branded the soldiers as rebels and deserters. In Vientiane, Prince Souphanouvong was placed under house arrest.³⁹

36. Dommen, p 114.

37. *Ibid*, pp 19-20; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61.

38. *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Jul 59), 108; George F. Lemmer, *The Laos Crisis of 1959* (Washington, 1961), pp 28-30.

39. Dommen, pp 117-18; Toye, p 125.

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By mid-July—the height of the rainy season—the escaped battalion was bolstered by several hundred former Pathet Lao veterans as well as new recruits. Small detachments of guerrillas soon began probing isolated government outposts in Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces. These attacks, each preceded by a short mortar barrage, a volley of rifle fire, or the blowing of bugles, were sufficient to convince the defenders they were under attack by superior forces. Many outposts were quickly abandoned, the troops fleeing into the jungle or to the next garrison. Despite heavy rains that washed out many roads, hordes of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops were seen marching straight to Vientiane. More than anything else, these pinprick engagements and the resultant panic opened the door for the State Department to publicly announce on July 23 that it was sending Phoui additional technicians for an emergency training program to expand the Royal Army from twenty-five thousand to twenty-nine thousand men. This was, of course, the revised Franco-American Heintges plan using the U.S. Special Forces, a plan worked out months before. The Americans began arriving the next day and were soon followed by considerable equipment, including tanks and trucks, to replace wornout Royal Army stocks.⁴⁰

Even so, the situation seemed threatening, especially at Samneua where the population and the Royal Army garrison were reportedly surrounded by Pathet Lao guerrillas. The government did not want to relinquish its hard-won presence in the northeastern provinces, so it decided to hold this town and Phong Saly at all costs. The monsoon weather, however, prevented the use of the roads for resupply. The infant Laotian air arm had to commit its small force of six C-47s and three L-20s. Since only nine Laotian military pilots were qualified to fly the C-47, pilots undergoing training were pressed into service as copilots. A troop/cargo shuttle between the Plain of Jars and the rainsoaked airstrip at Samneua⁴¹ was soon under way, augmented by transports chartered from Air Laos or CAT. The airlift was hazardous considering the proficiency of the Laotian pilots (none was instrument qualified), the absence of suitable navigation aids, poor air/ground communications, rugged mountains, and heavy cloud cover. Substantial drops of paratroops, food, and materiel were made; and the LAAF C-47s averaged fifty hours per month, compared to twenty-seven hours a month the previous year. The airlift did strain Laotian resources, necessitating the U.S. Air Force to take the long-promised C-47s from PACAF's inventory. In addition, five (increased from three) L-20s were obtained from the U.S. Army. All aircraft were delivered to Laos during the period September 8–10—nearly a year after Ambassador Smith's request.⁴²

Pathet Lao activity in the northeast also precipitated a second look by the Joint Chiefs at CINCPAC Operation Plan 32(L)-59. This contingency plan was designed primarily to hold the main towns and other vital centers of Laos, thus freeing the Royal Army for stepped-up operations against the enemy. Although OPlan 32(L)-59 called for SEATO or other allied nations to participate in any such undertaking, it was written on the presumption the United States would go it alone in an emergency. Using a combination of air and sealift, CINCPAC intended spearheading the deployment of Joint Task Force 116 (JTF 116) with three battalions of the Okinawa-based 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade. Strike support would be furnished by attack carriers of the Seventh Fleet stationed in the South China Sea. After the initial objectives were secured, two Army battle groups would be airlifted from Hawaii to replace the Marines.⁴³

40. Dommen, pp 121–22; *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p C-9.

41. The airstrip at Samneua measured 3,445 by 120 feet. It was reported to be surrounded on all sides by jungle and rugged mountains. The Plain of Jars field was only 1,900 by 66 feet but was an all-weather PSP and asphalt strip. Phong Saly had no airstrip. [DAF *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Sep 1959), 147.]

42. PACAF Curr Intel Sum, Oct 23, 1959, Sup; Dommen, p 121; Lemmer, p 30; *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Dec 59), 105–06.

43. Lemmer, p 42; Ray L. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, [The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia] (Washington,

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Neither the Army nor the Air Force was satisfied with Admiral Felt's plan. The Air Force's chief objection was that, aside from a firm commitment for airlift, its role was limited to merely alerting one fighter squadron for possible movement to Thailand. The Air Staff wanted a tactical fighter squadron and a tactical reconnaissance force included in JTF 116 and scheduled to arrive in Thailand at the same time as the first ground units. Then, too, the size of the initial and follow-on ground forces was thought to be excessive.⁴⁴

The Army believed Marines should be used only if speed was essential. They called for the inclusion of parachute assault operations in case the airlandings were opposed; and since the main operations after the first phase would center on the Army, one of their generals should command from the start.

Army and Air Force objections to the Marine/Navy flavor of OPlan 32(L)-59 persuaded the Joint Chiefs and CINCPAC to modify the plan around the end of August. In the new version, an Army general would command JTF 116, the main combat elements would be Army battle groups, and Air Force units would deploy to Thailand simultaneously with ground force movements into Laos. Admiral Felt insisted, however, that the original plan employing the Marines be kept for emergency use.

The situation in Laos in the summer of 1959 further convinced Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Thomas D. White that a full-time MAAG should be created in Vientiane, including a complete takeover of training from the French. White recognized such unilateral action could have serious international repercussions, but he believed it was necessary to save Laos from the communists. His proposal was being evaluated by key government officials⁴⁵ on September 4, when word reached them that Phoui had appealed to the United Nations for help, insisting that North Vietnamese soldiers were fighting in Laos. Under Secretary of State Robert D. Murphy warned that there was no proof of this and that if the U.S. overtly entered Laos, it was highly probable that North Vietnam and/or communist China would too.⁴⁶

Discussions resulted in a Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum to Secretary of Defense Wilson backing White's full time MAAG proposal and CINCPAC's alerting JTF 116. The chiefs also recommended that the State Department take steps to obtain SEATO military assistance. The next day, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the recommended military operations involving JTF 116 and directed that, if launched, it should move "with great swiftness."

In Honolulu, Admiral Felt had long viewed the situation in Laos with alarm. In early June, before the JCS review of OPlan 32(L)-59, he made Marine Maj. Gen. Carson A. Roberts head of JTF 116. He also notified PACAF that the first task under the plan was to airlift the Marines and their equipment from Okinawa to the Vientiane and Seno airfields. Logistic air support for the Marines and the U.S. Army troops that would follow was to last thirty days, or until overland supply could begin from Bangkok. Detailed planning by the 315th Air Division figured twenty-four (later fifty) C-130s could do the job. There was concern that the airfields in Laos and Thailand, as well as the terminal facilities in the western Pacific, would in time become saturated, causing severe control and handling problems. In any case, it would likely demand more aircraft. If so, PACAF intended asking the Tactical Air Command for two more C-130 squadrons. In early September, with the Laotian crisis coming to a head, PACAF was told that C-124 Globemasters might replace TAC's C-130s. Airlift

1983), p 38.

44. Lemmer, pp 42-43; Bowers, p 38.

45. Included were the other JCS members and representatives from Defense and State as well as from the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Information Agency. [George F. Lemmer, *The Laos Crisis of 1959* (Washington, 1961), 50.]

46. Lemmer, pp 40-59.

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personnel, however, doubted that the local airstrips could hold up under those larger and heavier transports.⁴⁷

● Back in Washington, General White questioned whether any of the current military proposals would solve the Laotian dilemma. On September 8, the day the fact-finding committee for Laos was approved by the United Nations Security Council, he asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the green light to send a squadron of Strategic Air Command (SAC) B-47 jet bombers to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. White wanted to cripple the insurgents and their supply lines by attacking selected targets in North Vietnam, either with conventional or nuclear weapons.⁴⁸ Although White's paper called for giving the North Vietnamese a preattack warning, the other chiefs tabled it, possibly due to the inclusion of nuclear weapons. Seven months later, the proposal was withdrawn. Still, the Air Force considered it a valid reflection of the long-standing USAF belief that Asian communists would be less likely to cause trouble if they knew U.S. counteraction would not be confined to Laos or conventional weapons.⁴⁹

● On September 15, the UN team reached Vientiane. Its presence in the country prompted an instant winding down of the fighting, followed by a general relaxation of tensions on both sides. By October 6, the situation so had stabilized that Felt authorized the unloading of JTF 116's supply ships and PACAF canceled its air transport alert. A week later JTF 116 began demobilizing, its members returning to their parent units. After a month of examining evidence and making on-the-spot visits to Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces, the UN committee reported to the Security Council. Since the North Vietnamese had refused to cooperate with the committee members, the report was missing pertinent facts. Nevertheless, it noted that Hanoi had sent ample arms, ammunition, and supplies, as well as political cadres to the Pathet Lao. On the weighty question of whether the North Vietnamese had done any of the fighting, the team said there was no hard evidence to support Phoui's accusations.⁵⁰

● The 1959 Laos crisis stressed that the anti-Pathet Lao, hard-line policies adopted by Phoui and abetted by the United States had scant chance of success. Souvanna Phouma's methods may have been slow and perhaps painful to American interests, but they reconciled the NLHX with the government and brought peace to the countryside. In contrast, Phoui and his CDIN cohorts had severely strained the accords, split the Government of National Union, and hastened a renewal of the insurgency.

● The crisis pointed out that, despite several years of support, America's long-range goals for the area were still hazy or ill defined—even unrealistic. In place of its historical position as a buffer state between contending centers of power, the mountain kingdom was to be a bulwark against communism. This was an enterprise for which the Laotian were not at all well suited, either by geographic location, history, or temperament. The instrument of this new policy was to be the Royal Army; but the stringent curbs on its development, first by the French and later by the Geneva accords, left the army neither trained nor equipped for the task of nation building. Furthermore, in any insurgency, the need to "win the hearts and minds" of the people is paramount; yet, funds for civic action and economic/technical assistance were relatively small.

47. Lemmer, pp 40-59.

48. White's proposal may have had its roots in "Atomic Weapons in Limited Wars in Southeast Asia," (see Frederic H. Smith, "Nuclear Weapons and Limited War," *Air University Quarterly Review*, XII (Spring 1960), 3-27). This Fifth Air Force study focused on the use of atomic weapons for "situation control" in jungles, valley supply routes, karst areas, and mountain defiles to block enemy movement and to clear away cover. Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay later reviewed the study in December, praising it as a "valuable addition to the present concept of limited war." (*Hist*, Fifth AF, Jul-Dec 58, Vol I, pp 146-51).

49. Memo, CS USAF to JCS, subj: Preparation for Decisive Termination of Hostilities in Laos, Sep 8, 1959; Lemmer, p 55; Dommen, pp 123-24.

50. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 10, subj: The 1960 General Elections in Laos, Jul 13, 1960; Toye, p 135.

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Four times as many American dollars were funneled into the Laotian armed forces as into social and economic projects designed to immediately assist the people at the village and tribal level. (If such projects had been started earlier, the ties between the rural population and their government would have been strengthened and Pathet Lao propaganda and recruiting would have had less chance of succeeding. A reexamination of priorities and a better balance between civilian and military requirements were needed.)

From a military standpoint, no one was sure what role SEATO would play or what action the United States should take if the kingdom collapsed. CINCPAC Oplan 32(L)-59 called for the Marines and the U.S. Army to hold the major towns along the Mekong while the Royal Army sought battle with the elusive, guerrilla enemy. Considering the capabilities of the Laotian army and their panicky overreaction to the pinprick attacks of the previous summer, their success in the field against the insurgents was doubtful.

The divergent views within the JCS and CINCPAC over roles and missions reflected traditional interservice rivalries. To the U.S. Army, using Marines to hold land areas after they were assaulted and captured encroached on its mission. Failure to bring reconnaissance and fighter forces into the plan meant that the Navy and not the Air Force would have the chief air combat role. Limited to airlift, the Air Force saw itself as nothing more than a logistic feeder service for ground forces. While most of these complaints against CINCPAC's plan were later rectified, they illustrated that each service was jealously guarding its roles and seeking to expand them whenever possible.

The Air Force's argument over the need to include reconnaissance and strike aircraft in CINCPAC's plan was justified. However, in light of TAC's emphasis in the 1950s on nuclear weapons delivery, its ability to effectively hit targets with conventional high-explosive bombs was questionable. So, too, was the proposal to employ nuclear weapons to destroy insurgents and their supply sources. It is doubtful whether any suitable targets for such weapons existed in the jungles of northern Laos or North Vietnam. More important, such an attack would have given the communists a tremendous propaganda victory and possibly spread the war to China and the western Pacific.

Even if U.S. goals in Laos had been clearly defined, the absence of reliable intelligence on enemy intentions and movements posed serious problems for future military operations. American reaction to the communists during the summer crisis rested on information furnished by General Ouane and his staff. These reports turned out to be inaccurate and overinflated, most of them based on radio messages from isolated government outposts in Pathet Lao strongholds. Due to the monsoon, few ventured into the northeast to find out firsthand the true nature of the conflict or the extent of North Vietnamese involvement. With such unreliable intelligence, it is no wonder government positions were visualized falling like dominoes. Some type of organization to acquire, evaluate, and transmit reliable information to the decisionmakers was sorely needed. That such a structure was never set up in Laos led to numerous misunderstandings between the embassy, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Air Force over the next decade.

The summer crisis of 1959 had no sooner faded than the government was beset by a new set of problems. On December 30, Phoui resigned as prime minister in a dispute with the CDIN over the forthcoming elections. The next night Phoumi Nosavan (now a brigadier general) staged a coup d'etat. However, western opposition to a military dictatorship led to a compromise in which elder statesman Kou Abhay would head a caretaker government with Phoumi as defense minister.

The new government decided to make sure that the Pathet Lao did not repeat their 1958 electoral victory. Election districts were gerrymandered, candidates' qualifications were altered to exclude the communists, and the Laotian Army (now called the FAL—*Forces Armées du Laos*) was sent into the provinces to create a "favorable climate" for conservative candidates. At the same time LAAF C-47s flew over the countryside dropping propaganda leaflets in support

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of government candidates. The U.S. Air Force also made a belated contribution. In March, the PEO requested a C-130 airdrop of two bulldozers and two jeeps at Phong Saly to construct an airstrip. The first airdrop did not occur until April 26, however, two days after the election.

Phoumi's efforts succeeded. Only nine Pathet Lao members ran for office and they came away empty-handed. The margin of victory of some progovernment candidates, however, underlined the fraudulent nature of the balloting. In the Pathet Lao stronghold of Samneua Province, the conservative candidate polled 6,503 votes, his opponent 13. In another area, the communist candidate voted for himself and was supported by at least a dozen members of his family; yet in the official tabulation, he received no votes whatever.⁵¹

There was one bright aspect to this rather seamy side of Laotian politics. Souvanna Phouma returned from the ambassadorial post in Paris, was elected delegate from Luang Prabang and subsequently chosen assembly chairman. Partly because of Western pressure against any military junta, the king selected moderate Tiao Somsanith (Souvanna's nephew) as prime minister, and Phoumi continued as minister of defense. In one of his first few acts, Phoumi decided to begin the trial of Souphanouvong; but on the rainy night of May 23/24, the prince escaped, taking his guards along. He then went underground and, after walking nearly three hundred miles and visiting Pathet Lao groups in several provinces, reappeared four months later in Samneua. By then, the northeastern border town was back in Pathet Lao hands.⁵²

At the time of the elections, the FAL had attained the planned goal of thirty thousand men but had improved little in quality, chiefly because the PEO/FMM training program was far behind schedule. The program had first slipped during the 1959 "summer crisis," and further delays ensued when Phoumi assigned the army to political activities prior to the 1960 elections. By March 1960, just 32 percent of the goals of the first phase had been achieved, and the second phase had not even started.⁵³

The attitude of many Laotian Army officers discouraged the Americans. Too often, the Laotian officers disdained the training offered, either with their units or in separate officer groups, considering themselves qualified merely by virtue of their commissions. Others who may have felt a need for the training would not attend because they would suffer loss of face, since the centers were manned by lower ranking U.S. and French instructors. Thus, the weapons and small unit tactical instruction given the NCOs and other enlisted men was largely wasted because many of the officers remained untrained and incompetent. Battlefield results would later show how disastrous this had been. Troops led by inept commanders sometimes pulled out of good defensive positions at the mere prospect of attack; or if they did prepare to fight, they found their officers beating a hasty retreat to the rear. When this happened, everyone played follow-the-leader.⁵⁴

Adequate logistic support for the program was lacking. Besides facilities, the Royal Army was to furnish items from its MAP stocks, but they seldom appeared. The problem was the army pipeline—once U.S. military aid left PEO hands, it was beyond any control within

51. Toye, pp 135-36; intvw, author with Col John S. Wood, USAF, Ret, Sep 7, 1974. Colonel Wood served in Laos from October 1959 to March 1962 as Programs Evaluation Office advisor to Military Region IV, and later as PEO advisor to the Revolutionary Free Army of Laos (Phoumi). When the Military Assistance Advisory Group surfaced, Wood became MAAG advisor to the Royal Laotian Government minister of defense.

52. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp 25-26, A-23; *Journal of Mutual Security* XIII (Jun 60), 137-38; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 310, subj: Transmission Report Franco-American Discussions of Joint Military Training Program, Mar 9, 1960; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 3241, Jun 10, 1960.

53. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp 26, 31, 49, C-128; rpt, JUSMAGTHAI, Final Report of Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Laos, Nov 6, 1962 [hereafter cited as MAAG Laos Final Rprt]; intvw, author with Col Ernest P. Uiberall, USA, Ret, Mar 13, 1974. A career Army intelligence officer, Uiberall served with the Programs Evaluation Office/Military Assistance Advisory Group from January to July 1961.

54. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p A-19.

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Laos. The Americans could not properly inventory, inspect, or check the use of this equipment; and as a consequence, little pressure or leverage could be brought to bear on Laotian officers to participate in the training program. Finally, the divided training responsibility caused friction between the Americans and the French.⁵⁵

● In February 1960, Phoumi requested that the training be extended for a year since it was so far behind schedule. Washington was willing to continue until June 30, 1961, when it believed the FAL would be reasonably well trained and in a position to start its own program. The French, however, wanted to resume exclusive instruction of the Laotian Army, preferably by September 1960, but no later than the end of the year. They were reported to have 120 instructors ready to ship to Laos as PEO replacements. Phoumi vetoed this proposal, his rejection reflecting his growing anti-French feeling. He would not discuss any changes that excluded U.S. participation. In fact, Phoumi wanted the French removed from the country and the entire training operation turned over to the U.S. Special Forces.⁵⁶

● Not everyone sided with Phoumi. Certain officers resented the "meddling" of U.S. instructors in their units and preferred French methods. Laotian officers were most persistent in their refusal to abandon defensive, positional warfare—derived in part from previous French training—as opposed to operations employing maneuver and surprise. These officers were backed by a group of politicians who believed the U.S. presence (the PEO's strength had increased to over five hundred by the end of 1959) violated the Geneva accords, was an unnecessary provocation to their communist neighbors, and should be terminated. Souvanna Phouma supported this position. In early July, rumors circulated in Vientiane that the cabinet was about to ask the king to discontinue the Franco-American effort and that the FAL training program be transferred to Thailand.⁵⁷

● The Royal Thailand Government (RTG), headed by Marshal Sarit Thanarat, had long kept a wary eye on the Laos situation. After consulting with U.S. officials, Sarit agreed to furnish instructors and facilities where entire FAL battalions would undergo training. This arrangement offered several advantages. First, since their languages were closely related, the Thai and Laotians did not need interpreters. Second, although the Thai considered the Laotians "poor cousins," the chance of racial conflict between them (an accusation occasionally leveled by both the French and U.S. Special Forces) was minimized. From an American point of view, Sarit's offer meant the program could be conducted openly without the French. A small step in this direction had been taken in 1957 when the PEO arranged for the training of a handful of Laotian logistics personnel. This was followed by a parachute battalion the next year; and in the fall of 1959, U.S. Special Forces, under the code name Erawan, were used to train a few Laotians in unconventional warfare and antiguerrilla tactics.⁵⁸

● Sarit's offer of Thai personnel and bases to augment the U.S. effort set a precedent that was to continue for the next decade. However, even as Vientiane, Paris, and Washington were trying to reach a compromise on the PEO/FMM training program, an obscure paratrooper, Capt. Kong Le, suddenly occupied the strategic points in Vientiane and overthrew the government.

● Standing five feet, two inches, Kong Le was the son of a Kha tribesman from southern Laos. Enlisting in the paratroopers in 1951, he became an officer within two years and fought with the Viet Minh in the Ou River Valley during the siege of Dien Bien Phu. Under PEO

55. *Ibid.*, pp C-13, C-14, C-45; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61; Wood intvw, Sep 7, 1974.

56. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p A-23; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2715, Apr 26, 1960, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 2135, Jun 3, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 3226, Jun 8, 1960.

57. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp A-24, C-49; Uiberall intvw, Mar 13, 1974; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 266, Aug 12, 1960.

58. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp 28, 47.

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sponsorship, Kong Le attended the Philippine army's ranger school in 1957 and took command of the recently formed 2d Paratroop Battalion when he returned to Laos.

During the 1959 summer crisis, this unit gained the reputation of being one of the best FAL units. For this reason, Phoumi chose it to spearhead the Bolovens sweep operations just before the elections. On August 8, 1960, three days after their return to Vientiane from the field, the weary paratroopers were abruptly ordered to mop up a suspected Pathet Lao pocket roughly thirty miles west of the city. Disgusted at the government's failure to afford them adequate messing and housing, and tired of being sent on what they deemed fruitless military operations, Kong Le and eight hundred men decided to act. On the night of August 8/9, while Prime Minister Tiao Somsanith and most of his cabinet were in Luang Prabang to discuss the state funeral of the late king, the paratroopers conducted a coup d'etat. They quickly occupied Wattay Airfield and captured five LAAF C-47s. Key government buildings and the radio station fell next, and by seven the following morning, Kong Le's soldiers completely controlled the capital.⁵⁹

Kong Le—"the soldier's soldier"—skyrocketed overnight from obscurity to a national hero. Broadcasting from Radio Vientiane, he said his purpose was to end the fighting, bring about a truly neutral government, and eliminate all foreign (especially American) intervention in the country's political and military affairs. (The last comment came as a shock to the U.S. advisors—they thought Kong Le was pro-American.) He also forcefully plugged for Souvanna's appointment as prime minister, claiming that Souvanna was the only man who could reconcile the country's different factions. These developments climaxed on August 13 when the National Assembly, practically at gunpoint, expressed "no confidence in Tiao Somsanith's cabinet and it resigned."⁶⁰ The prime minister remained in Luang Prabang following the coup. The assembly deputies sitting in Vientiane repeatedly sent him messages stressing the tense situation in the capital and that bloodshed was imminent. To spare the populace, Tiao accepted the "no confidence" censure even though he realized it was done under duress.

Three days later, Souvanna Phouma was approved as prime minister. In his address to the deputies, he pledged to unite the country, seek genuine neutrality, respect all treaties, and accept aid from any country. He proposed a new cabinet in which he kept the defense and foreign affairs portfolios. Quinim Pholsena, a known leftist, would be interior minister, but his influence was balanced by the appointment of Touby Lyfound, a conservative and respected Meo leader, as minister of justice and religious affairs.⁶¹

Refusing to recognize the new government, Phoumi Nosavan flew to Bangkok and then to Savannakhet where he formed a countercoup revolutionary committee. This divided the Laotian army and created new problems for the Programs Evaluation Office. Since splitting the PEO was the solution, General Heintges stayed in Vientiane with most of the office while a "rump PEO" was set up at Savannakhet under Col. Alfred R. Brownfield, Jr., USA. This created

59. Dommen, pp 143-45; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 266, Aug 12, 1960; memo, Dept of State (PA to PA), subj: Visit to Vientiane, Sep 30, 1960, n.d. (ca Oct 60); rpt, AIRA Saigon, Semi-annual FWAIS Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961. Bernard Fall claimed that, on the day of the coup, Kong Le and his officers went through a special tactical problem with their U.S./French advisors—how to hold and defend a major city. As a touch of realism, Vientiane was chosen for the problem. U.S. personnel later recalled that the Laotians watched with great care and assiduously took notes as they went through the exercise step by step. During the briefing, the Americans pointed out the need to secure the airfield, radio transmitters, central telephone and telegraph facilities, government buildings, and powerplants—all duly noted and subsequently performed by the paratroopers. [Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 186-87.] None of the PEO personnel interviewed by the authors remembered such a briefing. In fact, Colonel Wood, military advisor to Military Region IV at the time of the coup, termed the episode "a figment of Fall's imagination." [Intvw, author with Col John S. Wood, Jr, USA, Ret, Sep 7, 1974.]

60. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 268, Aug 12, 1960; *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p A-25; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 28-29; *New York Times*, Aug 11, 1960.

61. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 303, Aug 16, 1960; Dept of State Circular 248, Aug 18, 1960.

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an anomalous situation in which the United States was supporting both the established government and a rebel group.⁶²

American policymakers were likewise divided. Winthrop G. Brown, the new Ambassador to Laos, supported Souvanna. The Defense Department and CIA headquarters in Washington backed Phoumi. The State Department vacillated. On the one hand, it regarded Souvanna as soft on communism and unable to control the flamboyant Kong Le. Moreover, only Phoumi could reunite the army. On the other hand, open support for Phoumi might lead to a military dictatorship that was incompatible with U.S. policy. The sole practical solution in State's view was a compromise.⁶³ With this in mind, Ambassador Brown arranged a series of meetings between Souvanna and Phoumi, but both sides proved intransigent.

On September 16, a new element was injected. The Pathet Lao ordered forces loyal to Souphanouvong to avoid encounters with the Souvanna/Kong Le troops and, wherever possible, to attack Phoumi's. The Pathet Lao 2d Battalion (having escaped from the Plain of Jars the previous year) at once came out of hiding and struck the Samneua garrison. When the first PEO reports painted a dismal picture of the garrison's plight, Defense and State quickly authorized the release of military supplies from stocks in Thailand direct to FAL units in the field. Due to the FAL's cumbersome logistic pipeline, the urgent situation and the lack of LAAF airlift (Kong Le had captured five of eight C-47s during his coup), Air America (the new name for CAT⁶⁴) was given the resupply mission. To avoid any misunderstanding on Phoumi's part, Ambassador Brown stressed that the airlift was solely to assist in the defense of Samneua. Under no circumstances would the United States government condone the use of its equipment to attack the neutralists.⁶⁵

For the next ten days (September 17 to 27) the Air America airlift of two C-46s and two C-47s performed yeoman's service, transporting rice, ammunition, and some military personnel to areas throughout Laos. Casualties were often evacuated on the return trip. When the Pathet Lao overran the airstrip at Samneua on September 28, Ambassador Brown halted all Air America flights into combat areas. Henceforth, the airline was restricted to hauling troops and cargo to Savannakhet, to outposts securely in Phoumi's hands, and to the Plain of Jars, delivering five tons there on September 29. If supplies had to be dropped in combat zones, Air Laos or the LAAF delivered them. Cut off from all resupply and under strong Pathet Lao pressure, Samneua's garrison of fifteen hundred men evacuated the town and retreated southward. On September 29, a combined Kong Le/Pathet Lao force crossed the Kading River in a move toward Thakhek. Phoumi's soldiers fought stubbornly and eventually forced the attackers back across the river. The fighting ended when the king brought both sides to Luang Prabang, and they agreed the Kading River would be the boundary line between them.⁶⁶

While Ambassador Brown was desperately trying to prevent the Laotian fighting from erupting into open civil war, Washington was tiring of Souvanna's indecision. On October 12, Under Secretary of State J. Graham Parsons (the former Ambassador to Laos) and John N. Irwin II, ASD/ISA, were sent to Vientiane to sway the prime minister into taking a harder line toward Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. The mission succeeded only in further aggravating the matter.⁶⁷

62. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 288, Aug 15, 1960.

63. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, *et al*, 280, Aug 21, 1960; ltr, J. Graham Parsons, Asst SECSTATE for Far Eastern Affairs, to Winthrop G. Brown, Ambassador to Laos, no subj, Aug 26, 1960.

64. CAT changed its name in September 1959 to Air America. [Peter Dale Scott, "Air America: Flying the U.S. into Laos," in *War and Revolution*, eds: Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, (New York, 1970), 310.]

65. Dommen, pp 153-54; msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 315, Sep 16, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 579, Sep 21, 1960, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 531, Sep 23, 1960.

66. Dommen, p 154; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 623, Sep 27, 1960, 636, Sep 28, 1960, 640, Sep 29, 1960; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61.

67. Memo of conversation, John N. Irwin II, ASD/ISA, Vice Adm Herbert D. Riley, C/S, CINCPAC, Brig

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Late that month, several days after the first Soviet ambassador to Laos presented his credentials, Souvanna agreed to accept Soviet economic aid; and on November 9, he announced a new cabinet that included two Pathet Lao in minor positions.⁶⁸ Worse still was Souvanna's choice of the leftist Quinim Pholsena as chief negotiator with the Pathet Lao.⁶⁹ This was too much for Washington—even the State Department threw its weight behind Phoumi.⁷⁰

Still, the Americans hoped to avoid open hostilities. Ambassador Brown in particular went all out to curb Phoumi, but Admiral Felt encouraged the Laotian strong man. The upshot was a serious dispute over who was running things in Laos—a dispute that continued to characterize American involvement right up to the end.⁷¹ On November 28, Phoumi took matters into his own hands by crossing the Kading River. In the short fierce battle that ensued, the neutralists were driven back toward Paksane. The civil war between the noncommunist elements in Laos had begun.

Gen Phoumi Nosavan, and Prince Boun Oum, in msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 686, Oct 18, 1960; memo, Dept of State (John M. Steeves, FE, to Merchant thru S/S), subj: Recent Developments in Laos, Oct 24, 1960; Wood intvw, Sep 7, 1974; intvw, author with Brig Gen Albert R. Brownfield, Jr., USA, Ret, Aug 7, 1974. As a lieutenant colonel, Brownfield served in Laos during June 1960–July 1961 as G-3, PEO/MAAG. Two weeks after Kong Le's coup, he was sent to Savannakhet as Phoumi Nosavan's personal military advisor.

68. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane, 895, Nov 9, 1960.

69. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 498, Nov 9, 1960, 500, Nov 10, 1960, 502, Nov 10, 1960.

70. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 500, Nov 0, 1960, 502, Nov 10, 1960; memo, Col Edwin F. Black, USA, mil asst to DEPSECDEF, to Thomas S. Gates, Jr., SECDEF, subj: Laos 10:30 AM Meeting with Mr. Herter (Nov 10, 1960), Nov 9, 1960 [note that memo is dated before meeting took place]; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 511, Nov 12, 1960, 513, Nov 13, 1960.

71. Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 282316Z Nov 60, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1014, Nov 29, 1960, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 571 and 572, Dec 1, 1960, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 578, Dec 2, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1042, Dec 2, 1960. An unclassified version of this last cited message and Ambassador Brown's implied threat of resignation can be found in Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos since 1954* (Boston, 1972), p 117. Stevenson cites an interview with Ambassador Brown as his source.

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Chapter II

The Laotian Civil War and the Emergence of Air Power (U)

As Phoumi inched down the Mekong River from Paksane, he put the finishing touches on his planned airborne assault against Vientiane. At this point, the Russians decided to honor their October agreement with Souvanna and, on December 4, began airlifting food, fuel, and military hardware from Hanoi to Vientiane.¹ While the airlift may have been a late response to Thailand's unofficial blockade of traffic crossing the Mekong River to Vientiane, the real value of the Soviet airlift lay in keeping Kong Le (and the Pathet Lao) supplied with arms and ammunition under the cover of the economic aid agreement. Actually, cross-river traffic on the Mekong had always been difficult to control; and smuggling was brisk, with plenty of gasoline (otherwise rationed) available on the black market at only slightly higher prices. Most Laotians, in fact, preferred the illegal sources rather than putting up with bureaucratic red tape. Some foods, such as milk, flour, and sugar, were scarce; but rice could be found in the stores and, although costly, was expected to come down in price once the new crop was harvested.²

The Soviet transports had been flying for just four days when Col. Kouprasith Abhay seized the capital on December 8, forcing Kong Le's troops to withdraw to Wattay Airfield. Although expressing loyalty to Souvanna, Kouprasith claimed he acted because of communist inroads into the government. However, when he insisted on arresting certain Pathet Lao, Souvanna objected and the two men split. Kouprasith's men then withdrew back to the Chinaimo barracks outside Vientiane, and Kong Le reoccupied the city. Kouprasith was an independent-minded man who considered Phoumi incapable of resolving the present crisis; but he, nonetheless, decided to cast his lot with the Savannakhet group. He radioed Phoumi, who responded by dropping about two hundred paratroopers of the 1st Battalion into the area near Chinaimo. Other forces began pushing overland from Paksane, which also had been captured on December 8. The next day, Kouprasith's and Phoumi's troops joined and moved toward the heart of the city. That night, Souvanna, his family, and several of his cabinet fled to Cambodia. The battle for Vientiane had begun.³

Quinim Pholsena, the leftist, anti-American member of Souvanna's cabinet stayed behind. On December 10, he slipped out of Vientiane aboard a Hanoi-bound Ilyushin transport. Within twenty-four hours, he had a firm agreement with the Russians and North Vietnamese to airlift arms and supplies to Kong Le in exchange for an alliance between the latter's forces and the Pathet Lao. The next day, as Phoumi's column reached the outskirts of Vientiane, the Russian transports unloaded six 105-mm howitzers and several North Vietnamese gun crews at Wattay. Much of this equipment was of U.S. manufacture captured by the Viet Minh from the French at

1. The airlift had not started earlier because the Ilyushin transports had to be pulled off their Congo assignment and flown to Hanoi. [Dommen, p 164.]

2. Dommen, pp 166-67; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1057, Dec 6, 1960.

3. Msg, CINCUSARPAC to ACS/Intel, DA, 100220Z Dec 60; memo, Hugh S. Cumming, Dir/Intel & Rsch, Dept of State, to SECSTATE, subj: Laos: Implications of December 8 Coup in Vientiane by Colonel Kouprasith, Dec 8, 1960.

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Dien Bien Phu. Col. William Law, U.S. Army attaché, deemed this a "smart move" by the North Vietnamese since there were over nine thousand 105-mm rounds in the Vientiane depot. The United States countered by removing all restrictions on the use of Air America aircraft.⁴

Phoumi assaulted the capital on December 13 and captured Wattay the next day, thus temporarily ending the Russian airlift at seventy flights. Two days of wild shooting followed, causing over five hundred civilian casualties (but few military) and partially destroying the U.S. embassy and PEO compounds. On December 15, the North Vietnamese laid down an extremely accurate rolling artillery barrage that Kong Le failed to move in behind. Instead, he and his newfound allies withdrew northward from the city along Route 13. This retreating column (estimated at seven hundred men) was supported by a constant stream of supplies dropped by the Ilyushin transports. Meantime, forty members of the National Assembly, transported to Savannakhet by Air America, voted no confidence in Souvanna. The king quickly appointed Prince Boun Oum to head a new provisional government, a government recognized at once by Thailand and the United States. The legality of this action was questioned by those who believed it necessary for Souvanna to formally resign before a new prime minister could be appointed—this Souvanna steadfastly refused to do.⁵

As Phoumi retook Vientiane and Boun Oum's government was recognized by the king, Admiral Felt placed the units assigned to JTF 116 under increased readiness. He also thought it imperative that the United States start scouring the country to find out what Kong Le and the communists were up to. The LAAF, however, lacked reconnaissance aircraft; and Thai equipment was not suitable for deep penetrations. Therefore, Felt ordered the air attaché in Saigon, Lt. Col. Butler B. Toland, Jr., to resume low-level reconnaissance flights over northern Laos. Since August, Toland had been furnishing the Laotian government with occasional photography using his VC-47. Toland was accredited to Vientiane as well as to Phnom Penh; and having diplomatic immunity, he was legally entitled to fly over Laos without filing an International Civil Aviation Organization flight plan. His aircraft had K-17 and K-20 cameras mounted in back in the latrine section, and a door covering the cameras was opened whenever photography was needed. The cameras could take pictures at elevations ranging from three thousand to twelve thousand feet.⁶

Toland's earlier pictures were of airfields for upgrading aeronautical charts and publications, but his new photos showed the Soviet airlift to be more extensive than supposed. From the December 20 pictures, for example, interpreters counted eighteen parachutes on the ground and heavy road traffic about twenty-two miles north of Vientiane. On December 21, Toland contributed most to the fledgling reconnaissance effort. After an aborted attempt to land some FAL officers at Muong Sing in northeastern Laos, he observed an Il-14 making low passes over a drop zone near Vang Vieng. He maneuvered his VC-47 to within a hundred feet of the Russian aircraft, noting it bore the markings "KOFNCP" on one wing and serial numbers on the other. Toland banked his plane and began taking pictures with a hand-held camera. He followed the Il-14 in its racetrack drop pattern for about fifteen minutes, then headed south for Thailand—since he had no darkroom facilities whatever in any of his three offices, all film was

4. Dommen, p 167; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1124, 1128, Dec 11, 1960, 1136, Dec 12, 1960, JCS to CINCPAC, 987223, Dec 14, 1960, USARMA Vientiane to SECSTATE, 121145Z Dec 60.

5. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p D-26; Toye, p 159; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 198; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1016, Dec 15, 1960, CINCPAC to JCS, 180612Z Dec 60.

6. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), pp 608-9; hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, I, pt 2, 13-18; msg, CINCPAC to Actg CHPEO Savannakhet, 172359Z Dec 60, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 641, Dec 14, 1960, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1015, Dec 16, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1033, Dec 17, 1960, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE 1185, Dec 17, 1960; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Butler B. Toland, Jr., USAF, Ret, Nov 18, 1974. During July 1960-August 1962, Toland served as an air attaché to South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

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processed by the air attaché in Bangkok. Meantime, a message was sent to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay informing him of what had happened. LeMay knew the State Department was very anxious to document the Soviet airlift,⁷ so he immediately ordered a C-130 from Clark Air Base, Philippines, to Bangkok to pick up the film. Approximately seven hours after Toland's message, the C-130 touched down at Don Muang. Within twenty-four hours, the pictures were in the hands of high government officials and were subsequently distributed to major newspapers and magazines. A year later, Toland received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts that day.⁸

Washington now realized that if the Soviet airlift continued at such a high level, it could stymie Phoumi's efforts to subdue Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. The Laotian general had earlier asked Sarit or the United States for T-6 aircraft, since the LAAF lacked both the pilots and planes to counter the airdrops. On December 23, Admiral Felt backed the request so that the RLG could develop a "minimum air capability" for controlling its own air space.⁹

At this time, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) had nearly fifty T-6 Harvard trainers that mounted .30-caliber machineguns and could carry light bombs and napalm. Marshal Sarit had already agreed to furnish "volunteer" Thai pilots in case the United States decided to equip the LAAF with these planes. Wanting to develop an indigenous Laotian capability, Admiral Felt proposed that Thailand provide Laos ten T-6s, plus pilot checkouts. As soon as five pilots were trained, Felt said, the RLG should announce that it would no longer tolerate intervention by foreign aircraft and that its pilots had been ordered to shoot them down. Even if these attacks did not "bag a few birds," Felt believed their presence would be sufficient to deter the Soviets from making further flights.¹⁰

On December 27, Defense and State told CINCPAC to begin T-6 training while the American Embassy in Bangkok arranged to transfer ten RTAF T-6s and the CIA renegotiated its Air America contract for the necessary aircraft maintenance. There was one stipulation: none of these planes would be turned over to Phoumi unless he formally protested the Russian airlift in the United Nations and publicly stated he would take action unless it stopped. Ambassador Brown approved these moves, noting that the UN scenario was essential to legalize bringing strike aircraft into Laos.¹¹

On the day that State and Defense gave the green light to CINCPAC's T-6 plan, Toland's unarmed VC-47 was hit by enemy ground fire during a reconnaissance flight. On this flight, the VC-47 took photos of Samneua, Vang Vieng, and Dien Bien Phu airfields. Oblique photos of the North Vietnamese field were taken from Laos using K-7 and K-20 cameras equipped with telephoto lenses. No aircraft were found on the airstrip, but extensive resurfacing had occurred since the previous air attaché photos. Four days later, the aircraft sustained further damage but landed safely. On that flight, the crew reported an enemy convoy of over fifty trucks on or near the Plain of Jars. They also noticed that Vang Vieng's old airstrip had been lengthened to over four thousand feet and was being used by the Soviets as an airhead.¹²

7. Right after the landing of the first Soviet transport at Wattay, Kong Le cordoned off the airfield and refused admittance to all foreigners. Even so, Colonel Law used field glasses to spot the debarkation of the North Vietnamese gunners. He also took photos but, due to the extreme distance between his location and the unloading area, the personnel could not be identified as North Vietnamese nor the aircraft as Russian.

8. Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974; msg, USARMA Vientiane to SECSTATE, CX-A-2, 220856Z Dec 60.

9. Msgs, PACAF to CINCPAC, 220107Z Dec 60, USARMA Vientiane to SECSTATE, CX-A-2, 220856Z Dec 60, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1033, Dec 17, 1960, CINCPAC to JCS, 232339Z Dec 60.

10. Hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, I, pt 2, 13-18; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1044, Dec 17, 1960, CINCPAC to JCS, 232339Z Dec 60.

11. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 688, Dec 27, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1191, Dec 28, 1960.

12. Msg, USARMA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-A-9, 271432Z Dec 1960; Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974.

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President Eisenhower ordered Felt to ready JTF 116 and dispatched a C-130 squadron from Stewart Air Force Base, Tennessee, to Clark. In Admiral Felt's opinion, this squadron "could be the one asset that will keep us from being caught between a rock and a hard place." Other C-130 units based in the United States moved to various continental embarkation stations. Simultaneously, all 315th Air Division courier flights were canceled; all training was scrubbed; and certain division troop carriers stood alert, waiting launch orders. Eisenhower also approved a transfer of four [redacted] B-26s from Taiwan to Bangkok and the rehabilitation of another four B-26s. By January 2, 1961—coincident with the RTG's agreement to turn over ten T-6s to the LAAF—JTF 116 was set for operations in Laos.¹³ Six Laotian pilots previously trained in the T-6 at French flying schools were sent to Korat Air Base, Thailand, for their checkouts. Since it had been some time since the pilots had flown this aircraft, delays ensued when a few suffered air sickness during gunnery maneuvers. Meanwhile, the Joint Chiefs told CINCPAC to have the T-6s hit the communist air/ground logistic effort first, the hostile troops second. Such attacks would use rockets and machineguns; napalm and light bombs were withheld.¹⁴

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The LAAF was denied the heavier ordnance because of a strong protest from Ambassador Brown. To begin with, Brown was miffed because he first learned from the Thai Ambassador to Laos—not from Washington—that the United States planned to introduce aerial bombs. Brown feared that if the LAAF was given bombs, the other side might bring in anti-aircraft guns, a move that could result in losses of pilots and planes. Moreover, it might provoke a communist retaliation against Vientiane or the Air America airlift. Brown held that this would prove disastrous to the morale of an already jittery civilian population.¹⁵

Brown's action aroused Admiral Felt, who suggested he leave the choice of weapons to the judgment of military authorities better suited to the task. With undisguised sarcasm, Felt noted that it never occurred to him that killing communists with bullets or rockets was any more humane than killing them with bombs. Nevertheless, Brown's views prevailed in Washington.¹⁶

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By January 7, the four [redacted] B-26s manned by Americans were at Takhli Air Base, Thailand. Three days later, the six Laotian pilots completed their six gunnery missions at Kokotiem and returned to Savannakhet along with four Thai "volunteer" pilots wearing Laotian insignia. That afternoon, the Boun Oum government delivered a note to the Soviet embassy protesting the Kong Le airlift. The Russians refused to accept it, however, on the grounds that they recognized only Souvanna Phouma as the *de jure* head of the Royal Laotian Government. Infuriated, Phoumi Nosavan ordered the LAAF to fly its first combat mission—an armed reconnaissance of Route 13 from the Lik River to the Vang Vieng airstrip.¹⁷

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The J-2 (Intelligence) section of the PEO furnished the targets and complete flight plan for this first T-6 mission. Lt. Col. Joe Emory, a World War II A-26¹⁸ pilot who did not join the

13. Hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, I, pt 2, 13-18; Eisenhower, pp 608-611; Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years, 1950-1965* (Ofc/AF Hist, 1981), p. 58; msg, USARMA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-A-9, 271432Z Dec 60; MR, Robert H. Knight, ASD/ISA, subj: Laos Meeting-31 December 1960, Dec 31, 1960.

14. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 65, 67-69; Maj John C. Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force, 1954-1970* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1970), p 5; msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 988339, 072101Z Jan 61, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 733, Jan 7, 1961; MR, Rear Adm Luther C. Heinz, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, subj: Meeting on 7 January—Laos Situation, Jan 18, 1961.

15. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1232, Jan 2, 1961, 1265, Jan 5, 1961.

16. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 070320Z Jan 61.

17. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 988336, 071344Z Jan 61; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 67-69; intvw, author with Col William H. Pietsch Jr., USAF, Ret, Jul 25, 1974. Pietsch served with the PEO/MAAG from January to August 1961 as an evaluation officer and senior military advisor for intelligence to the Royal Laotian Government.

18. The Douglas Invader, a WW II attack aircraft, was initially designated A-26. When the Air Force dropped the attack category in 1948, the Invader was redesignated B-26 since the Martin B-26 Marauder had been withdrawn from service.

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Air Force when it became a separate service, worked out the details since he was the only J-2 member with air experience. The day before the flight was to take off, Emory and Lt. Col. William H. Pietsch, Jr. (Chief, J-2) loaded the Laotian and Thai pilots into a close air support C-45. The route was then flown, Emory and Pietsch pointing out the various navigational checkpoints and landmarks they wanted the pilots to see. Once in the general target area, the C-45's Chinese nationalist pilot flew the approach heading, diving against the target in a dry run pass. The aircraft then climbed back to altitude and returned to Vientiane.¹⁹

● The first T-6 mission was unimpressive, however. Perhaps because the dry run tipped the government's hand, no Russian aircraft were sighted nor was any military traffic seen on the road. The pilots chose to expend their ordnance on two bridges in the area. "Jammed guns, unspent rockets, and aborts" was the way Colonel Law summed up the results. Trying to find a silver lining, General Heintges thought the very fact that the T-6s had gotten into the air and flown a strike mission would leave the communists uneasy.²⁰

● The poor showing of the LAAF prompted Admiral Felt to urge Heintges to schedule sorties into the Plain of Jars where intelligence reported Kong Le was receiving nearly fifty tons of supplies a day. CINCPAC wanted these "juicy targets" hit and told Heintges he expected reports soon to show that the T-6s were destroying more tonnage than the communists were supplying. He also ordered the Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) and PACAF each to send one experienced fighter-bomber pilot for temporary duty with the PEO. Adm. John Sides, USN, CINCPACFLT, immediately dispatched a Marine aviator to Vientiane; and Gen. Emmett O'Donnell, Jr., CINCPACAF, furnished an Air Force major for Savannakhet. Unfortunately, the latter officer came down with dysentery and spent most of the duty tour on his back. Meantime, the LAAF pilots claimed their first kills on January 14—two trucks near Vang Vieng. The victories were short lived; on January 17, one of the T-6s was shot down. The pilots soon complained of the aircraft's slow speed (140 knots) and the difficulty in making attacks with guns and rockets instead of bombs and napalm.²¹

● Morale of the Laotian pilots hit bottom when PEO members and top-ranking officers openly criticized their ability. Such criticism seemed justified based on the results achieved, while in reality it underscored the ignorance of air matters that were inherent in the PEO and the FAL, both dominated by ground force personnel. They did not appreciate the fact that a tactical air arm, no matter how small, could not be created overnight. The pilots had flown the T-6 before, but they had no previous combat experience and little or no training in tactics or tactical operations. Their most recent flying was confined to liaison aircraft or C-47s, and the Thai checkout, which took less than a week, hardly qualified them as strike pilots. The program was actually a half measure that hoped to achieve quick results in operational performance. Like most "get rich quick schemes," it had ended in failure. Furthermore, the T-6 aircraft (designed in 1937) bordered on the obsolete.

● Thus, if Washington wanted to expand the composite squadron by adding an attack component, an accompanying training program and upgrading of equipment were vital. The latter need was met by funding fourteen T-28s (configured for ground support) in the MAP budget for

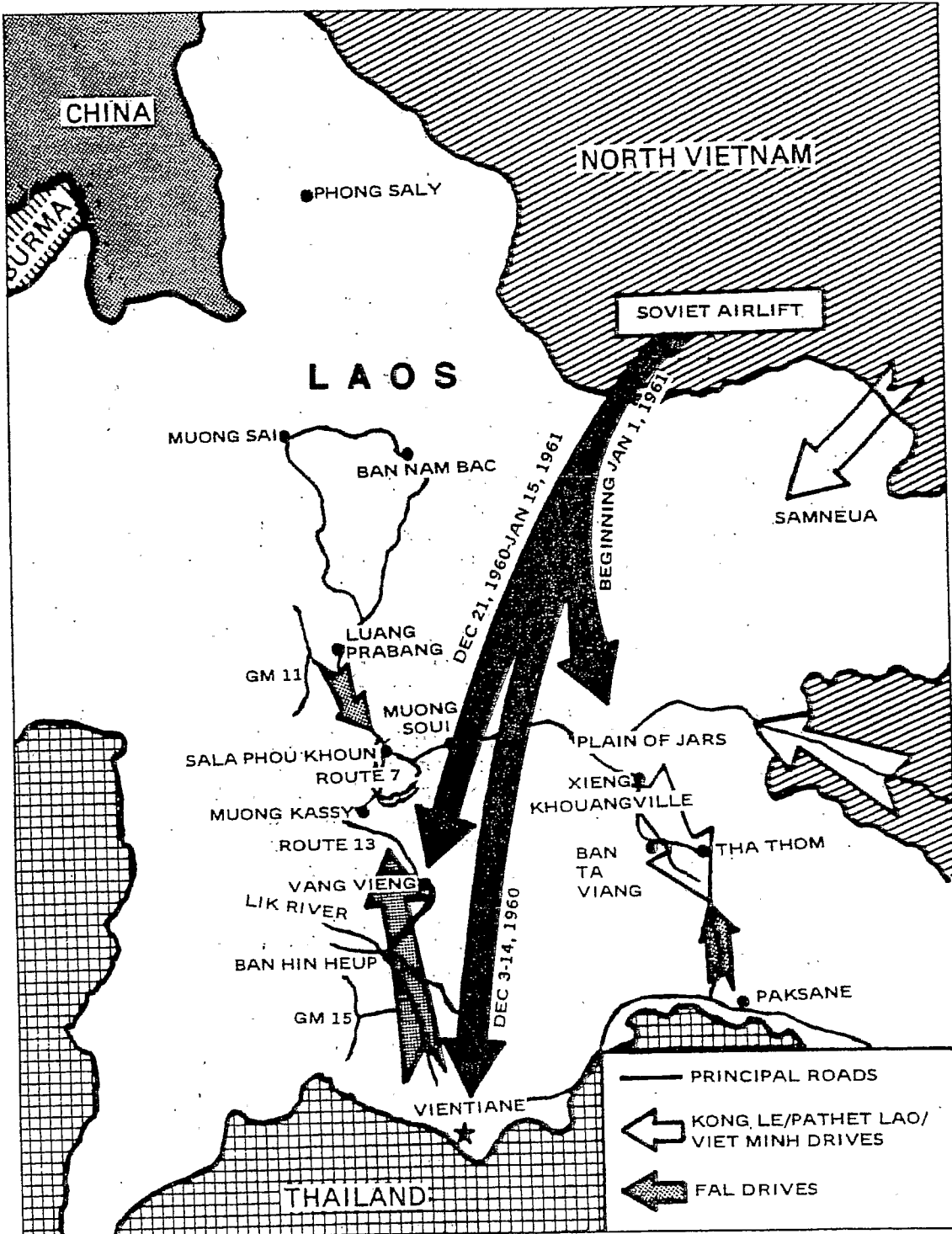
19. Pietsch intvw, Jul 25, 1974.

20. *Ibid*; msg, USARMA Vientiane to CSAF, Jan 11, 1961, CHPEO Vientiane to SECSTATE, 258, 111555Z Jan 61.

21. Msgs, CINCPAC to CHPEO, 131040Z Jan 61, to CINCPACFLT, PACAF, Jan 13, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 67-69; intvw, author with Col Ronald G. Shaw, Kelly AFB, Tex., Jan 22, 1975. As a captain, Shaw served with the PEO/MAAG during November 1960-November 1961 as a maintenance advisor to Maj Thao Ma, chief of the Laotian Army Air Force. Prior to the January 17 flight, the PEO recommended lifting the restriction on the use of bombs. CINCPAC agreed, but Washington took no action, presumably because of Ambassador Brown's continued objections. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, 68.]

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Laos. General O'Donnell proposed two to three weeks ground school, then thirty to forty hours in light aircraft to train the Laotian pilots. This would be followed by transition to the T-6 for twenty to thirty hours. O'Donnell's proposal was endorsed by Admiral Felt; and though a step in the right direction, it was barely adequate. However, once the poor condition of the LAAF was recognized, a thorough and comprehensive instructional program was adopted.²²

After seizing Vientiane, Phoumi Nosavan became embroiled in politics and turned over the pursuit of Kong Le to Maj. Gen. Bounleuth Sanichan. The latter was soon afflicted with what Abraham Lincoln, speaking of Gen. George B. McClellan, called the "slows;" and Kong Le was able to withdraw northward into the mountains around Vang Vieng. Even though he was supported by the Soviet airlift and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops, his position was still vulnerable. Recognizing this, the FAL general staff suggested a north-south pincers to encircle his forces. The plan called for *Groupe Mobile*²³ (GM) 15 to move up Route 13 while GM 11 advanced on Kong Le from Luang Prabang, simultaneously securing the strategic road junction of Sala Phou Khoun. At this junction, Route 13 meets Route 7 emerging westward from the Plain of Jars.²⁴

However, Kong Le and the North Vietnamese struck first. In late December, NVA units secured Samneua Province as another estimated five battalions advanced toward the Plain of Jars. The region was only lightly defended by widely dispersed volunteer companies, Meo tribesmen, and a single battalion of infantry at Xieng Khouangville, whose FAL commander was an officer stubbornly set in the French blockhouse-type strategy of fixed defenses. On December 31, the North Vietnamese spearhead approaching from the east was coordinated with a sudden Soviet airlift of Kong Le's paratroopers from the west. Having failed to send out patrols, the FAL commander was caught by surprise. His troops bolted and retreated in disorder to Tha Thom and Paksane, abandoning most of their supplies to the attackers. Paratroopers dropped by Phoumi on January 3 to restore the situation became scattered in the rugged terrain and eventually joined the panic. Air America was quickly summoned to extract the U.S. advisors. The one bright spot was Lt. Col. Vang Pao, commander of the Meo irregulars, who conducted an orderly evacuation of his men to the surrounding mountains. By the end of the first week in January, Kong Le had thwarted FAL attempts to eliminate his forces, linked up with the North Vietnamese, and controlled all of north-central Laos from Vang Vieng to Samneua. Assisted by the Soviet airlift and his allies,²⁵ he set about transforming the Plain of Jars into a formidable stronghold. However, when Kong Le showed no signs of further southward movement, CINCPAC reduced the alert status of JTF 116.²⁶

Undaunted by the loss of the plain and Samneua Province, Phoumi pushed the two-prong attack on the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. Vang Vieng fell on January 16, depriving the antigovernment forces of their forward airhead and considerable stockpiled material. From Vang Vieng northward, however, land mines, felled trees, and the rugged terrain slowed the advance. On top of this, the T-6 pilots refused to attack Kong Le's flak-defended positions on the Plain of Jars. Phoumi then requested the United States to employ the [REDACTED] B-26 light

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22. Msg, CINCPAC to CHPEO, 110305Z Jan 61; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 68-69; rpt, AIRA Saigon, Semiannual Updating FWAIS S-3632, Aug 1, 1961; msg, PACAF to CINCPAC, 010435Z Jan 61.

23. Normally three infantry battalions and one 105-mm howitzer battery.

24. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p 29; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 47.

25. Members of the French Military Mission on the Plain of Jars reported that Kong Le was busy forming new battalions from FAL deserters and prisoners of war. Relations between him and the Pathet Lao were strained. Although their forces were cooperating, Kong Le had retained his separate identity. He would not integrate his battalions into Pathet Lao units, but the Pathet Lao were said to be burgeoning in influence among Kong Le's soldiers. [Msg, AmEmb Paris to SECSTATE, 2486, Jan 17, 1961.]

26. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp D-19, D-20; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 65; msg, AmEmb Paris to SECSTATE, 2846, Jan 17, 1961.

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bombers against these defenses. Before these new planes were introduced, Brig. Gen. Andrew J. Boyle, USA, who succeeded Heintges as PEO chief in January, and Admiral Felt wanted better use made of the T-6s. Since the Harvards were limited to fifteen seconds of machinegun fire and two rockets—often fired on the same strafing pass—Boyle and Felt asked that the restriction on bombs and napalm be removed. They stressed that this ordnance would be used strictly for military targets and not against cities or civilians.²⁷

● Ambassador Brown still objected to lifting the restrictions, believing it would spark retaliatory air strikes by North Vietnam or China against Laotian airfields. If the enemy attacked the LAAF or the Air America transport fleet, Phoumi would be crippled because his troops were completely dependent on airlift for movement, matériel support, and food. The United States would then be forced to introduce interceptors to regain control of the air. The ambassador viewed the U.S. (but not the communist) steps as escalation and direly predicted that a single machinegun run on Wattay would panic the civilian population and force Vientiane's evacuation. As could be expected, Felt took strong exception to these views, holding them to be completely unrealistic.²⁸

● The Kennedy administration had been in office for just a few days and was not anxious to exacerbate the situation between Brown and Felt—especially when the ambassador considered the introduction of napalm and bombs to be a trigger for escalation. It elected to postpone any decision for the time being. President John F. Kennedy preferred a political solution for Laos, favoring neutralization over the Dulles effort to turn the country into a pro-Western bastion.

● The nagging feeling persisted that Laos was the key to Southeast Asia and that, if it fell to the communists, the entire area would soon follow. This was the "domino theory" strongly emphasized to Kennedy in a briefing given him by outgoing President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Christian A. Herter on January 19. Consequently, the new President was in a quandary. Had the previous administration's assessment been correct? Might he be forced to eventually go in there and fight it out as Eisenhower warned? The thought of American troops tangled in an Asian land war was distasteful to Kennedy, his advisers, and the Joint Chiefs. Nevertheless, American prestige was so heavily involved that Kennedy was determined not to accept "any visible humiliation over Laos."²⁹

● In his first press conference on January 25, the new President offered a face-saving statement: while he was firm on the kingdom keeping its independence, a Laos uncommitted to either side in the cold war was acceptable. The President directed Walt W. Rostow of the White House staff to form an interdepartmental task force (later called the Laos Working Group) to furnish alternative courses of action as well as daily briefings on the Laos situation. The U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh was also directed to keep a closer liaison with the exiled Souvanna Phouma.³⁰

● Back in Laos, Phoumi attempted an airborne assault against the Kong Le/Pathet Lao forces dug in on the Plain of Jars. The PEO had opposed the scheme, but the general and his

27. ● Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 65, 68-69; msg, CHPEO Laos to CINCPAC, 332, 181011Z Jan 61, CINCPAC to SECSTATE, 182058Z Jan 61; intvw, author with Lt Gen Andrew J. Boyle, USA, Ret, Sep 18, 1974.

28. ● Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 68-69; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1422, Jan 27, 1961; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

29. ● MR, SECSTATE Christian A. Herter, subj: Briefing of President-Elect Kennedy, Jan 19, 1961; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965; Fawcett World, 1977), pp 307-09; Hilsman, pp 127-29; Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965), p 640; memo, Clark M. Clifford to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, subj: Memorandum of Conference on January 19, 1961, between President Eisenhower and President-Elect Kennedy on the Subject of Laos, Sep 29, 1967, in *The Senator Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, 4 vols (Boston, 1971), II, 635-37, Doc 97 [hereafter cited as *Gravel Pentagon Papers*].

30. ● *Ibid*; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Phnom Penh, 662, Feb 1, 1961.

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field commanders were showing a marked disinclination to accept American advice.³¹ The attack faltered when the two parachute companies involved in the assault failed to receive sufficient aerial resupply. The luckless paratroopers were forced to fight their way out of the plain, and Phoumi's offensive ended.³²

Phoumi's debacle brought other means of attacking Kong Le and the Pathet Lao into focus, refueling the ordnance debate between the military and the U.S. ambassador. By now, aerial reconnaissance had uncovered many suitable targets on the plain, notably motor convoys, supply dumps, and enemy armor. This intensified reconnaissance stemmed from a JCS suggestion that the Royal Thai Air Force supply two unmarked RT-33s with volunteer pilots for missions deep inside Laos. At first, Sarit was lukewarm to the proposal. He believed these planes would need defensive escorts and that USAF high-performance aircraft were better. In early January, Washington assured him that equal or better aircraft would replace any losses and that it would rebut any international criticism of the Royal Thailand Government. More important, if this action touched off an assault from an outside power, the United States would "act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes." With these assurances, Sarit gave his approval.³³

The limited RTAF photoprocessing facilities were soon saturated. On January 11, the USAF 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron, located at Yokota Air Base, Japan, supplemented the Thai effort with two photo interpreters, a lab technician, and additional equipment and film. Special photointelligence reports were prepared after each RT-33 sortie and after the continuing VC-47 missions. These reports were distributed to many agencies, including the JCS, CINCPAC and his component commanders, the PEO, Headquarters USAF, and, when appropriate, to General Phoumi.³⁴

The greatest impetus, however, came when the Air Force transferred an SC-47 from Korea that had been operating along the line dividing the two Koreas. This aircraft carried a K-38 camera (twenty-four-inch or thirty-six-inch focal length) and a one-hundred-inch long-range oblique camera. It confirmed General Boyle's prediction that many of the targets could be successfully hit—provided the prohibition against bombs and napalm were lifted. Moreover, since the Laotian pilots were ineffective, Boyle wanted Thai volunteers to fly the T-6 Harvards.³⁵ Detection would be avoided by stationing the men at remote flying fields, such as Thakhek, through an agreement already reached by Sarit and Phoumi.³⁶

Ambassador Brown, although he forwarded Boyle's recommendations, disagreed with them. He continued to believe these actions would escalate the conflict, since the enemy would speedily answer any air attacks that employed bombs or napalm. Use of the latter, he asserted, had a "particularly bad odor for Laos and the world generally." Furthermore, the planes still had to attack areas defended by antiaircraft guns, and replacing the Laotian pilots would only help

31. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p D-32; rpt, AIRA Saigon, Semi-annual FWAIS Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

32. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p D-32.

33. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 69-70; msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1158, Jan 2, 1961, 1214, Jan 9, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 733, Jan 7, 1961.

34. Hist, 5th AF, Jan-Jun 61, I, 124; msg, CINCPAC to CHJUSMAGTHAL, 110330Z Jan 61.

35. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 69-70; Capt Mark E. Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 1; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1593, Feb 27, 1961; Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, USAF Aerial Reconnaissance in Laos, Aug 23, 1962; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

36. The original proposal, worked out between Boyle and Phoumi, called for 390 volunteers, including not only pilots and ground crews, but also doctors, other medics, radio operators, and parachute riggers. Sarit agreed to fill most of this shopping list. On March 2, 1961, the first shipment of Thai volunteers, funded by the United States through the PEO, was in Laos. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, 113.]

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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."³⁷

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.³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹

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.⁴²

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, ICS to CINCPAC, 991705, Mar 11, 1961, 991727, Mar 13, 1961.

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

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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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

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.

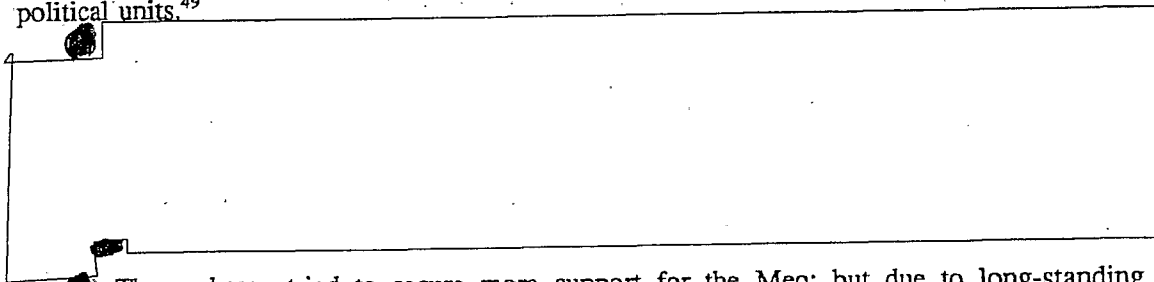
The War in Northern Laos

The most significant and far-reaching decision President Kennedy made on March 13 was to expand the Meo tribesmen program from three thousand to four thousand men. As noted, the Meo were a semi-independent mountain people numbering about two hundred thousand whose main agricultural product was the opium poppy. They lived chiefly in Xieng Khouang, Phong Saly, and Samneua Provinces and the hilltops surrounding the Plain of Jars, while another group lived in North Vietnam. The Meo had no written language, and the Lao regarded them as savages. Even so, they had acquired a reputation as a pragmatic, opportunistic people who would fight to protect their families, clans, and opium fields from outside intruders.⁴⁶

During the closing days of World War II, the Free French parachuted in commandos and, on a minor scale, began organizing, training, and supplying the tribes for guerrilla action against the Japanese. When the Indochina war broke out, many Meo remained loyal to the French. Others sided with Ho Chi Minh, and they often fought against one another. For example, the Phou Phathi stronghold in Samneua Province defied all communist assaults before the cease-fire of 1954. When it was finally taken during the 1959 summer crisis, it was by Meo allied with the Pathet Lao.⁴⁷

Their fighting qualities aside, the Meo living in Laos had several drawbacks. They were poorly equipped and devoid of any tactical organization above company level. Being locally oriented, they generally refused to fight outside the immediate vicinity of their hillside villages. An exception to this rule would be in response to an outstanding ethnic leader whose ability they respected, such as Lt. Col. Vang Pao, now the military commander of Xieng Khouang Province.⁴⁸

As early as mid-1959, combat operations in northeastern Laos had created thousands of Meo refugees. Consideration at that time was given to training some of them as irregulars; but since the French were solely responsible for tactical training, this could not be done. When the civil war erupted, however, the French ceased all training and withdrew to their air base at Seno. Subsequent events showed the Meo as the one force in Military Region II that could resist the Pathet Lao, and attention again focused on the tribesmen. Their command structure was reorganized, and they were eventually trained and equipped for intelligence gathering and paramilitary operations in the enemy's rear. Vang Pao welcomed this development, for it meshed with his desire to weaken clan and village loyalties and concentrate his people into larger political units.⁴⁹



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The embassy tried to secure more support for the Meo; but due to long-standing jealousies between Meo and Lao, Phoumi rejected these attempts. He claimed that the Meo were

46. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 85; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE 306, subj: Reports on Two Field Trips in Northern Laos by U.S. Personnel, n.d. [ca late Feb 60]; Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York, 1972), p 84.

47. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 46; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1235, Jan 2, 1961.

48. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, pp C-29, C-30; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A-65, Aug 30, 1971.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Air War in Northern Laos, 1 Apr-30 Nov 1971* (HQ PACAF: Project CHECO, 1973)]

51. Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974; msg, [redacted] to Washington, 1951, Jan 6, 1961, 2118 [ca Jan 61], CINCPAC to JCS, 060117Z Jan 61, CIA to JCS, 04317, Jan 18, 1961.

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primitive, untrustworthy, and their leaders had hoodwinked the United States by making promises they could not keep. All support must be through the FAL, which Phoumi declared was meeting Meo needs. The Americans knew this statement was absurd, for the FAL logistic pipeline was practically worthless. If the country team gave in, supplies would never get to the tribesmen. Still, because of Phoumi's military following and strong anticommunist policy, the issue was not pressed.⁵²

Nevertheless, by the March 13 meeting in Washington, everyone—including Phoumi—saw that it would be almost impossible for the FAL to defeat Kong Le and his allies without U.S. or other friendly power intervention. Further, Phoumi's political activities and his stubborn refusal to accept advice from the PEO had put him in disfavor with Ambassador Brown and the State Department. With his military position shaky, a more pliable Phoumi endorsed the increase in Meo strength to four thousand men, and President Kennedy added his blessing.

[REDACTED] it began shipping in carbines, grenades, mortars, antipersonnel mines, and other sabotage equipment as fast as possible. The ceiling was later increased to six thousand men; and toward the end of April, about five thousand Meo had been armed.⁵³ These troops soon became known as *L'Armée Clandestine*.⁵⁴

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The day after President Kennedy authorized additional support to the RLG, Phoumi unexpectedly flew to Phnom Penh to seek an accord with Souvanna. The Laotian general was anxious to stop the fighting and confident he could persuade Souvanna to join Boun Oum's government and drop his claim as the legitimate prime minister. As bait, Phoumi dangled the position of vice premier plus the foreign affairs portfolio. Souvanna turned him down, although the two men eventually issued a joint statement cautiously endorsing a fourteen nation conference to end the civil war.⁵⁵

After returning to Vientiane, a discouraged Phoumi dug in and threw up defensive positions south of the Lik River. Boyle and Felt wanted him to counterattack because the enemy seemed more intent on threatening Luang Prabang. The mercurial Phoumi quickly perked up, replaced some of his incompetent commanders, and ordered the general staff to plan for retaking the lost territory. Boyle hoped he would pass this newfound determination down the chain of command and bolster flagging army morale. It was wishful thinking—after satisfying himself that his staff (with the aid of PEO planners) was preparing to regain Muong Kassy and Sala Phou Khoun, Phoumi took a seven-day political junket with the king.⁵⁶

The Laotian ship of state appeared to be drifting aimlessly; and unless Washington acted, many deemed a communist takeover a certainty. However, President Kennedy evinced no enthusiasm for committing U.S. troops and still counted on a diplomatic solution. He was chiefly disturbed over the prospect of fighting for a people who, it seemed, did not care to defend themselves. Yet, at a March 20 meeting of the National Security Council, he was given two troop proposals. One called for sending a small contingent to Thailand's Mekong Valley, seeking to deter the Pathet Lao and serve as an incentive to negotiate over fear of U.S. intervention. This plan assumed Moscow could "turn the local boys off [anytime] it wanted to"—a questionable

52. *Ibid.*

53. Both the Meo and Kha tribesmen were organized into *Auto Defense* or militia units entirely separate from the FAL. These were broken down into *Auto Defense de Choc* (ADC) and *Auto Defense Ordinaire* (ADO). Of the two, ADC companies were better trained and paid and had more military experience. ADO units rarely fought outside their own locales; but ADC units could be sent, usually by helicopter, to any area in northern Laos. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, 110.] The Kha received mainly conventional training, while the Meo were instructed in partisan/guerrilla tactics. [Baldwin, p 312.]

54. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 992064, Mar 17, 1961, 994593, Apr 21, 1961.

55. Dommen, pp 186-87; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 75-76.

56. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 78-79, 84; msg, CHPEO Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 94444, Mar 18, 1961.

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assumption. The Joint Chiefs argued that such action would merely encourage North Vietnam and China to take bigger slices of the pie. They countered with a plan calling for up to sixty thousand men, complete with air cover and nuclear weapons.⁵⁷

The inclusion of nuclear weapons by the military was a legacy of the Korean War. To the chiefs, it was unthinkable for the United States to embark on another conventional, strength-sapping war. If American GIs had to fight, it should be to win. If this meant striking at the enemy's heartland, then one should not shirk from this decision. Essentially, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were saying that, once the administration opted for intervention, the "how" should be left up to them.⁵⁸

President Kennedy held back from accepting either of the two proposals. Certain precautionary moves were authorized, however. The commander of JTF 116⁵⁹ was to assemble and activate his staff, and the task force was placed in increased readiness. Included were two regiments and the headquarters of the 3d Marine Division and Marine Air Group 16 (around fifteen thousand to twenty thousand men). United States Army troops included nineteen hundred men of the 2d Airborne Battle Group and three hundred of the 1st Special Forces Group.⁶⁰ Admiral Felt directed Admiral Sides to divert the aircraft carriers USS *Lexington*, USS *Midway*, and supporting craft into the South China Sea. The carrier USS *Bennington* steamed to about one hundred miles south of Bangkok to be in position should the ship's helicopters be committed. On March 21, the 315th Air Division began a three-day airlift of personnel and equipment attached to Marine Air Group 16 at Okinawa. The marines landed at Udon, established a helicopter base, and turned over sixteen H-34s to Air America (the President's Millboard directive), including ten Army, ten Navy, and seventeen Marine pilots. [redacted] B-26s arrived at Takhli with four more on the way from Taiwan. Once in Thailand, however, [redacted] the aircraft would "marry up with volunteer USAF crews from the U.S."⁶¹

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

CIA

On March 23, while these military actions were taking place, President Kennedy held a televised news conference. With three large maps as a backdrop, the President noted that the Soviet airlift for Kong Le totalled over one thousand sorties and that there could be no peaceful solution unless this and other external support were withdrawn. Otherwise, he continued in somewhat graver tones, "those who support a genuinely neutral Laos will have to consider their response." So that no one misunderstood the U.S. position, he closed by stressing the need for a "truly neutral government, not a cold war pawn."⁶²

A flurry of diplomatic activity, aimed at achieving a cease-fire, came in the wake of this news conference. Kennedy secured the backing of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's prime minister, then flew to Key West, Florida, for a meeting with Harold Macmillan, Britain's prime minister. Though Macmillan doubted the wisdom of any western military intervention in Laos, he reluctantly agreed to a limited move if necessary. The two leaders concluded by issuing a call for a cease-fire and a new Geneva conference. The President flew back to Washington where he talked at great length with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, emphasizing the point that too many wars in history had been the result of miscalculation and that Moscow must not misjudge U.S. determination. In New Delhi, roving Ambassador W. Averell Harriman met

57. Schlesinger, pp 309-311; Hilsman, p 131.

58. Hilsman, p 129.

59. The Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, was still designated Commander, JTF 116, until a U.S. Army officer could be appointed SEATO Field Force commander.

60. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 84; Dommen, p 189.

61. Hists, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 47, 315th AD, Jan-Jun 61, II, Docs I, N; memo, Lt Gen Thomas J. H. Trappnell, USA, to CJCS, subj: Laos, Mar 28, 1961, atch to JCSM-206-61, Laos, Mar 31, 1961.

62. Schlesinger, p 311; Dommen, p 190.

[REDACTED]

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Souvanna Phouma, now embarking on a world tour to enlist support for his proposed fourteen nation conference. Harriman was aware of Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown's high regard for the prince and was impressed when Souvanna told him that neither he nor the Laotian people wanted a communist country. Laos could be saved, he stressed, but only as a neutral state with a tripartite government of neutralists, Pathet Lao, and supporters of Boun Oum and Phoumi. Souvanna declared that while he was prepared to head such a government, time was running out.⁶³

● Souvanna's closing remarks to Harriman seemed an ominous warning. On the day President Kennedy held his televised news conference, North Vietnamese troops spearheaded a Pathet Lao attack against Kham Keut, signaling an enemy offensive into the Laotian panhandle. The next day, the reconnaissance SC-47, which had flown nearly fifty missions and furnished excellent photointelligence on enemy movements, was shot down over the Plain of Jars. The sole survivor was the assistant Army attaché from Saigon. General LeMay temporarily suspended all aerial reconnaissance. Then, toward the end of March, Phoumi's soldiers abandoned Tha Thom and withdrew down Highway 4 toward Paksane. In trying to cover the "completely uncontrolled retreat," the LAAF lost another T-6.⁶⁴ The LAAF had now lost five of the original ten T-6s transferred from the RTAF. However, seven qualified T-6 pilots were available, and three more were scheduled to complete training in Thailand by April 1.⁶⁵

● The downward spiral of Laotian military fortunes continued through the next month. In a surprise move on April 3 and 4, the Russians dropped Kong Le's paratroopers west of Vang Vieng. This threat to Route 13 came just as an operation planned by the PEO to sever enemy-held Muong Kassy from its Plain of Jars supply base was getting under way. With the T-6s flying cover, seven C-47s and fourteen of the recently arrived H-34 helicopters shifted 640 government troops to positions east of the town. Although the airlift came off without a hitch, the operation ended in failure when the FAL troops once more proved unwilling to close with the enemy. A major newspaper noted, "It has become clear to observers here that the Laotian army . . . has no will to fight."⁶⁶

● Meanwhile, by April 3, all sixteen Millpond B-26s [REDACTED] eight (b) (1) by the Air Force) and their sanitized USAF crews were at Takim. As part of their cover, the crews (b) (3) were "hired" by a newly founded "firm" in Bangkok. General LeMay asked that the bombers be (S) put into action without delay. He believed the State Department's diplomatic overtures toward the Russians would drag on unless the United States showed willingness to back Phoumi with air strikes. LeMay also wanted to use the recent SC-47 loss as justification for some sort of retaliation. "As long as we don't do anything about our people getting killed," the Air Force Chief warned, "this type of action will be continued by rebel groups with impunity." Defense Secretary McNamara opposed using the B-26s just then, his decision being affirmed at an April 13 White House meeting. President Kennedy did say he would permit the planes to take off should the Pathet Lao execute a serious ground action against the FAL.⁶⁷ CIA

● Besides the Millpond B-26s, the sixteen additional bombers McNamara had ordered to be readied were expected to be available by April 18. Two of them would be "recce birds," (b) (1) reconfigured [REDACTED] and flown by USAF crews. These two RB-26s left the United (b) (3) States in mid-April, but the remaining fourteen aircraft were kept stateside for an emergency.⁶⁸ (S) CIA

63. ● Schlesinger, pp 312-14; Hilsman, p 310; msgs, AmEmb New Delhi to SECSTATE, 2144, Mar 23, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1032, Mar 27, 1961.

64. ● Dommen, p 188; Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, Aug 23, 1962; JCS Laos SITREPs 87-61 to 90-61, Apr 1-4, 1961; Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974.

65. ● Msg, Ch/PEO to CINCPAC, Apr 1, 1961.

66. ● Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 206; *New York Times*, Apr 18, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 91.

67. ● *Ibid*, p 18; JCSM-206-61, Laos, Mar 31, 1961; MR, Rear Adm Luther C. Heinz, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, subj: State-JCS Meeting, 14 Apr 1961, Apr 15, 1961.

68. ● JCSM-206-61, Laos, Mar 31, 1961.

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There were several other deployments. MATS C-124s airlifted a control and reporting center from Clark to Don Muang Airport north of Bangkok during April 15-17. For air defense of the Thai capital, the Clark-based 510th Tactical Fighter Squadron deployed a detachment of six F-100s. Needless to say, Marshal Sarit was delighted with this action by CINCPAC and the Air Force.⁶⁹

That week, the Kennedy administration suffered a severe blow to its prestige—the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. There is no doubt that the failure to support the Cuban exiles shaped President Kennedy's decisions on Laos. He was determined that his restraint in Cuba was not going to be construed as a lack of resolution elsewhere. On April 20, JTF 116 and its air component were redesignated part of the SEATO Field Force, and a naval flotilla steamed into the Gulf of Siam. In a more far-reaching decision that day, Kennedy converted the Programs Evaluation Office into Military Assistance Advisory Group, Laos.⁷⁰ Accompanying this change was the authorization for U.S. personnel to put on their uniforms⁷¹ and move out into the field with the demoralized FAL. Since they were primarily advisors, the Americans were not to participate in combat unless such action was forced upon them.⁷²

Converting the PEO to a MAAG was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Ever since the war in Laos began heating up, Defense and the JCS were worried over the absence of legal protection for the "civilians" in the PEO. Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric was concerned that if such personnel were captured, they could well be treated as unlawful belligerents or as spies. However, as members of the U.S. armed forces openly advising the Laotians, they would be in a better position to receive treatment as prisoners of war. Besides, Gilpatric believed that recent events in Laos had partly lifted the PEO cover, and completely removing it would convince the Soviets that Washington meant business. Ambassador Brown also favored the change—it would show the Russians (who had been delaying their response to behind-the-scenes overtures for a cease-fire) that the American eagle held arrows as well as olive branches in its claws. None of this seemed to have fazed Kong Le or the Pathet Lao. They later rendezvoused and, on the 23d, easily captured Vang Vieng.⁷³

The gravity with which the country team viewed the fall of Vang Vieng was reflected in Ambassador Brown's temporary reversal of his long-standing ban on heavy ordnance. Although not convinced bombs would achieve major military results other than boosting FAL morale, Brown asked for standby authority on April 23 to arm the B-26s with them. The aircraft

69. Hists, 5th Comm & Con Gp, Jan-Jun 61, p 7, 5th FW, Jan-Jun 61, p 18; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1828, Apr 10, 1961.

70. It was a busy day for President Kennedy. He later met with former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, and after discussing Cuba the conversation turned to Laos. Nixon urged Kennedy to take some affirmative action there, at least a commitment of American air power. The President's answer shows the impact the Bay of Pigs had on his thinking. "I just don't think we should get involved in Laos, particularly where we might find ourselves fighting millions of Chinese troops in the jungle. In any event, I don't see how we can make any move in Laos which is five thousand miles away if we don't make a move in Cuba, which is only ninety miles away." [Richard M. Nixon, "Cuba, Castro and John F. Kennedy," *Reader's Digest*, Nov 64, pp 290-92.]

71. General Boyle later recalled an amusing story regarding the switch from PEO to MAAG. He had received the alert order for the change forty-eight hours before from Admiral Felt, but all of Boyle's men wore civilian clothes; none had uniforms. Boyle sent a "frantic telegram to CINCPAC saying, 'If you want us to be in uniform, get some here.' In a matter of hours the uniforms and insignia—all U.S. Army—were airlifted to Vientiane. So when reveille came, everyone turned out, whether they were Navy or Air Force . . . in Army uniforms. But it was very interesting how quickly the Marines, Navy, and Air Force got their people in the proper uniforms. It didn't take them very long." [Intvw, Lt Col Frank G. Walton, USA, Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., with Lt Gen Andrew J. Boyle, USA, Feb 13, 1971.]

72. Schlesinger, p 134; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1118, Apr 16, 1960, JCS to CINCPAC, 994593, Apr 21, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88-89.

73. Ltr, Roswell L. Gilpatric, DEPSECDEF, to Dean Rusk, SECSTATE, Apr 10, 1961; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1884, Apr 17, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88-89; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

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would stand alert but not be allowed to take off unless the enemy threatened Vientiane or other major objectives. Washington gave the green light to this request that same day but reserved the right to grant final approval for the bomb-laden planes to take off. This same message gave Felt permission to use carrier-based recce aircraft in Laos on a case-by-case basis.⁷⁴

● Aerial reconnaissance over Laos had slowed to a crawl. In February, Sarit ended the RT-33 flights after just six successful missions. Now, with the SC-47 gone, only Colonel Toland's VC-47 remained. Slow and cumbersome, this plane could not survive the anti-aircraft fire nor could it fill the MAAG's growing photo requirements. High performance USAF reconnaissance aircraft, such as the RF-101, were needed. President Kennedy ruled them out because of international complications and a desire to keep the American presence in Laos as inconspicuous as possible. With the suggestion that aircraft known to be in the RLAF or RTAF inventory be used, Admiral Felt was restricted to RB-26s, RT-28s, or RT-33s. Felt chose to borrow an RT-33 from the Philippine Air Force and scrub it of its national markings. With Defense and State approval, he manned the plane with experienced USAF reconnaissance pilots from the 15th and 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadrons.⁷⁵

● These seasoned pilots faced the same aerial recce problems over Laos that would later plague crews of more sophisticated aircraft. They had to identify small obscure targets in a densely forested country virtually devoid of roads, railroads, canals, or other cultural features. In early 1961, there were no navigational aids such as up-to-date maps, radio beacons, or tacan stations. The pilots were forced to learn the topography of the country by trial and error, establishing their own checkpoints and developing a feel for direction and distance. In addition, the RT-33 was limited in range, speed, altitude, and the number of cameras it could carry.⁷⁶

● The film was developed and processed at Clark Air Base, Philippines. After preliminary intelligence reports were prepared, the film was shipped to Yokota Air Base for detailed examination by the 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron. Known as Field Goal, these Udorn-based sorties began on April 24. While these photos excelled those taken by the modified C-47s, Field Goal could never keep abreast of the burgeoning reconnaissance needs of the MAAG or FAL.⁷⁷

● By April 26, Muong Sai had fallen; and Phoumi urgently appealed for air strikes. By now, even Brown was convinced that unless the B-26s were used, and probably SEATO ground forces as well, the enemy could not be stopped. He asked for authority to fly the bombers, provided the enemy moved south of the Lik River or, in the case of Luang Prabang, Paksane, or Savannakhet, occupied the high ground overlooking the towns. Brown was aware that such an action would scuttle the cease-fire negotiations and probably lead to the intervention of U.S. or SEATO forces. Nevertheless, he saw no alternative if the enemy pressed beyond the limits he had indicated.⁷⁸

● In Honolulu, Admiral Felt was monitoring these cables with growing alarm. While not ready to quarrel with the authorization placing control of the B-26s in Brown's hands, Felt was visibly upset over the ambassador's ruling out their use except for attacking enemy forces threatening a FAL-held objective, particularly since the March 13 meeting in Washington set the communist logistic system as first priority for the B-26s. Support for troops in contact was

74. ● Msgs. AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1921, Apr 23, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1153, Apr 23, 1961.

75. ● Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966*, p 1; hists, 18th TFW, Jan-Jun 61, p 124, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88-89; msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1774, Mar 31, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1562, Apr 8, 1961.

76. ● Greenhalgh, p 1-24

77. ● Hist, 5th AF, Jan-Jun 61, I, 124.

78. ● Msg. AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1943, Apr 26, 1961.

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secondary. This arrangement had been reaffirmed at a March 27 meeting between the Joint Chiefs and high officials of the Defense Department. Now, Brown not only reversed these priorities but eliminated the B-26's primary mission. Felt deemed it impossible to accept restrictions stemming from Brown's interpretation of Washington's guidelines. CINCPAC requested that his views be forwarded to Secretary McNamara and that Ambassador Brown be directed not to interfere once "military action is joined and is being conducted in accordance with agreed objectives."⁷⁹

● In view of the fall of Muong Sai and the Brown/Felt messages, President Kennedy called in his top advisors. Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles attended in place of Rusk, who was in Ankara, Turkey, taking part in a meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Bowles believed the introduction of a large U.S. force into Laos could spark a Chinese reaction. If such a step was necessary, the administration must be sure it had the solid backing of its European allies and India. Defense Secretary McNamara and Arleigh A. Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, expressed considerable concern over the exposed position of U.S. or SEATO forces in Vientiane should the Chinese make an air strike. On top of these gloomy assessments, Kennedy suspected there was scant domestic or international support for an insertion of U.S. forces into Laos. The conferees nevertheless agreed they would have to be prepared to make a major commitment of forces to Thailand and South Vietnam if the Kong Le/Pathet Lao advance continued southward. In the end, Kennedy instructed Admiral Felt to move a naval force closer to the area and to alert those units earmarked for air movement into Laos under SEATO Plan 5. However, he withheld permission for Brown to employ the B-26s.⁸⁰

● Kennedy met with congressional leaders the next day and briefed them on recent developments, including Brown's cable regarding the B-26s and the probable need for SEATO intervention. Admiral Burke then gave a rundown on the current situation and repeatedly voiced the view that, unless the U.S. was ready to intervene militarily, all Southeast Asia would be lost. Yet, Burke warned that an American troop commitment might trigger a Korean-type intervention by communist China resulting in a long, tough war. After these sobering words, the congressmen were strong and unanimous in their reply—under no circumstances should the United States introduce its forces into Laos. They felt, with the Laotians unwilling to fight for themselves, there was no justification for American intervention. Significant support was shown, however, for putting U.S. forces into Thailand and South Vietnam.⁸¹

● With the B-26s now held back, Phoumi pleaded for bombs for his T-6s. On April 29, Kennedy authorized their release, but with a stipulation: the LAAF could use the ordnance until an effective cease-fire was reached. The cease-fire the President alluded to had been proposed a week earlier by Great Britain and the Soviet Union. It called for an international conference on Laos to include the three Laotian factions, the 1954 Geneva signatories, the three ICC countries, and Burma and Thailand (which border Laos on the west). The conference would start on May 12. It was hoped that the fighting would stop and, in the interim, a cease-fire observed. This announcement won the instant support of Hanoi, Peking, and the Royal Laotian Government; but for several days, no reaction came from Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. Except for around the Lik River, the skirmishing went on as each side maneuvered for better positions.⁸²

79. ● Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 070017Z Apr 61, 272037Z Apr 61; MR, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, subj: JCS-SECDEF Meeting on March 27 to Discuss Laos and Vietnam, Mar 27, 1961.

80. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Ankara (Eyes Only for Secretary fr Bowles), SEC 6, Apr 26, 1961. Although an Eyes Only message, it was microfilmed by the Kennedy Library in April 1964. Essentially the same information was sent to Vientiane as SECSTATE 1172, April 26, 1961. In fact, the messages were sent roughly two hours apart.

81. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Ankara (Eyes Only Secretary fr Bowles), SEC 23, Apr 27, 1961 [message microfilmed by Kennedy Library, April 1964].

82. ● Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1192, Apr 29, 1961; Dommen, pp 197-98.

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General Boyle was preparing to begin using bombs on the T-6s when he was suddenly reined in by Ambassador Brown.⁸³ With Averell W. Harriman (then in Vientiane), Brown sent an urgent cable to Rusk claiming that bomb-laden T-6s would be "wholly ineffective" and a half measure. He termed their use a needless provocation that the communists might seize as an excuse to prolong the fighting, thus delaying the long sought cease-fire. Furthermore, doubts would again be raised in the minds of the neutrals and America's allies about U.S. sincerity in seeking a cease-fire. Rusk agreed and delegated to Brown the final authority on use of the heavier ordnance.⁸⁴

After receiving Rusk's cable, Brown drove to the Wattay flight line and ordered a dismayed Capt. Ronald G. Shaw, the USAF maintenance officer assigned to the LAAF, to unload the weapons. Shaw, in turn, had considerable difficulty getting the Filipino and Laotian ordnance specialists to carry out the order. When Maj. Thao Ma, the head of the LAAF, learned of Brown's action, he was furious and was determined to fly the mission anyway. He was finally talked out of this rash act by Shaw, and the bombs were then removed. Nonetheless, from this time on, Thao Ma deeply resented Ambassador Brown and was bitter over what he believed was American indecision.⁸⁵

The war took a surprising twist at this point, when Kong Le and the Pathet Lao failed to advance toward Vientiane. MAAG personnel expected such an attack because the FAL was demoralized and appeared on the verge of being routed. Reasons later put forth for Kong Le's decision were his need to consolidate recent gains and his willingness to now accept the Anglo-Soviet cease-fire proposal of April 24. To a certain extent, these points are probably true; but more than likely, the decision not to press forward was based on military factors, particularly geography and air power. Vang Vieng was in the mountains, while the road south (Route 13) zigzagged through a mountain valley and then into open country. The troops heading southward would be denied cover from the jungle and exposed to air attack. (Even Rusk admitted air strikes could be effective in such a situation.) To reach Vientiane, the enemy would have to cross the Lik River, soon to be swift and swollen by the monsoons. Facing them on the south bank's high ground were Col. Siho Lamphouthacoul's paratroopers. They were the best troops Phoumi had, and they were entrenched behind revetments and could be supported by artillery and air power. This air support was not just a handful of T-6s, but it was fourteen B-26s carrying bombs (possibly napalm) and flown by American crews.

There was also the problem of resupply. Kong Le and the Pathet Lao were over a hundred miles from their base on the Plain of Jars. Transporting supplies over Routes 7 and 13 would have risked attack from the B-26s and ambushes from Meo tribesmen, and the monsoon soon turned the roads and footpaths into quagmires. While the Soviet airlift could have resupplied the insurgents, the Il-14 transports would have been in easy interceptor range of the T-6s or F-100s staging from Udom, Thailand. Complicating the resupply picture was the absence of any antiaircraft defense, a defense that had deterred the T-6s from attacking targets on the Plain of Jars. The odds, therefore, were in the government's favor. Kong Le and his Pathet Lao/NVA allies apparently realized this. They did not attack, and the areas south of Vang Vieng rapidly stabilized. Perhaps more important, a major East-West confrontation was avoided when the Soviet transports did not appear.

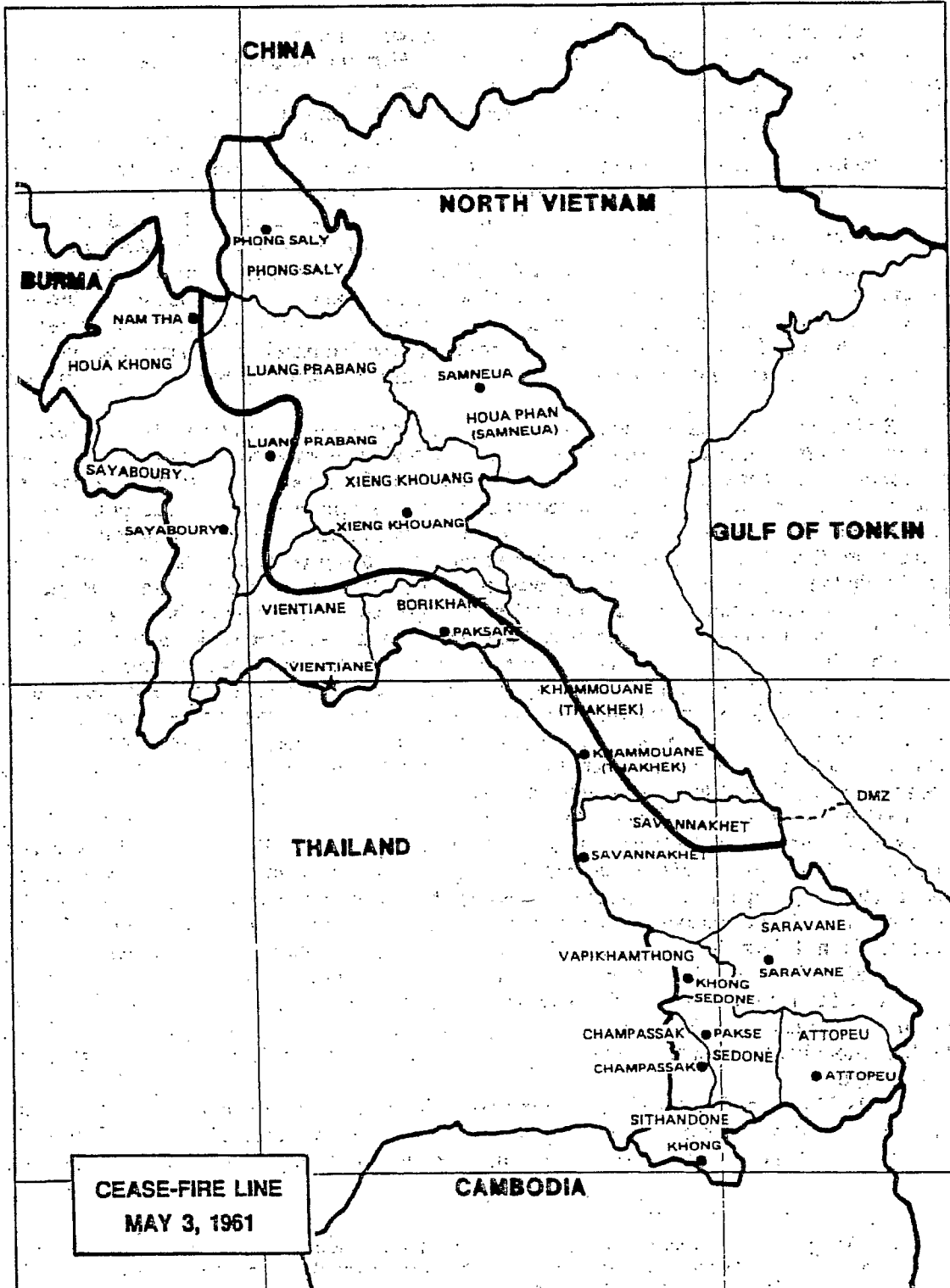
By May 3, both sides agreed to the cease-fire, although the Pathet Lao captured Muong Phalane in southern Laos on the morning of that day. (This action enabled them to later seize the vital town of Tchepone, subsequently a major supply and staging area for the Ho Chi Minh

83. In reporting these ambassadorial flip-flops to Felt, Boyle depicted himself as "again . . . caught in the middle" since he had alerted the FAL to imminent bomb release before Brown issued his holding order. [Msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 109099, Apr 30, 1961.]

84. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88-89; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1192, Apr 29, 1961.

85. Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

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Trail.) By that afternoon, however, the fighting had generally stopped.⁸⁶ A few days later, the International Control Commission arrived on the Plain of Jars. All aerial reconnaissance was halted and Washington soon withdrew its ordnance authorization. Neither the T-6s nor B-26s ever got off the ground as bombers.⁸⁷

Like many earlier and later cease-fires in Laos, the May 3 agreement was continually violated. One of the more flagrant Pathet Lao violations occurred at Ban Padong, a Meo-controlled mountain redoubt situated just a few miles south of the Plain of Jars. Since February, the communists had been increasing the pressure on the Meo garrison. They secured the mountain ridges in late April; and on May 15, Vang Pao estimated that over one hundred artillery shells fell on the mountaintop. On May 26 and 27, nearly four hundred incoming rounds were counted. The ICC tried to visit Ban Padong and the other Meo enclaves, but they were blocked by the Pathet Lao, since these were "liberated areas" where "patriotic forces" were merely "mopping up bandits."⁸⁸

Phoumi had put in 225 troops as reinforcements; and the LAAF flew several T-6 sorties (no bombs) in a counterbattery role, but most were ineffective. Since [REDACTED] sponsored the Meo, the burden for defense and resupply fell to [REDACTED]. A daily helicopter shuttle was started, but General Boyle believed the area indefensible. Fighting from static defensive positions ran against the Meo grain, Boyle argued, and the helicopters depended too much on open landing zones. If the enemy captured the landing areas, paradrops would be used; but Boyle reckoned it would only be a short time before antiaircraft guns stopped the airlift entirely. In fact, on May 30, an Air America H-34 crashed while trying to maneuver in the mist surrounding Ban Padong. This was followed by the downing of a transport soon thereafter.⁸⁹

The Meo made a conventional defense of Ban Padong because of the prestige that both Vang Pao and the RLG attached to holding the site and because of the need to defend the large Meo refugee camp nearby.⁹⁰ While the Meo stubbornly held on, a curious reversal of roles ensued between CINCPAC and Ambassador Brown. Previously, Admiral Felt had shown slight concern over the repercussions any anticommunist military action might bring. However, he questioned whether T-6 operations at Ban Padong were legitimate defensive actions as authorized by the terms of the cease-fire. Although aware of the adverse propaganda effect using T-6s could have, Brown believed something had to be done to counter enemy artillery and to sustain Meo morale; and he had authorized their use, but still refused to release any heavy ordnance. On May 30, the JCS formally approved the employment of T-6s in the Ban Padong area for as long as the Pathet Lao violated the cease-fire. Clearance would be required, however, for use of the fighters elsewhere or the loading of bombs.⁹¹

86. Dommen, p 198.

87. In mid-July, CINCPAC was notified that the RTAF planned to move an F-84G unit from Don Muang to Takhli the next month to provide space for F-86Fs due in September. The parking at Takhli was insufficient to accommodate both B-26s and F-84s. Since the tense situation on the Plain of Jars no longer existed, Felt recommended the B-26s be phased out. This recommendation was quickly approved by the JCS and McNamara. [JCSM-481-61, no subj, Jul 24, 1961.]

88. Dommen, p 207.

89. Msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 116915, May 27, 1961.

90. JCS SITREP 142-61, Jun 8, 1961.

91. Msgs, CINCPAC to CHMAAG Laos, 280546Z May 61, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2158, May 27, 1961, JCS to CINCPAC, 996, May 30, 1961. Apparently, Washington was confused over the ground rules governing T-6 operations. General Boyle noted that he had "little or no control" over T-6 missions flown by the LAAF. Nonetheless, on numerous occasions he pointed out to Phoumi that strikes not in reply to Pathet Lao attacks were of tremendous propaganda value to the enemy. Washington did not accept Boyle's explanation. He was told to reaffirm to Phoumi that T-6 strikes were to be flown solely against enemy forces violating the cease-fire. Boyle acknowledged these instructions but advised, "Phoumi takes orders from no one on employment of the FAL. He makes his own decisions on the employment of the T-6s without reference to this headquarters." Phoumi assured Boyle, however, that

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On June 6, the Meo position became untenable and Ban Padong was evacuated. Several hundred refugees (mostly women and children) streamed into Vientiane, where they caused a minor problem. Eventually, Vang Pao and many of the tribesmen, aided by the Special Forces [redacted] set up a new headquarters at Long Tieng and Sam Thong.⁹² Many Meo enclaves, some deep in the mountains of Samneua and Xieng Khouang Provinces, remained a constant irritant to the Pathet Lao.

The Royal Laotian Government had no advanced training program for its air force, relying solely on agreements with other countries. Under the Military Assistance Program, the U.S. Air Force agreed to accept a few English-speaking pilots for flight training in the United States during the last half of 1960. None with a satisfactory knowledge of English could be found, so the slots stayed unfilled; most pilot and mechanic training was conducted by the French at bases in Europe and North Africa. At the time of Kong Le's coup, seventy-one personnel were undergoing such instruction. However, as Phoumi's dislike for the French hardened, the program was suspended and the Laotians called home. During this turmoil, the LAAF continued L-19 training at Savannakhet; but in February 1961, when the Thai agreed to resume T-6 training, this in-country program was dropped.⁹³

The RTG decision to continue LAAF training was ratified on March 3 in Bangkok between representatives of the PEO, Royal Thailand Army (RTA), RTAF, LAAF, and JUSMAGTHAI. The Thai agreed to a ten-week course of forty-five hours for fifteen candidates. L-19 training would be given by the Thai army, to be followed by a forty-hour course in the T-6 by the Thai air force. Those pilots still in the program would spend an additional ninety hours in advanced T-6 training. A second class of pilots would follow approximately fourteen weeks after the first group. Estimated cost of the program was three hundred thousand dollars.⁹⁴

Ground personnel were also urgently needed to repair aircraft, engines, and auxiliary equipment. To fill this gap, the PEO had earlier selected on-the-job training—a method proven successful with MAAGs in technically unskilled, agrarian societies. Since manpower limitations and the Geneva accords restrictions hampered Americans, a contract was signed in March 1959 with the Eastern Construction Company of Manila to furnish eighty-two Filipino technicians for eighteen (later twelve) months in Laos. The Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL) program inched along for two years due chiefly to language difficulties. This, in turn, dampened the motivation of the trainees.⁹⁵

Although most of the Filipinos could speak English, few of the Laotians could. Unfortunately, all the manuals were in English, and the technical terms had no counterpart in the Lao tongue. One of the first things Captain Shaw did after arriving at Savannakhet in late 1960 was to begin translating tech orders into French. To help clear the English language hurdle, ECCOIL (and occasionally United States Information Service) personnel conducted language training with the technical instruction. (Capt. William G. Von Platen, assistant air attaché, noted that listening to a Filipino trying to teach English to a Laotian was less than inspiring.) A language trainer complete with earphones, tape recorders, and booths arrived in October 1960, but it remained in crates for nearly six months while LAAF chief Thao Ma tried to make up his mind whether he wanted it at Vientiane or Savannakhet. It is no wonder the Laotians appeared

the T-6s were being used solely for defensive purposes and the MAAG chief had confirmed this by having his men check the postmission reports. [Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 020506Z Jun 61; AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2186, Jun 2, 1961; CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 119700, Jun 7, 1961; JCS to CINCPAC, 1243, Aug 24, 1961; and CHMAAG Laos to JCS; DA IN 144330, Aug 27, 1961.]

92. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962*, p D-34.

93. Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Semiannual FWAIS Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961.

94. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 105.

95. See note 93.

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disinterested or showed a marked dislike for the on-the-job training program; however, Von Platen believed that part of this indifference was due to racial conflict between the Laotians and the Filipinos, the Laotians considering themselves superior to the Filipinos. The high absentee rate caused Von Platen to lament by the end of 1960, "On-the-job training thus far has not uncovered any personnel with the initiative, aptitude, or interest to complete U.S. type formal technical training."⁹⁶

96. The failure of ground personnel to respond to on-the-job training had severe repercussions for the LAAF C-47 fleet after Kong Le's August 9 coup. From then until mid-October, the transports were in the air⁹⁷ without any ground maintenance and they deteriorated markedly. When the rump Programs Evaluation Office moved to Savannakhet, fourteen ECCOIL mechanics went along to keep the planes flying. A crude facility, Savannakhet airfield had no hangars or parking spaces for aircraft, and a few scattered pieces of steel planking served as hardstands. The repairs, chiefly of the "bailing wire" variety, were all done in the open. During the dry season, clouds of red dust swirled around the field. It was, as Shaw later remembered, "A hell of a mess!"⁹⁸ Some relief came in late October 1960 when Thai Airways in Bangkok agreed to provide periodic inspection and IRAN (inspection and repair as necessary) on the C-47s. Without the Filipino mechanics at Savannakhet, the FAL would have lost its transport capability during the 1960-61 dry season.⁹⁹

97. The attitudes of its commanders, Colonel Sourith and Major Thao Ma, also affected LAAF performance. Sourith, who had headed the air arm since late 1957, had been appointed to this post because of his reputation as a disciplinarian. He later attended flying schools in France but was checked out only in liaison aircraft. Sourith did little flying and expressed no desire to upgrade into C-47s. He shunned PEO advice and at times was difficult to work with. After the Kong Le coup, Sourith became a staunch supporter of Phoumi; and after reoccupying Vientiane, Phoumi rewarded Sourith's loyalty by making him Military Region III Commander. To fill the post of Chief of the LAAF, Phoumi promoted Thao Ma, a young (thirty-two years old), but highly qualified (two thousand hours), C-47 pilot.¹⁰⁰

98. Thao Ma was a former paratroop commander who had jumped into Dien Bien Phu during that epic battle. When the garrison was about to surrender, the French told him to do what he could to save his command. He then took his company and escaped to friendly lines. After the Indochina War, he remained a parachutist and became friends with Kong Le (as did Vang Pao). In 1957, Thao Ma was sent to France for pilot training, returning two years later. After assuming command of the LAAF, he was described as "extremely interested in his work, diligent, forceful, but sometimes tactless." Like many Laotian officers, he seemed subject to deep depression when things did not go right and great elation when they did. He was deemed highly nervous (smoking

96. See note 93; rpts, AIRA Saigon, Semiannual Updating FWAIS S-3632, Aug 1, 1961, Semiannual FWAIS Air Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Harry S. Coleman, USAF, Ret, Nov 19, 1974. During January-July 1961, Coleman served as Chief, Air Force Section, PEO/MAAG Laos.

97. Whether operated by Phoumi or Kong Le, there were few flight logs maintained by the C-47 crews during the last four months of 1960. An accurate record of transport flying hours is therefore not available, but from their observations, U.S. personnel knew that a considerable number of troops and much cargo had been shuttled throughout the country. Another inference was the lack of time on the L-20s, because the pilots flew the C-47 as first priority. [Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Mar 22, 1961.]

98. To which George Concepcion, an ECCOIL line chief, replied, "Don't worry, Mr. Shaw. In about two or three months you'll get accumulated!" [Intvw, author with Col Ronald G. Shaw, Kelly AFB, Tex, Jan 22, 1975.]

99. Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Mar 22, 1961; ltr, CINCPAC to JCS, subj: Lessons Learned, MAAG and Special Forces Activities in Laos, Feb 21, 1963; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

100. Pratt, pp 8-9; DAF IR-1504023, AIRA Saigon, Who's Who Report, Ma, Thao, Aug 15, 1962. This intelligence report was written by Capt Ronald G. Shaw and forwarded to the office of Lt Col Butler B. Toland, Jr., in Saigon.

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about five packs of cigarettes a day) and excitable under pressure. He always impressed Americans, if for no other reason than that he often flew without shoes. Despite this idiosyncrasy, the few American air officers who met him were convinced that only he had the ability to command the LAAF.¹⁰¹

Intensely loyal to Phoumi, Thao Ma refused to take orders except from him and often bragged to outsiders of this close relationship. At least once a week he met the general, an act noticed and resented by other high ranking army officers. Because of his rapport with Phoumi, Thao Ma refused to go through channels when requesting funds, equipment and improvements for the air arm. In time, this alienated his former chief and immediate superior, Colonel Sourith.¹⁰²

In many ways, Thao Ma was the mirror image of Phoumi. Both men had attended French military schools even though they disliked the French intensely and were quite blunt in stating that dislike.¹⁰³ Neither was willing to delegate authority, citing incompetence among subordinates. Both begrudgingly sent men to the PEO-sponsored training schools and often mistrusted or ignored the advice of the Americans. At this stage, however, Thao Ma was not inclined to become embroiled in domestic politics. Phoumi's protege preferred rather to concentrate on managing and flying the C-47s based at Savannakhet. He did a creditable job in handling the C-47 fleet during the first half of 1961. Only four of the nine aircraft assigned were available owing to maintenance problems. Over this period, the average monthly flying rate was 270 hours per aircraft. The one complaint of the air attaché was that too often the C-47s were used in a "passenger convenience role."¹⁰⁴

As Thao Ma devoted most of his time to the LAAF transports, the flamboyant and charismatic Capt. Keo Soutsana headed the T-6 section. This promising young officer was killed in March 1961, forcing Thao Ma to take an interest in the attack branch. The LAAF chief was subsequently checked out in the T-6 but rarely flew it. He claimed he was too valuable to be killed in action, since there was no one qualified to replace him. Though Thao Ma was no doubt correct in assessing his subordinates, his reluctance to fly in combat did not escape the eyes of some western observers. In fairness to Thao Ma (and the other pilots), the T-6 was not suitable for combat. It was old and slow and, without armor plating, was susceptible to ground fire. Furthermore, Ambassador Brown's refusal to allow the aircraft to be armed with bombs undoubtedly lowered the morale of the T-6 crews. In light of these factors, it was evident the pilots intended avoiding combat in the T-6s, hoping to stay alive until the T-28s arrived. This explains the high flying hours versus results. The T-6 pilots for example, flew 210 hours in March when Kong Le counterattacked at Sala Phou Khoun and 113 hours in support of the Meo at Ban Padong in June. Still, the results were nil because they repeatedly refused to fly in any area where ground fire could be expected. At debriefings they frankly admitted attacking whatever moved rather than a bona fide target. It is no wonder that on several occasions they strafed government troops. At other times, they salvoed their rockets into the jungle. Their favorite expression soon became "Nous avons tue la nature"—we killed nature (meaning trees).¹⁰⁵

101. *Ibid.*; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

102. DAF IR-1504023, AIRA Saigon, Aug 15, 1962; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974.

103. Phoumi wanted to forcibly evict the French from Seno Air Base but was restrained from this rash act by Brown and Boyle. Thao Ma did buzz the home of Seno's French commander from time to time to see what kind of reaction he would get. Once he ordered a French officer to leave LAAF headquarters because "you have no more business with us." [Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Who's Who Report, Ma, Thao [sic] DAF IR1504023, Aug 15, 1962.]

104. DAF IR-1504023, AIRA Saigon, Aug 15, 1962; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974.

105. Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Aug 1, 1961; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975. Thao Ma was more subtle. He always reported he had successfully carried out an *exercice de combat*—combat exercise. [Intvw, author with Lt Col Ernest P. Uiberall, USA, Ret, Mar 13, 1974.] Others claimed, *Nous avons menace l'ennemi*—we

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● Air Force personnel of the PEO/MAAG had their work cut out. Unfortunately, a few of these individuals were without the background, temperament, and ability so vital to working with backward or unskilled people. They neither spoke nor tried to learn French, lacked tact, and groused constantly of primitive facilities, the humidity, and unsanitary conditions. Many holed up in the barbed wire-enclosed embassy compound counting the days to reassignment. None of this should have been surprising. Apparently, some high-ranking Air Force officers looked upon Laos as a "dumping ground" and exiled to Vientiane their misfits, malcontents, and alcoholics, whose poor behavior did not pass unnoticed. Since these men made the crucial mistake of treating the Laotians as the French had done, the LAAF commandos often refused to cooperate or work with Americans. Never was the need more starkly apparent for qualified and dedicated men to set an example of positive leadership.¹⁰⁶

● Yet, by mid-1961, the LAAF began to show slight improvement, even though this might not have been discernible to outsiders. This was due in great part to the arrival, during the year, of several USAF officers and enlisted men who, on their own, made a determined effort to train and work with the LAAF. Many of them spoke French and those who did not gained the confidence of the Laotians through their leadership qualities. Col. Harry S. Coleman is a case in point. Admiral Felt and General O'Donnell sent him to set up a tactical operations center when it appeared JTF 116 and other units might be deploying to Vientiane, but he wound up "cleaning house" in the Air Force MAAG section on the orders of General Boyle. The unsuitable individuals that had been sent to Laos were shipped home, and Boyle appointed Coleman commander of the air section. Although he could not speak a word of French, Coleman set about at once to gain the confidence of the airmen and Thao Ma. The process was painfully slow; it took weeks, even months, before an effective rapport and working relationship could be built. Gradually the Laotian attitude toward their American advisors changed. The dive angles of the T-6s became slightly steeper, and the enlisted personnel became more receptive to on-the-job training by demonstrating a willingness to learn and accept advice.¹⁰⁷ Even Thao Ma was convinced of the need to stop flying with his feet bare.¹⁰⁸

● Coleman did not stop here. He persuaded Thao Ma to resume O-1 instruction at Savannakhet and cross-train a few C-47 pilots in the T-6. Other transport pilots were put through a makeshift instrument school at Wattay. While the graduates were not good instrument pilots by USAF standards, Coleman had the foresight to reward them with a formal graduation ceremony, a rousing speech (that Shaw toned down in the translation), and the all-important instrument card. He also helped Shaw build a much-needed machine shop for the LAAF. Since no funds were available for the project, Coleman resorted to the age-old "midnight requisition." However, he failed to elicit the help of the French Military Mission, later terming them as "cooperative as a cobra in a corner." Perhaps because he spoke fluent French, Shaw had better luck. He succeeded in securing the aid of the Seno base commander for critically needed building materials for maintenance hangars and shops at Savannakhet.¹⁰⁹

(S) In September 1961, a new team of advisors (thirteen officers and five airmen) was sent to the MAAG. This group built upon the foundation laid by Coleman, Shaw, and others. They brought Thao Ma around to the idea that, for the on-the-job training program to be successful,

threatened the enemy. [Intvw, author with Col William H. Pietsch Jr., USA, Ret, July 25, 1974.]

106. ● Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Aug 1, 1961; Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

107. ● Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Updating of FWAIS S-3622, Nov 1, 1961; MAAG Laos Final Rprt.

108. ● Thao Ma only met Coleman halfway; he steadfastly refused to wear socks with his shoes. [Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Harry S. Coleman, USAF, Ret, Galveston, Tex, Nov 15, 1974.]

109. ● Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

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the students had to learn English. On November 15, 1961, the chief of the LAAF (now known as the RLAF or Royal Laotian Air Force) approved two hours per day for the forty-three students enrolled in on-the-job training or previously selected for stateside training. By January 1962, four pilots were deemed sufficiently proficient in English to be sent to the United States for T-28 training. Thao Ma now increased the classroom hours to six a day; by midyear, 120 students were enrolled, but the RLAF leader was always "too busy" to study English himself.¹¹⁰

Fortunately, the cease-fire coincided with the monsoon season so there was little combat flying in the last half of 1961. During this period, a practice range of sorts was developed on a hillside near Pakse, but the absence of scoring devices prevented correction of errors and the effectiveness of the T-6s remained low. In December, the first group of twelve pilots trained by the Thai returned, giving the LAAF twenty-two qualified flyers. Nevertheless, after being briefed on the situation in December, General O'Donnell remained skeptical that the LAAF would be able to operate the MAP T-28s by their May-June 1962 delivery date.¹¹¹

Despite signs of some progress, the chronic shortage of FAL leaders to conduct successful military operations persisted. Morale, motivation, and a willingness to fight were direct functions of leadership; officers lacking these key ingredients could not give them to their men. At the end of 1961, no responsible American officer anticipated that these basic weaknesses could be corrected with anything short of a program lasting from three to five years. Moreover, what few improvements had been made by the government forces were offset by similar improvements in the enemy force during the year. General Boyle, near the end of 1961, estimated that enemy strength had grown to nearly thirty thousand troops (twenty thousand in organized units with three thousand to five thousand classified as guerrillas). In addition, there were fifty-four hundred North Vietnamese troops serving as cadres and an unspecified number as advisors and technicians. Owing chiefly to Viet Minh cadres and logistic support, the Pathet Lao were consolidating their hold on Phong Saly, Samneua, and Xieng Khouang Provinces. Their morale was high as they pressed probes, patrols, and hit-and-run raids with relative impunity. It was obvious they not only had retained their superiority over the FAL but also could mount offensive operations on all major fronts at times and places of their own choosing. Without outside help, the FAL could offer nothing more than a delaying action for two to three weeks.¹¹²

By the end of 1961, the war in Laos had fallen into a distinct pattern that would prevail in varying degrees for the next decade. Unlike the conflict developing in South Vietnam, Laos was no longer basically a guerrilla insurgency. It was being fought conventionally by small infantry units supported by mortars, light artillery, and, to a certain extent, air power. Even armor had appeared, although it had yet to play a significant role in military operations. However, because of the economic and technological backwardness of Laos, both the government and the Pathet Lao now depended almost exclusively on outside assistance to sustain their positions. It is significant that this support came not only from the traditional antagonists of Laos—Thailand and Vietnam—but also from major powers located many thousands of miles away.

The monsoon weather was also setting a pattern for future military operations. At first, it served as a period for recruiting, refitting, and resupplying depleted units. Then, as the war grew in intensity, the weather's greatest impact was on the logistic network feeding the Pathet Lao. During 1960-61, the antigovernment forces were supplied by air and motor transport. This let them take the offensive and capture sizable territory from the Laotian Army. While the FAL had the same logistic capability, it was without the leadership, hard discipline, and esprit needed

110. *Ibid.*; rpt, AIRA Vientiane, Nov 1, 1961; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Pratt, p 8; Futrell, p 145.

111. DAF IR-1504023, AIRA Saigon, Aug 15, 1962; MAAG Laos Final Rprt.

112. DJSM-1259-61, Oct 13, 1961; msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 166366, Oct 27, 1961; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 247, Aug 14, 1961.



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to counter Kong Le's dedicated paratroopers and the Pathet Lao with their Vietnamese cadre. Hence, government forces withdrew, trading space for time as they awaited the rainy season. When the rains turned the roads muddy and unusable, supplies were hard to get in, except by air. Phoumi held the advantage in this area, for between the LAAF and Air America, he had the necessary airlift. On the other hand, the Pathet Lao and Kong Le would lose the Soviet transports in 1962. As time passed, their lines of communication had to be shortened. They withdrew, and the government troops reoccupied the territory; but when the rains stopped and the roads dried, the enemy once more seized the offensive. With one major exception, this constant ebb and flow, this trading of real estate coincident with the southwest monsoon, symbolized the war in northern Laos.

● Air power was still in its infancy in Laos during 1961. The fixed-wing and helicopter airlift, however, proved highly efficient and a portent of future operations. Early on, the poor road network forced both sides to rely on airlift. Moreover, the monsoon weather and mountainous, jungle-covered terrain placed motor transportation at a decided disadvantage. Until the roads were improved, the protagonists had to rely on some form of aerial mobility and resupply. During 1960-61, the Soviets and Americans sustained their clients in this manner, both being especially adept at airdrops. Kong Le's successful withdrawal up Route 13 after Phoumi's capture of Vientiane could not have taken place without aerial resupply. The timely establishment of an airhead at Vang Vieng, and afterwards on the Plain of Jars, was vital to the paratrooper captain's subsequent defense east of Sala Phou Khoun. Similarly, Phoumi pulled off a successful paratroop drop on the Plain of Jars, but his inability to resupply these men, because Ambassador Brown withheld Air America aircraft, lowered their morale and proved their undoing. The use of helicopters near Muong Kassy likewise showed how a quick, vertical insertion of troops could affect military operations. The later poor performance of this force ultimately detracted from the importance of the helicopter landings. Nonetheless, the value of airlift as a substitute for motor transportation in Laos had been demonstrated.

● In contrast, tactical aviation had been nearly worthless to the FAL. Obviously, it would have to improve immeasurably before it could be of real assistance. This improvement would come with proper training and equipment but would take considerable time, effort, and money because of the many, almost insurmountable, obstacles.

● The most striking pattern by far that emerged in 1961 was the U.S. ambassador's control of military activities. This control did not come without a struggle because the military leadership (personified by Admiral Felt and the Joint Chiefs) were loathe to accept a situation where the local State Department representative had the final say in such matters. Yet, this is precisely what CINCPAC and the JCS were confronted with as early as 1960. Since Felt and the service chiefs had gained their battle and command experience in World War II—when the military had a fairly free hand—ambassadorial control was not easily swallowed. True, there had been restraints on military operations during the Korean War, but these were in the form of specific directives from Washington. In Laos, the U.S. ambassador, acting like a Roman proconsul, decided when and where (if at all) to use heavy ordnance and had prevented legitimate enemy targets from being struck. He had even reversed tactical air priorities, stressing close support of ground forces over interdiction of supply lines. Several times he withheld vital Air America airlift from Phoumi. It is no wonder an exasperated Admiral Felt, even though overruled, filed vigorous protests over what he considered interference in a military sphere by a man of no military expertise.

● When the dust finally settled, Ambassador Brown's position had been strengthened, not reduced as the services had hoped. Following the May cease-fire, President Kennedy placed all ambassadors in charge of the entire U.S. mission where they served, including representatives of all U.S. agencies. The single exception was U.S. military forces operating in the field under the control of a U.S. military commander. Such an organization was in Thailand, the Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand, which later became the Military Assistance Command,



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Thailand (MACTHAI); and another would emerge in South Vietnam as the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). In Laos there was no such command, nor would there be one. Control of military activities, accordingly, was placed squarely in the hands of the U.S. ambassador. Kennedy emphasized that the ambassador was outside the military chain of command, but he recognized that actions of U.S. military forces might adversely affect relations with the host country. In such cases, the ambassador could consult with the proper military commander. If a stalemate resulted, either side could request adjudication by a higher authority. Under such guidelines, there would be many appeals to Washington during the next decade.

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Chapter III

The Decline of Phoumi (U)

On May 11, 1961, the newly revived International Control Commission for Laos reported a general observance of the cease-fire. Five days later, the fourteen-nation Geneva conference opened what was to be a series of endless sessions. Early the next month, President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev met in Vienna. They discussed Berlin, nuclear armaments, and "wars of national liberation;" but reached no agreement. However, the two leaders did issue a joint communique on Laos endorsing a neutral and independent kingdom under a government chosen by its people. President Kennedy now hoped that Ambassador Averell W. Harriman could handle the day-to-day policy questions on Laos.¹

The three princes (Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong, and Boun Oum) met in Zurich on June 19 under the aegis of Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk. On June 22 they agreed in principle to a tripartite government that would rule Laos until new general elections could be held. Endless delays ensued, and it was not until October 6 that a second meeting took place on a rickety bridge spanning the Lik River. At its conclusion, it was announced that a cabinet would be formed and that it would be composed of a neutral center of eight members and two four-member groups representing the left and right. On October 18, the king invited Souvanna to head the new government but stipulated that Boun Oum would stay in office until the cabinet was formed. With characteristic optimism, Souvanna believed one more meeting between the princes would settle all remaining differences. Yet Boun Oum, for whom the agreement was prelude to resignation, found it easy to disagree with Souvanna's suggestion that the next meeting be held on the Pathet Lao controlled Plain of Jars. He and Phoumi insisted on Vientiane, giving the embassy the impression the rightists were determined to prevent a reconciliation and perhaps provoke a resumption of hostilities.²

This impression was not unfounded. Prolonging the disagreement was a cornerstone of the Boun Oum/Phoumi strategy. Since the king had called on Souvanna to form a new government, Phoumi intended to agree to nothing until the prince submitted a plan outlining the government's composition and who would receive what portfolios. Details on integration and demobilization of the armed forces would also be required before he would meet with the other factions. Convinced that Souvanna could not solve these problems, Phoumi anticipated that negotiations would eventually reach an impasse. He intended to then push his plan for a government headed by the king.³

Phoumi pursued a foot-dragging strategy because he was convinced that the United States would always support him when the chips were down. After the Zurich meeting, he visited Washington but apparently misinterpreted what was said to him by U.S. officials. At the State Department, he was told that a negotiated settlement was the only workable solution for Laos; but after visiting President Kennedy, he came away with the impression that the Americans

1. Richard J. Walton, *Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1972), pp 25-27; Schlesinger, p 474. Harriman headed the American delegation to the Geneva conference. As his deputy, he selected a young foreign service officer, William H. Sullivan. Sullivan later served as Ambassador to Laos from November 1964-April 1969.

2. Toye, p 175; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 124.

3. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 123-24.

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"would make no more concessions to the communists." At this time, he also received tentative Pentagon backing for an increase in FAL strength to sixty thousand men.⁴ More important, Phoumi returned to Vientiane convinced that if hostilities resumed, the United States would intervene to maintain his position. Thus encouraged, he made plans to reorganize the army and concentrate the bulk of it in southern Laos where six of his nine GMs were already located. Meantime, his negotiating position with the neutralists and Pathet Lao hardened into intransigence.⁵

The State Department was understandably disturbed over Phoumi's interpretation of his Washington conversations and his conviction that the United States would openly and quickly give him massive assistance if fighting resumed. State was worried that he might trigger an FAL offensive in the firm belief that a Viet Minh response would be countered by U.S. action. Considering Phoumi's uncompromising attitude, State's forebodings were all the more understandable.⁶

For his part, Phoumi was aware that not all agencies of the United States government sided with the State Department. Despite Phoumi's recognized shortcomings, the CIA and most of the American military, particularly Admiral Felt, continued to urge stronger support for him because he was a dedicated anticommunist. However, CINCPAC's antipathy toward Souvanna was well known in Washington. Indeed, on several occasions Admiral Felt became so outspoken that William P. Bundy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, recommended that he be "kept on tight rein" lest Felt give the impression that he, not Washington, was running the show. Felt made his feelings clear in early October after a Vientiane meeting with Boyle and Phoumi. He publicly announced that if a peaceful solution to the Laotian question could not be found, American and SEATO forces were ready to come to the aid of Laos.⁷

As the United States government patiently waited for Phoumi and Boun Oum to negotiate, the MAAG raced against time to whip the Royal Army—now known as the FAR (*Forces Armées du Royaume*)—into some sort of fighting shape. The other side was not idle, however, as intelligence efforts showed a buildup of supplies by both air and land means.

Intelligence of the ongoing enemy supply buildup came chiefly from renewed aerial reconnaissance. The RT-33 Field Goal surveillance had stopped on May 10 in deference to the cease-fire. In early June, however, the Joint Chiefs alerted Secretary McNamara to "serious deficiencies" in the Laotian intelligence picture. The chiefs admitted that, since Field Goal's suspension, they were literally operating in the dark. Information was urgently needed on Pathet Lao strength, locations, organization, and equipment in northcentral Laos and the Plain of Jars. Although the CIA and State Department were furnishing military planners with some intelligence of this sort, it was deemed insufficient.⁸

4. On August 19, 1961, Phoumi formally asked General Boyle for an augmentation of the FAL to nearly 71,000. Boyle and Felt balked because of the acute condition of the FAL leadership and the training program. CINCPAC did consent to make a strong pitch to Washington for approval of the previously agreed on figure of 60,000 (46,200 FAL, 13,800 ADC). The JCS and Defense Secretary McNamara went along; but the State Department did not, noting that too often Phoumi had raised FAL force levels on his own and rarely consulted with U.S. personnel. Moreover, Phoumi's request came at a time when everyone was supposedly searching for a peaceful solution to Laotian problems. If Phoumi would abolish his unauthorized forces and show a willingness to follow U.S. policy guidelines, State would agree to review the matter of additional support next year. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 110-11.]

5. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 118; Stevenson, p 160;

6. Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 100345Z Jul 61, CINCPAC to CHMAAG Laos, 152335Z Jul 61, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 71, Jul 18, 1961.

7. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 118-19; memo, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, to Robert S. McNamara, SECDEF, subj: Rules of Engagement for Possible Laos Intervening Force, May 2, 1961, w/atch, ISA Proposed Amendments to Draft DOD Position Concerning Laos; Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974; Toye, 185.

8. JCSM-373-61, Jun 2, 1961, derived from JCS 1992/996, May 23, 1961.

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● The decision to renew aerial reconnaissance was delayed during the rainy season; but on October 4, 1961, Field Goal flights resumed against several key communist-held areas along the north-south axis of Route 13, including the Vang Vieng airfield. During the remainder of October, twenty-six successful flights were flown. At Ambassador Brown's insistence, these aircraft operated above forty thousand feet, ostensibly to avoid detection. When several flights were fired on, it was obvious they had been discovered. In lieu of lifting the altitude restrictions, Brown ruled out all sorties over the Plain of Jars and Xieng Khouangville without his permission and temporarily suspended (November 6-10) all surveillance over the plain.⁹

● The altitude restrictions and the RT-33's camera limitations produced poor-quality film. To replace Field Goal and Pipestem (an RF-101 reconnaissance group operating out of South Vietnam), four RF-101s (nicknamed Able Mable) deployed to Don Muang, Thailand, from the 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, Misawa, Japan, for thirty days, flying their first mission on November 8. The RT-33s assigned to Field Goal remained as courier aircraft to transport the developed film and prints.¹⁰

● The RF-101 Voodoo was the Air Force's primary tactical reconnaissance aircraft. It was a modified supersonic (but mediocre) fighter with a combat ceiling near forty-five thousand feet, a combat radius of nine hundred miles, and a top speed of eight hundred seventy-five knots. Normal camera configuration consisted of a nose oblique, left and right oblique, and a split vertical combination with two cameras of the same focal length offset slightly from the vertical to achieve wider coverage. The cameras, which took the large-format negatives needed by photo interpreters, could be operated singly, simultaneously, or in any combination. However, the RF-101 lacked the illumination devices, night cameras, and precise navigation systems for night photography.¹¹

● A photographic processing cell (PPC) accompanied Able Mable. The PPC had a developing and printing laboratory, a target intelligence section for briefing and debriefing, and a photo interpreter section. Five copies of each negative were produced for distribution, and the film was then sent to Japan for detailed examination and mass production of prints (if needed). Photo intelligence reports were normally in the hands of theater commanders or national agencies twenty-four hours after completion of the mission. In December, two U.S. Army photo interpreters joined the PPC to help identify enemy ground equipment.¹²

● In late November, General Boyle secured for PACAF a waiver to the ambassador's forty thousand-foot rule. This let the RF-101s and carrier reconnaissance aircraft operate at altitudes compatible with photographic equipment and enemy defenses. By the end of 1961, Able Mable had flown 130 sorties, processed nearly fifty-four thousand feet of film, and made over twelve thousand prints. Roads and passes were photographed and many convoys pinpointed, clearly identifying the support the Pathet Lao were receiving from North Vietnam. The continuing Soviet airlift into southern Laos was documented by the RF-101s. One unusual photo taken at Tchepone revealed two Russian Il-14 Crates (similar to the C-47) in the landing pattern and three other aircraft on the ground unloading.¹³

9. ● Hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, III; hist rpts, ACS/Intel, PACAF, Jul 61, Oct 61; memo, ACS/Ops, PACAF, subj: Altitude Restrictions on Reconnaissance Flights over Laos, in trip bk, Jan 5, 1962, of Col Richard A. Yudkin, ACS/Plans, PACAF.

10. ● Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966*, p 3.

11. ● William H. Greenhalgh, Jr., "U.S. Air Force Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1960-1975," manuscript (Maxwell AFB, Ala., 1977). The first major modification of the RF-101 took place in 1962 when the aircraft was given a limited night capability with the installation of high-resolution cameras and flash cartridge pods. [Hist, TAC, Jan-Jun 62, pp 404-05.] Problems inherent in night photo reconnaissance are discussed in Victor B. Anthony, *Tactics and Techniques of Night Operations [The Air Force in Southeast Asia]* (Washington, 1973), pp 182-83.

12. ● Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966*, p 3; msg, 13th AF to PACAF, 040935Z Nov 61.

13. ● Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966*, pp 4-5; msg, PACAF to 13th AF, PFCVC-556,

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General Boyle estimated that, with the end of the rains, the Soviet transports had flown 195 tons of supplies per week into Laos; and convoys of North Vietnamese trucks were also seen rolling through Barthelemy Pass into the Plain of Jars. The MAAG chief believed an additional 2,200 tons had entered communist territory between November 15, 1961, and January 15, 1962. The North Vietnamese had also stepped up their Pathet Lao training and maintained their cadres in many of Souphanouvong's units. Colonel Law believed the FAR could cope with the Pathet Lao on relatively even terms but could not successfully engage an enemy reinforced by the NVA. Law described the FAR as having an almost pathological fear of the North Vietnamese. It was conceivable that, if the Pathet Lao (supported by regular North Vietnamese troops) overwhelmed the government's forces, the United States would openly intervene in the end as Phoumi hoped.¹⁴

The enemy's buildup of supplies had been substantial; and with the United States matching this buildup, there was every indication that, unless a tripartite government was formed, the fighting would resume. Such a government was being held up by Phoumi's stubborn refusal to agree to the proposal (backed by the United States) that the defense and interior ministries be filled by neutralists, rather than rightists. To bring Phoumi into line, Brown favored suspending all military aid, believing that unless this was done, "we'll be shown to be the paper tiger he [Phoumi] asserts and any hope we have of influencing [him] will be lost forever." Admiral Felt strongly resisted such drastic action on the grounds it would just encourage Kong Le and the Pathet Lao to resume the offensive. However, General Boyle held that suspending military supplies to Phoumi would not have much effect for thirty days. During that time, only motor fuel would be in short supply. The FAR had stockpiled ordnance and ammunition to last at least forty-five days. Even withholding financial support would have little impact the first month. After that, Boyle believed Phoumi would float a loan from the National Bank of Laos as he had done in the past or borrow from Boun Oum or Sarit Thanarat. Washington decided to compromise: the flow of military supplies continued, but the monthly payment to the RLG was withheld. Finally, on January 10, Boun Oum agreed to meet with the other two princes in Geneva. Two days later, U.S. aid resumed.¹⁵

Meantime, the Pathet Lao were reinforced with substantial NVA regular units and began concentrating opposite key points held by the Royal Army. To ascertain the precise locations of these forces, FAR units moved into areas not clearly held by either side at the time of the cease-fire. Phoumi's troops maneuvered in these "buffer zones" relatively unhindered until they pressured a position the enemy considered critical; when the communists attacked, driving the FAR from the threatened area. In no case did the enemy pursue or follow up his advantage.¹⁶

Phoumi had been carrying out such probing operations since late 1961 near enemy-held Muong Sai in Luang Prabang Province. None of these probes made any headway, chiefly due to the Soviet airlift of fresh reinforcements into the region. One of his columns had approached from the direction of Nam Tha, a small town of about eighteen hundred people located fifteen miles from the Chinese border.

On January 25, Pathet Lao/NVA infantrymen lobbed a few mortar rounds into the outskirts of Nam Tha. With the approval of Ambassador Brown and General Boyle, Phoumi

Nov 30, 1961; rpt, Det 10, 2d ADVON, Report on Activities under PACAF Ops Ord 220-62 (Able Mable) to 1 March 1962, n.d.; hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, I, pt A, 19-20.

14. CINCPCAC Rcrd, 4th SECDEF Conf, Mar 21, 1962, sp agenda item: Current Situation in Laos and Possible Future Courses of Action; msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPCAC, 071730Z Jan 62, USARMA Vientiane to DA, DA IN 191004, Jan 9, 1962.

15. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 919, 920, Jan 1, 1962, 937, Jan 4, 1962; CINCPCAC to JCS, 030422Z Jan 62; CHMAAG Laos to CINCPCAC, 021600Z Jan 62; *New York Times*, Jan 5, 10, 1962. Technically, there was no suspension. The United States merely announced it was "reexamining the whole spectrum of aid to the RLG." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 943, Jan 5, 1962.]

16. Msg, CINCPCAC to JCS, 270233Z Jan 62.

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reinforced the town garrison, using Laotian C-47s. A few days later, reacting to a hit on a transport, Phoumi brought in four 105-mm howitzers and a dozen 75-mm pack howitzers. He also ordered the T-6s, operating from Nam Tha's dirt airstrip, to attack a reported enemy gun position; but the pilots neither saw nor hit anything. At this point, Boun Oum suddenly announced he was breaking off talks with Souvanna until the latter's troops ended their assaults. Judging the skirmishes around Nam Tha insufficient to warrant such an action, Washington withheld the Royal Laotian Government's February cash payment. Rather than knuckle under a second time, Boun Oum released unsupported currency from the National Bank of Laos.¹⁷

Enemy action at Nam Tha stepped up. On February 1, the airfield was mortared, forcing the withdrawal of the five remaining T-6s to Luang Prabang. Two days later, the shelling crept to the center of Nam Tha, causing minor civilian panic. Phoumi responded by airlifting several hundred paratroopers fresh from training in Thailand. During this operation, the T-6s flew cover and suppressed mortar fire, while the LAAF transports offloaded on the ground. This reinforcement was undertaken against the advice of General Boyle, who, after an onsite inspection, now suspected a trap; geographically, the area bore a very close resemblance to Dien Bien Phu.¹⁸

On February 9, enemy shelling destroyed between thirty and forty houses in the town. The next day, Phoumi told Boyle that he intended to further buttress Nam Tha with a parachute battalion from Seno but needed Air America's C-46s to drop the unit. His request was denied by Brown and Boyle, the latter now surer than ever that Phoumi was falling into a trap. The Laotian general brushed aside the MAAG chief's misgivings and used his own C-47s to drop the paratroopers.¹⁹

General Boyle was seriously concerned over Phoumi's unwillingness to follow his advice. He cabled his anxieties regarding Nam Tha to the JCS and Secretary Rusk, noting that the Laotian general appeared to be purposely inviting military defeat to draw the United States into the conflict. Rusk not only agreed, but further held that the Nam Tha reinforcements, coupled with aggressive patrolling and T-6 strikes, might force or give excuse for the other side to attack the town. On top of this, Maj. Gen. Bounleuth Sanichan (commander of the forces around Nam Tha) had been loading bombs on the T-6s, having gotten the ordnance and fuzes from Marshal Sarit. When this information was confirmed, Ambassador Brown lodged a stiff protest with Phoumi (both were in Geneva at the time) who agreed to order Bounleuth to stop using the bombs. Phoumi's promises notwithstanding, there was the strong suspicion that he would continue to go his own way. Politically, he had shown this by his stubborn refusal to accept a coalition government under Souvanna, and he had openly criticized American policy as leading his country into communist slavery.²⁰

Phoumi's attitude and actions drew White House attention. On February 28, President Kennedy directed Admiral Felt to make the United States government's position clear to Phoumi and his chief supporter, Marshal Sarit. Specifically, Felt should tell the Thai leader that the United States would not be drawn into war by his cousin's bullheadedness. Kennedy cautioned that he did not want Phoumi to quit, for his absence from the Laotian political scene would upset the U.S. plan for a balanced coalition. Even so, the President wished Sarit to realize that Phoumi was on a collision course with military disaster. Time was rapidly running out for changing

17. *Ibid*; Dommen, pp 213-14; Toye, pp 180-81; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 204; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1051, 1053, Jan 27, 1962.

18. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 202; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

19. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1146, 1151, Feb 10, 1962, 1165, Feb 15, 1962.

20. Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 726, Feb 10, 1962, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 172143Z Jan 62, DA IN 194258, Jan 19, 1962, Geneva to SECSTATE for action Vientiane, 714, Jan 19, 1962, 10063, Jan 19, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1021, Jan 20, 1962, 1220, Feb 25, 1962.

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course and cooperating with the United States and Souvanna Phouma. Kennedy hoped Sarit would counsel Phoumi in this direction.²¹

On March 5, 1962, Felt visited Sarit and gave him the President's message. The next day, he met with Phoumi in Bangkok, carefully repeating what he had told Sarit and stressing the need for the Laotian general to join forces with Souvanna in a solid front against the communists. In rebuttal to the "obviously . . . painful medicine," Phoumi declared he could not be justly charged with an unwillingness to cooperate. The key difference between his and Washington's position was that he believed Souvanna was not a genuine neutralist but merely a front man for Souphanouvong—just as, he noted, Boun Oum was his. By the end of the meeting, however, Phoumi agreed to follow President Kennedy's wishes. Despite this promise, Admiral Felt returned to Honolulu convinced that the President's message had not altered Phoumi's thinking and he was only paying lip service to the idea of cooperating with Souvanna.²²

Felt's skepticism proved accurate; for another three months Phoumi resisted all U.S. economic and political pressure to bring him to heel. Washington administered the first dose in early March by once again withholding the monthly RLG payment. Phoumi and Boun Oum were left to stew over this action for two weeks. Then, through the energetic efforts of Thailand's Director of Joint Intelligence (Sarit's contact man with Phoumi), a conference was arranged between Sarit, Phoumi, and Averell Harriman (now Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs). On March 24 at the Mekong River town of Nong Khai, Thailand, Sarit told his cousin that he had the choice of being responsible for the military takeover of his country or working with Souvanna to keep it independent. The latter course would receive the full support of the United States, Thailand, and other friendly governments. Sarit urged Phoumi to invite Souvanna to leave his neutralist "capital" at Khangkhai and come to Vientiane. Harriman interjected that any such meeting would be fruitless unless Phoumi was ready to give up the defense and interior ministries.²³

Unmoved, Phoumi rejected all arguments on the grounds that Souvanna had failed to carry out the royal mandate to form a new government. He did agree to consult his RLG colleagues on future negotiations, and he would not object to Souvanna's coming to Vientiane. These were the only concessions Harriman was able to wring out of Phoumi during the three-hour discussion. The assistant secretary gloomily reported to Washington that Sarit's staunch support for the U.S. position was the sole favorable development of the day.²⁴

Yet Harriman did not give up. He flew that same afternoon to Vientiane for an audience with King Savang Vatthana that proved even less productive than the meeting at Nong Khai. As he afterwards reported to the Secretary of State, Harriman depicted Phoumi as the sole obstruction to an independent, neutral Laos. At this, the king jumped to Phoumi's defense, terming the general a "patriotic national leader fighting both the communists and the traditional Viet Minh enemy." King Savang repeated his objection to any government that included the Pathet Lao. Harriman warned that Phoumi's intransigence (by implication, the king's as well) could lead to the loss of American support, ultimate destruction of the kingdom, and overthrow of the monarchy. To this, the king made a gesture of resignation, noting that history was replete with dynastic downfalls and "like all dramas, there must come an end someday." Harriman

21. Boyle intvw, Sept 18, 1974; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 696, Feb 3, 1962, to AmEmb Bangkok, 1367, Mar 10, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 202.

22. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1348, Mar 7, 1962, CINCPAC to JCS, 080834Z Mar 62.

23. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1391, Mar 13, 1962, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1492, Mar 20, 1962, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1441, Mar 20, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1325, Mar 25, 1962.

24. See note above.

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reported that the king was pained to think that the curtain might come down on the last act of the Laotian drama during his reign, but "if this was the way it had to be, however, so be it." The king's fatalistic appraisal of the future led Harriman to conclude that the meeting had been "two hours of futile talk . . . hardly worth reporting."²⁵

Assisted by Ambassador Brown and other country team members, Harriman held his final conversations the next day in Vientiane with Boun Oum, Phoumi, and key cabinet members. These talks were likewise unproductive. Shortly thereafter, Harriman's deputy, William Sullivan, traveled to Khangkhai where he assured Souvanna that the United States was doing everything possible to speed the formation of a coalition government.²⁶

Although Harriman's face-to-face diplomacy failed, Phoumi and Boun Oum eventually relented. However, their reversal was brought about not so much by U.S. pressure or persuasion as by a FAR military disaster. Four Pathet Lao battalions, spearheaded by the North Vietnamese, drove the FAR from Nam Tha on May 6. The government troops fled in disarray across the Mekong River into Thailand.²⁷ At the time, elements of the U.S. 27th Infantry Division were on a training exercise in Thailand with the Royal Thailand Army. The Joint Chiefs informed CINCPAC on May 7 that, due to Nam Tha, this force would stay in Thailand until further notice. Three days later, President Kennedy convened the National Security Council to consider a scenario drawn up by Harriman and a close State Department associate, Roger Hilsman.²⁸ The two men proposed notifying Great Britain, India, and the Soviet Union that the United States earnestly desired a coalition and a neutral Laos and would not tolerate a unilateral communist takeover. To back up these notes, they suggested the Seventh Fleet steam into the Gulf of Siam and roughly one thousand men of the 27th Division be sent to the Thai border opposite Vientiane. Meanwhile, the United States would pressure Phoumi to enter into realistic negotiations. For the long haul, steps would be taken to undermine Phoumi's prestige and political influence. Opposition to him in the FAR and Assembly would be encouraged; and in the end, he would be removed by the Laotians themselves.²⁹

The Joint Chiefs supported the diplomatic moves, naval show of force, and deployment of the 27th Division to northeast Thailand. They opposed placing any restraints on Phoumi and urged that all financial and military assistance to him be resumed provided he adhered to U.S. military advice. The chiefs further favored more air support, be it T-6s, B-26s, or a USAF Jungle Jim detachment.³⁰

Jungle Jim was the nickname given the all-volunteer 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. It had been formed in April 1961 to train foreign indigenous air force personnel in counterinsurgency operations. Realizing there would be times when the Air Force could not use its first-line aircraft in small wars or insurgencies due to political limitations, General LeMay stocked the unit with T-28s, B-26s, and SC-47s. Jungle Jim became operational in September 1961; and by the end of November, a detachment known as Farm Gate³¹ was flying in South Vietnam.³²

25. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1336, Mar 26, 1962, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1477, 1478, Mar 26, 1962.

26. Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1478, Mar 26 1962; Dommen, p 216.

27. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1495, May 6, 1962, 1508, May 7, 1962, 1513, May 3, 1962, CHMAAG Laos to JCS, DA IN 22725, May 6, 1962, DA IN 227338, May 7, 1962, JCS to CINCPAC, 4379, May 6, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1549, May 12, 1962.

28. Hilsman later succeeded Harriman as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.

29. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 4407, May 7, 1962, to COMUSMACV, 4488, 110104Z May 62; Hilsman, pp 142-43.

30. Msg, JCS to COMUSMACV, 4488, 110104Z May 62.

31. Code name applied to Detachment 2, 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, and subsequently to USAF air commando activity at Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam.

32. Maj Victor B. Anthony, *Tactics and Techniques of Night Operations, 1961-1970* [The Air Force in Southeast

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● If none of these measures restored the May 3 cease-fire line, the JCS thought SEATO Plan 5 should be put into action with such countries as were willing to join. SEATO Plan 5 was more elaborate than the CINCPAC OPlan 32 series, requiring about twenty-five thousand troops. Both plans called for the Americans gaining control of the major towns in the Mekong valley, thus freeing the FAR to fight the Pathet Lao.³³ Yet, in light of the FAR's fear of the NVA and Pathet Lao units with NVA cadres, the plans were overly optimistic.

● President Kennedy elected to defer a final decision until Secretary McNamara and JCS Chairman Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, USA, returned from Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, he authorized Admiral Felt to take certain precautionary steps to shorten the ninety-six-hour starting time for implementing OPlan 32-62. On May 10, Felt ordered the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division on Okinawa to activate JTF 116 headquarters, assemble the staff, and refine embarkation plans. As soon as the embassy at Bangkok received Sarit's clearance, General O'Donnell was to shift four F-100s to Thailand for an "operational visit." Admiral Sides was to give the Marine battalion landing team (BLT) "a good workout ashore," after which the marines should anticipate sailing on the USS *Valley Forge* from Subic Bay to the Gulf of Siam. Finally, Gen. James F. Collins, Commander in Chief, United States Army, Pacific (CINCUSARPAC), was to alert whatever additional units the 27th Infantry Division needed for support. On the 11th, the *Valley Forge* received sailing orders; and Felt asked for JCS permission to offload the BLT at Bangkok, with subsequent airlift to Ubon, Thailand. Felt's request was approved after a National Security Council Meeting on May 12, in which the President was handed the latest information on the Laotian situation from Secretary Rusk and the recently arrived McNamara and Lemnitzer. Their update showed the situation sufficiently grave to warrant additional deployments.³⁴

● On May 15, CINCPAC established the United States Military Assistance Command, Thailand, naming Gen. Paul D. Harkins, USA, as its commander.³⁵ Felt next selected Lt. Gen. James L. Richardson, Jr., USA, the deputy CINCUSARPAC, to command JTF 116 under OPlan 32-62. Richardson and his staff left the same day to assume operational control over all U.S. combat units in Thailand. Artillery, engineer, medical, aviation, signal, and ordnance support elements of the 27th Division were airlifted from Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii on the 16th. They joined the rest of the division at Ubon the next day. The Maine BLT was also scheduled for Ubon, but, due to RTG objections set up camp at Korat. For air support, a Marine attack squadron of twenty A-4D Skyhawks flew from Cubi Point, Philippines, to Takhli Air Base, Thailand. There it was teamed with the 510th Tactical Fighter Squadron of twenty F-100s from Clark Air Base, Philippines.³⁶

● The increase in air resources was significant. If the United States had to intervene in Laos, Admiral Felt believed the key was air power. From the outset, he envisioned a large-scale interdiction campaign against enemy airfields, supply dumps, troop concentrations, and lines of communication. If necessary, North Vietnam should be struck as well, but Felt and General O'Donnell agreed that strikes into North Vietnam might be politically unpalatable. However, they took a strong stand against any rules of engagement that would restrict air power and result in undue loss of American lives or prolong the fighting. They disagreed about the effect a Chinese intervention might have on air operations. O'Donnell believed the Chinese would at once shift air units south and try to take out the American (Thai) bases. While not denying this possibility,

Asia] (Washington, 1973), pp 1-2.

33. ● Msg, JCS to COMUSMACV, 4488, 110104Z May 62.

34. ● Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 214.

35. ● USMACTHAI was set up without consulting the RTG. This was to have a detrimental effect on U.S.-Thai relations in 1964-65 (see Chapters VI and VII).

36. ● Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 214.; msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 4527, 130231Z May 62.

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Felt held that carrier aircraft from the Seventh Fleet and USAF planes based in Thailand could stop them.³⁷

Meanwhile, the debacle of Nam Tha had shattered President Kennedy's confidence in Phoumi as a military leader. For the past few months, Phoumi had consistently disregarded General Boyle's views and repeatedly gone back on his word. In Secretary Rusk's opinion, Phoumi had stubbornly resisted any political agreement that would have removed the North Vietnamese units from Laos and averted Nam Tha. Then, too, rumors persisted that he had deliberately invited a major engagement to embarrass the United States and call its hand on the matter of military support. Accordingly, the President decided that Phoumi must be brought under control and his influence within the Laotian government diminished—the ultimate aim being his elimination from power.³⁸

As a first step, Kennedy wanted the general removed from any political post and returned to full time duty as FAR commander.³⁹ While Phoumi tended to his "military knitting" under MAAG guidance, the United States would help reorganize the RLG. At the same time, Ambassador Brown was to spread the word to the principal political military leaders in Vientiane that Washington blamed Phoumi for the current state of affairs and that it had lost confidence in his ability. Furthermore, the new MAAG chief, Maj. Gen. Reuben H. Tucker, USA, was to tell Phoumi that Nam Tha was the direct result of his deliberate disregard of American advice. Tucker should stress that, since the United States was bearing the entire cost of equipping the Royal Army, its prestige was tied closely to FAR conduct. Washington could not tolerate situations in which the FAR "capriciously loses its military equipment, scatters its best fighting units and generally incubates fiascos by willfully ignoring MAAG guidance."⁴⁰

A subdued Phoumi Nosavan met with Ambassador Brown on May 10 to discuss Nam Tha. From the outset, Brown pinned the blame on the Laotian defense minister, his incompetent officers, and his mulish refusal to follow Boyle's advice to reduce his forces at the town. This military reversal should convince him that he and Boun Oum could not hope to win by force of arms. The sole solution was a political settlement. Hence, in response to Souvanna's recent statements, Brown urged Phoumi to give up the defense and interior ministries. Phoumi readily conceded Nam Tha had shredded his political and military leadership and cast serious doubts on the competence of some of his senior officers. He agreed to yield defense and interior to the neutralists and would resume three-party negotiations. Phoumi's one stipulation was that all important decisions be made jointly and that the armed forces and civil administration remain as constituted pending an agreement on national integration.⁴¹

As instructed by Washington, General Tucker called on Phoumi three days later. After repeating what Brown had said, Tucker presented a list of reforms (actually demands) he thought essential to rehabilitating relations between the advisory group and the FAR general. They included removing incompetent officers and heeding MAAG advice in selecting replacements, developing a first-class NCO corps, reorganizing the ministry of defense and delegating ample authority to major staff officers, and making the logistic command efficient. In addition, better use would be made of training facilities, with the MAAG chief having final approval for units nominated for training. Phoumi would likewise need Tucker's endorsement on plans, tactical

37. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 208; CINCPAC Rcmd, 4th SECDEF Conf, Mar 21, 1962.

38. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 987, May 12, 1962.

39. Phoumi was never "FAR commander" but represented the coalition of generals then in control of the army. At first, having close ties with the CIA, he could always "deliver the goods"; but once he lost this support, his power position became quite shaky and eventually the Laotian generals—not the U.S. government—would see to it that he was removed (see Chapter VII).

40. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 987, May 12, 1962.

41. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1527, May 9, 1962, 1530, May 10, 1962.

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operations, and deployments of battalions and larger units. If Phoumi concurred, the FAR troops that had fled to Thailand would be repatriated using Air America transports.⁴²

Tucker's presentation was a bitter pill for Phoumi to swallow, but for now he had little choice. The United States was financing his army, and he knew Nam Tha had lowered his prestige in American eyes. He pledged closer cooperation with Tucker but innocently asserted that long ago he ordered all his commanders to cooperate freely with their MAAG and White Star⁴³ counterparts. He assured the MAAG chief that his counsel would be sought on any new FAR defense plans. Based on this understanding, Tucker began airlifting back to Laos the three thousand men that had fled to Thailand.⁴⁴

While acceding to Washington's demands, Phoumi was not as weak as he appeared, explaining away Nam Tha as the result of intervention by an overwhelming NVA and Chinese force. Despite President Kennedy's public statements that the current U.S. military moves were in support of SEATO, they were seen in Vientiane as further backing for Phoumi. Ambassador Brown noted that regardless of what he might say about the need to remove him, no Laotian would dare try it as long as the general controlled the police and army. The Laotians considered Phoumi to be an American creation, and it was up to the United States to get rid of him.⁴⁵

On the other side of the coin, Phoumi was not as powerful as he was made out to be. He could go just so far in meeting General Tucker's terms. For example, after receiving the MAAG chief's blessing, Phoumi designated Laos a single military theater divided into northern and southern fronts with headquarters at Vientiane and Savannakhet respectively. The fronts were subdivided into zones closely approximating the old military regions. As theater commander (actually, field commander of the FAR), Phoumi "appointed" General Bounleuth, who had fled Nam Tha in the early hours of the first day's battle. Bounleuth was evaluated by Tucker as being incapable of "leading a squad around the corner," but he and Ouane Rathikone, FAR Chief of Staff were the senior generals in the army. Bounleuth not only outranked Phoumi but was from the northern part of the country while Phoumi was a southerner, and the practice among the generals was to keep a balance between the two sections of the country. Lastly, Bounleuth had solid political backing (he was a favorite of the king) and could not be shunted aside despite his well-known shortcomings.⁴⁶

That the FAR was not a national army shaped along Western lines was underscored by Phoumi's position with the other generals. Rather, the generals were a group of local military commanders who had reached the top through the influence and assistance of the important families of each particular region. In many instances, they were members of these families.⁴⁷

42. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1552, 1553, May 13, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 206.

43. White Star mobile training teams consisted of Special Forces personnel from Okinawa. They acted as cadres for Phoumi's troops but were most adept in working with Vang Pao's guerrilla fighters. [Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 184.]

44. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1552, 1553, May 13, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 206.; msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 2510, 130515Z May 62.

45. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1553, May 13, 1962.

46. Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 3037, 060645Z Jun 62, USARMA Vientiane to DA, DA IN 238127, Jun 11, 1962. General Tucker's evaluation of General Bounleuth is in message, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 180848Z May 62. The rest of the paragraph is based on Uiberall interview, March 13, 1974.

47. Maj Gen Kouprasith Abhay, Phoumi's chief rival for power and Military Region V Commander, is a good example. The Abhay family was influential and wealthy in its own right; Kouprasith's uncle, Kou Abhay, had once been prime minister. More important, the general's mother and wife were each a Sananikone—the most powerful and wealthy family in the country save Boum Oum's. [Sp rpt 0403/70A, Dir/Intel, CIA, Elements of Non-communist Politics in Laos, Dec 31, 1970.] The MAAG deemed Kouprasith a competent officer, one of the few who sought American advice. He was also well liked by his men; his visits to the forward units on an average of once a week were unusual for senior Laotian officers. [Rpt, JUSMAGTHAI, Final Report of Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Laos, Nov 6, 1962; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.]

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Phoumi could not replace them without offending and causing loss of face. Besides, with but a very small club from which to draw, where could he have gotten replacements? Consequently, Phoumi was not going to take such a drastic step simply because Tucker objected to an officer's military competence.⁴⁸ Moreover, the MAAG would withdraw once a peace settlement was reached, and Phoumi wisely grasped that he would have to face the consequences for any of his rash or harsh actions. It was far easier to first accede to Tucker's demands and then weasel around them.

In early June, the three princes met on the Plain of Jars for a series of talks. By the 11th, they agreed on a coalition government with seven cabinet posts going to Souvanna's neutralists, four each to the Pathet Lao and to Phoumi's group, and four to the so-called right-wing neutralists (men who had remained in Vientiane but uncommitted to Phoumi). Souvanna would be prime minister with Souphanouvong and Phoumi as deputy prime ministers. Phoumi also headed the ministry of finance and could continue to control American funds, including those earmarked for Souphanouvong's ministry of planning. A key provision stipulated that either deputy could veto a decision in cabinet session. Thus unanimity was required on all important decisions. On June 14, U.S. financial aid resumed; and on the 23d, Boun Oum resigned, publicly announcing his retirement from politics. The following day, Souvanna was installed as prime minister. All three factions now pledged to restore communications between their territories and to rekindle the reconciliation process.⁴⁹

A unified Laotian delegation flew to Geneva; and on July 23, 1962, fourteen nations signed the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. The signatories agreed not to interfere in the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity, or territorial integrity of the kingdom, including its internal affairs. As in 1954, Laos was forbidden from entering into any military alliance. (Souvanna had previously declared he would not accept SEATO's protection.) No nation could establish a military base on Laotian territory nor introduce troops or military personnel except for diplomatically accredited attachés and a few French military instructors. Within seventy-five days, all foreign troops then in the country, including those serving as advisors and technicians, would be withdrawn. Finally, the Royal Laotian Government was allowed to acquire whatever conventional armaments it considered necessary for the country's defense.⁵⁰

Like the earlier Geneva accords, the 1962 convention was full of loopholes. The International Control Commission (Canada, Poland, and India) would stay, but there was still no provision for stationing inspection teams in the countryside. Accordingly, keeping track of foreign troops and arms in the mountainous, jungle terrain of northern Laos and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail was nearly impossible. The RLG could request investigation of incidents that might upset the peace or touch off hostilities. The ICC could carry out such inquiries by majority vote; yet—and this was a key provision—any conclusions or recommendations needed unanimous adoption. Unanimous ICC decisions were also demanded on questions pertaining to the withdrawal or prohibition of foreign troops, military personnel, and armaments.⁵¹

In keeping with the spirit of neutrality, Souvanna quickly established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, North Vietnam, and several East European countries. On his way home from Geneva, he stopped off in Washington where he talked with key State Department officers and President Kennedy. The Chief Executive repeated his support for Souvanna's neutralist policies but questioned the sincerity of the Pathet Lao and North

48. Later on, Souvanna Phouma appointed incompetent officers to such innocuous positions as inspector general or military adviser to the king. Too often, however, the prime minister had to wait until the officer retired before he could be replaced.

49. Toye, p 186; Dommen, p 220; Department of State Circular 2109, Jun 15, 1962.

50. Dommen, p 225.

51. *Ibid.*, pp 225-26.

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Vietnamese. Souvanna replied that in his recent conversations with Pham Van Dong, North Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs, he was assured that NVA troops would be withdrawn. On the question of the FAR, Souvanna said there would no longer be "private armies." He envisioned gradual integration of the Pathet Lao and a large-scale civic action program using troops for public works projects. As integration progressed so would demobilization. Souvanna estimated the new FAR would consist of fifteen thousand to twenty thousand men. On June 28, Kennedy announced that Leonard Unger, a career diplomat and former deputy chief of mission and consul in Bangkok, had replaced Winthrop G. Brown as Ambassador to Laos.⁵²

Although the United States expressed satisfaction with the 1962 accords and Souvanna's neutralist government, a number of problems persisted. One was Phoumi's relationship with the United States. The administration hoped to solve this problem by having Phoumi returned to a purely military role and ultimately removed from power. Other chief concerns entailed the MAAG, the Meo paramilitary force, and the continued development of the FAR and RLAF.

During the winter of 1961-62, as events at Geneva and in Laos pointed to a possible neutralist coalition, plans were drawn for terminating the MAAG. Yet, there needed to be some form of U.S. military assistance to the RLG in the post-hostilities period. On March 21, 1962, Admiral Felt proposed that the old Programs Evaluation Office be resurrected and charged with this responsibility, using military personnel under civilian cover. Early in April, he urged that such an organization become part of the ambassador's country team.⁵³

Washington, however, did not favor returning to a PEO. Still, some way had to be found to fill the void left by the departing MAAG and keep an eye on General Phoumi. After lengthy discussions between State, Defense, and the Agency for International Development (AID), it was decided that the MAP functions could be performed by a section in the embassy's AID office of fourteen to sixteen men. Felt thought this plan satisfactory but doubted if the group would be large enough since General Tucker recommended forty-two as the minimum needed. In any case, CINCPAC believed the men selected should be either regular military in civilian attire, carefully selected reservists, or younger retired officers. He also urged a small augmentation of the attaché office, mostly to handle intelligence collection.⁵⁴

Secretary McNamara finally decided to reorganize the MAAG and relocate it in Bangkok with an advanced echelon at the Peppergrinder depot south of Udom. General Tucker would remain its head under the pseudonym of Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI). As the "MAAG in exile," it would deal with Laos but have no external identification with the kingdom. It was authorized sixty-four U.S. Army and six U.S. Air Force spaces. If the coalition government failed, this cadre could be expanded and returned to Laos. Tucker's primary mission until that happened was "planning, programming, requisitioning, receipt and storage in Thailand and onward shipment of material to Laos." To work closely with the FAR and validate its requirements, twenty-five spaces were added to the embassy AID section as the requirements office (RO). The RO was to prepare, review, and monitor the defense support budget, and receive, store, and maintain all MAP equipment. It would be staffed by military retirees or civilians experienced in military assistance or logistics.⁵⁵ McNamara further approved more officers for the attaché's office to strengthen U.S. intelligence and assist in any military programming after the departure of the MAAG. The final strength was

52. *Ibid*, pp 226-28; memo of conversation, The President and His Highness Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister, subj: Meeting with Prince Souvanna Phouma, Jul 27, 1962.

53. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, pp 215, 219.

54. *Ibid*, p 220.

55. The bulk of the RO personnel were subsequently located in Vientiane with several stationed in the major towns outside the capital. The requirement that they be bona fide retired officers or civilians was set forth in memo, SECDEF to CJCS, subj: Augmentation of Military Attaché Strength in Laos, Aug 11, 1962, in JCS 2344/59.

[REDACTED]

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two USAF officers, two airmen, a USAF aircraft, four U.S. Army officers, two soldiers, and an Army aircraft. (In mid-June 1962, 866 U.S. personnel had been assigned to or under the control of MAAG Laos and 465 Filipino ECCOIL personnel had been in MAAG employ.) Also, the air attaché's diplomatic accreditation to Saigon and Phnom Penh was dropped.⁵⁶

With the Geneva agreement on Laos signed, Admiral Felt ordered General Tucker to start withdrawing the MAAG. At first, it was planned to move forty-five Special Forces personnel out early in the seventy-five-day withdrawal period. The ambassador liked this idea because it would show the good intentions of the United States, but Felt wanted them to stay until the last fifteen days of the period to check on the reciprocal retirement by the North Vietnamese. Felt would likewise draw out the exodus of the other MAAG members. "I want the final departure . . . to be of significant size," he said, "with flags flying and tails over the dashboard." Despite CINCPAC's desires, the withdrawal was incremental, with most of the men gone by October 6, 1962. On that date—the seventy-fifth day following the signing of the accords—General Tucker and a small MAAG group passed through the ICC checkpoint. All activities of MAAG Laos had ended. In contrast, just forty North Vietnamese soldiers went through the ICC checkpoints, though intelligence reports showed "several thousand" NVA troops had left. Still, these same sources acknowledged that several thousand had stayed behind.⁵⁷

One reason the Americans were not entirely sure how many North Vietnamese had departed was that they did not ever know precisely how many had been in the country to begin with. The North Vietnamese had constantly asserted they had but a handful of troops in Laos, and passing only forty through the ICC lent credence to their claims. However, Meo intelligence teams reported an ongoing NVA presence in Laos. Many merely put on Pathet Lao uniforms, while others were seen constructing and repairing roads as well as moving or trucking from one area to another. In fact, the Meo were occasionally spotted and firefights erupted between them and the enemy. Then, too, the Pathet Lao refused to let the neutralists back into Samneua Province where, it was rumored, an entire NVA regiment was stationed. Souvanna would not take the problem to the ICC despite Ambassador Unger's urging, preferring first to work within his troika government. Finally, on October 13, Phoumi's group finally protested the NVA presence and furnished specific locations on many remaining troops. In response, the Pathet Lao called on the ICC to investigate the RO's clandestine nature and the CIA agents it contended were hidden in the embassy under civilian cover. Although Air America was permitted to operate under the Geneva accords as a civilian contract airline, the Pathet Lao demanded it halt all resupply missions, particularly those to Meo outposts in Pathet Lao territory.⁵⁸

For two years [REDACTED] had painstakingly woven together the Meo intelligence network, while this network could tentatively identify isolated pockets or garrisons of NVA troops, aerial reconnaissance was judged a much better way to determine communist compliance with the withdrawal provisions of the Geneva accords. After Nam Tha fell, CINCPAC directed PACAF to send one solid-nose and one glass-nose Black Watch⁵⁹ RB-26 to Don Muang. These two aircraft were equipped for low-level and medium-altitude night

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56. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, pp 220-21; JCS 2344/59, Augmentation of Military Attache Strength in Laos, Jul 22, 1962; msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1154, Jun 19, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1776, Jun 21, 1962; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968; Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate, *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Kingdom of Laos*, 91st Cong, 1st sess (Washington, 1970), p 423 [hereafter cited as *Laos Hearings*].

57. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 218; Dommen, pp 239-240.

58. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 517, Sep 29, 1962, 597, Oct 13, 1962, to OSD, 181235Z Nov 62; memo, William H. Brubeck, Exec Secy of McGeorge Bundy, White House, subj: Laos, Nov 1, 1962.

59. Code name of the night reconnaissance missions over Laos.

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photography and would supplement Able Mable reconnaissance. All told, fifty Black Watch missions were flown between May 29 and July 21, 1962. Even so, the RB-26 camera system was eventually deemed inadequate, due to the limited film capacity of the magazines. In early August, these planes were transferred to the Farm Gate detachment at Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam, leaving reconnaissance over Laos solely to the RF-101s. Then, on August 14, one of the Voodoos was damaged by enemy AA fire over the Plain of Jars. The right access door, about five feet long and with three-quarters of the U.S. insignia on it, was blown off and recovered by the Pathet Lao. The flights were immediately suspended.⁶⁰

● Ambassador Kenneth T. Young in Bangkok wondered whether Able Mable should resume, in light of a buildup in enemy antiaircraft assets during the past few weeks. After all, the present Royal Laotian Government had given no green light for the Air Force to fly aerial reconnaissance. He would have nothing to say if the flights began again and an RF-101 was shot down over enemy territory. The cover story asserted the aircraft were at Don Muang for joint training and only now and then carried out reconnaissance at the RLG's request. That story would no longer hold water.⁶¹

● Ambassador Unger saw the RF-101 incident of August 14 as stirring serious doubts in Souvanna's mind regarding American sincerity. It came at a time when the prince was trying to convince Souphanouvong that the United States had abandoned "covert alternative lines of action" and that it was working for a neutral solution. Unger wanted to make a clean breast of the episode and assure Souvanna there would be no further overflights by USAF aircraft without the prime minister's permission. Besides, this would be an ideal time to remind him that on several occasions unarmed Air America transports carrying food and medical supplies to civilians and refugees had been fired at by the Pathet Lao.⁶²

● When it became clear that Souvanna was not going to make an issue of the reconnaissance mission, the State Department told Unger not to approach him on the subject. If he inquired, Unger was to say the overflights were by unarmed aircraft and were permitted under previous agreements with the RLG (meaning Phoumi). Moreover, Souvanna should expect them to continue as long as U.S. personnel were in the country. For Unger's benefit, however, Under Secretary of State George W. Ball assured the ambassador the reconnaissance flights had been canceled.⁶³

● The decision to end Able Mable missions over Laos displeased the Air Force. In a paper for an August 24 State/Defense meeting, the Air Staff pointed out that these flights were the only reliable check on communist compliance with the withdrawal provisions of the Geneva accords. Suspending photo reconnaissance was particularly bad in light of repeated Pathet Lao refusals to let the RLG or ICC enter its areas. Despite these arguments, Able Mable was withdrawn in December after 720 missions leaving the Meos, once again, as the primary source of intelligence.⁶⁴

● In July 1961, Secretary McNamara had asked the Joint Chiefs to examine a proposal for the Defense Department to assume responsibility for Meo operations. After thorough consideration, the chiefs concluded that the present arrangement should not be disrupted. They recognized that the effectiveness of the Meo was due, not only to their tribal cohesiveness, but to their willingness to follow an ethnic leader they could trust. [redacted] Vientiane, had exploited these characteristics by extending efficient financial, logistic, and training support. This in turn had strengthened Vang Pao's resistance and self-confidence against the Pathet

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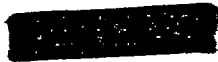
60. ● Hists, PACAF, Jan-Jun 62, III, pt 2, A-3, 13th AF, 1962, I, p II-63; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 254, Aug 14, 1962; Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, USAF Aerial Reconnaissance in Laos, Aug 23, 1962; Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966*, p 7.

61. ● Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 254, Aug 14, 1962.

62. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 230, Aug 16, 1962.

63. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 190, Aug 16, 1962.

64. ● Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, Aug 23, 1962; Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966*, p 6.



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Lao. Any change would lower his morale and that of his followers. The distrust of the Meo for the Lao (and vice versa) was also noted,

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The Joint Chiefs believed that under those circumstances, it would be difficult for Defense to assume a role [redacted] They were, nevertheless, willing to deploy more air assets on behalf of Meo activity.

Admiral Felt had opposed the change for basically the same reasons. He commented that General Boyle had reached agreement [redacted] whereby a few White Star teams would assist [redacted] personnel in training the Meo. Having evolved under actual operational conditions, this arrangement was highly successful and should not be disturbed.

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On October 4, the JCS informed CINCPAC that McNamara had accepted their views. Supplying, training, and financing of the Meo would remain unchanged until the withdrawal of the MAAG. Three weeks later, Washington notified the embassy they could recruit another one thousand Meo, bringing the authorized force level to twelve thousand.⁶⁶

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The country team had earlier suggested (January 12, 1962) a further expansion of local defense and resistance capabilities of the population in northern and central Laos (not necessarily Meo). The aim was to cut down further Pathet Lao encroachments in these areas. The team realized it would be advantageous to any Laotian government (pro-Western or neutral) to keep these areas as much as possible out of communist hands. Then, too, the various mountain tribes that made up most of the population in northern Laos did not like the Pathet Lao. Armed, they could disrupt supply lines and deny the Pathet Lao local sources of supplies, intelligence, and manpower; and the RLG could gain valuable information on Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese political and military activities in these areas. Also, tribesmen along the frontier between Laos and North Vietnam could observe NVA compliance with any promise not to infiltrate Laos or South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was understood that Air America would need more helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Helicopter strips and STOL airfields for handling them would likewise have to be built. This would enhance the mobility and thus the tactics of the Meo and other tribesmen. On February 5, [redacted] secured clearance for this fresh expansion of its unconventional warfare.⁶⁷

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Comments of communist delegates at Geneva six months later showed beyond a doubt that the program to arm the Meo and other minority people was more than just a burr under the Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese Army saddle. Specifically, the Soviet delegation voiced concern over Air America's continually dropping supplies to the tribesmen. They strongly hinted that such "provocations" might torpedo the conference. The State Department was not as disturbed over the Russians as it was over Souvanna, who might insist these supplies be cut off. Secretary Rusk instructed the American delegation to convince him that it was in his best interest to have the noncommunist minority groups loyal to the government.⁶⁸

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Souvanna was noncommittal, however. Not until his return to Vientiane did he give Under formal permission to continue the Air America airlift of supplies, medicine, and rice (no arms) to the hill people. Souvanna made it clear that in the future the Meo must look to

65. JCSM-61-62, Contingency Planning for Department of Defense Assumption of Responsibility for Support of Meo Operations, Jan 27, 1962.

66. Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974; US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955-1962, p C-30; msg, CINCPAC to JCS, DA IN 156147, Sep 29, 1961, JCS to CINCPAC, 1751, Oct 4, 1961.

67. JCSM-61-62, Contingency Planning for Department of Defense Assumption of Responsibility for Support of Meo Operations, Jan 27, 1962.

68. Msgs, SECSTATE to US Mission, Geneva FE Conf, 973, Jul 16, 1962, US Mission, Geneva FE Conf, to SECSTATE, 1257, Jul 17, 1962.



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Vientiane for such aid and not the United States. In spite of the airlift, the Pathet Lao kept on harassing and attacking Meo strong-holds in Samneua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. Although Souvanna believed this pressure would soon ease up, he urged Vang Pao to abandon some of the isolated outposts and consolidate his forces at not less than battalion strength. Ambassador Unger thought this made sense militarily, but he still could not understand why the Meo should give up positions legitimately occupied, especially when a cease-fire was supposed to be in force. Souvanna promised to discuss the matter with his brother. Nonetheless, through the remainder of the dry season, the pressure on the Meo and other [redacted] tribesmen mounted.⁶⁹

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The T-6 section remained an enigma, the bright outlook of the previous year having dimmed. Of the 140 recorded strikes in 1962, the Americans judged no more than 10 successful. Pilots reported they could not locate their targets even though reliable aerial photography was abundant. They kept firing their guns and rockets out of range and failed to press home their attack, even in undefended areas. The lack of a suitable gunnery range prevented the correction of these shortcomings. Moreover, the Air Force MAAG instructors viewed the "vacillation of U.S. policy" as a roadblock to orderly planning and implementation of improvements such as the conversion from T-6s to T-28s. Their final report underscored that

it will never be possible [for Laos] to maintain an Air Force without outside technical assistance. Even with a concerted effort on the part of the US, it will be 1970 before the RLAF could be expected to maintain the simplest type aircraft.⁷⁰

In March 1962, during a battlefield lull around Nam Tha, General Boyle had asked CINCPAC to replace three T-6s damaged beyond repair. With but five Harvards left, the RLAF badly needed strike aircraft. The State Department opposed the move on the grounds that it would abet Phoumi's stubborn refusal to accept a coalition government. The T-6s were replaced, but General Boyle vented his irritation to Admiral Felt over State's using critically needed military equipment as a political lever. He was concerned that the delivery of fourteen MAP T-28s set for May might become enmeshed in similar political considerations. These aircraft would soon be needed to counter the buildup in enemy armor on the Plain of Jars.⁷¹

However, the Laotian pilots had to go through a T-28 transition and upgrading program before they could use the T-28s. Because of the touchy political situation in Laos, Admiral Felt proposed transferring three T-28s from South Vietnam to the RTAF training base at Kokotiem for this purpose. Colonel Thao Ma, RLAF chief, initially refused to let his pilots enter T-28 training prior to the arrival of the planes. After Nam Tha, he became as pliable as Phoumi, and the program proceeded on schedule, led by five USAF instructors, three from MAAG Laos and the rest from a PACAF mobile training team. The program began in May with the first class of six pilots. When the program finished on August 22, twelve pilots had received instruction in formation flying, night operations, instruments, navigation, and gunnery. The T-28s supplied by CINCPAC lacked adequate instruments for night training; and the pilots were trained solely in day gunnery, dive bombing, and skip bombing. Employment of rockets and napalm was also omitted because of equipment shortages. Felt's plan also embraced ground personnel, and forty-eight mechanics (one-third each being Lao, ECCOIL, and RTAF) received both classroom instruction and on-the-job training.⁷²

69. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 222, Aug 17, 1962, 328, Sep 2, 1962, 531, Oct 3, 1962.

70. Rprt, MAAG Laos, Aug 21, 1962.

71. Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 120550Z Mar 62, 010800Z Apr 62, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1451, Mar 22, 1962. One U.S. intelligence report estimated nearly ninety tanks in Pathet Lao/NVA hands. The number adjudged to be on the Plain of Jars was not stated. [PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest 14-62, Apr 6, 1962, 13.]

72. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 112307Z Apr 62; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 212; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Annual FWAIS S-3632, Sep 26, 1962; Rprt, MAAG Laos, Summary of Operations, Fiscal Year 62, Royal Laos Air Force, Aug 21, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 212.

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Despite the training at Kokotiem, the MAP T-28s were not sent to Laos. Secretary McNamara had directed, as early as April 27, that, following overseas shipment, the planes be held in Thailand until the political climate cleared. By mid-August, the aircraft were still in the United States. When Phoumi pressed Unger for them, the ambassador replied his government would not give the FAR any more equipment since it was already well supplied. Moreover, the recently signed Geneva accords called for a major demobilization so there was no need for the T-28s. Unger did say that once the new unified Laotian armed forces were organized, the Government of National Union could assess the situation. Then, if it still wanted the planes, Washington would review its stand. So at the end of 1962, the RLAF was flying obsolete T-6 fighters. In the interim, the T-28s that had been earmarked for Laos were converted to reconnaissance versions and shipped to South Vietnam.⁷³

Other aspects of the RLAF were somewhat better. Total strength rose from 447 to 558 (against 721 authorized). This gain, mostly in the general service area, was attained by recruiting out of other branches of the FAR. At the same time, 43 Laotians had qualified for the MAAG-sponsored on-the-job training in maintenance, supply, and communications. The most chronic shortage at year's end was adequately trained ground personnel, stemming from the stress placed on checking out pilots.⁷⁴

The absence of an RLAF training base or camp inside Laos was a principal handicap to a successful ground school program. Likewise, no classification system designed along USAF lines existed, and there were no skill levels to denote proficiency—the Laotians considered any technical school graduate to be at the top of the proficiency ladder. A prime example was the attitude of the handful of French-trained technicians who returned to Laos in late 1961. Their training differed so radically from that given by the U.S. Air Force that the MAAG realized retraining was in order. Naturally, these men were not enthusiastic over this prospect and objected strenuously, citing their French diploma as proof of competence. It was not until Thao Ma stepped in and ruled in favor of the MAAG advisors that these men agreed to take more training.⁷⁵

To the Americans, no Laotian was presumed qualified above the apprentice level, and the only practical solution was on-the-job training. It was conducted informally; and the handicaps of language, motivation, and inadequate manuals and study materials remained. The skill levels were so low that Air Force MAAG personnel concluded the Laotians could not supervise their on-the-job training, much less teach formal courses. They pessimistically predicted that, at the current snail's pace, it would be mid-1966 or 1967 before sufficient Laotian graduates of stateside training schools would be available to serve as ground school instructors. Until this point was reached, the "chaotic, no-progress system" would prevail.⁷⁶

Against these dire predictions, certain areas showed promise. The English language trainer was uncrated and set up in Savannakhet. Qualified instructors were still in short supply, although offset to some extent by Thao Ma's constant enthusiastic support. The eight C-47s of the RLAF transport section (eleven combat-ready crews) sustained a high utilization rate, logging an average of 250 hours a month during the last quarter of fiscal year 1962. Much of this airlift was hauling troops and cargo to active zones and making supply drops. Even so, the American advisors complained about the transports being used for "passenger convenience," strongly hinting that too often they supported illegal operations such as gold and opium smuggling.⁷⁷

73. Msgs, SECDEF to CINCPAC, 270014Z Apr 62, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 206, Aug 12, 1962, CINCPAC to CSAF, 191320Z Oct 62.

74. Rprt, MAAG Laos, Aug 21, 1962; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Sep 26, 1962.

75. See note above.

76. Rprt, MAAG Laos, Aug 21, 1962.

77. *Ibid.*

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● In early October, Souvanna sent identical letters to Soviet Ambassador Sergei Afanasseyev and U.S. Ambassador Unger asking for assistance in flying supplies to neutralist forces in remote areas. The Russians responded by giving the Royal Laotian Government the Ilyushin transports that had been flying between Vinh, Hanoi, and the Plain of Jars. They also offered to fly the aircraft until Laotian crews could be trained. In addition, the Soviets suggested that fifty men from each faction be sent to the Soviet Union for pilot and mechanic training.⁷⁸

● The State Department was pleased but not surprised by Souvanna's request for American aid. For some time, intelligence revealed that the "marriage" between Kong Le (now a brigadier general) and the Pathet Lao had been one of convenience. Defectors told of troubles and strained relations between the two groups. For example, much of the material brought in by the Soviet airlift to the Plain of Jars had been expropriated by the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. What was left went to Kong Le's men. In this way, the communists controlled whatever passed to the neutralists who were now running short of critically needed food, clothing, and ammunition. On top of this, the Pathet Lao had infiltrated their "allies" and were accusing Kong Le of no longer being a "true neutralist."⁷⁹

● Reportedly due to pressure from the Pathet Lao, the Soviets dalled over the precise number of planes they intended giving Souvanna as well as the turnover data. In consequence, the tension on the Plain of Jars grew. Rumors circulated in Vientiane that Kong Le was completely surrounded. On November 20, Souvanna received a request from Col. Ketsana Vongsouvan, the neutralist commander at Khangkhai, for ammunition for his U.S. carbines. The prime minister passed the request to the American embassy. After discussing it with his country team, Unger concluded that the neutralist army might start to fall apart if he failed to deliver. This in turn would significantly weaken Souvanna's position within the troika government. Unger admitted that introducing U.S. war materials into the Plain of Jars at this juncture might be touchy, but he believed the material and psychological benefit outweighed the risk. Accordingly, he authorized Air America to fly supplies to Ketsana's forces.⁸⁰

● Again at Souvanna's bidding, Unger dispatched an Air America C-123 Provider on November 29 to the Plain of Jars with food and supplies. While on the final turn in the traffic pattern, the plane was hit by antiaircraft fire. It caught fire and crashlanded; only an air cargo specialist survived.⁸¹ Though neutralist soldiers at once surrounded the AA battery, its commander had escaped and no one was really sure who gave the fire order.⁸²

● Ambassador Unger sensed the hand of the Pathet Lao behind the C-123 loss. After the cease-fire, enemy propaganda against Air America had quickened, fueled by the logistic help given the Meo. In fact, the airline's planes had been shot at seventeen times since mid-October, the crews accepting it as a way of life. Now, besides resupplying the Meo, Air America was acting as an alternate source of airborne supply for Kong Le. Unger assumed the Pathet Lao

78. ● Dommen, pp 234-35; *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 43-62, Oct 24, 1962, p 11. Eventually, the neutralists met their quota and Phoumi ordered fifty RLAF personnel to report as well, although the latter never took their training in the Soviet Union. Having few men qualified, the Pathet Lao sent no one but later supplied a list of potential candidates. [Msg, [redacted] AF IN 34102, Jan 16, 1964.]

79. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 530, 531, Oct 3, 1962, 603, Oct 15, 1962, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 446, Oct 16, 1962.

80. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 772, Nov 20, 1962; *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 50-62, Dec 14, 1962, p 11. The USAF contract with Air America had been transferred from the MAAG to the director of Agency for International Development, Laos, for operational control on September 26. Thus, AID was in a position to carry on when the MAAG left. [Msg, CHMAAG China to SECDEF, 260703Z Sep 62; ltr A-75, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Contract between USAID and Air America, Sep 26, 1962.]

81. ● Just the day before, Unger had landed at the same field for a first-hand inspection of neutralist living conditions.

82. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 806, 809, Nov 27, 1962, 818, Nov 28, 1962.

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could not tolerate this and had retaliated. No longer able to vouch for the safety of the Air America aircraft and crews, the ambassador temporarily suspended their flights to the Plain of Jars.⁸³

Later information disclosed that disaffected neutralists led by Kong Le's deputy, Lt. Col. Deuan Sunnalath, had shot down the transport, not the Pathet Lao. Nonetheless, Souvanna was certain the act was "Pathet Lao-inspired." He discussed the incident with Souphanouvong, who proffered the excuse that maybe the mission had not been coordinated between Vientiane and the airfield. Souvanna knew the flight had been cleared, and his brother's remarks confirmed his suspicion that Souphanouvong was not in full control of his people. Souvanna promised Unger he would investigate the incident and punish those responsible but did not visit the airfield until December 20. By that time, the prime minister deemed it more important to reunite rather than discipline the neutralist forces.⁸⁴

Despite the C-123 shootdown, Souvanna put in for more supplies. On the day the aircraft was lost, he presented Unger with a new and larger shopping list that, in effect, called on the United States to completely resupply and outfit the neutralist forces. It included 1.7 million rounds of small-arms ammunition, eleven thousand artillery shells, five thousand bazooka shells, and over thirty-four thousand gallons of gasoline. Unger realized this exorbitant request would have to be cut back—he was not about to open the door to the MAP warehouse. However, he believed it was in America's interest to keep Kong Le strong enough to deter a communist takeover of the Plain of Jars and sought authority from Washington to make small-scale deliveries of carbine and rifle ammunition.⁸⁵

William P. Bundy, ASD/ISA, was wary of giving Unger this prerogative because his messages often referred to the neutralists "sharing" (admittedly under pressure) their supplies with the Pathet Lao. Bundy thought that Kong Le should pledge to distribute such supplies solely to his forces. Bundy also questioned including munitions in this assistance.⁸⁶

On December 4, State gave Unger the authority he wanted with several strings attached. As Bundy suggested, Kong Le would have to promise to confine the aid to his forty-five hundred troops. If trouble ensued between the neutralist factions, the embassy was to ensure that the ammunition was kept out of Pathet Lao hands. (The State Department assumed doling out small amounts of carbine ammunition at a time would satisfy this stipulation.) Unger was also to obtain from Souvanna his written request for continued MAP support for a FAR of forty-eight thousand men. The prime minister had said in the past he wished to prolong military assistance, and this letter made it official. Later, the AID requirements office was told to prepare recommendations for the neutralists as well as the FAR.⁸⁷

At this point, the Russians reentered the picture. Six Il-14 Crate transports flew into Wattay on December 1, about two months earlier than promised. On the second, two An-2 Colt biplanes and an Mi-4 Hound helicopter arrived. The Soviets announced that the aircraft would

83. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 823, Nov 29, 1962.

84. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 823, 824, Nov 29, 1962, 906, Dec 20, 1962.

85. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 812, Nov 27, 1962. Souvanna showed Unger an agreement signed by himself, Souphanouvong, and Ngon Sananikone providing for a unified thirty thousand-man army composed of equal contingents from the three factions. A tripartite general staff would be formed to select the three contingents and oversee the demobilization of the remainder. There would also be an integrated police force of six thousand, with two thousand from each group. With the C-123 loss foremost in his mind, Unger doubted if the Pathet Lao could be trusted to fulfill the pact in good faith. Souvanna, however, was confident he could hold the Pathet Lao to the bargain. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 816, Nov 27, 1962.]

86. Ltr, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, to U. Alexis Johnson, Dep Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Nov 28, 1962.

87. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 595, Dec 4, 1962, SECDEF/SECSTATE/AID to AmEmb Vientiane, 639, Dec 28, 1962.

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be repainted with Laotian markings and, except for the pilot transition program, they would exert no operational control over them. The Russians turned over the newer, longer range II-14s to the North Vietnamese, who used them to supply Pathet Lao/NVA troops located along the panhandle adjacent to the border with North and South Vietnam.⁸⁸

By January 1963, Souvanna was asking for larger shipments to Kong Le's forces, prompting a visit to the Plain of Jars by high-ranking U.S. officials. Led by Roger Hilsman of the State Department, the group also included special presidential advisor Michael V. Forrestal and Ambassador Unger, as well as other country team members. In a strange turn of events so characteristic of Laos, the group made the trip in a Russian transport flown by a Soviet crew. Meeting with these visitors on January 11, Kong Le made it clear he still backed the policies of Souvanna. He underlined the need for rice, clothing, gasoline, and communication equipment. He specifically mentioned a fifty-kilowatt transmitter so his radio station could operate unhindered by the Pathet Lao. Convinced that Kong Le sincerely desired to work with the United States, Unger, Hilsman, and Forrestal recommended that Washington extend him support. Admiral Felt added his endorsement but (perhaps remembering Souvanna's enormous request in November) hoped the Military Assistance Program "would not be used as a grab bag." On January 14, President Kennedy decided that Kong Le's requests should be filled, as long as they were within reason and in line with the U.S. policy to support Souvanna.⁸⁹

Afterwards, Admiral Felt expressed reservations about the wisdom of supporting Kong Le, saying it might be detrimental to Phoumi and the FAR. Washington stood firm, however; CINCPAC was to furnish whatever supplies Unger and the country team determined were needed. Felt was to consider Kong Le's and Phoumi's troops one and the same. By the end of February, Air America (under ICC supervision) was making regular deliveries once more to the Plain of Jars.⁹⁰

Surprisingly, Phoumi agreed to help Kong Le as well. Several of the items Souvanna and Kong Le asked for came from stocks held by Phoumi. In truth, Souvanna later told Ambassador Unger that he and Phoumi had come to an understanding on a joint defense plan for the Plain of Jars should conditions deteriorate into open warfare. Even so, Phoumi's interpretation did not envision the FAR entering the plain but waiting for the neutralists to abandon their positions and join them. At a meeting of the general staff, Phoumi admitted that this strategy would guarantee the loss of the area, yet it was necessary if the conservatives were to avoid being accused of renewing the war.⁹¹

Souvanna Phouma's troika government never got off to a good start because the Pathet Lao, from the beginning, repeated their tactics of the late 1950s. They rejected any meaningful steps toward reunification of the country and, stiffened by the North Vietnamese, kept their zone intact and free from outside influence or inspection. This enabled them to thoroughly organize and control their territory, while seeking to expand communist influence through propaganda, infiltration, pressure, and bribery. Their immediate objective was Kong Le's troops on the Plain of Jars. They hoped to weaken, divide, and eventually destroy this force, while simultaneously building up the "progressive" or Deuanist (Deuan Sunnalath's) faction. At the proper moment, this splinter group would be proclaimed the only "true neutralists."⁹²

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88. Dommen, p 244; PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest 50-62, Dec 14, 1962, p 11.

89. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 995, Jan 11, 1963, CINCPAC to JCS, 141009Z Jan 63, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 694, Jan 14, 1963.

90. Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 091910Z Feb 63, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 839, Feb 21, 1963, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1228, Feb 28, 1963.

91. Hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 167; FOV Rpt 6511, [redacted] Comments of General Phoumi Nosavan on Cooperation with the Neutralists, Mar 1, 1963.

92. Msgs, AmEmb to SECSTATE, 1311, Mar 21, 1963, 1453, Apr 14, 1963.

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Colonel Ketsana, the neutralist commander on the Plain of Jars, stood in the way of this scenario. A former FAR officer, Ketsana was outspoken in his opposition to the communists and staunchly resisted their efforts to subvert his troops. Through his newspaper connections, he consistently attacked the NLHX and the Deuanists. On February 12, 1963 (the evening following the departure of the king and Souvanna on a tour of the nations that signed the Geneva accords), Ketsana was assassinated. While the assailants were never found, money for the murder was rumored to have been supplied by Quinim Pholsena, the leftist foreign minister.⁹³

Kong Le and Ketsana's supporters swore revenge. On April 1, the king and Souvanna hosted a diplomatic reception in Vientiane after their tour abroad. Returning home from these festivities, Quinim was suddenly gunned down by a soldier guarding the front entrance to his house. Ironically, the murder weapon was a Russian-made machinegun.⁹⁴

Quinim's death impelled the Pathet Lao to action. Minor skirmishes had taken place between Kong Le's troops and the Deuanists; but on the night of April 3/4, several mortar and artillery rounds fell on Xieng Khouangville, killing twenty civilians. Souvanna protested to his brother, but Souphanouvong argued the fighting had been started by Kong Le. Despite Ambassador Unger's urging that he take the case to the International Control Commission, Souvanna demurred. By April 8, Kong Le's men were forced to withdraw from Xieng Khouangville, Khangkhai, and Ban Ban. Souvanna now requested that the ICC send a team to the Plain of Jars to help preserve the cease-fire. Souphanouvong resisted this action, contending that the fighting was just an internal dispute between forces loyal to Kong Le and those loyal to Deuan. Reports that the Deuanists were actually Pathet Lao were not true, he added; but within hours of the prime minister's proposal to the ICC, Souphanouvong slipped out of Vientiane for Khangkhai. He claimed, as Phoumi had done two years before, that security was inadequate. This move (soon matched by the departure of other Pathet Lao) meant the communists would no longer participate in the Government of National Union. Moreover, it signaled their resolve to press the fighting and to thwart reunion of the country.⁹⁵

The Pathet Lao attacks on the neutralists pushed Souvanna and Kong Le closer to the United States and to Phoumi Nosavan, a somewhat unlikely ally. For the past few months, Phoumi had been watching the turmoil in Vientiane and the Plain of Jars from his headquarters in Savannakhet. During this period, he was to have demobilized his weakest units. Instead, he enlarged his forces to nearly fifty thousand men and spent considerable time waging a quiet campaign to entice the neutralists into the "FAR fold." When the fighting on the plain flared, Phoumi airlifted food, medical supplies, weapons, and ammunition to Kong Le and offered even more help. For the time being at least, Souvanna preferred the United States. On April 14, he tendered Unger another want list for vehicles, signal equipment, weapons, and ammunition. Spurred by the war on the plain, Felt directed Tucker to quickly satisfy Souvanna's needs from the matériel he controlled. Much of this equipment (22,574 pounds) was flown into the Plain of Jars by the RLAF's six C-47s during April 21-26.⁹⁶

Secretary Rusk and Admiral Felt heard of the happenings on the Plain of Jars while attending a SEATO conference in Paris. Rusk clearly saw the North Vietnamese behind these latest Pathet Lao attempts to wreck the 1962 Geneva accords. He urged Washington to begin "serious contingency planning aimed at a clear warning to Hanoi that continued military action in Laos would lead to direct action against North Vietnam." The action the secretary had in mind did not involve ground troops—only heavy use of air power. In his view, "we can shoot

93. PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest 7-63 [on microfilm, date illegible].

94. Dommen, pp 245-46.

95. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1394, Apr 6, 1963, 1100, 1401, Apr 8, 1963, 1496, Apr 20, 1963.

96. Msg, CHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 130430Z Apr 63.

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the Viet Minh from the air and sea at less cost to us and maximum cost to them." Taking his cue from Rusk, Admiral Felt instructed his staff to ascertain how soon certain JTF 116 units could deploy to Udom. He further asked CINCPACAF how long it would take to send a squadron of F-100s to Takhli; if ordered to do so on short notice. General O'Donnell quickly replied that his aircraft could be in place twelve hours after receiving the order to take off. O'Donnell also suggested sending a flight of four to six B-57 Canberras to bases in Thailand, since CINCPAC OPlan 32-63 provided for a tactical bomb squadron if needed.⁹⁷

① No immediate action was taken to activate these forces; but by April 20, Washington decided certain military moves had to be made to prove its intent to stabilize the current crisis. The Joint Chiefs ordered Felt to shift a carrier task group (TG) and a Marine BLT into waters adjacent to South Vietnam south of the 17th parallel. The carriers would be told to change course for the Gulf of Tonkin if a demonstration of U.S. strength against North Vietnam proved necessary. No publicity was to be given the movement.⁹⁸

② CINCPAC at once directed TG 77.5 (USS *Ticonderoga* attack carrier strike group) to sail from Subic Bay to a position east of South Vietnam and start normal flight operations. The USS *Princeton* amphibious ready group (TG 76.5) would position itself in the same area, but south of TG 77.5. These groups reached their destinations by April 24 and were subsequently joined by SEATO naval forces (including the USS *Yorktown*) conducting Exercise Sea Serpent. They stayed on station until the end of the month, serving their purpose of "attracting the attention" of Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi. By May 3, the units returned to normal operations.⁹⁹

③ Meantime, the Joint Chiefs were staffing Secretary Rusk's suggestion to begin contingency planning aimed at North Vietnam. On April 25, they sent several alternative courses of action to Secretary McNamara for review and forwarding to Rusk and President Kennedy. The choices fell into three categories. The first were possible actions that would not violate North Vietnam's sovereignty but were indications of U.S. intent. The second category included possible actions violating North Vietnam's sovereignty but without physical hostile intent. The final category were possible actions with hostile intent.¹⁰⁰

④ The first category stressed a show of force. Selected USAF units would be flown into Thailand while the *Ticonderoga* and *Princeton* remained on station. With the Air Force units standing alert, the naval forces would conduct extensive air maneuvers from below the 17th parallel to the northern reaches of the Gulf of Tonkin. In no case would aircraft approach closer than twelve miles off the coast of North Vietnam or communist China. The JCS likewise recommended the Marines conduct an amphibious exercise with the chance of a landing into the northern part of South Vietnam between Hue and the Demilitarized Zone.¹⁰¹

⑤ Category II accented air power. Overflights and "air demonstrations" such as sonic booms, leaflet drops, harassing, and buzzing were listed as options. The Joint Chiefs deemed this an ideal time to reinstitute high-level and low-level reconnaissance flights, not only of Laos and North Vietnam, but of Hainan Island and the southern fringes of the Chinese mainland as well. In addition, U.S. naval forces might intercept and stop North Vietnamese shipping.¹⁰²

⑥ Category III was aimed solely at North Vietnam, for implementation as a last resort. The Navy would blockade Haiphong harbor and other ports, either by sinking old ships and

97. ① Msgs, AmEmb Paris to SECSTATE, SECTO, 17, Apr 9, 1963, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 815, Apr 14, 1963, CINCPAC to CHJUSMAGTHAI, 210038Z Apr 63; rpt, Rqmts Div/USAID, Utilization of RLGAF and RLAF Aircraft, in DOD IR 1 856 0011 63, Apr 26, 1963.

98. ② Msg, JCS to SECSTATE, CINCPAC, 9565, Apr 20, 1963.

99. ③ Hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 175.

100. ④ JCSM-330-63, Military Options to Stabilize Situation in Laos, Apr 25, 1963.

101. ⑤ *Ibid.*

102. ⑥ *Ibid.*

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barges or dropping aerial mines. As a parallel operation, shipping might be boarded, seized, or destroyed. Finally, the Air Force would be permitted to bomb selected targets. These would be away from population centers to avoid civilian casualties. Dong Hoi airfield would be given top priority, since most of the Pathet Lao's aerial logistic support came from there. Relatively isolated, this airfield was surfaced with fifty-six hundred feet of steel matting that could be easily potholed but, as the JCS admitted, just as easily repaired by coolie labor. Following Dong Hoi, the numerous bridges leading from Vinh into Laos and other key lines of communication targets were proposed. Vinh also contained an eighty-five thousand-barrel POL storage area located five miles inland, clear of the town and an early warning radar. The Thai Nguyen iron and steel combine outside Hanoi, including the dam that supplied the mill with water, was a prime industrial target put forward by the Joint Chiefs.¹⁰³

④ The chiefs believed that enemy reactions to Category I actions would no doubt unleash the usual communist propaganda barrage, diplomatic notes, and Chinese "warnings" against further "provocations." Actions in the second category would elicit shriller cries and a possible offer by China to North Vietnam of air defense forces. The Chinese would probably alert certain military units as well. Since Category III options were overt acts of war, it was conceivable the Chinese would enter with ground forces as they had done in Korea. Retaliatory strikes against airfields in Laos and South Vietnam were a distinct possibility.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the JCS evaluation of enemy reactions to Category III was its ignoring any possible retaliation by North Vietnam. All its calculations were based on Chinese responses.

⑤ McNamara dispatched the chiefs' plan to the State Department for coordination and comment, and two months passed before a joint State/Defense paper was presented to President Kennedy. Meanwhile, Averell Harriman was sent to Moscow to secure Soviet help in withdrawing the North Vietnamese. Foreign Minister Gromyko was not amenable, however, characterizing as absurd and unfounded U.S. claims that the North Vietnamese were in Laos. He charged the United States with maintaining "scores" of military personnel as civilians, adding that not everyone agreed with the American definition of "civilian." Harriman's rebuttal that his government had no military personnel in Laos except bona fide attachés was met with cold silence. From his "sticky" meeting with Gromyko (and later with Khrushchev), Harriman concluded that the Soviets would offer little help in securing North Vietnamese withdrawal.¹⁰⁵

⑥ Back in Laos, Kong Le was preparing for a May 16 counterattack to retake positions lost during the April assaults by the Pathet Lao. His plan, worked out with Vang Pao and Phoumi, called for simultaneous moves by the FAR, Meo, and neutralists against Xieng Khouangville and Nong Pet and for harassing actions against Khangkhai and Ban Ban. In the country team's judgment, this plan had slight chance for success because it demanded close coordination—a military quality notoriously lacking in the Laotians. Eventually, the government forces could wind up unable to handle any objective satisfactorily. An enemy counterattack might sweep them right off the Plain of Jars. The Americans were strongly supported in their evaluation by Gen. Robert A. Lancrenon, the new commander of the French Military Mission.¹⁰⁶

⑦ The State Department strongly opposed the May 16 plan. Averell Harriman immediately cabled Unger to avert any "reckless or foolish provocation" by Kong Le. Harriman had little confidence in the latter's military judgment, especially in operations carried out in collaboration with Phoumi. Nevertheless, the ambassador was to maintain the neutralists on the Plain of Jars

103. *Ibid*; encl B to *ibid*.

104. Hist, CINCPAC, 1963, Encl C.

105. Memo of Conversation, Under SECSTATE for Political Affairs W. Averell Harriman with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Apr 26, 1963; msg, AmEmb Moscow to SECSTATE, 2756, Apr 26, 1963.

106. *CIA Weekly Summary*, May 10, 1963; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1674, May 13, 1963, 1679, May 14, 1964.

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in strong defensive positions, so the only way the enemy could dislodge them would be through an "overt and flagrant attack." In other words, all offensive actions, even if designed to recover former government-held positions, were to be strongly discouraged. The onus for renewed hostilities must be placed squarely on the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. The administration recognized and accepted that the North Vietnamese would keep some military presence in Laos, not only as cadre for the Pathet Lao, but to secure the Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration route into South Vietnam. However, if they broke the Geneva accords in such a way as to force U.S. intervention, Harriman wanted to make sure Washington had all the international political support it could get.¹⁰⁷

Harriman had little cause to worry. The monsoon rains began to fall and the Pathet Lao/NVA gained advanced knowledge of Kong Le's plan. On May 15, they fired over twenty 85-mm artillery shells into the mile-long area that lay between the dirt airstrip at Muong Phan and Kong Le's headquarters. After a day's rest, enemy gunners resumed the shelling and did not let up until the ICC team landed on the plain. Things were calm for two weeks but, once the team withdrew, the sporadic artillery barrages started anew, with as many as one thousand rounds falling on May 31.¹⁰⁸

The precarious military posture of the Royal Laotian government forces on the Plain of Jars sparked a reexamination of U.S. military policy by Ambassador Unger on May 18. Unger noted that the United States, two years earlier, had gone all out to strengthen Phoumi's military forces so that he could put down the communist threat and unify the country under a pro-Western conservative government. Convinced this course would not work, the Kennedy administration switched support to Souvanna and later assisted in reassembling the Geneva conference and establishing a Government of National Union. It thought these actions might resolve the contest among the three factions in Laos in the political rather than the military arena. However, it was now clear that neither the Pathet Lao nor North Vietnamese would allow unification of the country, except in their own terms, nor would the Pathet Lao participate in the government. At this stage, Unger did not rule out a large-scale communist military assault; but he supposed the enemy would prefer "nibbling" at RLG positions, particularly on the Plain of Jars. Unger commented that FAR and Meo units had taken up positions on the fringes of the plain to shore up the neutralists and prevent nibbling.¹⁰⁹

In view of these events—especially Washington's recent approval of Souvanna's large arms requests—Unger was not sure what kind of armed forces the administration envisioned. For example, should Laos have an army sufficiently large and well trained to hold its own against Pathet Lao troops and their NVA cadres, or would it be better to settle for an army that could serve "primarily as a tripwire or plate glass window?" Considering the past poor performance of the Laotians and the fact that the MAAG could no longer operate in Laos, Unger saw the tripwire arrangement as the only practical solution.¹¹⁰

Responding to the ambassador's views, the State Department was in basic agreement, but the response was somewhat confusing and contradictory. State wanted a Laotian army that "could hold out long enough to focus international attention on the situation and crystallize the elements out of which we must make decisions as to what actions to take." It knew the available courses of action would sharply narrow should the government force collapse without much of a fight. Consequently, the Laotian Army should be strong enough to resist nibbling, but State did not want to build up these forces beyond their present size nor give them new equipment.

107. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1104, May 16, 1963; Hilsman, p 152.

108. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1690, May 15, 1963, 1717, May 18, 1963, 1844, Jun 2, 1963.

109. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1719, May 18, 1963.

110. *Ibid.*



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Only wornout items would be replaced. On the other hand, the department hinted it would look with favor upon embassy suggestions that bombs be provided the T-6s or U.S. advisors reintroduced at military region level. Then, apparently forgetting the events leading to Phoumi's loss of Nam Tha, Unger was told he should back efforts to extend government control into areas not yet firmly occupied by the Pathet Lao or where the enemy was weak. State seemed to have straightforward answers only to questions dealing with committing U.S. troops—for the present, U.S. troops would not be sent to Laos. However, concerning Laotian morale, "Regrettably, we have nothing new to offer on this perennial sixty-four dollar question."¹¹¹

111. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1136, May 24, 1963.

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Chapter IV

Air Power Backs Up the New U.S. Strategy (U)

Although Washington ruled out sending troops to Laos early in 1963, the White House in May asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to propose alternate, less drastic steps.¹ On June 19, the Joint Chiefs gave President Kennedy a three-phase plan of gradually escalating measures. The first phase, which was approved immediately and became National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 256, called for military and political actions aimed at building up noncommunist strength. These included an increase in military assistance, intelligence collection, and aerial resupply to Kong Le, the tribal elements, and FAR outposts in Pathet Lao territory. The second phase, approved by the President for further planning but not for implementation, contained more forceful measures. Among them were resuming USAF reconnaissance over Laos, enlarging the number of American advisors, introducing a Farm Gate operation into Laos, and harassing North Vietnam from the air.² Kennedy vetoed the third phase, which specified direct, active U.S. intervention into that country.³

Even as these strategic decisions were being shaped in Washington, preliminary steps were taken to stiffen the Laotian military. For some time, the State Department had studied the possibility of replacing Thao Ma's wornout T-6s with more modern T-28s. In late April, Phoumi Nosavan secured Marshal Sarit Thanarat's agreement to hand over eight of the fighters from the RTAF inventory. Phoumi hoped Ambassador Unger would go along with the transfer because of the precarious situation on the Plain of Jars. Then, too, if the fighting resumed—a shaky cease-fire had existed for three days—Phoumi wanted to arm the T-28s with two-hundred-pound bombs. Unger would not approve the switch, however. He lacked authority for such a move and believed the changeover would provoke the Pathet Lao. Nevertheless, he passed the request to Washington and approached Souvanna on the question the next week (May 6). To Unger's surprise, the prime minister granted permission, but he preferred the planes be kept at Savannakhet after delivery.⁴ State then relented; Phoumi could have the T-28s strictly on a one-for-one basis for the T-6s. Furthermore, the aircraft would stay in Thailand even though title passed to the Royal Laotian Government. Only if the United States agreed there was an "extraordinary emergency" would the planes be flown into Laos. State also felt the changed situation meant that restrictions could be relaxed on bombs (but not on napalm). The ordnance could be pre-positioned at the Peppergrinder depot south of Udorn (it had been removed when the MAAG departed Laos) and brought into Laos whenever Unger deemed it necessary.⁵

1. JCS 2344/67, May 23, 1963; memo, Actg Asst SECDEF William P. Bundy to CJCS, subj: Actions to Stabilize the Situation in Laos, May 23, 1963.

2. NSAM 256, Jul 30, 1963; msg, SECDEF/SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1219, Jun 22, 1963; hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 198.

3. NSAM 256, Jul 30, 1963.

4. Apparently, Unger expected to be rebuffed by Souvanna and was taken aback when the prime minister approved. The ambassador felt this action signaled a change in Souvanna's thinking: "He now appears to entertain seriously the idea that PL, North Vietnamese and Chinese communists may not intend that there be serious negotiations for peace in Laos but are bent sooner or later on war and [occupying the] entire country." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 061250Z May 63.]

5. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1542, Apr 24, 1963, 061250L May 63, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 281312L May 63, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 181911L Jun 63, SECDEF/SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, Jun 24, 1963.

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① The State Department now supported replacement of the T-6s for several reasons. The switch was considered legal under Article 6 of the accords because Souvanna had requested the aircraft in writing. Since replacement was on a one-for-one basis, there was no net addition to RLAF strength. Although Secretary Rusk was not overly impressed of the military utility of the planes in Laotian hands, he thought their delivery would bolster the noncommunist forces and afford new and concrete evidence of backing from Thailand and the United States. Moreover, the T-28s might force the communists to pause and consider future attacks. If hostilities started again, the planes could attack the North Vietnamese airlift as well as the enemy troops.⁶

② Refresher training for six RLAF pilots (Thao Ma among them) and six mechanics began at Kokotiem on July 2. Supervised by USAF instructors, the program lasted two weeks (ten hours flight time) and eventually qualified twelve pilots and sixteen technicians. It covered aerial and air-to-surface gunnery, air-to-surface rocket attacks, and both dive and skip bombing. Each Laotian pilot received four hundred rounds of .50-caliber ammunition, sixteen practice bombs, and three salvos of 2.75-inch rockets. That same month, the program got a bonus when four pilots sent to the United States for T-28 training returned ready for combat. Amid this activity, the ordnance for the planes was being stockpiled at Udom. It included the larger 5-inch rockets and 500-pound bombs, although Souvanna wanted the latter employed solely as an extreme measure.⁷

③ Meanwhile, the British and French Ambassadors to Laos (Donald C. Hopson and Pierre L. Falaize) privately told Unger they viewed the T-6 replacement as escalation and surmised the Pathet Lao would see it the same way. Through the U.S. embassies in London and Paris, Secretary Rusk knew the British foreign office and the French foreign ministry did not favor the changeover either. Consequently, he amended the replacement guidelines on July 16—replacement would now be piecemeal, meaning singly and stretched out, unless military circumstances dictated otherwise. Deputy Chief of Mission Philip H. Chadbourn, Jr. (Unger was on his way to Washington) was to reemphasize to Phoumi and Thao Ma that these new aircraft were to be used only for defense and would not be sent into Laos unless there was a severe emergency.⁸

④ That same day (July 18), Phoumi had his "emergency." Eight hours after Rusk's cable arrived, Phoumi told Chadbourn that a large-scale Pathet Lao attack was taking place on the Plain of Jars. The previous night, Phoumi continued, neutralist Brig. Gen. Amkha Soukhavong had urgently requested his help. He was more than willing to give it; all he needed was Souvanna's formal request in writing. Once it was in hand, Phoumi intended jumping six battalions (two GMs) across Route 7 east of Ban Ban, and then launching a FAR/Meo/neutralist offensive into the Plain of Jars. He optimistically predicted it would "hurl the enemy once and for all out of the Plain of Jars." There was one catch; Phoumi needed the T-28s to attack Pathet Lao positions at Xieng Khouang, Ban Ban, along Route 7, and in the plain.⁹

⑤ Chadbourn was noncommittal. He suspected Phoumi was up to his old trick of taking actions that would provoke NVA intervention on such a scale as to augur his defeat and force the United States to come to his aid. It also seemed highly coincidental that this fighting should break out the day before the T-28 pilots concluded refresher training at Kokotiem. Chadbourn decided to call General Lancrenon of the FMM for confirmation of the fighting. After talking

6. ① Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 081844L May 63 and 23, Jul 4, 1963, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 070110L May 63 and 1960, Jun 21, 1963.

7. ② Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1991, Jun 26, 1962, 191512L Aug 63; draft memo, JCS to SECDEF, subj: Status of Phase I Actions to Stabilize the Situation in Laos, n.d., in Talking Paper, Pacific Div, Dir/J-3 (Ops), for SECDEF-JCS Meeting, same subj, Jul 8, 1963, Tab H.

8. ③ Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 180125Z Jul 63.

9. ④ Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131, 138, Jul 18, 1963.

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with the French advisors attached to the neutralists, Lancrenon reported Phoumi had exaggerated and that conditions had calmed down. Still not satisfied, Chadbourn dispatched the Army attaché, Colonel Law, to the plain. Law later portrayed the enemy's artillery barrage as the heaviest of the past two months, but said no ground had been lost and the situation was now quiet. Significantly, however, Law believed that had the Pathet Lao attacked, there was no way the neutralists could have prevented them from overrunning the Plain of Jars.¹⁰

Despite Phoumi's attempt to flimflam him, Chadbourn realized the time was ripe to replace the T-6s. Like Unger, he had formerly termed them "antiquated [but] more or less adequate to the Laotian situation." Now, Lt. Col. Robert L. F. Tyrrell, the new air attaché, had told him that three of the Harvards were unflyable with the other three having vital parts, such as radios, inoperable.¹¹ Tyrrell had also discovered through the aircraft serial numbers that the "newest" T-6 had been built in 1943. On top of this, Chadbourn could add Law's sobering comment on the neutralist position on the Plain of Jars. The deputy mission chief was somewhat relieved when he saw Souvanna the day after Phoumi's "emergency," and the prime minister formally requested the planes. On July 25, after Souvanna's written request was received, Chadbourn informed the State Department and the International Control Commission he was transferring three T-28s to the RLAF. He also held to the piecemeal delivery schedule ordered by Secretary Rusk; the remaining T-28s were not turned over until August 29. The heavier ordnance was moved to Vientiane, but the embassy kept the fuzes (and control of the weapons).¹²

With the arrival of the T-28s and the pre-positioning of the heavy ordnance in Vientiane, Chadbourn felt it would serve U.S. interests to furnish an assistant air attaché for Savannakhet. This officer could report the utilization rate of the T-28s and other RLAF aircraft and coordinate supply requests with the requirements office of the embassy AID section. More important, he would remind the overeager Thao Ma of the limited defensive purpose for which the United States had approved introduction of the T-28s. Chadbourn's request was promptly confirmed and the officer arrived on August 9.¹³

Paralleling the T-28 substitution was an agreement to deliver more transports to the RLG, an action forced upon the Americans because of a similar no-strings-attached gift by the Russians in December 1962. In mid-January, Souvanna suggested the United States make such a donation rather than expanding Air America's inventory. Ambassador Unger could scarcely refuse since it would show the United States, in contrast to the Soviet Union, unwilling to cooperate; but Unger recommended just a token gift of one C-46 and one liaison aircraft. These planes would be repainted in Laotian markings and given to the government's new transport arm, the Royal Laotian Government Air Force (RLGAF).¹⁴ They could resupply the Meo and, being RLG owned and operated, might stand less chance of being shot down.¹⁵

Admiral Felt opposed any plan giving Souvanna more than the token aircraft the ambassador proposed, for the prince had shown a penchant for upping his requests. If the United

10. See note above.

11. At this time, the RLAF had seven C-47s, eighteen H-34 helicopters (operated under contract by Air America), three U-6s, four O-1s, and the six "junk" T-6s. Personnel included eleven C-47, ten T-6, twelve T-28, and seven L-19 pilots, plus one hundred mechanics. [Background Paper, Current Status of RLAF, attached to memo, Dir/Plans, USAF, to CSAF, subj: JCS Meeting with Leonard Unger, US Ambassador to Laos, Jul 16, 1963, in JCS File RL (63) 38-9.]

12. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 202107Z Jul 63, 251145Z Jul 63, 261446L Jul 63.

13. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 251250Z Jul 63 and 299, Aug 10, 1963; memo, Henry L. T. Koren, Ofc/SEA Affairs, to Roger Hilsman, Asst SECSTATE for FE Affairs, subj: Meeting on Laos Plans (Jul 27, 1963), Jul 29, 1963.

14. The RLGAF was built around the nucleus of Soviet gift aircraft. Its headquarters was in Vientiane, the RLAF's stayed at Savannakhet. [Capt Peter A. W. Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos, 1959-1972* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1973), p 30.]

15. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 523, Jan 17, 1963.

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States ultimately matched the Soviet delivery of nine transports and a helicopter, Felt believed the Pathet Lao would demand an end to Air America. The upshot would be the loss of the Meo and Kong Le forces as effective anticommunist elements. Rather than turning the aircraft over to the RLG, Felt urged the United States to control air supply operations, keep them open to ICC inspection, and publicize the humanitarian effort they represented.¹⁶

① The State Department compromised; the C-46 and liaison aircraft would be placed at RLG disposal in an on-call status. Souvanna accepted the offer yet made it clear he would not be satisfied with any arrangement save an outright grant similar to the Soviets'. A few days later, Unger was informed that the AID program would supply two more C-46s. The State Department hoped this would provide ammunition for Souvanna in arguing with the Pathet Lao that the Americans, as well as the Russians, gave unconditional help. It would also stiffen his resolve to pursue the Meo resupply effort against the demands of the communists that it cease. By the end of March, these planes were in Vientiane.¹⁷

② The addition of a MAP C-47 on April 19 raised the RLAF inventory to ten transports. Then, as part of the Phase I actions approved by President Kennedy, Secretary McNamara further augmented the RLAF's airlift assets in late July. Four more C-47s, three U-17s, and three H-34 helicopters were delivered by October, bringing C-47 strength to fourteen planes. As with past helicopter deployments, the H-34s were dispatched to Udom. Air America continued to supply the crews, although it was agreed that, as soon as enough indigenous pilots were trained, the RLAF would take operational control.¹⁸

③ Through the summer of 1963, Souvanna carried on sporadic negotiations with his brother but could not convince him to return to Vientiane. At the same time, the enemy stepped up military pressure on the Meo and other widely scattered units in Laos. The village of Ban Pha Tang was abandoned to the foe after a heavy artillery shelling. Since the communists would not accept the territorial status quo, Ambassador Unger concluded the time had come to encourage modest RLG actions that would warn the Pathet Lao not to attempt further advances. To deny them the "fruits of military salami tactics," Unger wanted more and better use of air power. Specifically, he wished T-28s to support ground elements in retaking Ban Pha Tang, driving home to the communists that "small nibbling tactics bring punishment."¹⁹

④ The exuberant Thao Ma wanted T-28s to hit the logistic dump at Tchepone, hoping to shoot down a North Vietnamese transport in the process. Unger felt the RLAF should go after enemy transports but not strike this key communist position yet, because it might trigger a strong reaction.²⁰

⑤ On August 19, Secretary Rusk set forth guidelines for using the T-28s. If the communists accelerated their attacks, the fighters would quickly counterpunch—the enemy must realize he could no longer act with impunity. Missions were also allowed against troop concentrations in critical areas and against trucks and POL storage facilities, but for now, "deep penetrations" were not to be flown. Armament would include rockets, machineguns, bombs, and, for the first time, napalm.²¹

⑥ Ambassador Unger had grave reservations about dropping napalm. From his many years in Southeast Asia, he knew the dread most ex-French colonials had for "incendjejl." During the

16. ① Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 200024Z Jan 63.

17. ② Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 706, Jan 18, 1963, 1032, Jan 19, 1963, 724, Jan 22, 1963; hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 187.

18. ③ Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to AmEmb Bangkok, 1255, Apr 19, 1963, SECDEF to CINCPAC, 232057Z Jul 63; hist, CINCPAC, 1963, pp 185-86.

19. ④ Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 281, Aug 23, 1963.

20. ⑤ *Ibid.*

21. ⑥ Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 158, Aug 19, 1963.

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Indochina war, the French employed it for rooting out enemy bunkers and attacking fortified villages. While the Viet Minh quickly found ways to protect themselves, napalm's use continued because it could be released close to friendly positions, often within three hundred feet without danger. In addition, the flame burst lasted from one to two minutes, long enough to gain an objective before the enemy had time to react. However, the French were somewhat indiscriminate in its use, dropping nearly 3,750 tons in 1954. In the end, it became a symbol in Southeast Asia of the more barbarous combat tactics employed. Unger, while agreeing to stockpile the canisters and detonators at Udorn, intended expending them only after getting Souvanna's permission and then only in case of a flagrant attack.²²

That the T-28 pilots could dispense napalm properly was doubtful, since the USAF instructors at Kokotiem had not taught them how; and even though the Laotians could fly their new T-28s under normal, peacetime conditions, their skill and aggressiveness in combat remained questionable. The ability of the RLAf to coordinate operations with ground forces also was untested, due to the dearth of radio equipment and trained forward air guides. Still, there were some hopeful signs. Under Thao Ma's direction, an indigenous T-28 upgrading program had begun at Savannakhet. In spite of heavy rains, pilots logged fifty-two hours in the new fighter-bombers during August. Just three missions could be classified as combat, but the esprit shown by Thao Ma and his few pilots induced the embassy to ask for additional T-28s in the Military Assistance Program for fiscal year 1964.²³ Once the maintenance problems associated with this shakedown period were ironed out, Unger intended to request an RT-28 photo reconnaissance model. Interim photo coverage came from cameras installed in an RLAf C-47.²⁴

By the close of October, Thao Ma had sufficient confidence in his pilots to solicit Ambassador Unger for fuzed bombs. The RLAf chief planned to crater Route 7, seeking to hamper enemy supply activities directed against guerrilla operations on the Plain of Jars. The State Department was opposed and issued new and stiffer guidelines. Henceforth, the T-28s would be confined to answering clearly aggressive enemy actions of such intensity as to justify calling on air. Cratering Route 7 or working with guerrillas was considered escalation, but State was still willing to have the T-28s intercept and down any illegal North Vietnamese supply flights. Communist artillery firing at government positions could be attacked, provided FAR or neutralist artillery could not respond. Such reprisals must be immediate, however, so the enemy understood it was punitive. In all cases, Unger was to consult with Souvanna before acting.²⁵

Officials of the Defense Department believed these instructions were not only unrealistic, but slowed down the program approved by President Kennedy on July 30 (NSAM 256). Like Admiral Felt, Defense wanted Unger delegated certain authority so he would have the requisite flexibility to react instantly to any Pathet Lao threat. These views were presented at an interdepartmental meeting on October 31. State afterwards modified the ambassador's charter on the use of T-28s for defense and reprisal, allowing these aircraft to aid any RLG position under attack or support counterattacks to regain lost ground. The State Department, however, insisted Unger secure Washington's permission each time he wanted to release fuzes to the RLAf.²⁶

22. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 324, Sep 5, 1963; Col V. J. Croizat, USMC, Ret, *A Translation from the French: Lessons of the War in Indochina*, Vol 2 (RM-5271-PR, Santa Monica, 1967), p 344.

23. One of Thao Ma's associates later recounted: "I went to the same schools in France with Ma . . . we used to sleep in the same room. But after he began to fly the T-28, it was as if he did not know anyone at all, if he did not fly the T-28." [John C. Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force, 1954-1970* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1970), p 9.]

24. Msgs, USARMA Vientiane to DIA, 191225Z Aug 63, SECSTATE, 547, Oct 25, 1963; rpt, AIRA Vientiane, Semiannual FWAIS, Sep 12, 1963.

25. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 362, Oct 26, 1963.

26. Memo, Stephen A. Loftus, Actg Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to Dep ASD/ISA, subj: Interdepartmental Meeting on Laos, Oct 29, 1963; memo, Stephen A. Loftus, Actg Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to William P. Bundy, Dep

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① This stance threw into sharp focus the question of T-28 control and employment. Case-by-case referral to Washington for fuze release lengthened the critical reaction time and placed decisionmaking and control of tactical operations in the hands of men halfway around the world. It also put CINCPAC and the Defense Department on the ambassador's side, previously a rare occurrence in the history of American involvement in Laos. This did not mean that Unger was suddenly a "hawk." On the contrary, while chargé d'affaires in Bangkok, he had supported Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown's efforts as country team chief to control military operations in Laos. Now, as Brown's successor, he saw his authority over day-to-day operations slipping back to Washington, with a cumbersome, time-consuming, and self-defeating chain of command taking its place.

② On November 2, while the new T-28 guidelines were being drafted, the long-held Meo position at Tha Lin Noi fell to the Pathet Lao, apparently the first in a series of attacks on Meo and other government positions. On November 13, Unger again asked for advance authority under specific cases to release fuzes to the RLAF, as well as for a reprisal attack on Tha Lin Noi. He listed three categories for advance permission: missions already approved (such as immediate reprisals), defense of key points (whether FAR, neutralist, or Meo), and efforts to retake captured key positions (such as Tha Lin Noi). The targets would be limited strictly to anti-aircraft or artillery batteries in the area of action, to personnel concentrations, and to convoys clearly identified as participating in ground operations in combat areas. However, State's guidelines were not relaxed, and Unger did not secure the leeway he sought.²⁷

③ Meanwhile, the RLAF had a lot of trouble maintaining its T-28s. Unger hoped these problems would soon be resolved, but the signs were not promising. The Laotians were unable to perform satisfactory maintenance; and on several occasions, USAF Farm Gate personnel from South Vietnam were sent covertly to Savannakhet to repair the aircraft. Suddenly, two of the T-28s were lost in mid-November when young RLAF pilots attempted low-level acrobatics. Thao Ma then shifted two of the remaining planes to Vientiane for use on the Plain of Jars. The other two stayed at Savannakhet to work all of central and southern Laos. Strapped for aircraft, Thao Ma was forced to drop his T-28 training program and curtail proficiency flights. It was only a matter of time before many of the checked-out pilots would lose currency in the aircraft. To avoid this and to bring the RLAF back to its authorized inventory, Colonel Tyrrell recommended that the Thai be approached again for planes.²⁸

④ Tyrrell's counterpart in Bangkok, Col. Roland K. McCoskrie, believed the embassy would object to the proposal. The RTAF had furnished the first six T-28s and had not yet received replacements. McCoskrie knew that Graham A. Martin, the new Ambassador to Thailand, would ask the RTAF for two T-28s, but he also knew the Thai did not like furnishing a replacement pool for Laotian aircraft. He accordingly recommended the aircraft be drawn from the Cambodian Air Force. Otherwise, a USAF Special Air Warfare Center detachment should be sent from Eglin to Udorn with six to twelve T-28s for training both RLAF and RTAF air and ground personnel. As a bonus, the T-28s could readily augment the RLAF whenever necessary. McCoskrie had broached this idea to the RTAF chief in September 1962. No mention was made in that meeting of working with the Laotians, but the discussion did include using special air warfare (SAW) personnel to help train the three Thai composite squadrons. McCoskrie saw no

ASD/ISA, subj: Interdepartmental Meeting on Laos (31 Oct), Nov 1, 1963; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 081919L Nov 63.

27. ① Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130344Z Nov 63.

28. ② Intv, Capt Richard B. Clement and Lt Col Barry L. Bonwit, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Lt Col Drexel B. Cochran, Aug 20, 1969; msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 261035Z Nov 63; Fact Sheet, Capability of Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF), May 11, 1964, in CINCPACAF Gen Jacob E. Smart's Fact Bk II for SECDEF Mtg, May 13, 1964, Tab 7.

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reason why this could not be done for both countries and the detachment put under the air section in DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI.²⁹

By December, Admiral Felt had proposed that Defense Secretary McNamara give the green light to the deployment to Udom of four T-28s and between thirty and forty SAW personnel. Ambassador Unger had added his strong endorsement, being especially pleased with the inclusion of specialists in maintenance and armament. He trusted that the SAW personnel (known as air commandos) could deal with the "vexing and unresolved technical assistance problem." An added benefit the ambassador envisioned was the chance for continuous RLAF pilot training in association with American instructors. Working alongside the Thai would likewise remove any difficulties relating to the operation of RLAF T-28s over Thailand.³⁰

On January 3, 1964, Thailand's new prime minister, Thanom Kittikachorn (Sarit had died in December), and Air Chief Marshal Dawee Chunlasap (RTG Deputy Minister of Defense) authorized the transfer of two T-28s from the RTAF. To get them, Ambassador Martin promised that the original six T-28s, as well as these two, would be replaced by similar types by June 30. Dawee hinted that the new Northrup F-5 Freedom Fighter would be acceptable, although Martin deemed it best to discourage talk of jets.³¹

To meet Meo airlift needs, Unger had persuaded the FAR to make one C-46 available daily. The FAR had also committed itself to placing two C-47s and one liaison-type aircraft at the disposal of the neutralists. However, Ambassador Unger was running into troubles with the RLG's transport fleet. In the past few months, the Laotians had been given extra transports, either through lease or grant; and more transport pilots were available. With this in mind—and as a step designed to reduce activities that might cause the United States to be charged with violating the Geneva accords—Unger had cut back on Air America operations. To induce greater utilization of the government transports, he turned aside all FAR requests for such airlift. It did not work out that way, however.³²

Airlift operations were hamstrung by the absence of trained aerial port specialists and managers and the absence of a central organization to coordinate transport resources. Furthermore, the RLAF had tried to exercise exclusive control over some of the aircraft placed at the RLGAF's disposal by the United States. This had strained relations between Souvanna and Phoumi and resulted in a government transport effectiveness far below that of Air America. As a remedy, Unger suggested the creation of an air transport operations board composed of cargo plane owners and users. The board would screen flight requests and allocate priorities and space, generating better use of all transports and cooperation between the FAR and the neutralists. This system would be much better than the disarray that existed with attachés or AID people settling disputes by knocking heads together.³³

Souvanna said he would go along with whatever the ambassador decided, but he seized the opportunity to vent his growing concern over Air America. The airline's connection with the past fighting and its resupply missions to the Meo interfered with his attempts to get the Pathet Lao to return to Vientiane to again participate in the national government. Souvanna did not want Air America to close down but wondered if their operations could be transferred to a new American company. Under these circumstances, Unger thought it best to withdraw Air America. Its twenty-one transports would be turned over to a new airline "unsullied by pre-Geneva connections in Laos." It would pick up most of Air America's personnel, but Unger favored maximum use of non-Americans to reduce U.S. visibility. As the Laotians gained proficiency,

29. Msg, AIRA Bangkok to SECSTATE, 151511L Nov 63.

30. Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 285-86; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 161300Z Jan 64.

31. Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1795, Jan 4, 1964.

32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 271314L Nov 63.

33. *Ibid.*

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the airline would be phased out. The new company could be targeted for Pathet Lao propaganda, but it would not be handicapped by being connected with the past fighting. The State Department authorized the air transport operations board but was lukewarm to removing Air America. That idea was eventually dropped.³⁴

● In December 1963, Souvanna and the Pathet Lao signed a preliminary agreement on the neutralization and demilitarization of the royal capital at Luang Prabang. This accord encountered stout opposition from Phoumi, who demanded similar concessions (such as the neutralization of Sainneua and free movement within Pathet Lao territory). Backed by the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao refused and quickened military operations. Lak Sao and Kham Keut in central Laos fell to them in late December, and the FAR lost the Na Kay plateau on January 29, 1964.³⁵ All of Route 8 from Lak Sao to Nhommarath, including the Na Kay airfield, was now under Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese control. When enemy patrols were spotted less than sixteen miles from Thakhek, Colonel Law gloomily stated that little stood between them and the Mekong. In northern Laos, there were daily artillery exchanges. The long awaited-Meo/FAR drive to recapture Tha Lin Noi fizzled, and the perennial pessimistic view of FAR leadership and will to fight again appeared in embassy correspondence.³⁶

● In early February 1964, the U.S. Army General Staff pushed for implementation of some of the Phase II measures approved by President Kennedy. The Army wanted the American advisory role to the FAR and neutralists expanded beyond the handful of accredited attachés, and it endorsed the Air Staff position that the USAF resume reconnaissance of Laos. On February 24, the General Staff seconded Admiral Felt's proposal that the United States supply sanitized combat aircraft and American or third-country pilots to the RLAF. Their strikes on Pathet Lao concentrations and supply dumps, chiefly the logistic hub at Tchepone, could cripple communist support both in Laos and South Vietnam. The Army was sure these actions would clearly demonstrate U.S. resolve to stay in Southeast Asia. Though tabling the Army paper, the Joint Chiefs did recommend to Secretary McNamara that high-level and low-level photo reconnaissance of Laos be renewed.³⁷

● Even though all of the Army's paper was not accepted, a change of Southeast Asia strategy was in the offing. The new administration of Lyndon B. Johnson (following Kennedy's assassination) had finally settled in and was calling for a review of the "continued flagrant communist violations of the Geneva Accords." It was now obvious to Washington that the principal communist goal in Laos was to disrupt the operation of Souvanna's government. The United States favored the Geneva tripartite arrangement, but this goal was unattainable as long as the communists refused to cooperate politically and kept up their military pressure. Often labeled "talk-while-fighting," this strategy was adopted by the communists in Korea (and used by the North Vietnamese at Paris during 1968-72).³⁸

● On February 26, 1964, Secretary of State Rusk asked for Ambassador Unger's views on a proposed memo to President Johnson. In the memo, Rusk recommended expanded use of

34. *Ibid*; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 192013L Dec 63.

35. The T-28s flew forty-five sorties in the Thakhek region from January 13 to February 4, using 2.75-inch rockets and .50-caliber ammunition. Results were unknown. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130822Z Feb 64.]

36. *CIA Weekly Review*, Jan 10, 1964; CIA Intel Study 67-14, Laos, the Divided Nation, Jan 67; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A-224, subj: Recent Critical Developments on Laotian Military and Political Scene, Feb 19, 1964.

37. Talking Paper, USA GS, Situation in Laos, Feb 6, 1964; msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 231010Z Feb 64; Talking Paper, USA GS, Steps to Improve the Situation in Southeast Asia with Particular Reference to Laos, n.d., in JCS 2339/120, Feb 23, 1964.

38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris *et al*, Feb 29, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 664, Feb 26, 1964.

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T-28s, [redacted] and sabotage against the North Vietnamese. He also suggested larger Meo units, the resumption of South Vietnamese border patrols into Laos, and high-level USAF photo reconnaissance of the country. Rusk wanted Unger to gauge Phoumi's reaction to these measures.³⁹

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● Ambassador Unger's response rested on the premise that the United States intended to be bound by the Geneva accords and still wanted Laos neutral, with the main U.S. support going to Souvanna. Unger said the root problem was the Pathet Lao/NVA strategy of gradually nibbling away at government held territory. Washington could ill afford more erosion, and this included the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Yet, open American intervention would nullify Souvanna's goal of a neutral Laos removed from the East-West conflict. No doubt the prime minister shared the United States government's concern over Southeast Asia as a whole. On the other hand, he was unsympathetic to American actions in Laos being "coordinated with those regarding Thailand and South Vietnam." He concluded that if Laos ever became a battlefield, it would be hurt the most. As an old Laotian proverb noted, "When buffalo fight, only the ground suffers." Hence, Unger presumed the prince would thumb down any proposal to launch guerrillas from Laos into North Vietnam. At the same time, Phoumi would favor all these moves because his basic aim was to entangle the United States to the point of providing overt troop support.⁴⁰

● Turning to the FAR, Unger pointed out that whenever the United States contemplated stronger military actions in Laos, "we come up against the inescapable fact that friendly forces . . . are woefully weak and limited in their capabilities." He felt the Royal Army could hold its own with the Pathet Lao but could not stand up to the North Vietnamese or to Pathet Lao units that included NVA cadres. Something needed to be done to discourage the North Vietnamese from giving such support. An increase in F-100s might put them on warning, but it would do little else unless the United States was willing to intervene openly.⁴¹ Since Washington was not prepared to do this, the one hope Unger saw was greater use of the T-28s.⁴²

● Unfortunately, the RLAF was small, unversed in staff work, and deficient in individual skills. The caliber of the pilots ranged widely, from relatively well qualified to that of one barely out of training. None were current in gunnery, because the air arm was still without a gunnery range inside Laos. Thao Ma had not reinstated T-28 training, although he had received two T-28s from the RTAF and his inventory was back to six. In fact, few T-28 combat missions had been flown (none in the face of enemy antiaircraft fire), and the aggressiveness of the pilots continued untested. However, when the T-28s appeared, the morale of the friendly forces did go up and enemy's went down, even though the aircraft were limited to machineguns and rockets. FAR commanders quickly grasped this phenomenon and requested strikes far in excess of RLAF capabilities.⁴³

● This seemed to augur well for the RLAF; but in truth, ground commanders had no real grasp of how to properly use air power. Some observers attributed this to their former French training. Whatever the reason, it was evident that strike requests gave insufficient information about location, priority, troop disposition, or enemy AA capability. The FAR was not trained in forward air guide procedures, and army leaders turned a deaf ear to suggestions in these matters. Likewise, Thao Ma could not be persuaded to assign air liaison officers to FAR units, and the

39. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, Feb 26, 1964.

40. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 927, Mar 1, 1964.

41. [redacted] ASD/ISA William P. Bundy had been told (erroneously) that Rusk's memo included the introduction of U.S. ground forces, a move Bundy opposed. Bundy held that an air squadron alone would send the proper signal to Hanoi. [Memo, William P. Bundy to SECDEF, subj: Laos, Feb 28, 1964.]

42. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 927, Mar 1, 1964.

43. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 942, Mar 3, 1964; A-249, subj: Utilization of T-28 Aircraft, Mar 4, 1964.

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lack of a tactical air control net forced strike requests to labor up the military region chain of command to the RLAF. (The single exception was in MR III, where RLAF and military region headquarters were together.) Receipt and coordination of strike requests lagged to the point where the situation markedly changed before fighters took off—too often, the communists had melted back into the jungle. Finally, strike results were unknown because ground units rendered neither after action nor evaluation reports.⁴⁴

● Ambassador Unger stressed there would be no improvement in the RLAF until bombing restrictions were lifted. More important, the mandatory U.S. consultation, including Washington referral, entailed a delay that discouraged the RLAF from asking for the fuzes in expectation of being refused. Therefore, any upgrading of the strike air arm must be coupled with a loosening of the curbs imposed by Washington. As a start, a few bomb fuzes could be turned over to the Laotians on the understanding they were to be used solely for defensive purposes⁴⁵ and in consultation with the embassy. If the airmen showed "prudent and effective use" of the ordnance, it would be replenished. For a stronger punch to the strikes, Unger wanted the 500-pound bombs, but demurred on napalm since the Laotians could not deliver it properly. He also favored low-level reconnaissance but wanted all missions cleared by Souvanna through the embassy. No answer was given to the question of introducing U.S. or third-country pilots and aircraft.⁴⁶

● The ambassador underscored that, while the military measures in Rusk's memo might engender a gradual improvement in the RLG armed forces, they would not stop further gains by the Pathet Lao or seriously stem North Vietnamese support. Clearly, actions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail would merely provoke a stronger reaction from North Vietnam; and better armament, equipment, and relaxing the rules would not enable six T-28s to tip the scales in favor of the RLG. Nonetheless, Unger stressed that if President Johnson opted for expanding T-28 use, the Army attaché and the air attaché were set to assist in target selection, mission planning, and coordination. Furthermore, pilot proficiency should pick up once the SAW detachment got to Udom.⁴⁷

● The Air Force was convinced Ambassador Unger's response did not go far enough. General LeMay held that, even if heavier ordnance were inserted, far more than a meager six T-28s were needed to interdict roads or support ground forces. He thought the time had come to use Thai, Vietnamese, and U.S. forces to augment the RLAF. The Air Force chief especially wanted to hit the major supply lines running from North Vietnam. A memo from LeMay to the other members of the Joint Chiefs was withdrawn and revised, resurfacing later as a JCS memo to Secretary McNamara. This version assigned offensive and defensive roles to the RLAF and specified giving them napalm once their pilots were trained in delivery by the SAW detachment. The chiefs wanted the first priority in interdiction to be inbound convoys, with road cratering and bridge destruction secondary. Finally, T-28 reconnaissance should not be tried; at the least, that mission should be weighed against other missions of the planes. The chiefs believed the Air Force should furnish reconnaissance in most instances.⁴⁸

● On March 5, just a week before this JCS memo was sent to him, Secretary McNamara approved the assignment of a SAW T-28 detachment to Udom. (The Royal Laotian Government had approved the deployment on March 4.) The deployment was to be for six months or longer, depending on a later evaluation. The unit was officially designated Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, with the nickname Water Pump. Its job was to train RLAF pilots and

44. See note above.

45. Defined as reprisals for aggressive enemy actions and for interdiction aimed at preattack enemy buildups.

46. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 942, Mar 3, 1964.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Memo, Dir/Plans, USAF, to CSAF, subj: Concept of Employment of Royal Laotian Air Force, Mar 5, 1964; JCS 2344/76-1, Mar 11, 1964.

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mechanics; maintain the Laotian planes; supplement RLAf sorties, if required; and provide experienced planners to the air attaché at Vientiane, if needed. The detachment was also to be the air nucleus if any U.S. contingency plan for Laos was activated and would assist the Thai in their up-country civic action program. Although the unit was attached to the 2d Air Division in Saigon, it would carry out the training specified by Col. Jack G. Cornett, USA, the new DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI. In reality, the unit worked for Ambassador Unger.⁴⁹

Water Pump's commander was Maj. Drexel B. Cochran who, like most of his men, had served earlier with Farm Gate in South Vietnam. All the detachment's thirty-eight members were volunteers, including eight pilots and four crewchiefs and one prop, one engine, and four armament specialists. The group was highly skilled in all phases of T-28 operations. As part of their early commando training and tours with Farm Gate, many pilots had learned to perform the light aircraft maintenance associated with primitive, forward operating bases. Though some Water Pump personnel spoke French, they expected to train the Laotians through Thai interpreters. They were fully aware their students would have low levels of technical training. Eight days after receiving McNamara's approval, Water Pump personnel were on their way to Udom. At Saigon, the four disassembled T-28s were reassembled at Tan Son Nhut and ferried to Udom by the Water Pump pilots.⁵⁰

Due to funding problems, it was another six weeks before the first Laotian pilot came. While waiting, Cochran and his men updated facility charts by flying to all Thai airfields that could handle T-28s. With the cooperation of the Royal Thailand Army, the much-needed gunnery range was laid out on an exposed table rock ten miles southwest of Udom. Because no provision could be made for ground triangulation, a rudimentary method of air scoring was devised. The unit's flight surgeon began a medical civic action program for the local villages in northern Thailand, many still under communist influence or infiltration. The participation of the accompanying RTG member was spotlighted, with that of the Americans kept in the background. During this period, Cochran received several visits and inspections from Colonels Tyrrell and Cornett, Ambassadors Unger and Martin, and Maj. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, the 2d Air Division Commander. It was during one such visit that Moore reemphasized to Cochran the key role Ambassador Unger would play in Water Pump's operation.⁵¹

While the detachment was preparing to accept its first Laotian students, Thao Ma and Phoumi Nosavan requested Ambassador Unger to release fuzes for one-hundred-pound bombs. Thao Ma planned a T-28 attack on a strongly entrenched Pathet Lao position outside the village of Nong Boua. Lying in a traditional FAR area, this town fell in January to the Pathet Lao after six months of steady harassment. RLG troops were currently trying to retake and clear the area, but a fortified position held up the drive. T-28 rocket runs had not reduced it, and two fighters had been hit by antiaircraft fire. The fuzes were needed to support this effort.⁵²

After Phoumi had broached the subject to Souvanna and he went along, Unger asked Washington to authorize release of the bomb fuzes. The ambassador contended that the fall of Nong Boua was another clear case of Pathet Lao nibbling that should be stopped cold. His request met State Department criteria: the target was well within a FAR area and the bombing would bring retribution for enemy aggression, while concretely demonstrating that force would be met with force. Unger did not intend to release more than the four to six fuzes needed to do the job. He would not give in to further requests unless they seemed justified. This time Washington concurred. However, before the fuzes could be turned over to Thao Ma, the three

49. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 052053Z Mar 64, CINCPAC to JCS, 130443Z Mar 64, CSAF to TAC, AFXOP 98476, Mar 5, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

50. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 200854Z Mar 64.

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sides agreed to a tripartite meeting on the Plain of Jars. A cease-fire was again declared and the T-28s were relegated to flying reconnaissance.⁵³ Notwithstanding, a significant and fundamental change in American policy toward Laos had occurred—Washington was no longer willing to overlook Pathet Lao attacks on government positions. Bomb fuzes would be furnished if friendly forces were counterattacking to regain lost ground or the T-28s were flying a reprisal mission. Employment of T-28s as bombers was no longer deemed escalation.

The Plain of Jars meeting (April 18) ended in sharp disagreement when the Pathet Lao insisted on the demilitarization and neutralization of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. After flying back to Vientiane, a disappointed Souvanna Phouma decided to resign as prime minister. King Savang Vatthana, however, said he would not act on the resignation until the next day. That night, Siho Lamphouthacoul's DNC troops closed Wattay Airfield and set up numerous checkpoints in Vientiane and at all entrances to the capital.⁵⁴ By eight in the morning on April 19, the "Revolutionary Committee of the National Army" (about seventy to seventy-five FAR officers) had arrested Souvanna and General Amkha and taken over the government. For several months, there had been many proposals, even threats, by the rightists to do away with the Government of National Union. Feeling that Souvanna had not put enough pressure on the ICC to investigate Pathet Lao nibbling, the Laotian military was fed up with flagrant enemy violations of the Geneva accords, a sentiment felt by many anticommunist Laotians. The commander of Military Region V, Kouprasith Abhay, was announced as the committee's head with Siho as his deputy. Thao Ma was also named an assistant and Bounleuth Sanichan an "advisor." The T-28 force was reported on alert, the pilots sleeping in tents beside their planes. Kong Le, who had been slowly losing power to Amkha Soukhavong, was rumored to be ready to throw in his lot with the coup leaders.⁵⁵

At the time, Ambassador Unger was meeting in Saigon with Secretary Rusk, the Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, and the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William P. Bundy.⁵⁶ Accompanied by Bundy, Unger flew back to Vientiane that afternoon. In no uncertain terms, he told Kouprasith and Siho that the United States supported Souvanna, the Government of National Union, and the 1962 Geneva accords. He advised them to release Souvanna, Amkha, and other officials. A public announcement should follow in which the generals would say they acted only because Souvanna's intention to resign had caused them concern for the nation's security. Now that the Laotian ship of state was back on course, Unger continued, the question of Souvanna's resignation would be handled in a constitutional manner. Kouprasith and Siho, taken aback by Unger's strong remarks, could merely nod their agreement. Unger noted that throughout the conversation the two Laotian generals "gave the impression of badly frightened little boys who now realize they have climbed far out on the limb and are uncertain how to proceed." Bundy was more graphic; it appeared to him that they had "stepped in it" and were now hoping to save face.⁵⁷

53. *Ibid*; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 773, Mar 20, 1964.

54. By 1964, the Directorate of National Coordination (DNC) resembled a combined military intelligence, CIA, FBI, immigration service, and civil police organization. It was run by Phoumi through Siho to maintain the former's political power and position. Included in the DNC were three paratroop battalions called border security battalions—actually Phoumi's private army. Total strength was sixty-five hundred men. [Msg, USARMA Vientiane to DA, 160550Z Apr 64.]

55. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 190222Z Apr 64, ARMA Vientiane to DA, 190530Z Apr 64, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, date blurred.

56. President Johnson had shifted Bundy from his previous post of Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

57. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 191658Z Apr 64, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, A-961, subj: Conversation between Assistant Secretary Bundy and Foreign Minister Thanat in Regard to Laotian Situation, Apr 24, 1964.

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④ Bundy and Unger then went to see Phoumi, who professed disgust at what Kouprasith and Siho had done, and heaped most of the blame on the latter. He agreed to see the two generals and restore the government to what it was before the coup. Apparently, Phoumi was not an instigator of the plot, although he was probably not unhappy about it. His dislike for the Geneva accords was well known and he had often expressed his preference for the MAAG's return. Thus, the coup gave Phoumi the chance to sit back and not take the blame, or to cash in if it turned to his liking. Since a majority of the FAR's senior commanders still backed him, Phoumi could probably have stepped in if Souvanna had quit. Moreover, if the prime minister's resignation had prompted a Pathet Lao offensive, Phoumi believed his accession to power would have forced the blessing of the U.S., British, and French governments.⁵⁸

④ Nevertheless, Phoumi kept his promise—Souvanna, Amkha, and other neutralists were released. The next day, Souvanna flew to Luang Prabang with Phoumi and Assembly President Oun Sananikone, who was a relative of Kouprasith. The coalition government was soon back in business but not before Souvanna agreed to reorganize the armed forces into a single group. He also promised to appoint successors to the assassinated Quinim and the absent Pathet Lao members of the government.⁵⁹

④ With the prime minister moving further away from their ideological position, the Pathet Lao decided to deploy more forces into the Plain of Jars. Two significant events simplified their takeover of the area. Shortly after the April 19 coup, while the revolutionary committee controlled the radios of Vientiane, an order went out to GM 17 to move to the capital. Two infantry battalions of this force were defending a row of small but strategic hills cutting across the northern part of the plain. This line, never of real strength, depth, or firepower, was further weakened. Almost simultaneously with the withdrawal order, the Pathet Lao began an artillery shelling of the area. It was never determined if this was a repetition of the harassing fire that had been going on for several months or was for the purpose of preparing an assault. Regardless, GM 17 withdrew and the ground was immediately occupied by the enemy. When Maj. Gen. Khamkong Vongnarath, commander of Military Region II, learned of the withdrawal order, he countermanded it. By this time, however, GM 17 was in no mood to fight, its discipline having faded away. This gave the communists control of Phou San, a strategic hill overlooking Route 7. From this vantage point, they could use their artillery to interdict any supplies moving up to Kong Le's headquarters at Muong Phan.⁶⁰

④ The second event was also tied to the April 19 coup. When Lt. Col. Cheng Saignavong, the commander of Kong Le's 4th Paratroop Battalion, learned of the coup and subsequent arrest of Souvanna and Amkha, he contacted the Pathet Lao. Although Cheng did not go over to the communists, his men began to openly collaborate with them. This was an ominous sign since Cheng controlled the town of Tha Thom, the southern anchor of Kong Le's defense line. His soldiers also occupied the dominant terrain in the Plain of Jars. As the days went by, a subtle tug-of-war evolved between Kong Le and the Pathet Lao for Cheng's loyalty. When Cheng discovered the military reorganization that Souvanna had agreed to in Vientiane, he grew more rebellious. On the night of May 13/14, he and Kong Le's armor commander, Lt. Col. Soulideth Rattanakone, threatened a coup against Kong Le. Souvanna at once flew to the plain to smooth things over but met with an ultimatum—reorganize the neutralist forces and restructure the command to weed out the worthless, weak, and right-leaning officers. Playing for time, Souvanna

58. See note above; msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 3530, May 6, 1964.

59. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 200419Z Apr 64, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris, 1614, Apr 21, 1964.

60. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 281642Z Apr 64, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-188, Apr 30, 1964, 150620Z May 64, 170530Z May 64, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 10278, Jun 11, 1964; PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest 22-64, May 29, 1964.

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agreed. Thus, while the neutralists were torn between recrimination and distrust, the communists attacked on May 16. Significantly, Cheng fought the invaders but was killed in action. Soulideth, however, refused to obey Kong Le's orders. Plans called for his Russian-built PT-76 tanks to counterattack the northern flank of the penetration. Instead they remained in their tank park, content to lob a few rounds in the general direction of the Pathet Lao advance.⁶¹

● Few neutralists units gave a good account of themselves; most fled in panic to the western fringe of the Plain of Jars. The huge store of supplies, painstakingly stockpiled for the upcoming rainy season, was largely abandoned. The neutralists now regrouped at Muong Soui, a small village straddling Route 7 at the plain's western edge. If it were lost, the neutralist army might well be finished.⁶²

● As soon as he learned of the neutralist retreat, Ambassador Unger requested Souvanna's permission to fuze the RLAF's one-hundred-pound bombs. Since one of Water Pump's missions was to augment the RLAF in an emergency, Unger also asked his consent to fly the American pilots in Laotian-marked T-28s. Seeing the situation on the plain was grave, Souvanna accepted both proposals, but said he wished target selection done jointly by Amkha and Thao Ma. Unger then instructed Cochran (through Tyrrell) to start sheep-dipping his flyers. If the first air strikes were successful, Unger intended to ask Souvanna to allow fuzing of the five-hundred-pound bombs stored at Udom (Washington had given Unger permission that day to introduce and use these larger bombs). Eagerly anticipating combat, the air commandos spent the entire night of May 17/18 sanitizing their T-28s, painting on Laotian markings and changing the tail numbers.⁶³

● Secretary Rusk threw cold water on the use of USAF pilots, citing excessive risks. If it desired, the embassy could turn over Water Pump's T-28s to the RLAF, and the Joint Chiefs had alerted CINCPAC to this possibility. However, in view of the combat experience of the Laotian pilots, Rusk thought it better for the Thai to furnish the extra pilots. The embassy in Bangkok was told to ask the Royal Thailand Government for them and for approval to fly out of Udom. Ambassador Unger was also to secure Souvanna's assent to a series of low-level U.S. jet reconnaissance missions covering the Paksane-Tha Thom road and key areas in the Plain of Jars.⁶⁴

● Souvanna opposed the jet reconnaissance flights on the grounds they would be exploited by the communists as direct U.S. intervention and would seriously undermine behind-the-scenes diplomatic actions to have the Pathet Lao return to their previous positions. Unger supported Souvanna and injected a new twist: Jet reconnaissance flights, unaccompanied by air strikes, would depress rather than boost the morale of government troops. He hinted Souvanna might approve the reconnaissance flights (despite his past statements) if they were accompanied by Thai or U.S. air strikes. The ambassador also implied Washington was fooling itself if it did not recognize that reconnaissance missions would inevitably suffer the same political/propaganda repercussions as offensive air attacks but would not achieve any tactical success. Finally, Unger failed to understand why his superiors refused to allow American pilots in T-28s while endorsing reconnaissance flights using U.S. pilots and planes. Either way entailed risk—and the military value of the T-28s far outweighed the risk.⁶⁵

● While Washington pondered Unger's communique, the ambassador decided to hand over Water Pump's four T-28s to the RLAF. Bombs could not be loaded at Udom, since prior

61. ● PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest 22-64, May 29, 1964; msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, et al, 10278, Jun 11, 1964; Talking Paper, JCS, Laos, May 17, 1964; CIA Intelligence Summary 67-14, Jan 67.

62. ● PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest 22-64, May 29, 1964.

63. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1329, May 17, 1964; SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1007, May 17, 1964; JCS to CINCPAC, 6345, May 17, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

64. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, et al, May 17, 1964.

65. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180505Z May 64.

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clearances allowing RLAf planes to land in Thailand applied solely to maintenance flights. Ambassador Martin suggested an Air America C-47 be sent to Udorn to pick up the bombs and hoists, returning them to Wattay where the ordnance would be loaded. Unger concurred and, to speed the arming, sanctioned the move of five USAF technicians to Wattay. Because this violated the Geneva accords, the five were given civilian identification and thoroughly briefed on the need to keep that cover.⁶⁶

On May 18, Thao Ma and his flyers arrived at Udorn to take over the four T-28s, much to the disappointment of the USAF air commandos who had anticipated combat in Laos. That afternoon, the RLAf T-28s flew four missions of three aircraft against enemy positions on the Plain of Jars. Twenty-four one-hundred-pound and twelve five-hundred-pound bombs were dropped, mostly on the supplies and material left behind by Kong Le's soldiers. In spite of the air attaché's suggestion that the T-28s strafe after each bombing run, only one pass was made on each target.⁶⁷

Late that evening, a transpacific telephone conference was held between high-ranking administration officials and Ambassador Unger. The Washington participants included Bundy and Sullivan of the State Department; John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA; William E. Colby, CIA; and Brig. Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Dir/J-3 (Ops), JCS. While it was late evening in Vientiane, it was midmorning in Washington. Such conference calls were rare, underlining the urgency these officials viewed the topics discussed. Speaking for the group, Bundy again stated that U.S. military personnel were not permitted to fly RLAf T-28s in combat—it was too risky. If there were enough T-28 qualified Air America pilots, thought should be given to using them. Though skeptical over the difference a handful of T-28s would make, Washington was willing to turn the four Water Pump planes over to the RLAf. If needed, more fighters could be procured from the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), currently converting from the T-28 to the A-1. Lastly, Washington was willing to weigh a shift of USAF personnel to Vientiane to assist in ordnance loading.⁶⁸

Unger replied that the four Water Pump T-28s were now in Laotian hands and had flown several missions that day. He told them he had earlier dispatched five USAF armament specialists to Wattay under civilian cover. Seven Air America pilots had previous T-28 experience, and three more could be provided by Bird and Sons, another civilian contract airline.⁶⁹ All needed minor refresher training and checkouts that could easily be handled by Water Pump. If this road were taken, ten additional T-28s would have to be shipped in. Still, Unger did not see how this choice was "any more secure or gets us any less dirty vis-a-vis the Geneva Accords" than using USAF personnel. However, if Washington wanted to substitute Air America pilots, he believed Souvanna would go along.⁷⁰

Turning to reconnaissance, the group wanted Unger to press Souvanna to authorize continuing low-level jet flights. Such missions would pinpoint potential RLAf targets along the Paksane-Plain of Jars axis. Then, too, they would uplift FAR morale, particularly when flown in partnership with the T-28s as Unger had proposed. The prime minister should be reminded

66. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1338, May 17, 1964, 1350, May 18, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok to AmEmb Vientiane, 308, May 17, 1964.

67. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1350, May 18, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 181800Z May 64.

68. Msg, Washington to Vientiane (telecon), 181600Z May 64.

69. Bird and Sons' contract was with the Royal Laotian Government, not with the Agency for International Development that had Air America's. Bird did not possess cargo carriers like the C-46 or C-47. It relied on the smaller Helio Courier and Pilatus Porter aircraft that were better suited for short-takeoff-and-landing airfields. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011237Z Aug 63.]

70. Msg, Washington to Vientiane (telecon), 181600Z May 64.; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1362, May 19, 1964.

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that aerial reconnaissance was a noncombat operation that could furnish him facts he could no longer get through the ICC. Unger should be aware—but not tell Souvanna—that this afforded a golden opportunity to route the planes over the Ho Chi Minh Trail on their way north. The need for pictures of the infiltration net into South Vietnam was termed acute. Bundy also wanted to know if it mattered whether Air Force RF-101s or Navy AD-3s did the job.⁷¹

Unger was still unenthusiastic about the aerial reconnaissance proposal, yet was willing to give it another try with Souvanna. Since the chief motive for this reconnaissance was to photograph the Ho Chi Minh Trail, not to detect enemy forces on the Plain of Jars, Unger stressed that these aircraft would have no real value for the prime minister and could have severe repercussions for him if the Pathet Lao publicly protested. He promised to do his best, asserting that even if Souvanna acquiesced, “he won’t like it.” As far as aircraft went, the ambassador had no preference.⁷²

To save time, the Joint Chiefs directed Admiral Felt to transfer five T-28s and five RT-28s, with full armament and camera systems, from South Vietnam to Udom. The former VNAF aircraft were to be repainted with Laotian markings, but Cochran would not turn them over to the RLG until told to do so by Ambassador Unger. Checkouts of Air America pilots in the T-28s were also authorized. In addition, Able Mable at Tan Son Nhut and U.S. naval units operating off Vietnam were alerted to be prepared to fly reconnaissance missions over Laos the following day.⁷³

Early the next morning (May 19, 1964), Unger again broached the jet reconnaissance question to Souvanna. As instructed, he made no mention of flights in the Laotian corridor. He later reported that the prime minister “looked somewhat troubled” but after some thought said, “If they insist, I would not oppose, but they must take full responsibility.” Souvanna did not comment on the point that these aircraft, albeit American, would not be engaged in combat. He expressed little enthusiasm for U.S. civilian pilots in T-28s and vetoed outright the proposal that Thai pilots with civilian Laotian papers fly the planes. Consequently, Unger asked Washington to hold up the reconnaissance until he could assess T-28 results and the possibility of using the RT-28s coming from South Vietnam.⁷⁴

The flights were not held up—once Souvanna’s permission was in hand, Washington wasted no time in launching the alerted reconnaissance aircraft. That same day, Able Mable RF-101s flew low-level “show of force” missions along the Laotian panhandle (reconnaissance over North Vietnam or west of 105° E was forbidden). The State Department announced that the flights were justified because of the long-standing refusal of the communists to permit ICC inspection of their territory. The photos, however, did not disclose any targets worth striking.⁷⁵

That evening, Unger and chargé Chadboum dined with Souvanna and other Western diplomats. To their surprise, Souvanna began speaking “in stinging terms” of a Pathet Lao betrayal and the losses recently suffered by neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars. Apparently, he had just received a message from Souphanouvong denying any Pathet Lao role whatsoever in the recent fighting, and his other diplomatic undertakings had not borne fruit. Earlier in the day, the Soviet ambassador had told him that his country was washing its hands of Laos and would not

71. See note 68.

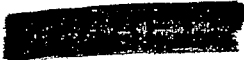
72. See note 68.

73. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 6379, May 19, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269.

74. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1355, May 19, 1964.

75. Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269; 1st Lt Robert L. McNaughton, *Yankee Team, May 1964–June 1965* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 2. Apparently these pictures were of so little value that COMUSMACV neglected to send them to Vientiane. Unger quickly made it known that he expected all prints to be sent to the embassy for interpretation. [Msg, retransmitted by JCS to White House and SECSTATE, 210819Z May 64.]

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pressure the Pathet Lao to return to Vientiane or to their former positions on the plain. Several times Souvanna said it seemed to him that force was all that was left. He became so distraught that he pointedly asked Unger what was the United States waiting for. Why didn't it bomb North Vietnam and communist China? The ambassador countered with the proposal to augment the RLAF with additional T-28s flown by American [redacted] pilots. Souvanna unhesitatingly approved.⁷⁶

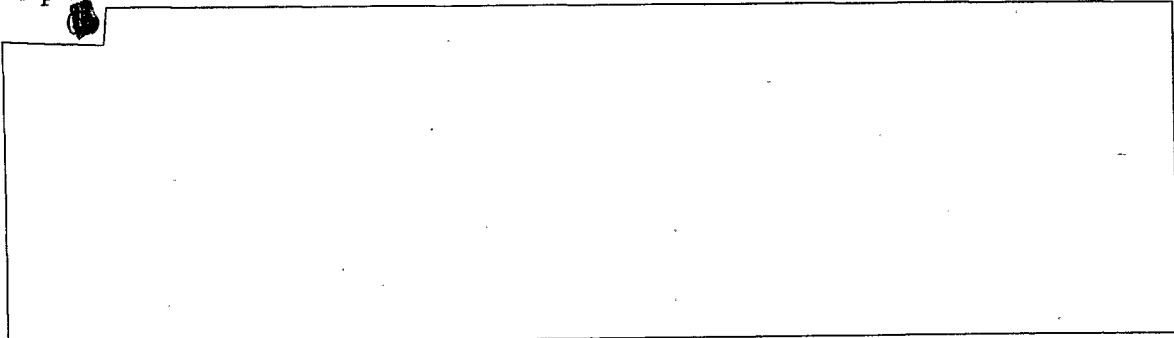
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Owing to the prime minister's attitude change and his own conviction that it would take a concrete show of force to dissuade the communists, Unger now withdrew any previous reservations or objections to low-level jet reconnaissance. In fact, embassy attachés would soon forward to CINCPAC priority areas to be photographed. Until the T-28s could mount follow-up strikes, however, Unger wanted no reconnaissance. Washington did not heed the ambassador's wishes, and another effort was mounted the next day by Able Mable and U.S. Navy RF-8As from the USS *Kitty Hawk*. Again, there was little significant photography.⁷⁷

By this time, Kong Le's situation was considered so critical that reconnaissance was scheduled for May 21 over the Plain of Jars and the roads leading to it from North Vietnam. Pathet Lao forces were reported west of the new neutralist headquarters at Muong Soui near the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. If Muong Soui were lost, the neutralist army for all practical purposes would disappear and the neutralist political party would probably end as well. The Pathet Lao would likely wind up controlling all of northern Laos. The ambassador saw the small T-28 force as the one effective deterrent to a communist takeover of the area.⁷⁸

Time was now urgent. Almost from the minute the first group of former VNAF T-28s touched down at Udon on May 20, Water Pump personnel began training the five Air America pilots Unger selected. In light of their past experience in fighters (all were former U.S. servicemen), just a minimum checkout in the T-28 and a few passes over the practice bombing range were given. By May 23, the pilots were judged operationally capable but with varying degrees of proficiency in ordnance delivery. To reduce exposure, the crews and aircraft would stay overnight at Udon in place of Vientiane. Each morning, the unarmed T-28s would fly to Wattay for refueling and ordnance loading by Water Pump specialists. A rudimentary air operations center (AOC) was set up in a rice warehouse belonging to Air America to provide centralized control of the augmented air resources. The pilots were briefed at the AOC by the air commandos on the targets furnished by the air attaché and the Controlled American Source representative.⁷⁹



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76. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1368, 1369, May 20, 1964.

77. Msgs, AmEmb to SECSTATE, 1370, 1373, May 20, 1964; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269; McNaughton, p

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78. Kenneth Sams, *Escalation of the War in Southeast Asia, July-December 1964* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1965), p 3; msg, CJCS to CINCPAC, 201653Z May 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 211314Z May 64.

79. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1034, May 20, 1964.

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On May 21 and 22, reconnaissance was flown over the Plain of Jars, apparently with good results. Kong Le commented on the upsurge in morale when his troops first detected the RF-101s dipping low over their positions. A U.S. observer at the scene said the neutralists literally jumped up and down with joy when they saw the USAF planes. The battlefield reverted to calm the next day, but on the 24th the Pathet Lao resumed pressuring Kong Le. The neutralist general was rumored ready to abandon Muong Soui and retreat into the surrounding hills. With two T-28s down for maintenance, the RLAf only had four available. Souvanna phoned Ambassador Unger, seeking to help Kong Le with air strikes. Unger explained that [redacted]

[redacted] to do anything quickly, he would have to use Air America personnel. Souvanna hesitated. After his dinner with Unger on May 19, he began to have doubts about letting these pilots fly Laotians T-28s. Even so, the desperate conditions at Muong Soui impelled him to approve the use of American pilots.⁸¹

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The following day, the Air America pilots flew ten sorties, mostly armed reconnaissance along Route 7 in the Plain of Jars. The road was cratered in several spots, but attempts to create rock slides and destroy bridges with five-hundred-pound bombs proved fruitless. Unger, present at Wattay when the afternoon sorties touched down, was distressed when he saw the numerous bullet holes in the T-28s. Antiaircraft fire, apparently unknown to the crews, had spattered several of the planes during their bombing/strafing runs. This led Unger to stop the use of Air America pilots. He feared not only the loss of T-28s and crews but exposure of such combat operations to the press, ICC, and other embassies. From his Wattay visit, the ambassador concluded that in the long run it would be most difficult to keep these activities secret.⁸² He also temporarily closed the AOC.⁸³

Now, and apparently without touching base with Colonel Law, his Army attaché, Ambassador Unger called for limited U.S. Army intervention to restore conditions on the Plain of Jars to what they were before May 16. The ambassador envisioned a short campaign; once the neutralists were back in control of the area, the U.S. troops would withdraw. He likened this action to that taken by President Eisenhower in Lebanon during 1958. Unger frankly admitted that the enemy could escalate or hit another area; Souvanna might not see it through; and the enemy would reoccupy the Plain of Jars immediately after the U.S. forces withdrew. Nevertheless, he believed that unless such action took place, neutralism would be destroyed as a force that could stand up to the communists and bring peace to Laos.⁸⁴

80. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1971, May 21, 1964, 1998, May 22, 1964; AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1382, May 21, 1964; MSgt Robert T. Helmka and TSgt Beverly Hale, *USAF Operations from Thailand, 1964-1965* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 31.

81. Msgs, ARMA-Vientiane to DA, CX-233, May 22, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 221207Z May 64, 240956Z May 64; memo, Richard M. Helms, Dep Dir/Plans, CIA, to McGeorge Bundy, Jr., Gen Maxwell D. Taylor, USA, William P. Bundy, John T. McNaughton, and Brig Gen Lucius D. Clay, Jr., subj: [redacted] Assessment of Situation in Plain of Jars and Immediate Requirement to Bolster Friendly Forces in Laos, May 23, 1964.

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82. If queried by the press, Unger intended denying U.S. pilots ever took part in such actions. This would follow the desires of Souvanna who, only a few days before, had suggested Unger do as he did: say nothing. In this respect he was merely copying the communists—"They don't say anything or when they do, they lie." [Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1442, Mar 27, 1964, and 221207Z May 64.] The State Department cautioned against issuing a flat denial because someday the facts might be known and embassy credibility would suffer. If it ever became known (and State thought that highly unlikely), Souvanna could issue a statement saying the gravity of the situation on the Plain of Jars forced the RLG to contract temporarily the services of a few civilian pilots. Then, at his discretion, Unger could confirm that the foreigners hired were Americans. [Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1093, May 28, 1964.]

83. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1442, May 27, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

84. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1430, May 25, 1964 [retransmitted by SECSTATE to White House (McGeorge Bundy), 260053Z May 64].

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Air Power Backs Up the New U.S. Strategy

① The Army General Staff strongly opposed a ground intervention in Laos, contending that "Ambassador Unger is looking for a cheap solution to a big problem, and his recommendation will not achieve significant results, either psychological or military." The operation was neither feasible nor similar to the troop landings in Lebanon. Tactically, the enemy controlled the high ground surrounding the Plain of Jars, much like the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Complicating matters was the onset of the rainy season, and the plain would soon be a big mud hole. Any intervening force needed land lines of communication, but these were controlled by the enemy, who had the added advantage of interior lines. Though air supply was possible, there were no suitable airfields and considerable airlift would be required. Weather and enemy antiaircraft guns were another factor. Finally, U.S. troops on the Plain of Jars would likely trigger both a North Vietnamese and a Chinese communist reaction, as in Korea. If it had to intervene, the Army favored activating CINCPAC OPlan 32-64, which was designed for just the type of contingency Unger thought the United States faced. Better still, allow the Air Force to attack North Vietnam. This would send a signal to Hanoi while striking "at the heart of the PL/NVA political base that is directing these efforts." The Army concluded by calling for a revision of U.S. political objectives in Southeast Asia in lieu of a limited military operation designed to show support for a neutral Laos. It seemed to the General Staff, that for the past two years, American policy had failed to keep Laos neutral or do much to deter communist aggression throughout Southeast Asia. When Colonel Law's message supporting the Army's position reached Washington, Unger's plan for ground intervention was shelved.⁸⁵ This meant that once more, somehow, air power would have to do the job.

② Attention now focused on introducing into Laos a SAW unit similar to the Farm Gate detachment in South Vietnam. Admiral Felt disliked the idea, noting that, since Farm Gate's deployment to Bien Hoa in November 1961, it had come to mean different things to different people. At first, it was to train VNAF pilots and maintenance personnel in the T-28. Yet, combat missions were authorized, if the VNAF lacked the necessary training and equipment to conduct the mission and the flight was confined to South Vietnam. To lend a training cover to the combat strikes, a combined USAF/VNAF crew was needed. Felt presumed these rules would apply to any Laos Farm Gate operation. If so, indigenous crews would severely limit the unit's success. The undermanned RLAF had but twenty-three pilots to fly twenty T-28s and RT-28s, thirteen C-47s, and eight liaison aircraft. The Air America pilots would help relieve the strain, but Unger had halted their flying T-28s. Felt also commented that enemy antiaircraft was far more sophisticated in Laos than in South Vietnam and, sooner or later, Washington could expect an American crew to be shot down. Fear of this had induced Unger to cease using the Air America pilots. The ambassador had likewise ended all American activity at Wattay in the belief it could not be kept secret for very long. The same logic applied to placing a USAF unit there. Consequently, Felt recommended against a Farm Gate detachment for Laos, voicing strong support for overt operations with modern aircraft. Like the plan for U.S. Army intervention, the Farm Gate proposal was quickly dropped.⁸⁶

③ American hopes were now pinned on the four RLAF T-28s Thao Ma kept at Vientiane

Water Pump instructor pilots swiftly discovered that

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85. Memo, Brig Gen John C. F. Tillson III, USA, Dir/Ops, to DCS/Mil Ops, USA, subj: Analysis of Message in DA IN 300175, May 27, 1964; msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA ARMA, CINCPAC, CX-248, May 29, 1964.

86. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 021615Z Jun 64.

87. Six T-28s were stationed at Savannakhet for operations in southern Laos. During May 17-31, 135 T-28 sorties were flown, but just 36 were in northern Laos. Most of these were used to destroy supplies left behind by Kong Le. [Msg, USARMA and USAIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 10278, Jun 11, 1964.]



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their students were well versed in day formation flying, but "it took almost . . . direction from [redacted] to get one to turn a prop when there were many clouds in the sky or if it was getting dark. None could fly by instruments and only a handful had flown cross-country navigation legs or dispensed live ordnance. Therefore, the [redacted] program exceeded Air America T-28 training but was less than that needed by RLAF pilots. It included ordnance delivery and night instrument flying. Five pilots were released for combat by June 1 and the remainder one week later. Two of the less proficient flyers were also trained in photo reconnaissance.⁸⁸

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● Ambassador Unger now reopened the Wattay AOC. The procedure that had been started with the Air America pilots was followed [redacted]

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[redacted] where they were armed and refueled. The pilots were briefed on targets furnished initially by the FAR general staff. If the mission entailed close air support, Lao or Meo observers were usually supplied. Each pilot flew a morning and afternoon sortie [redacted]

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The Water Pump personnel (two officers, ten enlisted men) stayed in [redacted] Vientiane in quarters furnished by the embassy, [redacted]⁸⁹

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● Most of the targets struck by the [redacted] pilots between June 1-5 were along Route 7 east of the Plain of Jars.⁹⁰ The road was cratered in several places and one wooden bridge was reported destroyed. The RLAF pilots supported the neutralists west and northwest of the plain, flying eighty-eight sorties on thirty-two missions. No damage was reported, although forty-four 500-pound high-explosive and sixteen 250-pound fragmentation bombs were dropped. Following the bombing missions, Kong Le had not been completely pushed off the Plain of Jars and the communist attacks subsided. From the evidence, however, it appeared the monsoon rains had stopped them rather than the sprinkling of T-28s.⁹¹

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● What was becoming obvious was the embassy's growing dependency on air to curb the communists or at least to make them think twice before taking further aggressive action. This trend had been growing for the past two years, ever since the MAAG withdrew. Still, air power was not a panacea. As the Army General Staff pointed out to Billy Mitchell and his followers in the 1920s, air power could not gain, hold, or occupy terrain; only ground forces could do this. However, air power was all the embassy or the Royal Laotian Government had; and without a MAAG to work in the country with the FAR and neutralist armies, it was clear that little could be expected of them. In fact, the longstanding axiom that government forces could hold their own against Pathet Lao units without NVA cadres was now questionable. Pure Pathet Lao units did defeat, almost at will, government forces. The latter's esprit, motivation, and willingness to fight seemed as elusive as before. The answer did not lie in more material assistance because government troops were already better equipped than the Pathet Lao. Deploying U.S. ground forces to the Plain of Jars might have restored the status quo, but the stakes were too high. During the ensuing years, more and more dependence would be placed by the embassy and RLG on Vang Pao's Meo, [redacted] and on air power to hold government territory, stop communist advances, and even go on the offensive.

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88. Rprt, AIRA Bangkok, Capability of RTAF Pilots, DIA 1895011164, Jul 28, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; Sams, *Escalation of the War in Southeast Asia, July-December 1964*, pp 171-72.
89. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA CIIC, 260935Z Jun 64.
90. Bad weather grounded the Thai pilots for two of the five days.
91. Msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, et al, 10278, Jun 11, 1964.

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Chapter V

The Pace Quickens: Summer 1964 (U)

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While [redacted] and Laotian T-28 pilots flew intermittent air strikes in northern and central Laos, Air Force and Navy reconnaissance crews zigzagged across the country. The effort was only four days old when Admiral Felt complained that parceling out the missions one day at a time prevented proper sortie planning. He further implied that Washington was over controlling; field commanders were better placed to make proper military decisions than others thousands of miles away. Even though the Joint Chiefs may have agreed with Felt, there was too much high-level interest in the reconnaissance to allow CINCPAC much leeway. Nevertheless, on May 25, 1964, the operating rules for the missions—now christened Yankee Team—were relaxed a bit. Felt could schedule and launch them on a continuing basis, including occasional ones for night and infrared photography. Except in unusual circumstances, such as situations demanding quick action, he submitted all scheduled sorties to Washington thirty-six hours in advance. The information submitted included target description, reasons for the mission, and specific justification if the sortie rate exceeded nine aircraft in any twenty-four hours. Unless he was told to modify or cancel a sortie, the missions went as planned.¹

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The Joint Chiefs of Staff specified 2d Air Division as the coordinating agency for all reconnaissance; and General Moore, 2d Air Division Commander, immediately set up a Yankee Team command post in his headquarters. An Air Force officer was sent to the USS *Kitty Hawk*, and, in turn, Rear Adm. William F. Bringle (TG 77.4 commander) detailed a captain, two lieutenants, and two yeomen to the Navy liaison office in the command post. For planning purposes, Moore assigned the Navy all missions north of 18° 30'. Thus, the Navy handled the reconnaissance in northern Laos, and that in the south or panhandle fell to the Air Force.²

The overall thrust of Yankee Team's several tasks was to show U.S. willingness to match escalating moves in Laos. The flights hoped to document Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese violations of the Geneva accords for later use by the Royal Laotian Government and the International Control Commission. It was this phase of the operation that State Department briefers played up to the press and that later embarrassed Unger. The reconnaissance missions supported requests from the air attaché and Army attaché at Vientiane for pictures of enemy supply dumps, bivouac areas, transportation convoys, and possible road interdiction points in northern and central Laos. These photos were used to develop potential targets for T-28 strikes. Another Yankee Team task—the most significant for U.S. military planners—was the gathering of intelligence on enemy construction and infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail leading into Cambodia and South Vietnam, but these flights did not have the specific approval of Souvanna Phouma. Finally, Yankee Team's reconnaissance missions gave a psychological shot in the arm to the Laotians, Thai, and other friendly forces in Southeast Asia.³

Air Force and RLAFF RT-28 photography was developed by the Able Mable reconnaissance task force at Tan Son Nhut. Duplicates were shipped to Washington for use by

1. Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 230229Z May 64, JCS to CINCPAC, 251737Z May 64.

2. McNaughton, p 4.

3. Memo, ACS/Intel, MACV, to Gen Paul D. Harkins, USA, COMUSMACV, subj: Laos Low Level Reconnaissance Operations ("Yankee Team" Operations), Jan 15, 1964, in Harkins' Fact Book, Feb 62-Jun 64, Tab B; msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 260836Z May 64.

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President Johnson, the Pentagon, and the National Photographic Interpretation Center. Eventually (but not at first) positives were sent to Vientiane for use by the country team and now and then by the FAR general staff.⁴ The original negative was flown to the 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron (RTS) at Yokota Air Base, Japan, where additional copies for theater use were made. Navy film was developed onboard the carriers, then sent to Cubi Point, Philippines, for more prints. From there, the pictures went to Washington.⁵

Yankee Team had been working only a week when Ambassador Unger asked for a two-day standdown between May 28 and 30. The priority targets, based on Army attaché, air attaché, [redacted] recommendations, had been covered. Although Unger had seen just a few photos, the pilot debriefings cabled to him by air and naval authorities had indicated a majority of the missions successful. He believed the hoped-for political and psychological impact of the flights had been achieved and a steady continuation at the same level was not likely to deter the Pathet Lao. Besides, northern Laos had been quiet the past few days. Should the enemy resume the offensive, the flights could easily be put back on. Finally, he thought General Moore and Admiral Bringle might welcome the chance to "recheck their flight plans." A few of the planes had met flak, and several Navy pilots had reported their electronic warning equipment showed enemy radar lock on. However, Washington did not suspend the flights. General Moore asked for authority to scramble U.S. aircraft in search and rescue (SAR) missions in case any plane was shot down over Laos, but no action was taken on Moore's request.⁶

Unger was peeved because he had not received any Yankee Team photos covering the Plain of Jars, even though, back in Washington, State Department spokesmen were telling reporters these photos had been handed over to the ICC and Souvanna. As a result, the embassy, Souvanna, and the ICC were being buttonholed by newsmen wanting to know what information had been garnered from the reconnaissance missions. So far, the wolves had been kept at bay, but the ambassador knew a persistent press would ultimately dig out the truth. He urgently petitioned Washington to rush him the pictures so he could turn them over to Souvanna and the ICC.⁷

Unger had not received any photography from the early Plain of Jars flights because it was U.S. Navy film and had been flown to the Philippines for duplication. The Air Force had taken pictures over northern Laos on May 21-22, but the photographic processing cell at Tan Son Nhut ran out of print paper after the May 19 sortie. The negatives from the next three days were flown to Japan for reproduction, and delivery to Washington was delayed until May 25. To ensure the best exploitation and accuracy, the results were analyzed at the National Photographic Interpretation Center. The State Department was told the untrained eye could not detect Pathet Lao/NVA violations of the accords unless "a carefully developed annotation and narrative" was attached to the photos; but from the pictures given the center, interpreters could not prove NVA intervention. Hence, the package they gave Unger concentrated on territory formerly held by the neutralists and the FAR. The pictures showed that this territory was now occupied by the communists and that they were being resupplied from North Vietnam.⁸

4. Many of the Yankee Team photos carried a "No Foreign Dissemination" tag. The CINCPAC microfilm viewed by the authors has many requests from Unger and Tyrrell to remove this classification from certain pictures so that the pictures could be given to the FAR General Staff, Souvanna, and the ICC.

5. Memo, ACS/Intel, MACV, to Gen Paul D. Harkins, USA, COMUSMACV, subj: Laos Low Level Reconnaissance Operations ("Yankee Team" Operations), Jan 15, 1964, in Harkins' Fact Book, Feb 62-Jun 64, Tab B; msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 260836Z May 64.

6. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1441, May 27, 1964, CTG 77.4 to COMSEVENTHFLT, 251515Z May 64.

7. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1414, May 24, 1964.

8. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1063, May 24, 1964, 1089, May 27, 1964; hist, PACAF, Jan-Jun 64, I, pt 1, A-2.

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The Pace Quickens: Summer 1964

9. When the ambassador received the photo boards with narrative on June 3, he was disappointed. (A similar set was given Ambassador Martin for the use of the Thai embassy and the RTS.) In Unger's view, the pictures failed to document communist violations of the accords. Although the reconnaissance had signaled American concern, the poor results were now overshadowed by the distinct possibility an aircraft might be shot down. The T-28 pilots already reported many more 37-mm antiaircraft positions on the Plain of Jars, and Unger proposed again that reconnaissance over northern Laos be curtailed but not suspended. Widely spaced rechecks of key areas were still needed to pinpoint new concentrations, shifts of enemy units, and altered or camouflaged installations. Unger stressed that his comments applied solely to northern Laos, not the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the panhandle.⁹

10. Admiral Felt was in basic, but not total, agreement with Unger. Photo requirements were not as high as when the Pathet Lao "were knocking Kong Le off the PDJ."¹⁰ Recon could be random, say, twice a week, but not until there was better coverage of northern Laos. Moreover, spot checks would not likely produce the proper T-28 targets. Only regular photo and visual reconnaissance would discover trucks, troop concentrations, and supply buildups.¹¹

11. Unger found an ally in Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Jr., CINCPACFLT, who thought the results did not justify the effort. Roads and areas of suspected Pathet Lao/NVA activity had been reconnoitered repeatedly without locating significant numbers of troops or war materials. The hazards of poor visibility and low-level flying in mountainous terrain had forced stereotyped tactics. So far, he added, 50 percent of the Navy's Yankee Team planes had encountered ground fire. Sharp feared that if the enemy's guns were massed, one of the reconnaissance planes could easily be mousetrapped. Like Unger, Sharp wanted the Yankee Team tempo slowed to random flights.¹²

12. What Unger and Sharp feared occurred on June 6. A Navy RF-8A from the *Kitty Hawk*, flying at twelve hundred feet near Xieng Khouang, was downed by communist flak. At this time, General Moore's earlier request to use U.S. aircraft in Laos for SAR still had not been approved. Even though a rescue coordination center manned by a few rescue controllers was set up in Saigon AOC, no professional USAF SAR forces were in Southeast Asia when the RF-8A was lost. The prevailing MACV view was that VNAF, U.S. Army, or Marine helicopters could perform any SAR. This might work in South Vietnam; but in Laos, such U.S.-conducted operations were forbidden by the Geneva accords. The task accordingly fell to Air America. Fortunately, two of their transports, a C-123 Provider and a C-7 Caribou, were near Xieng Khouang at ten thousand feet when the Navy aircraft was shot down. The transports intercepted the pilot's "mayday," immediately jettisoned their cargoes, and began directing the SAR. Two Helio Couriers and two H-34s of the airline were flown to the scene, and Meo guerrillas in the vicinity were alerted for a possible extraction. Because of poor communications, none of the Air America people knew they were looking for an American pilot.¹³

13. Meanwhile, Colonel Tyrrell requested that Ambassador Unger let U.S. aircraft fly cover for the rescue helicopters. Unger sent [redacted] instead, but they could not contact the downed flyer, Lt. Charles F. Klusmann. The helicopters were compelled to turn back when a crewman

9. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1114, Jun 1, 1964, 1512, Jun 4, 1964.

10. Felt was in error. Kong Le still retained forces on the western and southern fringes of the plain and several scattered redoubts in its heart.

11. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 052030Z Jun 64.

12. Msg, CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 060420Z Jun 64.

13. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1528, Jun 6, 1964, 1532, Jun 6, 1964, 2d AD to 13th AF, 061037Z Jun 64 (retransmitted by CSAF to SECSTATE, 061635Z Jun 64), AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2116, Jun 10, 1964; Helmka and Hale, pp 116-17; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 271; Capt B. Conn Anderson, *USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), pp 1-2, 32.

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was wounded by intense enemy ground fire. The SAR commander in the Helio Courier then called for maximum fighter support so the downed pilot could be picked up by another Air America helicopter that was en route.¹⁴

④ By coincidence, General Moore was visiting Udom when the first distress call came in and monitored the rescue from the Air America operations center. When the call came in for more fighters, Moore got in touch at once with Gen. Jacob E. Smart, CINCPACAF,¹⁵ and Admiral Felt. With their approval, he launched three T-28s with Water Pump pilots and five Takhli F-100s. Admiral Bringle added four *Kitty Hawk* F-8s and two Da Nang A-1s.¹⁶

④ Tyrrell called Unger and, after explaining the situation, asked for additional T-28s. Unger agreed to the use of Air America personnel, and the first pair of T-28s took off from Wattay at four in the afternoon, five minutes behind the T-28s with USAF pilots. A second pair was airborne fifty-five minutes later. As the weather worsened and the downed pilot could not be found, Admiral Felt issued a recall. He then stressed that, in the future, only nonmilitary resources would be committed to SAR operations in Laos. The recall was of slight immediate consequence, since Klusmann had been captured earlier by the Pathet Lao.¹⁷

④ What could have been a serious confrontation between Thai and American officials over the search and rescue attempt was averted by the quick thinking of Ambassador Martin and his air attaché, Colonel McCoskrie. Martin was alerted by McCoskrie within an hour of Klusmann's first "mayday." Both instantly knew that once the SAR was put in motion, the next logical step was to order the Thai-based USAF aircraft to fly cover. Martin assumed that, under the loose command arrangements governing USAF activities in Thailand, little or no attention would be paid to the specific restriction against using RTAF bases for overt strikes in Laos. Not desiring to inhibit the employment of every available resource to hunt for Klusmann, Martin did not mention this restriction. Aware of Thai sensitivity to being taken for granted, he solicited and received from Air Chief Marshal Dawee approval to use these planes. As expected, that afternoon the 2d Air Division relayed General Smart's message scrambling the five F-100s from Takhli.¹⁸

④ The episode caused Martin to conclude "this is really a hell of a way to run a railroad." It appeared to him that once it was decided to fly reconnaissance in Laos, the need for using Thai bases should have been seen and the proper coordination worked out. "I would much rather irritate the prime minister by getting him out of bed," he continued, "than explain why we casually assumed authority to utilize his country's facilities without his permission." Martin believed the Klusmann search and rescue effort spotlighted the need to plan future operations far ahead and be able to carry them out quickly.¹⁹

④ Back in Washington, the Yankee Team loss was not taken lightly. President Johnson called on his close advisers on the morning of June 6. They opted for conducting two reconnaissance flights escorted by six to eight fighter-bombers the next day. If the reconnaissance plane was shot at, the escorts would reply in kind. Everyone agreed Souvanna's permission was

14. [redacted] Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-206, 061650Z Jun 64; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, USAF, Ret, May 12, 1975.

15. [redacted] General Smart became PACAF commander when General O'Donnell retired on August 1, 1963.

16. [redacted] Msgs, 2d AD (Maj Gen Joseph H. Moore) to CTG 77.4 (Rear Admn William F. Bringle), Jun 7, 1964, Udom Aprt (Maj Gen Joseph H. Moore) to 2d AD (Maj Gen Sam Maddux, Jr.), 061250Z Jun 64, CTG 77.4 to CNO, JCS, et al, 061150Z Jun 64.

17. [redacted] See note above; msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-206, 061650Z Jun 64, CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, COMUSMACV, et al, 061040Z Jun 65, Det 3, Pacific Air Rescue Center to CSAF, 061135Z Jun 64. Klusmann escaped four months later. In a September debriefing, he praised the Air America rescue attempt, noting that every effort was made to reach him despite the intense ground fire. [MSGt Robert T. Helmka and TSgt Beverly Hale, *USAF Operations from Thailand, 1964-65* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 116.]

18. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2116, Jun 10, 1964.

19. [redacted] *Ibid.*

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required before such a mission could be flown. Unger should tell the prime minister this action was essential to offset the psychological effects of the loss, show U.S. determination to continue, and to "punish the communist side." So far, the press had not heard of the loss, and the communists had not yet begun to beat their propaganda drum. Washington wanted to break the news before the Pathet Lao did and to say that Unger had Souvanna's concurrence for escorts to fire back when fired on. The group proceeded to honor Unger's prior request that the flights be curtailed but not until the June 7 mission was flown. Further, all future flights would be escorted.²⁰

● Souvanna assented but vigorously insisted Washington not publicly state it was sending fighters to escort Yankee Team aircraft. He refused to back any statement that acknowledged U.S. planes were attacking antiaircraft batteries in Laos and believed the less said about all this the better. It was wiser to adopt the communist tactics of denial, even lying, if need be. Unger pointed out that the administration was not concerned about communist reaction or propaganda but needed to show Congress and the American people it would not condone defenseless planes being shot down at will. After much discussion, the two men hit upon a new formula. If Washington had to speak of retaliatory strikes, it would say they were flown by RLAFF T-28s. Otherwise, it would keep mum.²¹ In arriving at this solution, neither Unger nor Souvanna seemed to have realized that the T-28s were too slow to fly cover for the faster jets.

● The Navy flight of June 7 was escorted by carrier-based F-8s. The fighters very quickly got their chance to retaliate when the reconnaissance planes took ground fire. An F-8 piloted by Comdr. Doyle W. Lynn was hit on its second pass and Lynn had to eject. Admiral Felt instantly lifted his day-old ban on using military assets for search and rescue. He sent four Da Nang A-1s to cover the Air America helicopters and dispatched tankers to refuel the F-8s orbiting over the downed pilot. The AOC in Vientiane diverted [REDACTED] from searching for Klusmann (as yet, there was no confirmation he had been captured) to the Lynn SAR effort. Washington approved an urgent request from Unger to commit the Water Pump pilots and aircraft. The search proved fruitless, and the T-28 USAF pilots dropped their bombs on areas known to be held by the Pathet Lao. One group, for example, attacked Lima Site 22 near where Klusmann was shot down the day before. Just as the T-28s were heading back to Wattay, the A-1s showed up with bombs and rockets. The Air America SAR commander cleared them to strike enemy flak batteries in the vicinity of the downed pilot. Attacks by a flight of Navy F-8s and eight USAF F-100s followed. Although this was the most U.S. air power sent into Laos, Lynn remained unrescued.²²

● After returning to Wattay, Major Cochran, Water Pump commander, pondered the search for Lynn. He discovered that the Navy, unlike the Air Force, had a "warble beacon" that transmitted after a parachute opened. Air America's four C-7 Caribous carried ultra high frequency (UHF) radios that could pick up the signal and home in on it. During debriefing of the Air America pilots, Cochran learned that three of them had heard the beacon signal. Through triangulation, he plotted a new fix that was nearly forty miles from where the wingman reported Commander Lynn had bailed out. At dawn on June 8, the search resumed over this new area. Lynn heard the planes, fired a flare through the overcast, and was rescued by an Air America helicopter. His position was right in the middle of the triangulation.²³

● Despite the successful rescue, Yankee Team reconnaissance flights were temporarily suspended. General LeMay insisted that the Able Mable RF-101s working southern Laos also be escorted when their flights resumed. Objecting, the State Department and Ambassador Unger

20. [REDACTED] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1133, Jun 6, 1964.

21. [REDACTED] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1537, Jun 6, 1964.

22. [REDACTED] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1543, 1553, Jun 7, 1964, CTG 77.6 to CINCPAC, 070615Z Jun 64, 070834Z Jun 64, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, C-13, 070800Z Jun 64; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

23. [REDACTED] Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CTG 77.6, 070834Z Jun 64.

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argued that the United States had no mandate whatever from Souvanna authorizing these flights. Inevitably, the escorts would be fired upon and fire back. Another loss was highly likely. How would Unger explain this to Souvanna? What would be his answer when the prime minister learned that missions over the Plain of Jars played second fiddle to those in the corridor? So far, Unger thought Souvanna was unaware of the panhandle flights, or, if he had an inkling, believed the aircraft were merely en route to the Plain of Jars.²⁴

● LeMay remained adamant, and President Johnson sided with him. On June 8, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered eight F-100s with the specific mission of escorting USAF Yankee Team aircraft deployed from Clark to Tan Son Nhut. In addition, the Lynn shutdown pushed President Johnson to stronger measures. Henceforth, the escorts would precede the reconnaissance planes and strafe or sanitize the area before each photo run to minimize the risk of another loss. Johnson further directed the Air Force to ready a retaliatory strike for June 9. The target was a star-shaped anti-aircraft site (actually an old French fort) located about a mile from Xieng Khouang. This gun position was said to be the one that had downed Lynn. Since the Royal Thailand Government still ruled out overt strikes from its bases, the mission would be flown by the eight recently dispatched F-100s now at Tan Son Nhut, not by those at Takhli. Bombs, rockets, and napalm were sanctioned. The State Department admitted these new directives and procedures conflicted with the previous Souvanna-Unger agreement and agreed that Pathet Lao propaganda would capitalize on any strike, suppressive or retaliatory. Even so, the President asked for Unger's comments before approving the mission.²⁵

● Ambassador Unger urged Washington to reconsider as attacking enemy gun positions would destroy public announcements that the reconnaissance was purely for intelligence gathering. He warned that the escorts could become an end in themselves, that is, purposely flying with Yankee Team to attack flak batteries. Unger saw substantial danger in the United States' "backing or sliding into an escalating situation . . . without a conscious decision to do so or any clear indication of where this road leads." Furthermore, such strikes were inconsistent and in conflict with U.S. political objectives in Laos as he understood them. If deeper involvement had to be accepted, Unger suggested the Air Force augment the RLAF whenever it supported the ground forces of the FAR or the neutralists. Even though his air attachés had told him it was the best ordnance to wipe out gun positions, the ambassador still had grave reservations about dropping napalm. Unger was in a quandary since severe political and propaganda repercussions would certainly follow its first use in Laos. He advocated that if Washington sanctioned napalm, that it be delivered by RLAF T-28s, not Air Force or Navy jets.²⁶

● General LeMay pressed for approval of napalm. With it on board in lieu of iron bombs, the strike aircraft could fly lower and reduce the risk of another loss. Moreover, the ordnance's spreading characteristics raised the odds on knocking out a gun emplacement. Rusk dissented and, after citing Unger's trepidations and the long history of napalm's prohibition to Secretary McNamara and President Johnson, was upheld. The rest of the mission, however, would go forward as planned.²⁷

● Unger made one last try to have the Xieng Khouang raid aborted because of Souvanna's possible reaction. The prince had approved armed escorts if the United States give the matter no publicity and if retaliation was immediate (on the same mission)—not this preplanned strike Washington had concocted. The prime minister had made it clear on several occasions that he

24. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1548, Jun 7, 1964.

25. [redacted] Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 072358Z Jun 64, 6706, 072022Z Jun 64, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1152, 1154, Jun 8, 1964.

26. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1551, Jun 7, 1964, 1562, 1563, Jun 8, 1964.

27. [redacted] Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1154, 1155, Jun 8, 1964, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 081905Z Jun 64.

would not publicly acknowledge giving the United States permission to escort its reconnaissance planes. The ambassador hated to think what Souvanna's reaction might be when he discovered the Air Force had deliberately bombed positions in Laos without his approval. Unger envisioned his work of the past two years going up in smoke. If Washington followed through on the strike, Unger wanted the State Department to furnish him the rationale it would put forth to explain this violation of the Geneva accords.²⁸

● Due to the demand for a fast response to the June 7 loss, the strike order went out before Unger's comments were received. Assistant Secretary Bundy was halfway through this message when Unger's cable came. Bundy knew this put ambassadorial relations with Souvanna in jeopardy. All Bundy could promise was no more reconnaissance until previous missions were reviewed. As a way of smoothing things over with Souvanna, Unger should tell him this was a one-time retaliation designed to "signal . . . Hanoi and Peking that they must leave their neighbors alone before events go too far."²⁹

● Bundy added that high officials had heard alternative arguments that the recon continue unescorted or that the RLAF T-28s hit the AA site. The former was rejected because no safe flight path could be guaranteed. Besides, more losses without American counteraction would doubtless buoy communist hopes, be roundly criticized in the United States, "and possibly lose us crucial support for the whole course of action we are pursuing in Southeast Asia." The T-28s were ineffective without napalm and stood a good chance of being shot down. Dispensing napalm was vetoed because it could generate serious international repercussions.³⁰

● In addition, Rusk pressed Unger to abandon the notion that the United States was violating the Geneva accords. "It is a well established principle of international law," the secretary said,

that where one side grossly violates particular provisions of an agreement such as those forbidding Viet Minh personnel in Laos or the use of Laos as a corridor to South Vietnam that those unilateral violations relieve other parties of relevant restrictions upon themselves. Our objective remains the fullest execution of and meticulous compliance with the Geneva Accords. Central to our policy is full support for Souvanna Phouma despite repeated and contemptuous rejection of his role and authority by the Pathet Lao.³¹

● President Johnson's rejection of napalm for the June 9 retaliatory strike triggered a quick armament shuffle at Da Nang. The aircrews had originally planned a low-level napalm run followed by dive-bombing attacks with 750-pound bombs. When the President's order omitting napalm was received shortly after midnight, the canisters were hurriedly unloaded and replaced with bombs. In view of the ordnance switch and because overflights of Thailand were banned, new refueling plans had to be made.³²

● These setbacks were minor and the mission took off as scheduled; but an inflight change in tanker and fighter routes was required, due to towering cumulus that resulted in less than the preplanned fuel for the F-100s over Xieng Khouang. The flights then became separated, and the first four F-100s—with the Water Pump pilots in their T-28s pre-positioned to provide rescue combat air patrol—could not find the target right away because of broken clouds extending from the ridgeline to thirteen thousand feet. When the pilots did find the AA site and went after it, heavy ground fire greeted them. Only six of twenty-eight bombs hit the target. The second flight, also handicapped by the poor weather and absence of navigational aids in Laos, became disoriented. They were about to jettison their ordnance when they spotted a star-shaped fort near

28. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1564, Jun 8, 1964.

29. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1158, Jun 8, 1964.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Futrell, p 446.

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an airstrip. They attacked this area, which later proved to be near the communist-held town of Phong Savan. Owing to this mixup, about 20 percent of the primary target and 50 percent of the fort near Phong Savan were destroyed. Six of the F-100s made it to their tankers and back to Da Nang. Two, however, were so short of fuel they had to violate instructions and recover at Ubon. The T-28s returned to Udorn, salvaging their ordnance "in a known hot area on the way back." Yankee Team operations were then suspended as Washington promised, pending a thorough review of the photography on hand.³³

That the second flight of four F-100s on the Xieng Khouang mission had inadvertently struck Phong Savan airfield was not immediately known. On June 10, Washington was startled to hear Hanoi and Peking radios loudly denounce the strafing that day of Khangkhai (the former neutralist capital) by American jets. Souphanouvong's headquarters reported several casualties, and a colonel attached to the Chinese communist economic and cultural (military) mission had been killed. Since a similarity existed between Xieng Khouang and Khangkhai, there was a good chance the F-100s might have mistaken one town for the other. However, Yankee Team had been grounded after the June 9 retaliation strike, but the administration viewed the Hanoi and Peking claims as more than the usual "Chinese communist nonsense." The Joint Chiefs at once scheduled a Lucky Dragon U-2 to photograph the entire Plain of Jars, and a KC-135 flew the developed film from Clark to Washington. Unfortunately, the U-2 mission was 98 percent cloud covered. Xieng Khouang airfield was located; but due to the haze, the photo interpreters could not discern any damage. Khangkhai was completely obscured. By June 12, extensive debriefings of the strike pilots and a thorough examination of bomb damage assessment photography had revealed the second flight's accidental strike at Phong Savan.³⁴

This did not solve the problem of who actually hit Khangkhai. The International Control Commission visited the town to find out on June 16, and Souphanouvong then claimed that on June 11 (not the 10th) six T-28s (not U.S. jets) "piloted by Americans" bombed and strafed the village. When questioned about the source of his information identifying American pilots, Souphanouvong merely said he "knew." The ICC was taken on a walk of Khangkhai and shown the bullet holes in Souphanouvong's villa and two bomb craters, the largest seven feet across and five feet deep. As a clincher, the Pathet Lao displayed parts of what they claimed was an F-100 they had shot down. The fragments, however, were clearly identifiable as from an RF-8A, probably from Klusmann's or Lynn's aircraft.³⁵ This completely destroyed the Pathet Lao claim. Still, the question of who attacked Khangkhai remained a mystery.³⁶

Attention now focused on the RLAF. Thao Ma staunchly denied his Savannakhet-based T-28s had anything to do with the Khangkhai attack, but Unger had his doubts. Others thought [REDACTED] were to blame since they were working near the Plain of Jars that day.³⁷ In fact,

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33. *Ibid.*, pp 446-47; McNaughton, p 6; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 271; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, I ASOC to CINCPAC, 090715Z Jun 64; 2d AD, CINCPAC, 091534Z Jun 64, PACAF to CINCPAC, 112205Z Jun 64, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 121835Z Jun 64.

34. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964; 1614, Jun 13, 1964; PACAF to CINCPAC, 112205Z Jun 64; CINCPAC to PACAF, 120029Z Jun 64; JCS to DIA, CINCPAC, *et al.*, 271329Z Jun 64.

35. Souphanouvong also informed his visitors that Klusmann was a prisoner of the Pathet Lao.

36. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1644, Jun 16, 1964.

37. [REDACTED]

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[Intvw, Capt Richard B. Clement and Lt Col Barry L. Bonwit, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Lt Col Drexel B. Cochran, Aug 20, 1969; Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, USAF, Ret, May 12, 1975.]

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one press account based on William P. Bundy's "off-the-record" briefing to newsmen fingered [redacted] as the culprits. Nonetheless, the State Department categorically denied [redacted] were involved. By June 18, Unger was forced to declare that whatever occurred was in error or an "action [Laotian [redacted] pilots judge they should not acknowledge." The awkward situation was smoothed over somewhat when Souvanna told newsmen the Laotian pilots had struck the town accidentally and failed to report the incident after landing. Both Souvanna and Unger agreed hitting Khangkhai was regrettable, but they also agreed that the Royal Laotian Government need not apologize for carrying the war to the Pathet Lao.³⁸

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After the Xieng Khouang mission, Unger looked for an angry protest from Souvanna once he found out USAF planes had attacked a Pathet Lao battery in violation of their mutual agreement. Souvanna, however, had raised a bigger fuss over an earlier State/Defense briefing given reporters that admitted reconnaissance aircraft were being escorted by jet fighters. He labeled such public disclosures as "very serious . . . beyond his comprehension . . . and a major breach of faith." All through the conversation he kept coming back to an oft-repeated theme—"Act but don't talk about it." Whatever the United States or Laotian governments publicly acknowledge, he continued, plays into communist hands. The communists, if anything, say only what they want and avoid being accused of violating the Geneva accords. With Washington's admissions, Souvanna believed there was real danger of retaliatory air strikes against Vientiane. Unger asserted that neither Congress nor the American people would accept sending unarmed recon planes into areas defended by enemy AA batteries. In that case, Souvanna replied, the flights should stop. The ambassador defended the press briefing as a way to signal Hanoi that the United States was determined not to let their aggressive acts go unpunished. Souvanna remained unmoved. Privately, however, Unger deplored the briefing and expressed amazement that it was done. He felt that as long as the previous line was maintained, the bombings and strafings could be attributed to the T-28s; but with the briefing, the United States had virtually acknowledged that U.S. aircraft "have been bombing and strafing in direct violations of the Geneva Accords."³⁹

Meanwhile, back in Washington, information on the Xieng Khouang raid was leaked to the press. With the story about to break, the State Department believed it could no longer hold to "no comment." In a briefing on noon, June 10, it was acknowledged that USAF planes had reconnoitered the Plain of Jars the day before and that escorts had returned fire after being fired upon. State wondered if this briefing would further rile Souvanna.⁴⁰

Unger was beside himself. He had just passed Souvanna a message from Averell Harriman and his own letter of assurance that the United States still supported the prime minister's government and the Geneva accords. He also thought that spokesmen back in Washington were now skirting press queries about operations. Letting the cat out of the bag at this stage only served to make him "a liar a second time in three days." Unger believed Souvanna would no longer have confidence in his word, to say nothing of his government's. Besides, if the briefing was to signal Hanoi, Unger judged it redundant. The Xieng Khouang raid itself "would speak louder to the communists than words released in Washington."⁴¹

Nevertheless, the briefing was given; and when Unger met with Souvanna on June 11, he fully looked for a verbal upbraiding. To his surprise, Souvanna asked for a resumption of Yankee Team. When the question of escorts was raised, the prime minister posed no objections but restated that he wanted nothing said about them and that questions of protection should be

38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris, 6782, Jun 18, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok, 22307, Jun 21, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1655, Jun 18, 1964, 1613, Jun 13, 1964, 1637, Jun 16, 1964.

39. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1559, Jun 8, 1964; 1567 and 1573, Jun 9, 1964.

40. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1170, Jun 10, 1964.

41. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1586, Jun 10, 1964.

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Meanwhile, back in Washington, information on the Xieng Khouang raid was leaked to the press. With the story about to break, the State Department believed it could no longer hold to "no comment." In a briefing on noon, June 10, it was acknowledged that USAF planes had reconnoitered the Plain of Jars the day before and that escorts had returned fire after being fired upon. State wondered if this briefing would further rile Souvanna.⁴⁰

Unger was beside himself. He had just passed Souvanna a message from Averell Harriman and his own letter of assurance that the United States still supported the prime minister's government and the Geneva accords. He also thought that spokesmen back in Washington were now skirting press queries about operations. Letting the cat out of the bag at this stage only served to make him "a liar a second time in three days." Unger believed Souvanna would no longer have confidence in his word, to say nothing of his government's. Besides, if the briefing was to signal Hanoi, Unger judged it redundant. The Xieng Khouang raid itself "would speak louder to the communists than words released in Washington."⁴¹

Nevertheless, the briefing was given; and when Unger met with Souvanna on June 11, he fully looked for a verbal upbraiding. To his surprise, Souvanna asked for a resumption of Yankee Team. When the question of escorts was raised, the prime minister posed no objections but restated that he wanted nothing said about them and that questions of protection should be

38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris, 6782, Jun 18, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok, 22307, Jun 21, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1655, Jun 18, 1964, 1613, Jun 13, 1964, 1637, Jun 16, 1964.

39. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1559, Jun 8, 1964; 1567 and 1573, Jun 9, 1964.

40. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1170, Jun 10, 1964.

41. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1586, Jun 10, 1964.

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answered by referring to use of the RLAF T-28s. Unger accepted his point "in principle" but asserted Washington had to continue acknowledging the escorts to assure Congress and the public that the reconnaissance planes were being properly protected. Moreover, by openly mentioning the escorts, the signal Washington wanted Hanoi and Peking to receive would be recognized. Souvanna nodded he understood. If asked by the press why the flights were on once more, the prime minister planned to say that new information had come his way on NVA infiltration and he had requested their resumption. If queried on armed escorts, he would state that he did not object if Washington deemed them necessary for protecting the reconnaissance planes.⁴²

● This abrupt change in the prime minister's position from disavowal to an agreement with public announcements of Yankee Team missions, including escorts, can more than likely be attributed to events that occurred in Laos between June 8 and 11. On the 8th, neutralist positions on Phou Kout mountain were lost to the Pathet Lao, including eight tanks and many weapons. The mountain was about thirteen hundred feet higher than the surrounding terrain, giving the communists easy access to Muong Soui (Kong Le's headquarters). Souvanna requested replacements for the tanks and automatic weapons for the neutralists from French Ambassador Pierre L. M. Millet. Millet flatly refused, citing President Charles de Gaulle's policy of not furnishing arms to various Southeast Asia factions, since their possession only encouraged people to fight.⁴³ Disappointed at this rebuff, Souvanna flew to Luang Prabang to discuss the situation with King Savang Vathana. The king told the prime minister in no uncertain terms that the escorted Yankee Team flights must continue. Ambassador Unger credited Savang's strong views for tipping the balance, not only in favor of the flights, but also for the press briefings that went with them.⁴⁴

● By coincidence, Admiral Felt was likewise changing his mind about Yankee Team, chiefly the role of the escort. He now thought the photo missions served no real purpose and needlessly endangered American lives. If they had to go on, he wanted the escorts put to better use. He frankly conceded that his original aim in recommending them "was to change the rules of the game. In effect, it was to institute armed reconnaissance with the target identifying itself by opening fire." Considering the poor weather prevalent in northern Laos, escort entailed serious tactical problems and safety hazards. Felt wondered if it might not be better to fly unescorted reconnaissance at medium and high altitudes and use the photo results to lay on strikes. He well knew his views did not meet the self-defense criteria, but he deemed them intrinsic to aircrew protection.⁴⁵

● General Harkins sided with Felt. Washington should grant blanket approval for strikes on known anti-aircraft sites along the mission's flight path before a reconnaissance mission. The sole limitations would be targets within towns or villages. Harkins also argued for dispensing napalm but not near or on areas inhabited by civilians.⁴⁶

● Loss of two of his aircraft over the Plain of Jars caused Admiral Sharp to be deeply troubled over stereotyped tactics and enemy AA guns.⁴⁷ When tackling flak batteries, the escort

42. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964.

43. ● Unger replied this was understandable "except for the fact that this is not the policy followed by the communists." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Conversation with Ambassador Millet, French Ambassador (on June 8, 1964), June 10, 1964.]

44. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1583, Jun 10, 1964, 15, Jul 2, 1964, A-389, subj: Conversation with Ambassador Millet, French Ambassador, on Jun 8, 1964, Jun 10, 1964.

45. ● Msg, CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, PACAF, COMUSMAC, 100500Z Jun 64.

46. ● Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 110425Z Jun 64.

47. ● Vice Adm Thomas Moorer, Seventh Fleet Commander, reported that neither photo nor electronic intelligence had disclosed the presence of flak batteries "in the classic sense." The airmen were facing large numbers of manually directed machineguns and 37-mm automatic weapons often located on hilltops. The guns depended on volume of fire and were primarily effective against low-flying aircraft. They were often moved and Moorer doubted if the pilots could ever

had to have sufficient altitude and be back far enough to put his sights on the target before he flashed past. Repetitive missions over the limited road network in the Plain of Jars meant the recon planes and Sharp's escorts were "running the gauntlet" for several miles. Sharp favored hitting known antiaircraft positions prior to a photo run.⁴⁸

● Opposition to Yankee Team by high-ranking USAF officers was not so severe as that of flag officers in the Navy. Air Force missions seemed to do better than the Navy missions in northern Laos, due in great part to better weather and far fewer AA guns than in the south. Yet, even these missions were showing an alarming trend—the enemy's antiaircraft force in the panhandle was growing almost daily. Not only had new sites been detected, but previously unmanned positions appeared to be active. Many of these RF-101 photos were turned over to the RLA for targeting, but the Laotians did little with them.⁴⁹

● General Smart wanted more flexibility for General Moore and his 2d Air Division staff in the planning of Yankee Team missions. All tactics and technicians, for example, should be the prerogative of the field commander. Only he could determine whether armed escort was required. The type of reconnaissance aircraft, escorts, and ordnance should be left up to 2d Air Division. Like Sharp, Smart warned against stereotyped tactics and standard routes and patterns. He seconded Felt on the suppressive role for escorts and advocated using the most effective "non-nuclear weapons [a pitch for napalm?] available." The best tactic, he concluded, was a single RF-101 with two escorts in visual and radio contact trailing it. When the reconnaissance plane was fired on, it would become a forward air controller (FAC), either directing the escorts or proceeding with the mission alone while the escorts took care of the target. The sole governing factors for this tactic should be weather and terrain.⁵⁰

● On June 13, 1964, Yankee Team resumed but under modified operating rules that reflected somewhat the thoughts of Felt and his commanders. The changes included authorization for a weather plane to precede a flight and flying reconnaissance flights at random and intermittent intervals and at medium altitude, that is, above the effective range of hostile ground fire. The rules allowed armed escorts to retaliate against antiaircraft fire either on the same pass with the reconnaissance plane, or by circling back for repeated attacks. Low-level flights were permitted whenever medium-level photography could not produce the needed results, but approval for such flights was granted only for specific, cogent reasons and on a case-by-case basis. The escorts on these flights were free to attack AA sites ahead of the recon aircraft when ground fire suppression was held essential for aircraft and crew safety. The areas selected, however, were confined to those known to be less heavily defended by enemy flak. The Plain of Jars, for example, was avoided whenever possible. So were Route 4 southeast from the plain to Xieng Khouangville and Route 7 east from the plain to around Ban Ban. Samneua and its environs were off limits, as was Tchepone and other selected areas in the panhandle. Finally, Ambassador Unger was sent advanced information on all missions planned (including U-2 flights) and a daily summary of those flown. This enabled him to have precise knowledge of every sortie, so that he could keep Souvanna up to date and rebut communist propaganda charges.⁵¹

● To prevent further conflicts with statements of Souvanna and Unger, the State and Defense Departments established U.S. policy for public disclosures of Yankee Team flights. The

pinpoint the gun that downed a specific plane. The mountainous terrain, the monsoon, and the five hundred-knot speed of the aircraft rendered such identification very difficult. Rather than trying to hit a questionable machinegun position based on "eyeball identification," Moorer preferred a large-scale conventional attack against selected fixed targets. "I also recommend that such an attack be carefully planned, executed in good weather, and not laid on with a few hours notice." [Msg, COMSEVENTHFLT to CINCPACFLT, 07181Z Jun 64.]

48. [Redacted] Msg, CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 110437Z Jun 64.

49. [Redacted] Msg, PACAF to CINCPAC, 110620Z Jun 64.

50. *Ibid.*

51. [Redacted] Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 112028Z Jun 64, 161904Z Jun 64, 6985, 221418Z Jun 64.

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instructions stressed that these missions were being flown at Souvanna's request and that the United States deemed armed escorts necessary. Moreover, the need for these escorts had been explained to the satisfaction of the prime minister, and he understood that, in protecting the reconnaissance jets, the escorts might have to return hostile fire. Souvanna had raised no objection, but he had insisted on the need for silence about such retaliation. Thus, it became official policy to admit that reconnaissance was being conducted in Laos "as necessary," but no admission or announcement was made for specific missions. Press inquiries about escorts firing to protect the mission were answered with the official response: "We do not answer questions about operations." If an aircraft were shot down, just the bare facts were given; and if there were overriding reasons why the loss should not be disclosed, it would remain secret. Last, and perhaps more important, selected congressmen and certain allied ambassadors were briefed on Yankee Team operations ("strictly in private and on a need-to-know basis"), but at no time were suppressive tactics conceded. Escorts were depicted as firing only after being attacked by the enemy. It was permissible to say to a very restricted group (not identified in the instructions) that U.S. planes had attacked targets in Laos without having first been fired upon.⁵²

By this time, it was clear Souvanna's attitude toward the Pathet Lao was growing more militant. At the meeting when he requested Yankee Team's resumption, he urged more use of the T-28s to interdict enemy supply lines, destroy Pathet Lao caches, and support ground forces. The RLAF now had twenty T-28s (fourteen "on loan") and thirteen qualified pilots. Operating under embassy control were [redacted] in an emergency, six Air America pilots; in addition, ten Laotian pilots were about to enter T-28 training at Water Pump.⁵³

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In light of the potential of these air resources, the prime minister approved the FAR General Staff's Operation Triangle. Tentatively set for early July, this plan featured a combined FAR/neutralist/Meo assault on an enemy pocket at Sala Phou Khoun that threatened Route 13 and the rear of Kong Le's Muong Soui headquarters. Souvanna hoped this small offensive, supported by the T-28s, would serve as a springboard for the eventual recapture of the Plain of Jars. Unger was skeptical of the plan but agreed a rise in T-28 sorties was in order. Significantly, the ambassador further favored retaliatory air strikes on Samneua, Xieng Khouangville, Tchepone, and "perhaps against communists outside Laos."⁵⁴

Responding to Souvanna's request for more T-28 missions, the RLAF flew seventeen sorties on June 13 against enemy antiaircraft and artillery positions east of Muong Soui near Phou Kout mountain. Five aircraft were launched against this target in the early morning, and six T-28s hit it again around midday. The results were unknown due to deteriorating weather. That afternoon, another three aircraft flew to the area but found the ground nearly obscured. Rather than return to Wattay, the flight commander dropped the ordnance through the overcast; it landed on friendly troops, wounding two soldiers. In investigating the short rounds, Colonel Tyrrell determined the individual acting as FAG knew next to nothing of air-ground control procedures and could not contact the flight on the briefed radio frequency. Similar incidents could occur since neither the FAR nor the RLAF had a system for controlling air strikes. Thao Ma still refused to furnish personnel for forward air control training or as ALOs to either the neutralists (whom he disliked intensely) or to the FAR (whose generals disliked him). After the Phou Kout incident, Thao Ma became moody and transferred nine T-28s from Wattay to Savannakhet. This left northern Laos almost completely under the purview of the [redacted] USAF air attaché.⁵⁵

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52. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, Bangkok, Saigon, *et al*, 1189, Jun 12, 1964.

53. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, CX-332, 260935Z Jun 64.

54. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964.

55. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCSTRIKE, CSAF, DIA, *et al*, J-7-64, 132154Z Jun 64, AIRA Laos to

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● Tyrrell and Cochran knew it would take cooperation and coordination between air and ground units or Operation Triangle would bog down and fail. Cochran, "to educate the ground troops up there on how to control air a little bit," sent two of his USAF pilots to Muong Soui and Vang Vieng to work as Forward Air Controllers (FACs) with the neutralists. They flew O-1s and occasionally a Controlled American Source C-45. Fearing that one of these planes would be shot down and American participation disclosed, Ambassador Unger ordered the Water Pump FACs to orbit away from the strike area when working the T-28s. With this restraint, the commandos had to abandon controlling the air strikes. Thao Ma then reversed himself and asked for a U-17, so the RLAF could furnish forward air control for Kong Le's troops. On June 18, he received such an aircraft equipped with UHF, VHF, and FM radios. Thao Ma would not base the plane at Muong Soui, fearing the neutralists would harm its crew. A compromise was reached with the RLAF FACs (such as they were) operating from Muong Soui during the day but remaining overnight at Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng (Lima Site 98/20A). Thao Ma also agreed to an RLAF pilot/neutralist observer team in a second U-17. After this plane was shipped in, Thao Ma abruptly turned it over to the neutralists (who could not fly it) and again refused to join the FAC effort. To save the program, two neutralist officers were recruited by Kong Le to fly as backseaters in [redacted] T-28s.⁵⁶

● Tyrrell and Law flew to Savannakhet to confer with Phoumi Nosavan, hoping he could pressure Thao Ma to cooperate. Since Sarit Thanarat's death in December 1963, Phoumi's control of the FAR had been slowly slipping away. Even so, he remained the most powerful figure in the army, and the bond between him and Thao Ma was as strong as ever. At the meeting, Tyrrell cited Thao Ma's failure to supply ALOs, FACs, or strike aircraft for the neutralists and the failure to provide air support for the recent probes by the Meo south of Xieng Khouangville. Because Thao Ma's shortsightedness was hamstringing military operations, Phoumi promised to try and convince him to lay aside his fears and petty jealousies. In spite of Phoumi's pronouncements, no RLAF FACs, ALOs, or liaison aircraft were furnished the government ground forces. Thao Ma's sole concession was to let one neutralist or Meo officer fly in the backseat of his second U-17.⁵⁷

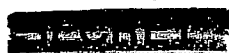
● The RLAF chief's intransigence—so similar to Phoumi's prior to Nam Tha—did not deter the FAR General Staff (but they would remember Thao Ma's attitude). On June 23, they firmed up plans for Operation Triangle. The plan envisioned a three-pronged attack to secure Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang and that part of Route 7 running east from the Sala Phou Khoun road junction to Muong Soui. The initial troop deployment would begin on July 1 and the main assault six days later. Ten battalions would be involved, including the three battalions of GM 16 (eighteen hundred men) airlifted from southern Laos. The commitment of southern troops was noteworthy for it marked the first time they had been deployed outside their local military regions since 1962. Opposing them was an enemy force now said to have dwindled to just three battalions, due to logistic troubles brought on by the monsoons. The FAR plan specified prior Yankee Team reconnaissance and considerable airlift, with subsequent resupply by Air America. More important, it included extra USAF armed reconnaissance missions and American pilots in T-28s.⁵⁸

● The State Department opposed Operation Triangle; the troops could be better used defending Attopeu and Muong Soui. In particular, State had little enthusiasm for employing American air and now sensed danger in the Laotians "getting out in front of us [rather] than vice versa." As an alternate to Triangle, it proposed holding the line at Muong Soui. To do this (and

13th AF 220340Z Jun 64, AIRA to Vientiane to DIA, CX-332, Jun 26, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.
 56. Msg, AIRA Laos to 13th AF, 220340Z Jun 64; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.
 57. Msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, CSAF, et al, 230700Z Jun 64.
 58. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb London, Paris, et al, 7035, Jun 27, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, et al, 231350Z Jun 64.

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soothe Souvanna's feelings), State suggested giving the RLAF more T-28s. [redacted]

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59 Ambassador Unger dissented. After closely examining the general staff's plan, he admitted it was fraught with danger, might not succeed, "and even if it does . . . it may bring on to our heads and those of the Lao leaders bitter criticism." He conceded the plan entailed extensive U.S. airlift that would highlight the American presence and definitely violate the Geneva accords. However, the ambassador contended that Laos could no longer remain free by the FAR holding the line and staying on the defensive. If Washington did not get behind Triangle, Souvanna would take it "as a clear sign we do not mean all the recent strong statements supporting a free Laos against a communist takeover."⁶⁰ Unger was saying it was time for everyone to fish or cut bait.

60 To ensure the FAR General Staff's definition of armed reconnaissance was the same as his, Unger visited Souvanna on June 26. The prime minister was first asked in general terms if he would approve Yankee Team escorts for purposes beyond retaliation or suppression, for example, cutting Route 7 and supporting Kong Le at Muong Soui. Souvanna said he would prefer to see escorted reconnaissance do whatever it could to cut Route 7 east of Khangkhai or east of Ban Ban. In other words, photo reconnaissance could be used as a cover for armed reconnaissance in certain circumstances. Around Muong Soui, he favored RLAF T-28s, but if a major Pathet Lao/NVA attack erupted, he would welcome the overt support of American jet fighters. Unger observed that, if he judged Souvanna correctly, the prince would let U.S. planes work areas where they were not likely to be seen by many people or where it would be hard for the Pathet Lao to prove U.S. participation.⁶¹ Unger asked if the prime minister would consent to the RLAF dispensing napalm to repel a Pathet Lao assault on Kong Le's headquarters. Souvanna said yes, if genuine military targets were struck. Unger should further confine these missions to the most experienced pilots to avoid short rounds. With Souvanna's approval for napalm, the ambassador again asked Washington for discretionary power to give napalm to the RLAF in case of a sizable new attack by the Pathet Lao, commenting that napalm was the best antipersonnel weapon available. Without it, the T-28s of necessity would resort to high dive angles for bomb release and probably suffer crippling losses from the burgeoning AA fire on the Plain of Jars.⁶²

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61 Previously, Colonel Law had visited Muong Soui and, as usual, found the neutralists incapable of serving their pieces. As a stopgap, he sent three assistant attachés (artillerists) to Muong Soui to train Kong Le's gunners as best they could in gun emplacement, targeting, and fire control. However, Law felt that the best solution was to import [redacted] gunners. Souvanna was lukewarm to [redacted] gunners, favoring the use of the FAR or French Military Mission personnel. When Unger pointed out that FAR gun crews were no better and that General Lancrenon had forbidden his people from engaging in any operation remotely resembling combat,

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62 While Washington was digesting this flood of information from Unger, Admiral Felt informed the Joint Chiefs that the VNAF A-1 conversion program was proceeding so smoothly (the VNAF now had eighty A-1s)⁶⁴ that surplus T-28s could be turned over to the Laotians at

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59. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1250, Jun 24, 1964.
60. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1694, Jun 25, 1964.
61. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1704, Jun 26, 1964; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Recce Laos, Jun 29, 1964.
62. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1709, Jun 26, 1964.
63. [redacted] Ibid.
64. [redacted] Apparently, someone suggested using VNAF A-1s on the Plain of Jars. Felt was opposed since it would dilute the South Vietnam air effort and open the door to further charges of U.S. intervention. [redacted]

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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.

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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

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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.

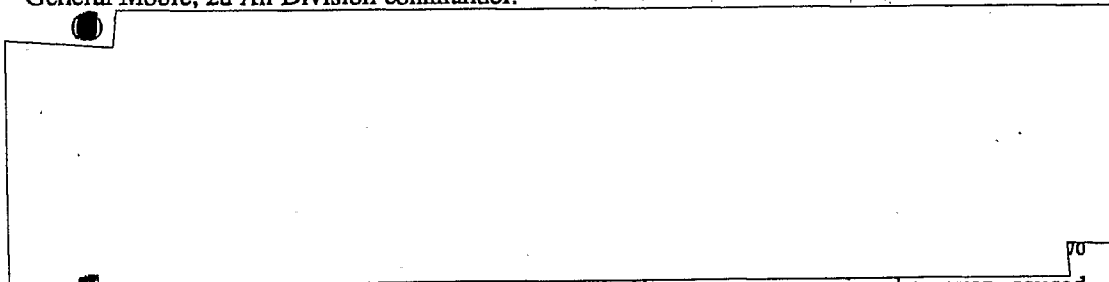
68. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1267, Jun 27, 1964.

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On June 29, 1964, the U.S. government formally endorsed Operation Triangle. Yankee Team missions over the Plain of Jars resumed and included night reconnaissance east of Muong Soui. The escorting fighters were allowed to hit any enemy activity detected during such flights, which opened the door to armed recon missions. U.S. Army and Air Force personnel were also allowed to serve as advisors to the Laotian troops, and the ambassador immediately detailed five artillery officers from DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to neutralist artillery at Muong Soui and Vang Vieng. Three USAF detachment members from Udorn were dispatched to Muong Soui, Vang Vieng, and Luang Prabang as "attachés" to work with the three columns as ALOs controlling air strikes. An air operations officer and an intelligence officer were added to the Vientiane AOC by General Moore, 2d Air Division commander.⁶⁹



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Operation Triangle was set to go on July 6. Heavy monsoon rains, however, caused numerous delays, and only one hundred of the sixteen hundred men from GM 16 could be airlifted from Pakse and Attapeu to Muong Soui. The [redacted] battery, flown in by Air America's new C-7 Caribous, was the last unit to arrive before the field was closed. The weather also hampered other air operations. The RLAF, which had been flying between twenty and thirty T-28 sorties a day in and around the Plain of Jars, was limited to three on July 8 due to the rain and low visibility. In spite of this downturn, the RLAF lost two T-28s to enemy ground fire during the first week of July.⁷⁰

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On July 11, the weather began to clear, and by the 15th, all of GM 16 was positioned at Muong Soui. The next day, a Pathet Lao regiment, supported by 85-mm and 105-mm guns, attacked the headquarters but was beaten back when strafed by the T-28s. Government forces counterattacked on the 19th, aided by [redacted] Laotian artillery that expended nearly twelve hundred 105-mm and 155-mm rounds. Also out in force, twelve T-28s flew thirty-two sorties and dropped sixty-four 500-pound and sixty-four 250-pound bombs. Faced for the first time with a well-planned defense that knitted artillery to heavy T-28 strikes, the enemy fled eastward toward Phou Kout Mountain.⁷¹

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Densely covered with scrub pine and rising about thirteen hundred feet above the surrounding terrain, Phou Kout dominated the eastern approaches to the Muong Soui valley. Government forces wanted to capture the mountain because it was an ideal observation post for correcting artillery fire and conducting air-ground liaison. Phou Kout was held by two or three companies of dug-in enemy infantry, and its approaches were sowed with antipersonnel mines.⁷²

During the next week, two assaults on the hill by government troops were thrown back. A third attack on July 25 was preceded by two days of heavy T-28 strikes. This time the 2d

69. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1270, Jun 29, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 10, Jul 2, 1964.

70. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2244, Jun 29, 1964, 55, Jul 13, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 16, Jul 2, 1964.

71. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 27, 48, Jul 8, 1964.

72. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 91, Jul 14, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-331, Jul 20, 1964; rpt, MACV J-2 (Intel), Monthly Intelligence Summary—Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Aug 16, 1964.

73. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-345, Jul 29, 1964.

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Parachute Battalion carried to the summit but, once there, believed it had fallen into a trap and hastily evacuated. A distraught General Amkha now insisted the hill was occupied by North Vietnamese Army troops on orders to hold to the last man. The neutralist general promised a fourth assault in a few days. If it did not succeed, Amkha predicted to Colonel Law that all would be lost.⁷⁴

Amkha's account was so disjointed that the Army attaché doubted if the 2d Parachute Battalion ever reached the summit, and the general had not adequately explain how his men became entrapped. Apparently, the paratroopers expected the T-28s to kill all the enemy, leaving them only a leisurely walk up the mountainside to the top. Law later discovered that Amkha had turned down [redacted] artillery support for the advancing infantry, claiming the T-28s would suffice. It was the Army attaché's conclusion that after reaching the top and finding the communists very much alive, the 2d parachute battalion panicked and bolted back down the mountain. This was Amkha's "trap." Just the same, the neutralist general's somber mood could not be discounted. Law warned that one more unsuccessful attack on Phou Kout might spell the end of this phase of Operation Triangle.⁷⁵

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Law and Tyrrell believed a fourth ground assault on Phou Kout could prevail if it came hard on the heels of a T-28 napalm drop. Ambassador Unger was persuaded by their arguments. Dropping napalm might escalate the fighting at Muong Soui, but Unger thought it might deter Pathet Lao attacks in other areas, for example, an attack against one of the columns advancing from Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng. However, once the napalm genie got out of the bottle, Unger knew he would be under intense pressure to employ the ordnance elsewhere. Its use would also be grist for the enemy's propaganda mill—and even America's allies might see it as escalation. There seemed to be no clear-cut solution. Unger could only point out that Phou Kout was a military target and the United States controlled the napalm. Any future decision on its use rested solely with him and Washington. Having obtained Souvanna's assent, Unger meant to have only the most experienced Thai pilots deliver the ordnance. With these considerations, Unger asked for Washington's approval.⁷⁶

Before receiving Washington's confirmation, Unger attended a reception where British Ambassador Donald C. Hopson relayed his Foreign Office's version of a recent conversation on napalm held at the Department of State between Ambassador Denis A. Greenhill and William P. Bundy. At this July 22 meeting, Bundy told Greenhill that discretionary authority to use napalm was going to be given Unger in connection with the fighting at Muong Soui. Bundy stressed that this would not be implemented unless Souvanna said so, although the prime minister had previously agreed it should be used if needed. The targets, Bundy emphasized, would be strictly military with civilian areas avoided.⁷⁷

Ambassador Greenhill said napalm's use would do more harm than good. He recalled that Robert G. K. Thompson, the noted guerrilla warfare expert from Malaysia, had said that, in South Vietnam, it would be better for the Americans to allow the Viet Cong and Viet Minh to escape into the bush, than to take the chance of injuring civilians with napalm. Greenhill underlined that the communists had already cranked up their propaganda machine and napalm had become a "dirty word." He did add that, since there was proper military justification and it was directed against military targets, dispensing napalm was understandable, especially if Souvanna agreed and was aware of its sensitivity. He cautioned that any military advantage must

74. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-334, Jul 28, 1964.

75. *Ibid.*

76. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 145, Jul 23, 1964.

77. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 152, Jul 23, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 73, Jul 22, 1964.

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always be weighed against possible harm to civilians. Bundy concurred—this was the sole basis on which the United States would consider its use.⁷⁸

● Bundy gathered from his conversation with Greenhill that the British did not relish the United States' employing napalm but would not object if the targets were military and Unger had Souvanna's permission. Apparently, this was not the case. To Unger's surprise, Hopson noted that the Foreign Office saw the same meeting as a statement of Unger's disapproval. They asked that their objections be conveyed to Unger because napalm was peculiarly American, and its use would highlight U.S. shipments of arms to Laos. ("This was the one weapon Churchill had always refused to agree to," Hopson said.) Even though USAF forward air guides would direct the strike and [redacted] pilots would fly the T-28s, the British did not believe [redacted] could be trusted to put the ordnance on strictly military targets. Finally, Foreign Secretary Robert A. Butler was on his way to the Soviet Union to try and convince Khrushchev to support another fourteen-nation conference on Laos. When he got to Moscow, the Foreign Office did not want Butler greeted with the news that the United States had dropped napalm. None of this impressed Unger—he was determined to proceed. He left it up to Washington to placate London.⁷⁹

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● Unwilling to do this, the State Department restrained Unger after Ambassador Greenhill again voiced deep concern over the proposed use of napalm at Phou Kout. When State had given its basic approval for napalm a month earlier, it had considered such international repercussions and concluded that this backlash could be tolerated with Souvanna's approval; it acceded to British wishes at this juncture, since Foreign Office support was needed internationally. A recent Polish proposal for the three Laotian factions to consult prior to a new international conference on Laos was in acute danger of falling through. The United States sanctioned this motion; and Souvanna had gone along, provided the Pathet Lao withdrew from captured territory. (This stipulation was rejected by the Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, and communist Chinese.) Nevertheless, Foreign Secretary Butler hoped to revive the Polish suggestion in Moscow, and Washington suspended consideration of napalm until the outcome of Butler's visit was known. Unger's instructions were modified: Napalm could not be dispensed without Washington's approval, except in an emergency or where a specific action already under way would otherwise fail. In any event, Souvanna's consent was also needed.⁸⁰

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● Admiral Sharp, who became CINCPAC on June 30, 1964, following Admiral Felt's retirement, was displeased with this decision. From the moment he assumed his new command, Sharp had pushed for napalm and for USAF SAW pilots in combat, but this suggestion was again vetoed (July 24) by the Defense and State Departments. He argued that the T-28s were a deterrent, but they had not produced a decisive impact on Pathet Lao offensive operations. Sharp did not contend that the T-28s alone could defeat the enemy. Instead, he envisioned them tipping the scales toward the government, if allowed to employ the full range of weapons available, meaning napalm. Before bringing in U.S. fighter-bombers to knock out communist artillery and antiaircraft sites, Sharp urged "we give the RLAF a good shot at hacking it." This included dropping napalm on targets that could not be destroyed with iron bombs.⁸¹

● From Luang Prabang, Souvanna requested on July 26 requested that Unger release napalm to the RLAF so the FAR General Staff could plan its use in the fourth assault against Phou Kout. Citing London's objections and the current discussions in Moscow between Khrushchev and Butler, Unger demurred; and Souvanna withdrew the request.⁸²

78. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 73, Jul 22, 1964.

79. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 129, Jul 21, 1964, 152, Jul 23, 1964.

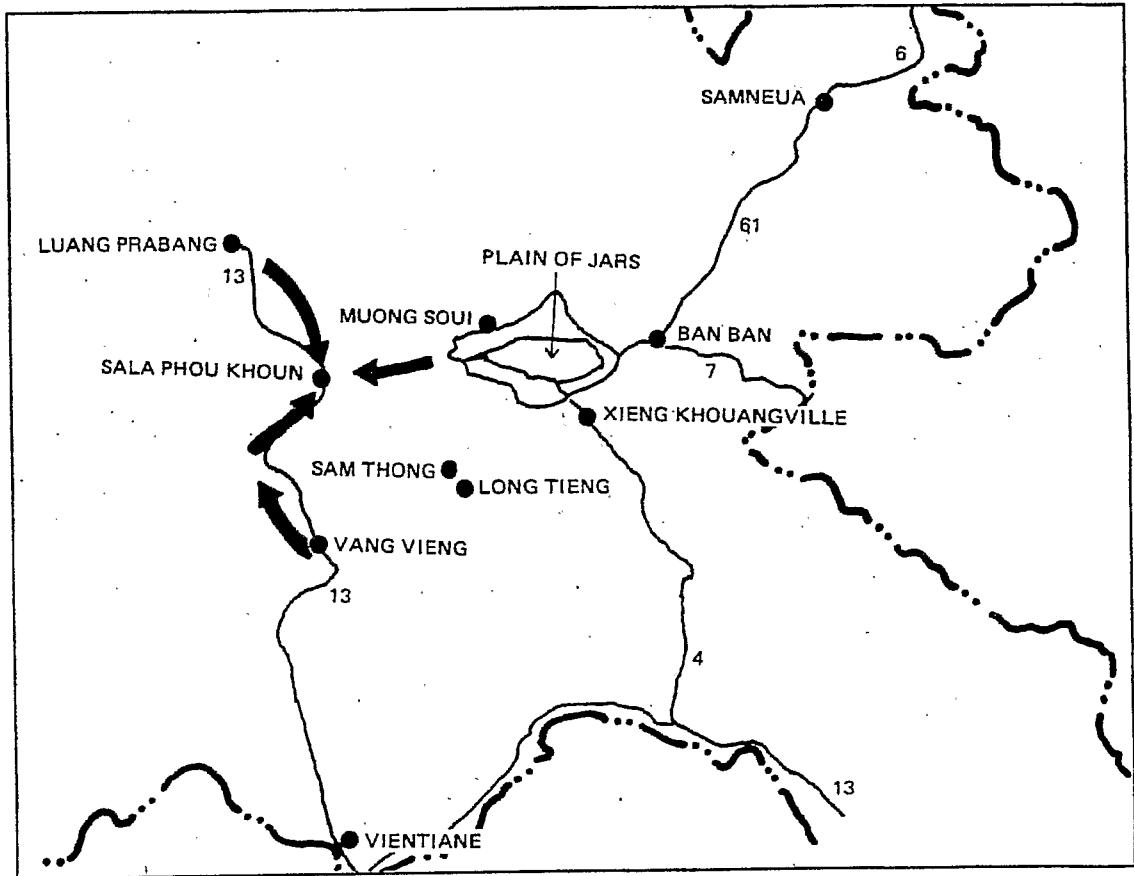
80. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 82, Jul 23, 1964, 92, Jul 27, 1964.

81. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 240215Z Jul 64.

82. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 164, Jul 26, 1964.

Meantime, the three columns of Operation Triangle were slowly and cautiously advancing toward their rendezvous at Sala Phou Koun. The columns were augmented with U.S. Army advisors (furnished by CINCUSARPAC from the 25th Infantry Division), USAF air liaison officer teams from Water Pump, and indigenous forward air controllers. The latter flew two U-17s from Muong Soui and Vang Vieng, carrying ground force observers in the backseats. The

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FACs used ARC-44 and PRC-10 radios for air/ground communication but passed their air support requests back to the USAF ALOs by UHF radio or courier. The ALOs were equipped with vehicles, bilingual radio operators, and appropriate communications equipment. The ALOs accompanied the ground force commanders and relayed strike requests to Colonel Tyrrell by radio. He, in turn, maintained communication with the air operations center in Vientiane via telephone. From the AOC, the T-28s were fragg⁸³ against the FAC requests.⁸⁴

On July 25, at the height of the monsoon, there was an unexpected break in the weather, and the RLAf flew fifty-nine sorties against preselected targets along Route 13 as far north as

83. That is, fragmentary operations orders were issued for these missions.

84. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to CHJUSMAGTHAI, 291149Z Jun 64, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 55, Jul 16, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 165, Jul 26, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

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the Sala Phou Khoun road junction, encountering only light ground fire. It claimed sixty-six buildings destroyed after expending seventy-two 500-pound and fifty-eight 250-pound bombs and 318 rockets. Thao Ma then flew over Muong Kassy and reported drawing no fire nor seeing anyone. GM 17 occupied the town on July 30 without a shot being fired. That same day, Meo ADC (militia) units captured Sala Phou Khoun; five hundred enemy reportedly fled after token resistance. Phou Kout remained the one obstacle to a clean sweep by government forces.⁸⁵

● By August 1, word reached Washington that Foreign Secretary Butler was having no luck with Khrushchev, who refused to convene the Geneva conference on Laos. That being the case, Washington again authorized Unger to use napalm at his discretion after consulting with Souvanna and Ambassador Hopson. Colonel Law, Army attaché at Vientiane, was directed to explain the full military rationale for napalm's employment to the British military attaché. Nonetheless, the sixteen RLAFF strikes on Phou Kout the next day relied on fragmentation bombs and .50-caliber machineguns—not napalm. Just three T-28s struck the mountain's summit, the pilots reporting no significant sightings or damage.⁸⁶

● Colonels Law and Tyrrell were briefed on the FAR General Staff's plan for a fourth try at Phou Kout on August 2. The plan had been drawn up before Ambassador Unger got the approval for napalm and did not include its use. However, it called for considerable air and artillery softening up on August 5 and seemed better thought out and coordinated than past failures. Right after the shelling stopped, for example, the 8th and 14th battalions would move out and up the hill. Colonel Law was unimpressed. He remembered that other attacks on Phou Kout had been preceded by heavy artillery and air strikes but had floundered because of the poor followup by government soldiers. He pessimistically predicted that, unless the Laotian infantry was prepared to close with the communists, no amount of preassault artillery or air bombardment would force them off the hill.⁸⁷

● As the neutralists were preparing for their fourth assault on Phou Kout, events took place in the Gulf of Tonkin that were to completely change the character of the war in Southeast Asia. Since April 1962, U.S. Navy destroyers had patrolled the waters adjacent to North Vietnam and China. These De Soto patrols had often come under air and surface surveillance during 1963-64 and once were buzzed by communist planes. On the late afternoon of August 2, 1964, radar aboard the destroyer USS *Maddox* picked up three North Vietnamese patrol boats closing at high speed. Their maneuvers showed hostile intent, so the *Maddox* fired three warning shots. When this did not deter them, the *Maddox* opened fire with its five-inch battery. One boat was disabled but not before it launched two torpedoes that missed the destroyer by one hundred yards. The second boat lost all power. Hit at least once, the third boat passed within seventeen hundred yards of the ship, spraying it with machinegun fire. About forty minutes after the action began, fighters from the USS *Ticonderoga* appeared and the attack ended.⁸⁸

● Washington's reaction was reserved, but the administration made it clear that another such episode could expect a violent reception. On August 3, the *Maddox* was joined by another destroyer, the USS *Turner Joy*. They soon noted they were under enemy radar tracking. Early that evening, the ships' radar revealed a distant surface contact paralleling the *Maddox*'s course. This shadowing continued until about ten, when the contact's pattern indicated it was positioning

85. ● Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 160, Jul 25, 1964, 201, Jul 31, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-494, 251310Z Jul 64, ARMA Vientiane to DA, 301050Z Jul 64.

86. ● Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 111, Aug 1, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 212, Aug 2, 1964; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Status of Use of Napalm in Laos, Dec 11, 1964.

87. ● Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-362, Aug 3, 1964.

88. ● Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 367-69. For a contrary view of this episode, see Joseph C. Goulden, *Truth is the First Casualty* (Chicago, 1969).

for attack. Fighters from the *Ticonderoga* arrived to support the patrol, and the *Turner Joy* subsequently fired into the darkness at the fast-moving targets seen solely on the ship's radar. The patrol then withdrew from the gulf's narrow waters. There was no damage or casualties.⁸⁹

Admiral Sharp at once asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to authorize punitive air strikes on North Vietnam. Two hours later, the chiefs alerted him to ready a retaliatory strike for dawn the next day (August 5). That morning, as the planes rose from the decks of the *Ticonderoga* and *Constellation*, President Johnson announced the United States was making a measured response to North Vietnamese aggression. The strike—Pierce Arrow—was directed against the Vinh petroleum storage area and the bases harboring the enemy patrol boats. Twenty-five PT boats were damaged and the oil storage depots destroyed, with two planes and pilots lost, although one pilot wound up a prisoner.⁹⁰

The Gulf of Tonkin incidents and uncertainty about reactions the retaliatory strikes would provoke led to a buildup of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. Most of the USAF increase went to South Vietnam, although Thailand approved twelve more F-100s to supplement the six at Takhli and eighteen F-105 Thunderchiefs for Korat. On August 7, the RTG agreed the aircraft could launch from RTAF bases for combat operations "outside Thailand."⁹¹

As the Pierce Arrow flights hit North Vietnam, twenty-three T-28 sorties pounded enemy positions at Phou Kout. The neutralists pushed up the hill that afternoon, and early reports revealed they were making good progress. About two hundred feet from the crest, however, they ran into a mine field.⁹² This roadblock, plus reports of heavy reinforcements, discouraged them from attacking. The RLAF responded with eighteen sorties against the hillside on August 7, but the neutralists withdrew from their most advanced positions the next day.⁹³

After a visit to the area on August 9, Colonel Law concluded that Phou Kout would stay in enemy hands. The mines were a major obstacle, already accounting for 106 neutralist casualties. Even if the mines were cleared, it was unlikely the troops would advance. General Amkha and other officers were now convinced "a superior clan of spirits" were protecting the handful of North Vietnamese on the summit. They staunchly believed they were pitted against a supernatural power. Any soldier who deliberately killed one of the defenders (if indeed it could be done) would be rewarded by the personal vengeance of the demon associated with the victim. Realizing this would sound strange to Western ears, Law stressed he was not being frivolous or sarcastic. The belief in the supernatural was a way of life with many Laotians and could not be brushed aside. Moreover, Law doubted if rotating in fresh troops or dropping napalm would change matters. He suggested that napalm be withheld until there was some reasonable chance for its success. This would have a maximum benefit to the FAR and neutralists as well as an adverse effect on the enemy.⁹⁴

Unger sided with his Army attaché. When Souvanna called in the ambassador later that day and requested napalm for Phou Kout, Unger said no. By then, most of the mountain was in government hands. Despite the reinforcement rumors, it was plain only a few enemy were left on the summit; but there was no assurance napalm would guarantee the mountain's capture because of the mines, barbed wire, and what Unger called "the psychological hazards." He did

89. *Ibid*, pp 369-370.

90. Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 367-69.

91. Hist, 2d AD, Jul-Dec 64, p 68; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 37, Aug 7, 1964.

92. Major Cochran, Water Pump commander, later recalled that the neutralists put one of their "deathless men" in charge of the attack. These were soldiers who had narrowly escaped death on previous occasions and were thought to lead charmed lives and be immune from bullets. At Phou Kout, one of these deathless men apparently stepped on a mine that blew off his foot and "everyone turned around and retreated [although] there was no one to bother them." [Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.]

93. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 051110Z Aug 64, 261, Aug 7, 1964, 274, Aug 8, 1964.

94. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CS-38294, Aug 9, 1964.

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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.

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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.

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It was presumed the T-28 incommision rate would not surpass 75 percent, meaning that between twenty-five and thirty planes out of forty would be available daily. With a pool of twenty Laotian and twenty Thai pilots, the crew ratio was about 1.5, which was judged adequate for needs at that time.¹⁰⁶

The June Secretary of Defense Conference had also considered reintroducing the Military Assistance Advisory Group into Laos as a way of showing American "intent." Ambassador Unger was opposed, noting that when the Programs Evaluation Office was changed to a MAAG three years earlier, the other side had been unimpressed, and reestablishing the MAAG would probably not sway the communists. The embassy was continually accused by the communists of hiding numerous military advisors; and consequently, Unger contended, the surfacing of a MAAG would merely lend credence to their claims, "not to mention putting the French Military Mission nose out of joint."¹⁰⁷

Unger argued that, while U.S. Army and Air Force MAAG personnel did a fine job under trying circumstances in 1961-62, their experience showed it was almost impossible to put any backbone in the FAR. One military disaster after another only tended to rub off onto the Americans, and U.S. prestige was tarnished. Unger did not want this repeated and felt that it could easily happen as long as the North Vietnamese shored up Pathet Lao units. The best that could be hoped for was for Colonels Law and Tyrrell to continue giving advice, for Washington to keep up its MAP deliveries, and for Water Pump to sustain its highly productive T-28 training program. As then established, the Army attaché, air attaché, and requirements office staffs were ample. In summary, Unger argued, activating the MAAG would have no impact on the enemy, would violate the Geneva accords, and would tie American prestige to "an inept and uninspired army." After weighing the pros and cons, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended no expansion of the military assistance and advisory role in Laos. If U.S. aims changed, however, the chiefs said the question should be reexamined. Secretary McNamara concurred and all thought of reintroducing the MAAG at that time ended.¹⁰⁸

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During the summer of 1964, the war in northern Laos underwent a series of escalations—some subtle, others violent. As if played on a giant chessboard, each move by one side was matched by the other's countermove, resulting in deeper American, [redacted] and North Vietnamese involvement. Yankee Team began as a modest photographic effort to counter the Pathet Lao's refusal to let Souvanna's government have access to its territory. This effort soon grew to encompass armed escorts, with new rules designed for the new situation. Escorts flew ahead of the photo planes, bombing and strafing to deter enemy flak batteries from opening fire. What originally started out as unarmed reconnaissance was, by mid-1964, one step short of being armed reconnaissance without the benefit of the cover of photo reconnaissance.

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This period witnessed a strengthening of ambassadorial control over U.S. military operations in Laos. Ambassador Unger, better attuned than his predecessor to military operations, proved more flexible in his dealings with high-ranking officers. He and Admiral Felt succeeded in resolving their differences and a harmonious relationship developed. The two also improved relations with the governments of Laos and Thailand; Unger nurtured a mutual trust with Souvanna, while Felt maintained close relations with Thai leaders [redacted]

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106. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 165, Jul 26, 1964.

107. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1628, Jun 15, 1964.

108. () *Ibid*; JCSM-574-64, Reintroduction into Laos of a Military Assistance and Advisory Organization, Jun 27, 1964; memo, ASD/ISA to SECDEF, same subj, Jul 13, 1964; memo, SECDEF to ASD/ISA, same subj, Jul 14, 1964.

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Early command and control arrangements for USAF units operating from Thai bases were unclear and at times conflicted with normal procedures. In theory, the 35th Tactical Group at Don Muang controlled all in-country assets as a detachment of 2d Air Division,¹⁰⁹ which in turn reported to Thirteenth Air Force. In reality, the command lines were not so precise. Although the Water Pump detachment received its maintenance and logistic support from the 35th Group, it was responsible to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI for training and to Ambassador Unger for out-country operations. Such an arrangement irritated the U.S. Army's Maj. Gen. Ernest F. Easterbrook, then serving in Bangkok as Deputy Commander, MACTHAI. As the senior American military officer in Thailand, Easterbrook believed he should control all U.S. military activity in the country. In February, he tried to get the special air warfare unit attached to him because of its training mission, but General Smart thwarted him. Smart contended that while Water Pump was charged with training, these activities did not fall within the charter of a Military Assistance Advisory Group or a Joint United States Military Advisory Group. The detachment's mission was closer to operations, meaning support for Ambassador Unger and the Royal Laotian Government. Admiral Felt sided with Smart in this dispute, especially after he realized the Air Force general had wisely enlisted the support of Unger, who also opposed a takeover of Water Pump by MACTHAI.¹¹⁰

However, there were signs that the conditions might change. Scrambling of the F-100s from Takhli on June 6 to rescue Lieutenant Klusmann pointed up the need to define more closely the command and control procedures. Although Ambassador Martin was able to placate the Thai over the incident, Prime Minister Thanom was disturbed over the multiplicity of command channels and the trouble he and other RTG members had in determining who was responsible for each U.S. military activity in the country. Martin attributed this confusion to the unilateral creation of MACTHAI by President Kennedy in 1962 after Phoumi's loss of Nam Tha. Its mission had been to handle the operations of Joint Task Force 116 and any future deployments of U.S. units. Army Gen. Paul D. Harkins, then COMUSMACV, was also designated COMUSMACTHAI. The Thai did not object because Marshal Sarit Thanarat liked and respected General Harkins. After the signing of the Geneva accords, the units of JTF 116 returned to their parent outfits, but the MACTHAI structure was left intact. Moreover, General Easterbrook, CHJUSMAGTHAI, retained the title DEPCOMUSMACTHAI; and again, the Thai did not object. The escalation of the war in South Vietnam during the next two years changed the situation, and the RTG became quite sensitive to any linking of activities in South Vietnam with those in Thailand. When President Johnson announced that Harkins would leave his Saigon post in late June, the RTG deemed it time to reexamine all command and control arrangements. By itself, the Thai proposal posed no insurmountable obstacles; but Thanom believed that all U.S. activities in the country should be concentrated under General Easterbrook.¹¹¹

General Moore had been advised earlier of the Royal Thailand Government's attitude. On June 5, he proposed that PACAF establish Detachment 2, 35th Tactical Group, at Udom as an "organizational vehicle" for Laos operations that would "preclude interference from MACTHAI and JUSMAGTHAI." The proposal included vesting operational command and control in an officer known as the Deputy Commander for Laos Affairs who would provide liaison, advice, and assistance to Ambassador Unger. Due to the rising importance of air operations in Laos, Moore suggested that a control and reporting post (CRP) and an air support operations center (ASOC) be placed at Udom to provide the deputy commander a way to control

109. Besides Detachment 1 at Korat, the 35th Tactical Group governed the 331st, 332d, and 333d Air Base Squadrons located at Takhli, Ubon, and Udom, respectively. Water Pump was supported by the 333d. [Hist, 2d Air Div, Jan-Jun 64, p 127.]

110. Msg, 13th AF to PACAF, 13 CCR-6-003, May 1, 1964; hist, 2d AD, Jan-Jun 64, p 123.

111. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2104, Jun 8, 1964, PACAF to CSAF, Jun 12, 1964.

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tactical operations. Secure communications would be set up to link the ASOC with the 2d Air Division AOC in Saigon, the AOC in Vientiane, and other Thai bases having USAF tenants. The deputy commander position could come from present 2d Air Division manpower authorizations, but Moore asked for twenty-four new spaces to man the ASOC. Under this plan, the 35th Tactical Group would continue to furnish administrative and logistic support to the new headquarters and USAF units in Thailand.¹¹²

● PACAF approved the 2d Air Division proposal on June 7, but the move had to have RTG approval and had not been coordinated with the American embassy. When Ambassador Martin heard of the plan, he sent a stinging letter to Maj. Gen. Sam Maddux, Jr. (Thirteenth Air Force Commander and Moore's immediate superior) scoring the "back-door approach." Martin preferred a MACV-type organization, with the Air Force component commander in MACTHAI directing air operations in Laos. This, of course, would have placed General Easterbrook in the middle of the picture, a move the Air Force did not relish. To smooth Martin's feathers, Moore sat down with him and Easterbrook in Bangkok on July 9. He succeeded in convincing the ambassador of the need for the headquarters, along with the ASOC and the CRP. He promised both men closer cooperation between the new command and 2d Air Division on the one hand and MACTHAI and the embassy on the other. Martin next approached the RTG and secured permission to put the new organization at Udon.¹¹³

● On July 18, the 2d Air Division advance party reached Udon. The former director of the Tan Son Nhut AOC, Col. Jack H. McCreery, was appointed Deputy Commander for Laos Affairs; and the 315th Air Division began airlifting the ASOC and CRP on the 21st. The move, completed within forty-eight hours, entailed twenty-one C-130 and eight C-124 flights, with over thirty-three tons of cargo and 145 passengers. On July 26 the ASOC and CRP were operationally ready and manned by members of the 5th Tactical Control Group and 1st Mobile Communications Group. (The air support operations center was really a tactical air control center, but because of RTG sensitivity to the word "tactical," the ASOC nomenclature was adopted.)¹¹⁴

● When Colonel McCreery assumed his new post on July 25, his title was changed to Deputy Commander, 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force. As such, he was General Moore's personal representative in Thailand to Ambassadors Martin and Unger. McCreery was first told to take operational control of all USAF units "in the area." On August 3, his command was confined to the USAF units based at Udon; but for planning, he was prepared to assume operational control of all USAF units in Thailand and Laos. This additional control was only under contingency operations and exercised by McCreery through the 35th Tactical Group. The 35th followed up with a notice that it retained operational control of all USAF units in Thailand, except those at Udon. The command limitations were soon made part of a 2d Air Division regulation detailing the deputy commander's organization and mission, but the new directive did not remove from McCreery's control any USAF unit in Thailand that supported air operations in Laos.¹¹⁵

● As 2d Air Division commander, General Moore had this responsibility for all of Southeast Asia; but because of the expanding USAF role in Laos, a single agency was needed to control all search and rescue operations outside Vietnam. Although SAR in Laos was the exclusive domain of Air America USAF aircraft were authorized to furnish rescue combat air patrol. However, at a June 15 meeting at Udon, Air America officials said they were not staffed or equipped to

112. ● Hist, 2d AD, Jan-Jun 64, p 123; Helmka and Hale, pp 9-13.

113. ● MR, Maj Gen Joseph H. Moore, Comdr, 2d AD, subj: Visit with Ambassador Martin and Major General Easterbrook, Jul 9, 1964; Helmka and Hale, pp 9-13.

114. ● Helmka and Hale, pp 10-12.

115. ● Msgs, 2d AD to Det 2, 35th Tac Gp, 250956Z Jul 64, 031108Z Aug 64, 35th Tac Gp to 331st ABS, et al, 071105Z Aug 64; 2d ADR, Organization and Mission-Field, Deputy Commander, 2d Air Division, Thailand, Sep 18, 1964.

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provide the around-the-clock, all-weather SAR that would be required with the increased air activity. Even now, normal airlift operations put the H-34s in the air from nine to eleven hours a day. Well-organized search and rescue, with helicopters on ground alert, would demand an increase in personnel and H-34s as well as an upgrading of the airline's communications network with expensive UHF equipment.¹¹⁶

This conference prompted General Moore to take several steps that eventually led to the creation of the first USAF search and rescue structure in Southeast Asia outside South Vietnam. First, he delegated his SAR authority for Laos to the new Udom ASOC; and on June 19, he placed a small detachment of the 1st Air Rescue Squadron at the austere Thai base of Nakhon Phanom, a move that had been approved by the Royal Thailand Government on June 18. Known as Rescue 2, this unit had two HH-43B Huskie helicopters and thirty-six personnel. Its helicopters carried single-sideband (SSB) and UHF radios that could reach out 100 miles from their base on the Mekong River. Launch orders were issued by Tan Son Nhut's rescue control center, Udom's ASOC, or the SAR commander. Rescue combat air patrol was flown by carrier-based A-1s standing ramp alert at Nakhon Phanom. To cover the Laotian panhandle, the Marines positioned two H-34s at Khe Sanh in South Vietnam. These helicopters had a 120-mile range, and their rescue combat air patrol was performed by carrier-based fighters on strip alert at Da Nang. For airborne control, an HU-16 amphibian was sent to Da Nang. This plane featured radar and UHF/VHF/SSB radios, and it had enough fuel to stay aloft all day. It orbited over Nakhon Phanom and acted as a communications relay aircraft during all missions.¹¹⁷

On June 20, the Royal Thailand Government granted PACAF permission to use its bases for search and rescue operations. Two days later, the Pacific Air Rescue Center at Tan Son Nhut worked out procedures for coordinating rescues between Air America and USAF assets. Under the agreement, Air America helicopters were scrambled either by the air attaché in Vientiane or by the HU-16. In every case, the procedures included informing both ambassadors whenever a search and rescue operation was needed.¹¹⁸

Militarily, there was a burgeoning emphasis on air power. The lamentable state of the Laotian government's troops, plus a growing tendency on the part of field commanders to call for air support in place of artillery, forced more of the strike burden on the RLAF and [redacted] pilots. That they could support ground forces to the extent they did, in the face of growing ground fire, can be attributed to the training and assistance afforded by Water Pump at Udom.

Politically, the American position did not change. The United States continued to support the Geneva accords and the neutrality and independence of Laos. Souvanna's government was still seen as the only means through which this could be done. However, these goals were in conflict—Washington realized that to keep Souvanna in power, limited and carefully controlled departures from the Geneva accords were necessary. To achieve its main intent, the United States realized that some provisions of the 1962 agreement had to be set aside; but as Secretary Rusk noted, had the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese lived up to the accords, these limited actions would not have been required.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, no moves were undertaken until alternate methods had been thoroughly explored, with Souvanna's views and desires always respected.

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116. Ltr, Dir/Current Ops, 2d AD, to Comdr, 2d AD, *et al*, subj: Report of Staff Visit, Jun 22, 1964; Anderson, pp 33-34; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 285.

117. Msgs, PACAF to 5th AF, 160942Z Jun 64; AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 217, Jun 18, 1964; Helmka and Hale, pp 119-121.

118. Helmka and Hale, p 121; msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 190336Z Jun 64.

119. Memo, Benjamin H. Read, Exec Secy, Dept of State, to McGeorge Bundy, White House, subj: Laos Situation, Sep 18, 1964; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 524, Sep 29, 1964.

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