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PART III:

Air Power Redresses the Balance, 1969-1973 (U)

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Chapter XIII

The Enemy Reaches Muong Soui (U)

● The communist offensive at the opening of 1969 caused a great deal of apprehension among State Department officials. The American game plan for Southeast Asia called for de-escalation, but in northern Laos the North Vietnamese were following a different script. Shortly before leaving office, Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy visited the Russian chargé d'affaires, Yuri N. Tcherniakov, to warn that "renewed pressure in Laos could confront the new administration with a very serious problem." Tcherniakov tried to downplay the matter, claiming that North Vietnamese actions were purely in response to "threats" posed by Operation Pig Fat. Bundy countered by observing that a few hundred Meo defending their homeland hardly constituted a threat to North Vietnam. The Russian remained unmoved but promised to inform his government of Bundy's views.¹

● Back in Laos, the communist offensive led to the first public admission of U.S. bombing activities by any top Laotian official. On February 12, 1969, in an exclusive interview with United Press International, Souvanna Phouma admitted that the United States had been bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail and North Vietnamese troop concentrations in northern Laos. According to the prime minister, "we have no other means to stop them [the North Vietnamese]." Souvanna followed up this interview by informing the Pathet Lao representatives in Vientiane that he would halt the American bombing if the North Vietnamese would withdraw from Laos. In reply, the Pathet Lao demanded an "unconditional" halt to the bombing but did not mention the North Vietnamese.²

● With popular attention focused on South Vietnam, the United Press International story went practically unnoticed by the American public, and the State Department advised Ambassador Sullivan that the "no comment" policy on U.S. military operations in Laos was still in force. The State Department also suggested that, while a bombing halt in northern Laos might be acceptable in exchange for North Vietnamese withdrawal, there was no question of halting operations against the trail until the war in South Vietnam had been resolved.³

● The communist offensive likewise injected a sense of urgency into a number of USAF programs already under way. One of these was the Raven forward air controller program. There were twelve Ravens assigned to Laos in November 1968, about half of them at Long Tieng. As the pace of the war quickened, the Ravens found themselves overextended and unable to handle all of the available sorties and their obsolete O-1s did not stand up to the primitive conditions at most of the forward sites from which they operated. The crude dirt airstrips tore up the landing gear, while dust and gravel choked the engine. There were no maintenance men or facilities at most of the lima sites. The pilots, occasionally aided by air operations center personnel, performed their own routine maintenance between the one-hundred-hour periodic maintenance trips to Udom. This procedure proved wholly unsatisfactory, as the O-1s

1. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 8110, Jan 17, 1969.
 2. ● Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 140033Z Feb 69.
 3. ● *Ibid.*

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experienced fourteen partial or total engine failures during the last three months of 1968. Such conditions threatened to cripple the entire operation.⁴

Responding to the crisis, PACAF sent a team to Udon to completely survey the Raven program and its needs. The upshot was an increase in the number of Ravens from twelve to sixteen (later raised to twenty-two), and the number of aircraft jumped from eight to sixteen. Six USAF maintenance men were dispatched to Laos to keep the planes operational between periodic inspections. Colonel Tyrrell used this opportunity to renew his bid for U-17 aircraft but was overruled by PACAF.⁵

To supplement the Ravens (and A-1 FAC aircraft), the Air Force introduced jet forward air controllers in March 1969. Jet FACs had operated in southern Laos since 1967, because hotter North Vietnamese Army anti-aircraft fire had driven the slower prop planes from large areas of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In northern Laos, however, AA fire was fairly light until 1969, when, freed from the danger of attack on North Vietnam, the communists moved larger guns into the Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger areas. When the North Vietnamese launched their offensive in January 1969, they covered much of their advance with an impressive array of 37-mm and 57-mm guns besides the usual complement of 12.7-mm and 23-mm weapons. With conditions too dangerous for prop aircraft to operate, the response was to turn to jets. After Lima Site 36 fell, Wolf F-4 FACs from the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Udon began operating in the more heavily defended sectors of eastern Barrel Roll. They were joined by Falcon F-4s from the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udon.

The Falcons frequently teamed with Atlanta RF-4s, also from the 432d Wing at Udon, to combine visual and photo reconnaissance into a single mission. They shared the visual recon task, and the F-4 acted as escort for the unarmed RF-4. When striking a target, the Atlanta RF-4 first took pre-strike photos, after which the Falcon F-4 directed the attacking aircraft onto the target. The RF-4 then returned for post-strike photography. The presence of the RF-4 relieved the F-4 of many of its pre-strike and post-strike duties, allowing more time to direct the attacks. The immediate post-strike photography also made it easier to assess strike results.

The Atlanta/Falcon combination (later changed to Laredo/Bullwhip) soon proved its superiority to the single jet FAC operating on his own. For example, during a typical week in June, eight Atlanta/Falcon missions controlled fifty-four strikes, 6.75 per sortie, while forty Wolf FACs, acting singly, controlled sixty-seven strikes, or 1.68 per sortie. The photo/visual team also secured better strike results. During the strikes mentioned above, the Atlanta/Falcon teams averaged 1.07 secondary explosions per strike compared to 0.75 for the Wolf FACs.⁶

Along with the Atlanta/Falcon program, the 432d Wing developed a system of "hip-pocket targeting," essentially a local version of the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force Tiger target list. Before Atlanta/Falcon, the 432d sent photos to Saigon (and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force) for target selection and scheduling. In April, the wing began to retain a copy for rapid readout for potential targets. Lucrative targets falling within the current rules of engagement were identified and placed on an active list. Target folders, including photographs, route mosaics, and other relevant data were assembled and the Falcon forward air controllers briefed. If other targets were not available, the Falcon could hit one of these hip-pocket targets. Other units in northern Laos developed similar procedures, each tailored to its own particular circumstances and capabilities. The net effect was a marked improvement in bombing results. For example, within the first three weeks, the 432d identified and struck twenty hip-pocket targets in addition to those on the regular schedule.⁷

4. Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Msg, 432d TRW to 1st AF, 270704Z Jun 69, subj: Atlanta/Falcon Concept and Schedule.

7. Hist, 432d TRW, Apr-Jun 69, p 14.

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Although the introduction of jet FACs and hip-pocket targeting enhanced USAF capability, bombing in bad weather and at night needed to be improved.⁸ Accordingly, the Air Force extended its Loran D coverage to northern Laos. Like the jet FAC program, Loran D had been developed for use in North Vietnam and southern Laos, but the worsening situation in Barrel Roll led to its application there. In essence, Loran D employed a computer aboard an F-4 to measure the time difference between signals received from two pair of radio stations. Maps with a Loran D overlay translated geographic coordinates into loran coordinates for use by the F-4s, allowing bombing of a target regardless of the weather. Commando Nail, a system of radar offset aiming points, used easily recognizable radar returns (mountain peaks, a prominent bend in a river, etc.) as fixed reference points. The bearing and distance from these points to a selected target were set into the F-4 computer, which then guided the aircraft to the proper release point. Like Loran D, Commando Nail was suitable solely against area targets such as truck parks, storage areas, and troop concentrations.⁹

Another effort to upgrade air operations in northern Laos was the introduction in January 1969 of airborne radio direction finding, with EC-47 aircraft monitoring and locating enemy radio transmissions. A detachment of three to five EC-47s had operated out of Nakhon Phanom for some time, chiefly covering Steel Tiger and the adjacent areas of North and South Vietnam. However, as the new electronic sensors assumed an ever-greater role in the Commando Hunt campaign, EC-47 missions were gradually switched to northern Laos. By midyear all five EC-47s were working mostly in Barrel Roll. Besides pinpointing enemy headquarters for air strikes, the EC-47 radio intercepts furnished information on communist strength, logistic structure, and intentions. All of this was to prove extremely useful in blunting the enemy thrust.¹⁰ In the opinion of one forward air controller,

[Communications intelligence] does a lot for you. Not just where the transmitters were but what they were saying word-for-word. You can gauge—have some ideas what their attitude or what their supply problems are. If a guy is starving to death, leave him alone. Work on his supply lines little. But if some guy is fat and sassy and causing you a lot of trouble, just bomb the shit out of him. Don't waste your assets on a guy who is not doing anything. For example: There was a guy up near Muong Soui named Nguyen who sent a report to Hanoi every night telling about all the bad guys, which were us, they had been killing that day and all the land that had just been taken and all that kind of stuff; and they would just send him all kinds of supplies, ammo, food. Actually that guy never got off his ass. He never did a thing, and we drew a "no bomb" line around him. We didn't want to get rid of him. Just like you never bomb bad gunners.¹¹

At this point Colonel Duskin, the Army attaché, saw a chance to expand his service's air role in northern Laos. In May 1969 he convinced Robert A. Hurwitz, the deputy mission chief, that the Army's OV-1 Mohawk (call sign Spud) could enhance intelligence collection in Barrel Roll. With side-looking airborne radar and infrared sensors, the Spud gave a direct readout for an observer in the right seat and recorded the image on the observer's screen for later analysis by photo interpreters. Like the EC-47, the OV-1 had flown in South Vietnam and southern Laos for several years. However, as action decreased in Vietnam and the Air Force turned more to sensors for intelligence in Steel Tiger, the Army found less need for its services. Thus, the Army responded favorably to a request from Vientiane to dispatch two of the aircraft to Udom. Using

8. ● Intvw, James T. Bear, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Thomas D. Dejarnette, Asst Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, May 69.

9. ● Memo, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Commando Nail Ops in BR, Feb 14, 1969.

10. ● Talking Paper, 7th AF, ARDF Application in Laos, Jan 14, 1969; Background Paper, 7th AF, ARDF Application in Laos, Sep 20, 1969.

11. ● Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 73.

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infrared sensors to detect enemy bivouac areas and the side-looking airborne radar coupled to a moving target indicator in the cockpit to pick out enemy trucks moving along the roads, the Spud quickly demonstrated its worth at night.¹²

The OV-1s were controlled by the Army attaché, and their missions were not coordinated with either the air attaché or Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. This presented some hazard to USAF aircraft flying in the same area at night, and the OV-1 observers apparently had trouble converting information on their scope to map coordinates that could be passed to the airborne battlefield command and control center. When a Spud returned to Udom, its film was processed and analyzed by Army photo interpreters who reported their findings to the Army attaché (but not to the air attaché or Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force). This drew a strong protest from Colonel Tyrrell who was being upstaged by the Army attaché at the ambassador's morning briefing. Tyrrell further asserted that withholding information until the formal briefing kept the Air Force from acting on it promptly.

Colonel Duskin had an answer to the problem of responsiveness. He proposed that a detachment of armed helicopters be sent to Udom to support the OV-1. G. McMurtrie Godley, who replaced Sullivan as Ambassador to Laos, was enthusiastic, but Colonel Tyrrell was apoplectic. The CIA, MACV, and USAF authorities in Udom and Saigon all lined up against the Army attaché. Armed helicopters were still very much in demand in South Vietnam, and those that the Army could spare were being turned over to the Vietnamese. From Bangkok, Ambassador Unger cabled that while the Thai government was willing to turn its head to the presence of the OV-1s, bringing in armed helicopters was a major escalation that raised "serious questions."¹³

This combined opposition killed the armed helicopter proposal, but the question of how best to use Army (and CIA) intelligence was unanswered. Each agency remained reluctant to share its information with the other, for "security reasons." Each thought it could best exploit its own (and others') intelligence if it were but given the strike assets. Over the years there were numerous attempts to overcome this problem, but they generally foundered on the rock of interservice rivalry. Hence, the data collected by the OV-1 has proven useful to the historian but had no appreciable impact on the conduct of the war.

The 1969 communist offensive also spurred improvement in the Royal Laotian Air Force. Because of Tyrrell's reorganization, T-28 sorties had jumped from 235 in August 1968 to 1,367 by the end of the year—a sixfold increase in just five months.¹⁴ With only fifty-three planes and sixty-one pilots, the Laotians could not sustain this rate, much less reach Tyrrell's desired goal of 2,500 sorties a month. So in February 1969, the air attaché suggested that the number of T-28s be raised to seventy-seven and that forty-eight rather than thirty-six pilots be trained every year. The ambassador was sufficiently impressed with the RLAF's progress—and concerned over the deteriorating military situation—that he vigorously supported the request.¹⁵

After asking for and receiving more specific justification, CINCPAC recommended that the JCS approve the request. But the Joint Chiefs said no, citing the "worldwide shortage" of T-28s and the greater requirements for T-28s to be used for Vietnamese pilot training.¹⁶

12. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to MACV, 140732Z May 69, subj: Use of OV-1 in Barrel Roll, 7th AF to 7th AF/13 AF, 201010Z May 69; MR, DCS/Intel, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: OV-1 Speeds, May 31, 1969.

13. (S) Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 11-13; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to MACV, 261714Z Jul 69, subj: Increased Air Support for Laos, MACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 281310Z Jul 69, subj: Increased Air Support for Laos, AmEmb Bangkok to AmEmb Vientiane, 3472, 281933Z Jul 69.

14. (S) Hist, CINCPAC, 1968, II, 198.

15. (S) Msg, DEPLCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 9043, 111020 Feb 69.

16. (S) Msgs, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, J5 322, 122247Z Feb 69, subj: RLAF Reorganization, to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, 260440Z Feb 69, subj: Additional Justification for Increase in RLAF UE, to JCS, J5322, 152055Z May 69, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 202028Z Feb 69, subj: RLAF Reorganization, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 100330Z Mar 69, subj: Increased UE for RLAF; JCSM 2344/19, May 16, 1969.

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Challenging the JCS position, the ambassador pointed out to the Secretary of State that there were 911 T-28s in existence (Navy, 538; Air Force, 61; foreign governments, 193; and commercial corporations, 119). Consequently, "it would not seem unreasonable to expect that with the proper effort, imagination, and cooperation within the U.S. government our modest request for an increase of twenty-four aircraft could be met." As to the contention that Vietnamese pilot training took precedence, the ambassador argued, "In Laos we have the only active war in the world in which T-28s form an integral part." If there were not sufficient T-28s for both programs, then "the war in Laos where air power has been proved crucial time and again warrants curtailing the VNAF training program."¹⁷ CINCPAC seconded the embassy, but the request fell on deaf ears in Washington. For the moment at least, Vietnamization took precedence over events in Laos.¹⁸

One of the reasons Colonel Tyrrell wanted more T-28s was to support an independent Meo squadron stationed at Long Tieng. Ly Lee, de facto commander of the Meo flyers, had already shown that T-28s could operate out of Long Tieng and it was an hour closer to the fighting. In addition a separate Meo squadron with an air operations center/joint operations center would round out the tactical air control system and put Military Region II on an equal footing with the other military regions. At first General Sourith, RLA commander, opposed the idea. Nonetheless, he realized that the Meo were effectively controlled by General Vang Pao anyway, and a separate squadron would eliminate the social problems of a mixed Lao/Meo unit. He finally came around to Tyrrell's view. The CIA liked the idea of a separate squadron but balked at the establishment of an AOC/JOC.

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Subsequent events swung the CIA to Tyrrell's side, but a separate Meo squadron did not become a reality until October 1969.¹⁹

The Meo flyers meantime operated out of Vientiane, nominally as part of the Lao squadron. They faced their first real test during Operation Pig Fat, and Tyrrell's confidence was fully vindicated as the Meo pressed home their attacks when the Lao refused to fly. In the communist dry-season offensive they kept up the pace, winning a reputation for absolute recklessness. According to one forward air controller, "Their tactic was no tactic. They looked like a swarm of bees when they came in on a target. There was no way to figure them out. Just whoever had an opening would go in. That's the way they fought."²⁰ Another FAC observed

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They would press to the point it was terrifying. Their idea of strafing was sticking a .50 cal in a guy's ear and pulling the trigger. I watched them strafe out 37-mm positions at absolute point-blank range zero—right on the deck, didn't have 20 feet of altitude, and they would make repeated passes. They had more guts than anybody I have ever seen. . . . They set their bomb fuzes for 2-second separation and just blew themselves right out of the air—well, not out of the air, but they would come back with 80, 90, 100 holes in them. They just thought it was funnier than hell. They were something else!²¹

In particular, Ly Lee became known as a fearless and indefatigable leader. The Lao normally flew one or two missions a day, and the Meo six to eight. Ly Lee would fly ten to twelve mission a day even when he was ill. In many cases, he would not get out of his aircraft between missions. With the engine running, he would have his plane

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17. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 3544, 020833Z Jun 69, subj: MASF Laos T-28 Aircraft UE.
18. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, III, 191-93.
19. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 13-14.
20. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Maj Michael E. Cavanaugh, Raven FAC, Nov 21, 1974, p 17.
21. Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, pp 17-19.

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refueled and rearmed while he gulped a handful of gummy rice and washed it down with fiery Meo liquor. When his wingman wore out, he just went on by himself. At the end of the day, he would be so exhausted that he had to be lifted out of the cockpit; yet the next day he would be back for more. He would also carry more bombs than any other pilot.²² The Americans tried to get Ly Lee to slow down but to no avail. When he was killed in July 1969, he had logged over three thousand combat hours.

Understandably, the Meo loss rate was high. At the time of Ly Lee's death, just one of his original comrades was still alive. Meanwhile, five more had graduated, but a year later three of them were dead and five others had taken their place. By June 1972 only one of these was alive, a cripple, while eleven new pilots had joined the squadron. The saying, "They fly until they die" applied to the Meo more than to any other group. The Meo seemed to know they were doomed and they fought like it.²³

In a further effort to strengthen the Royal Laotian Air Force, Colonel Tyrrell tried to secure AC-47 gunships. In the interim, he proposed that four Laotian C-47s be converted to gunships by mounting three .50-caliber machineguns, a loudspeaker, and flare dispenser in each aircraft.²⁴ Although the .50-caliber version offered less firepower than existing USAF gunships, Tyrrell thought it met the Laotian's base defense needs at night, and the inclusion of loudspeakers provided a psychological warfare capability. As envisioned by the air attaché, one gunship would be assigned to each of the four main airfields—Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse.²⁵

Considerable correspondence on the C-47 conversion ensued between the embassy, the deputy chief of the military advisory group, CINCPAC, and the Air Force Logistics Command. On February 28, 1969, the Air Force approved the requested modification (but without the loudspeaker) if there were funds. The following month, however, Air Force headquarters advised that funds were not available. As a substitute, it offered eight C-47s and a like number of surplus SU-11 miniguns, 7.62-mm weapons that fired six thousand rounds per minute with a muzzle velocity of 2,750 feet per second. The first five of these aircraft were due to arrive in July, the other three in October.²⁶

In the meantime, Seventh Air Force agreed to make four USAF AC-47s available from the 4th Special Operations Squadron. The embassy at Vientiane had been trying for quite a while to get USAF gunship support, but the aircraft it had in mind was the AC-130 Spectre. During Operation Pig Fat, Tyrrell had asked for Spectre night support but Seventh Air Force turned down the request due to the requirements of Commando Hunt. While the battle for Lima Site 36 was being waged, the embassy renewed its request and an AC-130 was diverted from Steel Tiger. Over the following months, other Spectres were now and then diverted into Barrel Roll to cope with an emergency but none were regularly scheduled. For one thing, Commando Hunt had first priority and only a desperate situation in the north coupled with bad weather in the south justified shifting the Spectre. Then, too, the AC-130's armament was most effective against vehicles while the need in Barrel Roll was for night defense of isolated lima sites and other close air support missions. For this role, Seventh Air Force felt the older (and less expensive) AC-47 Spooky was better suited.²⁷ In addition, the Spooky gunships could be spared

22. *Ibid.*

23. Scott intvw Apr 6, 1973, p 43.

24. While in the United States, Colonel Tyrrell had become aware that the Air Force Logistics Command was experimenting with this configuration.

25. AF Div Hist Sum, Apr 1-Sep 30, 1968; hist, CINCPAC, 1968, p 323.

26. AF Div Hist Sums, Oct 1-Dec 31, 1968, Jan 1-Mar 31, 1969; hist, CINCPAC, 1968, p 324, 1969, pp 208-9.

27. The AC-47 carried three 7.62-mm miniguns. The AC-130 carried four of these and four 20-mm weapons. Later versions of the AC-130 substituted two 40-mm guns or one 75-mm cannon for two of the 20-mm guns.

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because of the falloff of combat in South Vietnam. The embassy continued to favor Spectre but accepted the AC-47s. The first two came to Udom on March 11, 1968, and were joined by two more four days later. The Spookies flew night support for General Vang Pao, and the C-47 training team used one of them during the day to instruct Laotian gunship crews.²⁸

● The gunships had an instant and dramatic impact. They flew their first mission on March 13 in defense of Lima Site 1 and devastated the North Vietnamese. For months the Spookies saw almost continuous action, winning praise at every turn. Between March and October, the AC-47s flew 376 sorties in support of 383 government positions, none of which fell. On the night of March 20, for example, three AC-47s supporting Lima Site 32 were credited with killing 175 enemy. Two weeks afterwards a single Spooky, responding to a Laotian ground team, struck an enemy staging area near Lima Site 50. After the strike, ground troops saw the communists carrying away a "large number" of dead and reported that the target area was drenched in blood. On April 25 the Spookies were back at Site 32 beating off another communist assault. Again the enemy was reported "carrying hordes of dead and wounded out of the area" owing to the gunship strikes.²⁹

● Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force deemed the gunships "the deciding factor" in preventing the collapse of friendly positions north of the Plain of Jars, and a 4th Special Operations Squadron message said:

Since the arrival of Spooky, no major sites have fallen. Probably as important as the damage inflicted on the enemy is the psychological effect of the Spookies on the defenders. The value of the AC-47 has been widely publicized in the northeast and the guerrillas have complete faith in the reliability of the system. Consequently, troops on the ground have stiffened their resistance to heavy enemy attacks that would have been successful in other years.³⁰

● In fact, the guerrillas may have become too enamored of the gunships. Sometimes ground commanders may have called on Spookies needlessly—just to drop a few flares to scare off a real or imagined enemy in the area or to put on a firepower demonstration to make their own men feel more secure.³¹

● The improvements in air operations came none too soon, for by March 1969 conditions were critical for the Laotian government. With about two months left in the dry season, the enemy seemed to have the time and resources to drive toward the Meo heartland southwest of the Plain of Jars or to push westward toward the neutralist stronghold at Muong Soui. The collapse of Lima Site 36 left only the lightly held crescent formed by Lima Sites 50, 6, and 32 stood in his way. In the embassy's view, the loss of Muong Soui and Long Tieng would "seriously shake the fragile government here and could lead to its upset."³²

● At this juncture the allies were handed a sudden stroke of good fortune. A North Vietnamese defector disclosed that the chief enemy thrust would come north of the Plain of Jars toward Muong Soui. The offensive was to begin on March 23 with an attack on the lima site crescent. In particular, the North Vietnamese 924th Regiment had orders to seize Lima Site 32 and kill everyone in it—men, women, and children.³³

28. ● Talking Paper, 7th AF/13th AF, Spooky Gunships, May 69; msg, 4th SOS to 14th SOW, 200437Z Mar 69, subj: AC-47 Employment in Thailand.

29. ● Target: *Barrel Roll, March-October 1969* (Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969), pp 22-23.

30. ● Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 141130Z Mar 69, subj: AC-47 Gunship Employment in Barrel Roll, 4th SOS to 14th SOW, 191413Z May 69, subj: Flight Operation Summary.

31. ● Intvw, James T. Bear, Proj CHECO hist, with Lt Col Alan F. Crites, 4th SOS, Jul 2, 1969.

32. ● Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 260902Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance.

33. ● Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 110746Z Mar 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II. This was a sharp departure from previous practice. Normally each side sought to surround the other on three sides, always leaving the defenders the option of withdrawing or fighting to the end.

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Believing the crescent could not withstand a major attack, Vang Pao decided to forestall it by launching an all-out offensive on the Plain of Jars. Souvanna Phouma approved the plan and joined Vang Pao in a personal appeal for "massive air support." Embassy officials judged the scheme completely impractical, given the disparity in forces and exhaustion of the Meo. Mr. Hurwitz, deputy mission chief, dubbed the idea as "an act of desperation reminiscent of the last German counteroffensive in the winter of 1944." The Americans finally got Vang Pao calmed down and Hurwitz said the general was "reverting to the old Vang Pao, guerrilla leader par excellence, after briefly flirting with the role of Vang Rundstedt."³⁴

As an alternative, the embassy suggested a modest three-day air campaign (Operation Rain Dance) against transshipment points, base camps, storage areas, and headquarters in what had always been restricted areas on the eastern edge of the plain. It was hoped the enemy would construe the air strikes as the prelude to a counteroffensive and return to defend his sanctuaries, easing pressure on the Lima site crescent. To reinforce the illusion of an offensive, Vang Pao would carry out ground probes toward Route 4, southeast of the plain, and Route 7 to the northeast.

In the first truly effective joint effort, CIA, air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force planners developed 345 targets. In contrast to past operations, the targets were grouped into target complexes each covered by a single mosaic photo map. Individual targets within a complex were given a priority and outlined on the mosaic. Target coordinates and priority were annotated next to the target itself. The mosaics were then numbered and briefed to the Raven forward air controllers on March 15. Using this system, one FAC could be assigned to direct strikes on Mosaics 1 and 2 while another worked 10 and 11. This afforded an element of target control and ensured geographic separation.

The request to Seventh Air Force was for eighty sorties a day starting on March 17. Sixty sorties would support the Ravens while the other twenty struck targets along Route 7. General Brown okayed the plan but pared the sorties to sixty-five. Souvanna Phouma also approved and lifted the bombing restrictions on the Plain of Jars except for a six-mile circle around the towns of Xieng Khouangville, Phong Savan, and Khangkhai.³⁵

The results of Rain Dance surpassed the Americans' wildest expectations. Although only seven targets were struck the first day, forward air controllers reported "hundreds of secondary explosions as stockpiles of ammunition were destroyed and large POL fires started."³⁶ Since these sanctuaries had never been hit before, the communists had done little to conceal or protect their stores and they were very vulnerable to air strikes. With results on March 18 as impressive, Seventh Air Force opted to extend the operation "as long as resources are available, lucrative targets exist, and weather permits."³⁷ By March 20, 261 USAF and 43 RLAFF sorties had caused 486 secondary explosions, 244 fires, 44 POL fires, and 3 road cuts. There were 570 structures destroyed and 75 damaged; 28 bunkers and over 160 feet of trench were demolished. Also wiped out were 700 pounds of supplies, a 105-mm howitzer, 6 gun positions, 25 pack animals, and a radio station.³⁸ Five days later, Colonel Tyrrell reported that 192 (55 percent) of the original targets had been destroyed,³⁹ but as important as the individual strike results was the systematic destruction of the targets.

34. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 240554Z Mar 69, subj: M-16 Rifles and Sec Green's Visit.

35. () Background Paper, 7th AF/13th AF, Maj Gen Vang Pao's Planned Offensive, n.d. [ca Mar 69]; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 191249Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance, 7th AF to AIG 8272, 161437Z Mar 69, subj: 7AF Weekly Operating Intentions (Mar 18-24, 1969).

36. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 191249Z Mar 69.

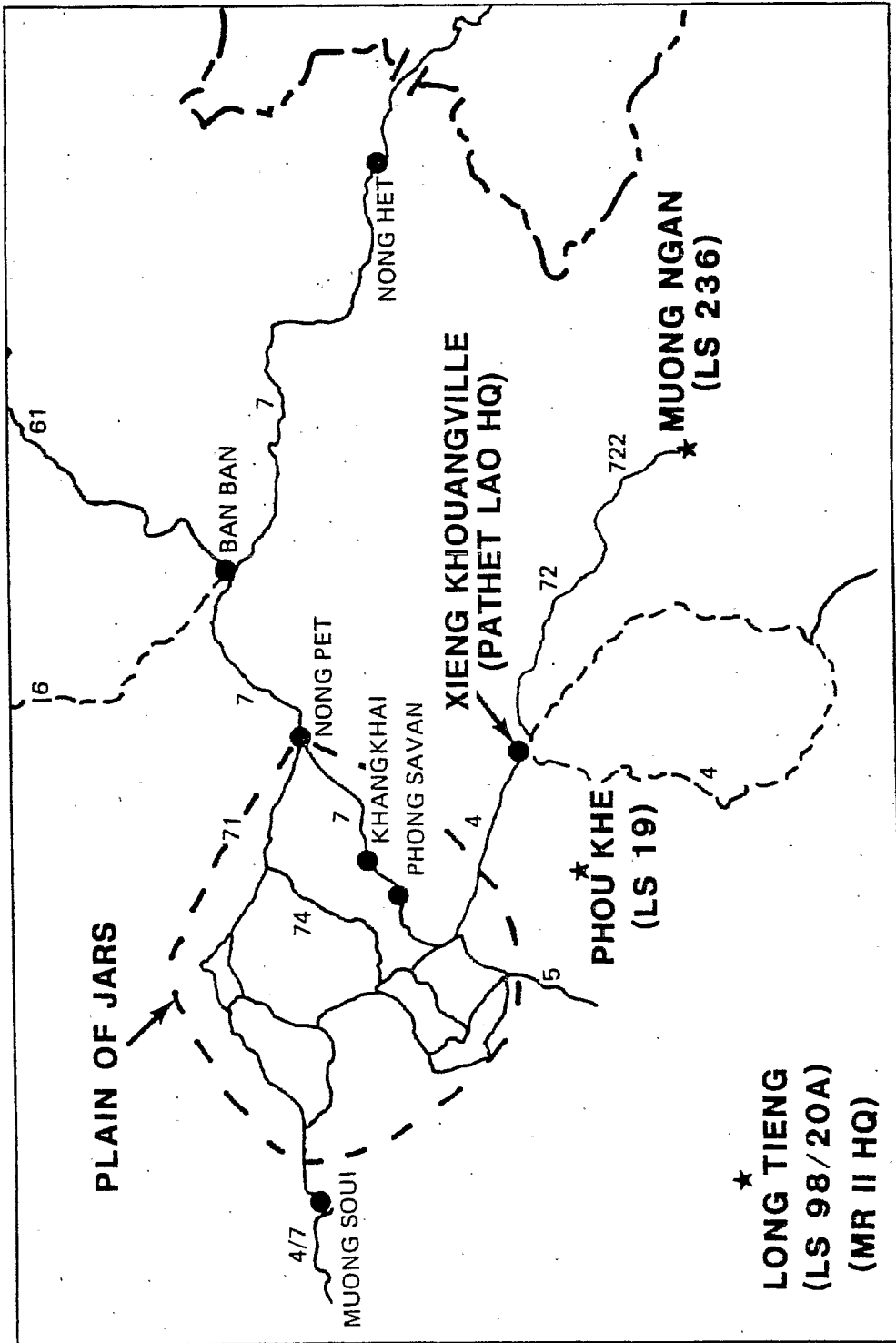
37. () Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 270734Z Mar 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.

38. () *Ibid.*

39. () Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 250417Z Mar 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.

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Behind this aerial assault, Vang Pao began his ground attack on March 23. The initial objective was Lima Site 19 about eleven miles southwest of Xieng Khouangville. From there he sent out patrols to harass Route 4 between Xieng Khouangville and the Plain of Jars. With the methodical destruction of supplies and the disruption of communications, the enemy could not counter this move and fell back into the remaining sanctuaries, principally Xieng Khouangville and Khangkhai. By the end of the month, Vang Pao had occupied Phou Khe (Lima Site 19) and Meo patrols were probing along Route 4 and onto the southeastern edge of the plain.⁴⁰

Coincident with this southern "feint," guerrilla teams from lima sites north and south of Route 7 moved to cut that artery. Bombing in this area had not been as intense as farther south, however, and the enemy easily repulsed these assaults. The communists proceeded with their attack on the lima site crescent, even though they must have known their plan had been compromised. The North Vietnamese seized Lima Site 50 and nearby Lima Site 50A on March 14, but a combination of gunships and tactical fighters smashed the assault on Lima Site 32. Later that same day, the Meo were able to reoccupy Sites 50 and 50A.⁴¹

Even so, the embassy viewed the situation as "extremely critical." It was still too soon to determine the impact of Rain Dance. Vast amounts of supplies had been destroyed, but so far there had been no ground reaction. Souvanna was worried too; at a cabinet meeting on March 25, he chose to remove the remaining restrictions on the Plain of Jars except for a 820-foot circle around the Chinese cultural mission in Khangkhai.⁴² The prime minister informed Hurwitz, deputy mission chief, that if these strikes did not slow the communist advance he would request B-52 strikes in the north.⁴³ Two days later, the State Department assented to these changes but said B-52 strikes would not be approved.⁴⁴ Seventh Air Force, too, was wary of stepping up the tempo of air operations in the north. On March 28 Maj. Gen. David C. Jones, Seventh Air Force deputy chief of staff for operations, warned General Seith that too much air power could "whet their appetites for air to the extent they fall back and count only on air." He went on to request the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force deputy commander to use his influence to moderate further requests.⁴⁵

Despite these reservations, Seventh Air Force kept up its support. Forty F-4s and F-105s hit Xieng Khouangville, demolishing fifty buildings and most of the supplies stored there. By the time Rain Dance officially ended on April 7, Colonel Tyrrell reported that 80 percent of the original targets had been destroyed by a total of 730 USAF and RLAFF sorties. The remaining targets and 150 new ones were furnished to the Ravens, and the embassy asked Seventh Air Force to schedule sixty sorties a day until all of these targets were wiped out.⁴⁶

Heartened by Rain Dance, which had yielded the most impressive results ever in Laos, Seventh Air Force scheduled fifty sorties a day for the rest of the month. Two of these missions achieved especially spectacular results. On April 15, EC-47s located a major enemy headquarters on the Plain of Jars. Twenty-six jets hit this complex the next day, completely knocking out the headquarters. A few days later, a [redacted] reported a cave loaded with fuel on the southeastern

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40. (U) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 100315Z Apr 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.

41. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 260902Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance.

42. (U) The mission had been established in the early 1960s. When Laos formally recognized Peking in 1964, the king directed all Chinese officials to move to Vientiane and to close all other establishments. CIA reports revealed that the Chinese had complied and the cultural mission building had been turned over to the Pathet Lao. Since then it had served as a major storage facility. Inasmuch as Souvanna was wary of any action that might offend the Chinese, the mission remained off limits.

43. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 260902Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance.

44. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 280036Z Mar 69.

45. (U) Ltr, Maj Gen David C. Jones, DCS/Ops, 7th AF, to Maj Gen Louis T. Seith, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 28, 1969.

46. (U) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 100315Z Apr 69.

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edge of the plain. A flight of F-105s on April 21 managed to put a Bullpup missile through the mouth of the cave. The forward air controller described the explosion as the largest he had ever witnessed. Explosions coming from the mouth of the cave and ventilator shafts on the top of the mountain continued for sixteen hours, and a village over half a mile away erupted in a ball of fire—the communists had dug an access tunnel from the village to the cave.⁴⁷

■ In the wake of these air actions, the Meo pushed deeper into enemy territory. What began as a diversion had developed into a major advance. Yet during the entire operation, Vang Pao never used more than one thousand men (three battalions). The Meo had not fired a shot in anger nor suffered a single casualty because air strikes had simply rendered the enemy's position untenable. On April 29 the Meo walked into Xieng Khouangville unopposed—the first time government forces had occupied the town since 1962. Meantime, another Meo force took over Ban Muong Ngan, and all the territory southwest of Routes 4 and 72 was in government hands as were vast stores of matériel left behind by the communists.

■ The loss of Xieng Khouangville finally forced the foe to shift some forces away from the lima site crescent toward Xieng Khouangville. By mid-May these troops were beginning to make their presence felt, and Vang Pao decided it was time to withdraw. Meanwhile, three fresh NVA battalions were reported to be on their way to Laos with orders to take Muong Soui "or die trying."⁴⁸

■ To cover his withdrawal and intercept the North Vietnamese reinforcements, Vang Pao elected to renew his earlier efforts to cut Route 7. Seventh Air Force was once more asked to assist the operation. In response, CIA and USAF officials worked out a scaled-down version of Rain Dance scheduled for five days beginning May 22. Called Stranglehold, it included 150 identified targets, with additional targets to be developed as the campaign unfolded. Because Route 7 had always been open to air strikes, the Stranglehold targets were better dispersed and camouflaged and more heavily defended than those associated with Rain Dance. The Americans therefore anticipated the results would be less striking but, if successful, would have greater long-term significance.⁴⁹ Seventh Air Force was requested to furnish fifty sorties a day over and above the seventy already scheduled into Barrel Roll. Saigon approved the plan but selected only seventy-five of the recommended targets, and reduced the sorties to ninety for all of Barrel Roll.⁵⁰

■ Unfortunately, the ground operation met the same fate as its predecessor although guerrilla teams did briefly enter Ban Ban and Nong Pet. The air attacks, however, extracted a high price from the foe. During the five-day operation, 250 sorties struck 68 of the planned targets, demolishing or damaging 516 structures and touching off 296 secondary explosions, 142 fires, and 70 POL fires. It also destroyed 16 antiaircraft artillery sites, 14 trucks, 5 mortar positions, and 2 tanks.⁵¹

■ By the end of May, Vang Pao had completed his withdrawal and the communists resumed control of all ground lost in Rain Dance. It appeared, however, that the enemy offensive against Muong Soui had been forestalled and air power was given the major credit. Between November 1968 and May 1969 the Air Force had flown over 11,000 sorties in Barrel Roll (up

47. (S) Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 291432Z Apr 69, subj: Barrel Roll Operations Summary, Apr 7-28, 1969; Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969, p 34; Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 80; Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, p 6.

48. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 091151Z Jun 69, subj: Critique of Dry Season Offensive.

49. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 181013Z May 69, subj: Tactical Air Support.

50. (S) *Ibid*; msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 191732Z May 69, subj: Operation Stranglehold, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 280323Z May 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.

51. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 280323Z May 69, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 020634Z Jun 69, subj: Operation Stranglehold.

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from 5,000 the year before). Laotian sorties had also doubled (from 4,943 to 9,818). According to the embassy, "The RLAF and USAF, cooperating splendidly, constituted the decisive factor in thwarting the enemy."⁵²

As the rains commenced and progovernment and communist forces sparred inconclusively along the western edge of the plain, the embassy concluded that major operations were at an end. Actually the main enemy blow was about to fall. Taking advantage of the poor weather, which hampered air operations, the North Vietnamese chose to bypass the lima site crescent and to strike directly at Muong Soui. This was the first time the communist forces had attempted a wet-season offensive. Normally, the heavy rains favored the government by bogging down the foe's logistics while providing numerous holes for helicopters and tactical fighters to support the airmobile guerrillas. Even so, the improved communist road network enabled the enemy to move men and supplies forward in spite of the rain. Further, the rain, during mid-June, afforded few openings through which air strikes could pinpoint and destroy troop concentrations. The failure of Stranglehold also apparently convinced the communists they had nothing to fear from the lima sites to their rear.⁵³

The North Vietnamese mounted their offensive on June 18, and three battalions ringed Muong Soui by the twenty-fourth. The four thousand neutralist defenders outnumbered the attackers three to one, but the neutralists were notoriously unreliable and the North Vietnamese had tanks. A three-hundred-man [] artillery battalion and one hundred Meo served as a stiffener for the neutralists. On the morning of June 24 the enemy, supported by six tanks, launched the main assault. A fortuitous break in the weather let thirty-four jets, fourteen A-1s, and twenty-nine RLAF T-28s hit the attackers, destroyed three tanks and damaged another, and held the enemy at bay. Nevertheless the neutralists, who had suffered two killed and sixty-four wounded, deserted the eastern perimeter of the artillery compound and the North Vietnamese captured three 155-mm and five 105-mm howitzers.

That night, AC-47s and tactical fighters broke up a concerted ground and mortar attack, but weather closed in the next morning to curtail air support to eleven sorties. The FAN began a wholesale desertion, but fortunately, the enemy did not renew the assaults. By June 26, just five hundred neutralists remained to defend the site, and that night two hundred more slipped away. Weather crimped air activity as only thirteen sorties could find targets.⁵⁴

Because of the mass desertion, the Americans decided to evacuate the remaining defenders on June 27. A force of twenty-four helicopters assembled at Long Tieng to carry out the evacuation, designated Swan Lake. It included two UH-1s and five CH-3s from the 20th Special Operations Squadron, three CH-53s from the 21st Special Operations Squadron, three HH-53s from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron, and eleven Air America H-34s.

At dawn on the twenty-seventh the North Vietnamese renewed their attack, spearheaded by four tanks. Clearing weather enabled twenty-one USAF and fifteen RLAF fighters to maul the enemy, but the government position was basically hopeless. At two in the afternoon the order was given to implement Swan Lake, and the evacuation got under way an hour and a half later. By nightfall, 231 Thai, 51 Meo, and about 200 dependents had been airlifted to safety at Long Tieng. The rest of the forces withdrew overland covered by AC-47 gunships.

During the evacuation A-1s supplied air cover, but the helicopters still had to descend through heavy ground fire to make their pickup. One CH-3 from the 20th Special Operations

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52. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 091151Z Jun 69; study, AmEmb Vientiane, subj: Mission Assessment of Dry Season, Jun 16, 1969.

53. Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969, p 55.

54. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 241215Z Jun 69, subj: Muong Soui, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 270801Z Jun 69, subj: Situation Report, Muong Soui.

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Squadron was hit and crashed. The crew and passengers fought off the North Vietnamese with M-16 rifles and grenades until rescued by another helicopter.⁵⁵ Although the loss of Muong Soui was a disheartening chapter in the annals of Laotian warfare, the air strikes by U.S. and Laotian pilots took a heavy toll of the enemy. The air attaché had special praise for the helicopter crews:

No praise can evaluate the aircrews of the unarmed and vulnerable helicopters who time and time again descended into the enemy-controlled areas at minimum altitude and airspeed, crammed their burdens into the overgrossed machines and staggered out of the area to the Long Tieng sanctuary. We were extremely fortunate under the circumstances to sustain only the loss of a mechanical instrument and no loss of life. These deeds should not go unnoted to the men of the Air Force helicopter units and their comrades Air America, Inc.⁵⁶

The saga of Muong Soui did not close with Swan Lake. During the evacuation, a Raven forward air controller, Capt. Michael E. Cavanaugh, and a Meo observer had been directing air strikes to the far east near Ban Ban. Like most Ravens, Cavanaugh worked the area until he had barely enough fuel to make it back to Long Tieng. Arriving over his home base, he could not land because the weather had closed in. Too short on fuel to reach either Luang Prabang or Vientiane, he advised Long Tieng, "I am hurting." Another Raven, one of the last to leave Muong Soui, informed Cavanaugh that some fuel was still stored in a bunker not far from the east end of the runway but that the North Vietnamese had occupied the field. With the one alternative a crash landing in the mountains or on the plain, Captain Cavanaugh settled on a try for Muong Soui. An A-1 in the area was assigned to fly cover. While the A-1 strafed to pin down the enemy, Cavanaugh landed and taxied as close as he could to the bunker, which contained several fuel barrels and a hand pump. Picking the closest barrel, pilot and observer rolled it to the airplane. Cavanaugh later recalled:

[We] took that barrel of gas and rolled it 200 yards up hill at a great rate of speed. It's amazing how much strength you have when you are scared to death. I probably couldn't budge it now. But we got the barrel up to the airplane. It was dark and raining now and they were shooting mortars at us. They were dropping mortars on the runway and the fragments were hitting all around us. You could hear them going by.⁵⁷

Using the barrel of his pistol as a wrench, Cavanaugh got the cap off the barrel and put in the pump. With his Meo partner manning the pump, Cavanaugh filled just the right wing tank because the other was already riddled with shell fragments. The plane drooped to one side but it would have to do. Since it was now completely dark and the instrument panel had been destroyed, the covering A-1 dropped napalm on the opposite end of the runway as a marker. Cavanaugh lined up on this point and gave the O-1 full throttle. As he remembered, "With no instruments I couldn't tell what our speed was. I just waited until it sounded right and then lifted off. I got the thing airborne and headed for Luang Prabang."⁵⁸ For their action, the two A-1 crewmen were recommended for the Air Force Cross. Captain Cavanaugh received the Silver Star.⁵⁹

Laotian and American officials in Vientiane considered the loss of Muong Soui critical. Souvanna and Hurwitz agreed that the communist offensive was a major escalation demanding an instant response. General Vang Pao quickly readied plans to retake Muong Soui using sixteen

55. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 270801Z Jun 69; *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, pp 55-56; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1969, pp 14-15, 20th SOS, Jan-Jun 69, pp 28-30.

56. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 291417Z Jun 69, subj: Situation Report, Muong Soui Evacuation.

57. Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, pp 41-42.

58. *Ibid*, pp 42-43.

59. *Ibid*; hist, 56th SOW, Jan-Jun 69, pp 10-12.

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hundred men (six hundred Meo, seven hundred neutralists, and three hundred FAR). The Laotian general staff, underscoring the seriousness of the situation, for the first time allowed Lao troops to serve under a Meo commander. Colonel Tyrrell sought sixty sorties a day starting on June 30 to support the operation which was christened Off Balance. The allies hoped this prompt, organized action would catch the communists by surprise.⁶⁰

Beyond the ground attack, the prime minister wanted a singular action to show he was determined to punish continued aggression. Removing restrictions, he requested a major strike on the previous sanctuary of Khangkhai. He desired an "air armada" of 150 planes to hit the heart of the town on July 1, "with emphasis on destroying all structures and other immediate area targets." For the next day, he wished a follow-on strike against the town's periphery by an additional 150 aircraft. In sending this proposal to Seventh Air Force, the embassy noted, "It is essential that this exemplary and devastating blow be obviously recognized by the communists as the Royal Laotian Government's answer to their calculated act of escalated aggression."⁶¹

A copy of this request went to the State Department where Deputy Assistant Secretary Charles T. Gross saw that the proposed bombing was more than a mere tit-for-tat response and required high-level approval. Since it was Saturday morning in Washington, Gross felt this could not be obtained until Monday—which would be too late. He therefore ordered Hurwitz to hold off, saying the bombing of Khangkhai "constitutes considerable escalation and change in ground rules. Such changes require high-level . . . decision which is impossible to obtain on a weekend."⁶²

State, Defense, and CIA officials met on Monday to review the concept for retaking Muong Soui as well as the proposed strike on Khangkhai. They approved the former "as part of the continuing battle," but disapproved the latter. Washington officials judged it "unwise to risk escalation in Barrel Roll when the enemy holds all the tools for re-escalation." The message also pointed out that the embassy could not extend the free-strike zone unilaterally—a request had to be submitted to CINCPAC with full justification and then to Washington for final approval—and State could see no advantage at that time in extending the free-strike zone or attacking the center of Khangkhai. The results of such a "spectacular retaliatory raid" would not outweigh the political repercussions of destroying the Chinese cultural mission. The embassy was further cautioned not to let the RLAF bomb Khangkhai, since the attack would be seen as inspired by the U.S.⁶³

Apologizing to his superiors for the apparent mixup, Hurwitz said he thought he had been acting within his authority. He also passed on to Seventh Air Force the restriction on bombing Khangkhai.⁶⁴ There is no indication that Seventh Air Force would have approved the strike in any event. Even so, the episode reopened the old question of Defense versus State authority over military operations in Laos. Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird wrote the Secretary of State on July 14,

We concurred in your 2 July guidance to Chargé and specific disapproval of his request for a spectacular retaliatory air raid.

I believe our mission in Vientiane erred in this case by independently directing significant escalatory action, and I hope that the point can be made with all concerned

60. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 290800Z Jun 69, subj: Occupation of Muong Soui, 291330Z Jun 69, subj: New Free Strike Zones, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 290949Z Jun 69, subj: Military Plans to Recapture Muong Soui.

61. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 291120Z Jun 69.

62. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 271710Z Jun 69, subj: Free Strike Zone.

63. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 109132, subj: Political Assessment of Military Response to Fall Muong Soui, Jul 2, 1969.

64. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 021157Z Jul 69.

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that review at the highest level, as well as our approval in advance, is necessary before operations of this character and magnitude are undertaken.⁶⁵

Secretary Laird's letter was fielded by Winthrop G. Brown, former Ambassador to Laos, who still wore the scars of his many battles with Admiral Felt over ambassadorial authority. Brown gave his suggestions to Under Secretary Elliott L. Richardson, since Secretary of State William P. Rogers was in Paris for the Vietnam peace talks. He told Richardson that Ambassador Godley, who had recently arrived in Vientiane, could be expected to moderate future requests. However, Brown believed Defense was trying to diminish the role of the ambassador and get into the act itself.⁶⁶ Having chastised Hurwitz through State Department channels, Richardson felt compelled to defend him against the Defense Department. He therefore informed Secretary Laird on July 25 that while agreeing "military action should be reviewed if out of the ordinary," he considered Hurwitz as having been within the rules in requesting the Khangkhai raid. He reiterated the position that it was "essential that the ambassador remain as the responsible senior U.S. official in Laos."⁶⁷ Not to be put off, Laird replied:

I appreciate your views. My main concern, however, is of a more basic nature. We must insure that any escalatory action and extension of U.S. military participation are reviewed at the highest level before implementation. This may require new procedures of operating authority.

(S) My staff is reviewing current operating authority and rules of engagement. The Air Attaché is hosting an 11 August conference on simplified rules of engagement. After this review we may wish to establish new authorities and procedures, including a high-level Washington group to approve or deny proposed escalatory actions.⁶⁸

Richardson agreed to review any proposed changes in operating authority in consultation with the Defense Department. He suggested, however, that State and Defense seek comments from Vientiane and the appropriate military commanders before or after this review.⁶⁹ This final ploy succeeded in muting the issue for the present, but it was clear that in the future Washington officials would take a more direct hand in military operations in northern Laos.

Ironically, while this sparring was going on in Washington, the Chinese cultural mission (which had sparked the whole issue) was inadvertently destroyed by one of those freak accidents that seemed to characterize so much of the war in Laos. In early August, radio intercepts revealed a Pathet Lao radio station located in a building just three hundred yards from the cultural center. Because the station was so close to the restricted area, embassy and Seventh Air Force officials made elaborate plans to ensure against any short round. A Raven FAC would identify and mark the target, and an F-4 equipped with a laser beam would "illuminate" the target for a second F-4 carrying a one thousand-pound laser-guided bomb. All three planes arrived over the target on schedule and the illuminator placed his beam on the building. The second F-4 released the bomb "in the basket" formed by the reflected laser beam. Just then a small cloud drifted between the illuminator aircraft and the target, scattering the light beam. Confused, the "smart" bomb followed the strongest ray—straight into the cultural mission! The explosion destroyed the cultural mission (which was loaded with high explosives) and leveled every building within a quarter of a mile, including the radio station.⁷⁰

65. Ltr, SECDEF Melvin R. Laird to SECSTATE William P. Rogers, Jul 14, 1969.

66. Memo, Winthrop G. Brown, Ambassador to Laos, to Elliott L. Richardson, Under Secretary of State, Jul 23, 1969.

67. Ltr, Under Secretary of State Elliott L. Richardson to SECDEF Melvin R. Laird, Jul 25, 1969.

68. Ltr, SECDEF Melvin R. Laird to Under Secretary of State Elliott L. Richardson, Aug 7, 1969.

69. Ltr, Under Secretary of State Elliott L. Richardson to SECDEF Melvin R. Laird, Sep 3, 1969.

70. Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, pp 13-14.

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Seventh Air Force braced for the accustomed blast from the embassy. But Ambassador Godley, far from seeking to "moderate" military action, was even more aggressive than Sullivan in prosecuting the war. Consequently, he waited for a reaction from the Chinese—who said nothing. Either they were unaware of the strike or felt it would be difficult to explain their presence in violation of the king's orders. As time passed and the war swirled on, the incident quickly faded from memory. A month later Godley replied to a polite inquiry from State, saying there was no confirmation of a strike on Khangkhai in mid-August.⁷¹

Meantime, General Vang Pao's drive to capture Muong Soui had failed. The attack got under way on July 1, backed by fifty USAF sorties that destroyed thirty-nine bunkers, two buildings, one antiaircraft position, and caused eighteen secondary explosions and twelve fires. Behind this barrage, the Meo were reported to be making good progress although neither the FAR nor FAN supported the assault. Initially, weather was more of a problem than the enemy as no strikes were flown on the second or fourth and only twenty-four on the third. On July 5, the skies cleared enough to permit thirty U.S. and thirty RLAF aircraft to hit the enemy positions, enabling the Meo to move within three miles of their objective. Weather once more closed in and the advance ground to a halt as just six aircraft (two USAF and four RLAF) were able to strike on July 8. Then, on the eleventh, the neutralists finally moved out—south, away from Muong Soui.⁷²

That same day, Ly Lee fought his last duel with an antiaircraft gun. One observer said "a 37-mm caught him and just hosed him all the way to the ground." In his eighteen months, Ly Lee had amassed over a thousand missions and had won the admiration of all who knew him. One Raven forward air controller later commented, "He was the only man I ever cried over when I heard he was dead." Ly Lee was also posthumously (and secretly) decorated by the United States government, one of the few Laotians to be so honored.⁷³

Colonel Tyrrell used the occasion of Ly Lee's funeral to further his efforts to bring the Lao and Meo together. At his suggestion the entire FAR high command was invited to Long Tieng. This was the first time Lao officers had been allowed into the Meo/CIA base, and most were surprised to find that the Meo were not wallowing in CIA dollars. Instead they found a group of scraggly, ill-equipped teenagers and old men living in makeshift facilities. Being an excellent politician in his own right, Vang Pao arranged for a Buddhist funeral ceremony although Ly Lee was buried according to Meo custom rather than being cremated. Vang Pao also took the opportunity to discuss future plans and politics with his contemporaries.⁷⁴

The desertion of the neutralists effectively ended the Off Balance operation. Nevertheless, Vang Pao still had hopes of taking Muong Soui with the Lao reinforcements that had been promised by Ly Lee's funeral. The communists, meanwhile, were busy reinforcing their own positions. During the first two weeks of July, pilots and roadwatch teams reported eight tanks and over one thousand trucks moving toward Muong Soui. Apparently the North Vietnamese high command had ordered a major concentration at Muong Soui, and was stripping troops from other sectors to accomplish this. On July 13, these forces launched a counterattack behind tanks and heavy artillery. Without air support, the Meo swiftly abandoned their offensive and fell back to defensive positions south of the Ngum River. The government, only two weeks after losing Muong Soui, had suffered yet another defeat.⁷⁵

71. *Ibid*; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 161430Z Sep 69, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180936Z Sep 69.

72. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 39-41; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 021156Z Jul 69, subj: Operation Off Balance, 141300Z Jul 69, subj: Operation Off Balance.

73. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, p 41; Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 17; *New York Times*, Oct 26, 1969, p 27.

74. Hartley intvw, Jul 14, 1974, p 16.

75. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, p 41; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 150619Z Jul 69, subj: Operation Off Balance.

Chapter XIV

Air Power Provides a Temporary Respite (U)

The collapse of the Off Balance operation caused a near panic among the Laotians. Intelligence reports disclosed that the North Vietnamese had massed nineteen battalions (seventy-nine hundred combat troops) plus four thousand support personnel and sixty tanks around Muong Soui. Another seven battalions (five NVA and two PL) were seen massing in the Xieng Khouangville/southwest Plain of Jars area. Most of these troops belonged to the veteran 316th Division and had been drawn from other areas of Barrel Roll. At least three battalions, however, and most of the armor had come straight from North Vietnam. Roadwatch teams and USAF pilots likewise reported steady and heavy traffic on all of the major roads leading to Muong Soui.¹

Defector and prisoner interrogations further revealed that the communists planned to move west from Muong Soui to cut the road between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. This would isolate the royal capital from the administrative center, but neither would be directly attacked. The North Vietnamese would next swing south to seize the Meo stronghold of Muong Kassy and the neutralist headquarters at Vang Vieng. The capture of Vang Vieng would remove the last vestige of neutralist influence and outflank the Meo headquarters at Long Tieng. A second prong would push down Route 4 to complete the encirclement of the Meo heartland.²

The allies assumed (incorrectly, as it turned out) that this attack would come during the wet season.³ As subsequent events showed, the communists actually planned to hold their position at Muong Soui and build up their supplies for a conventional dry-season offensive. This miscalculation on the part of the allies was matched by a more serious one by the North Vietnamese. The failures of Stranglehold and Off Balance apparently convinced the communists there would be no more wet-season operations and their supply lines were safe. They therefore stripped their rear areas bare to furnish the concentrations of men at Muong Soui and Xieng Khouangville. This left a virtual vacuum stretching from the Plain of Jars all the way back to Samneua and Nong Het, with just a sprinkling of engineering troops and dissident neutralists to support the supply system. These two miscalculations combined to produce the most dramatic reversal of the war—Operation About Face.

Souvanna Phouma believed the projected communist offensive was meant to topple this government. He told Ambassador Godley the Pathet Lao would use the fall of Vang Vieng to acquire the portfolios currently held by the neutralists. This would assure them of a majority voice in the cabinet and mark the end of the Geneva accords (and of the U.S. bombing in southern Laos). Souvanna looked to the United States for aid in this crisis, to include increased air support, M-16 rifles, and M-41 tanks. Unless such aid was forthcoming, the prime minister warned, he would be forced to reorganize the armed forces and form a "national neutralist party" to negotiate with the communists.⁴

1. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 160510Z Jul 69, subj: Armed Recce of Routes 7/4 and 71, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 160915Z Jul 69, subj: Enemy Intentions in North Laos.

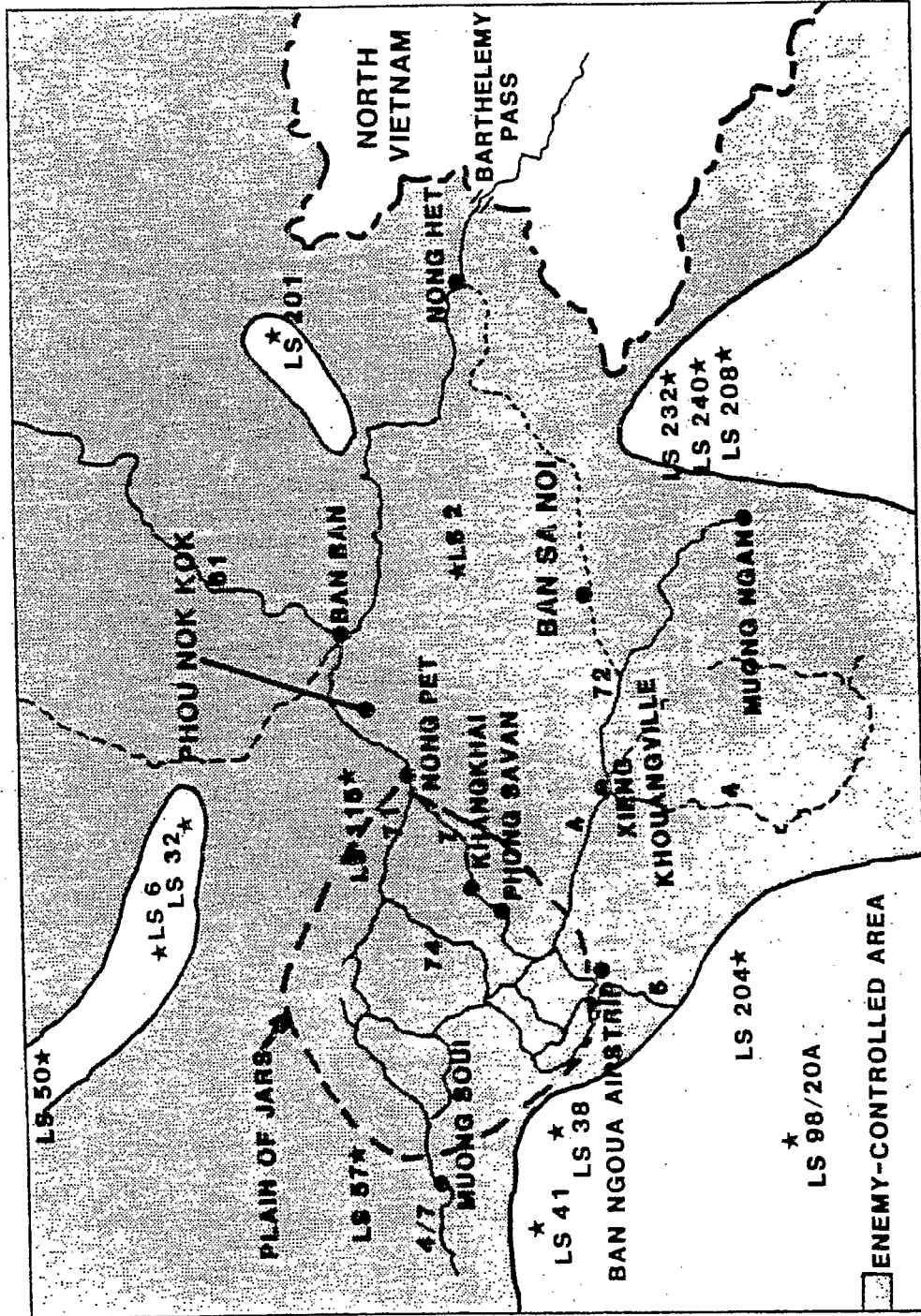
2. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 160915Z Jul 69.

3. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171020Z Jul 69.

4. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170750Z Jul 69, 171120Z Jul 69.

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Operation About Face
Ground Situation on August 1, 1969



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Air Power Provides a Temporary Respite

On the military side, General Vang Pao advised the Americans his depleted Meo could not withstand another onslaught. "There are not enough Meo to fight for all of Laos," he said. He was even considering moving his people to Thailand where the government had given him "assurances." The only chance of stopping the enemy was by "massed air sorties" to include the use of B-52s. General Oudone, FAR chief of staff, echoed Vang Pao's sentiments, telling Colonel Tyrrell, "Only airpower can stop the enemy's present offensive to take over the government."⁵

At a cabinet meeting on July 16, 1969, the Laotian generals demanded that Souvanna break diplomatic relations with North Vietnam, order a general mobilization, arrest the Pathet Lao in Vientiane, and ask for more U.S. assistance including "intensive bombardment by great means [i.e., B-52s]." Ambassador Godley appreciated the seriousness of the situation but thought the cabinet proposals, except for greater air support, were ill advised. Nevertheless, he directed Tyrrell to cooperate with Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force in preparing a "saturation air campaign" based on the Rain Dance model. If this failed to stop the communists, he informed the State Department, B-52s should be considered.⁶

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Defense, State, and CIA officials in Washington met to mull over the matter. They agreed there was no suitable or effective military response to an all-out communist offensive. The Joint Chiefs restated their position that defense of Laos was ultimately up to the Laotians; U.S. actions were supplementary. The "best feasible military approach" was continued use of air power—but not B-52s. The chiefs went on to warn: "Military means alone are insufficient. The Laotians' problem can best be kept manageable by a mixture of means—diplomatic, political, economic, and military." The State Department concurred and suggested diplomatic steps be taken to restrain the North Vietnamese. The embassy was also instructed to advise Souvanna not to request B-52s, since this might complicate the Paris peace talks.⁷

Ambassador Godley responded by softening his earlier dire appraisal. He admitted there was no proper military reaction to an all-out offensive, but now said the enemy did not plan one. Instead, the ambassador thought the communists would try to isolate Luang Prabang, capture Vang Vieng, and crush the neutralists. Against these "limited" objectives, he considered the proposed air campaign had a reasonable chance of success by attacking the one vulnerable chink in the enemy's armor—his exposed lines of communication. Diplomatic efforts, he warned, would be unproductive until the ground situation stabilized.⁸

If diplomatic overtures were to be made, the ambassador suggested the State Department approach the Soviets to see if they would restrain the North Vietnamese in exchange for reducing bombing in Barrel Roll from one hundred to fifty sorties a day. State did not like the idea. A direct approach to the Russians would indicate that Souvanna (and the North Vietnamese) were mere puppets. The department further contended that Souvanna should sound out the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris to see what they would concede if the bombing was reduced. Godley in turn did not think much of State's idea. "Let's not get Souvanna ahead of us on these negotiations," the ambassador cautioned, "he might give away too much." In reply, the department pointed out it could not prevent Souvanna from negotiating with the communists, "so let's get him in step with us." However, State recognized that the communists probably had more to gain by resuming their offensive than by negotiating. So it consented to the proposed air campaign, since there was no suitable or effective diplomatic means to restrain the communists.⁹

5. Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 160915Z Jul 69, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 161542Z Jul 69, subj: Air Attache Evaluation of Requirement for Air Sorties.

6. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170420Z Jul 69, 180430Z Jul 69, 181155Z Jul 69.

7. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 162337Z Jul 69, 171845Z Jul 69, 172350Z Jul 69; JCSM 2344/153, Aug 19, 1969.

8. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171020Z Jul 69, 171145Z Jul 69, 181155Z Jul 69.

9. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 271145Z Jul 69, 311319Z Jul 69, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane,

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The air attaché, the CIA station chief, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force had prepared the plans for the air campaign, named Operation About Face. Essentially an enlarged version of Rain Dance, the plan called for two hundred sorties a day to interdict Route 7 between Ban Ban and Nong Pet, to conduct armed reconnaissance along the roads leading from North Vietnam into Ban Ban, and to destroy enemy supply bases around the Plain of Jars. Special stress was put on interdicting Route 7, and a series of chokepoints were identified where terrain made it hard to bypass road cuts. These interdiction points would be hit systematically day after day using two thousand-pound laser-guided bombs and Bullpup guided missiles to break up the road surface and crater the subsoil. The rains were then counted on to complete the job by washing away the weakened roadbed. Delayed-action bombs and wide-area antipersonnel mines would be used to hamper repair efforts. This technique had been employed for years in southern Laos, but About Face was its first regular application in Barrel Roll.

To support the air campaign, a three-phase ground operation was planned. During the first phase, guerrillas from Lima Site 32 would move to Lima Site 115 just north of Route 7. At the same time, forces from Lima Site 2 would occupy Phou Nok Kok overlooking the road from the south. From these positions, patrols would move out to intercept and harass enemy efforts to repair or bypass the road cuts. The second but simultaneous phase was to "apply pressure" on the southern part of the Plain of Jars. Meanwhile, the third phase would maintain pressure in the Muong Soui area. Significantly, the plan did not call for any attempt to recapture Muong Soui or move onto the plain itself. The objective was merely to blunt the expected enemy offensive. Thus the ground plan was even less ambitious than either Rain Dance or Off Balance.

As part of the campaign, eight RLAF (Meo) T-28s were moved to Long Tieng (Lima Site 20A) and an air operations center set up. [redacted] the Lao squadron at Vientiane would also take part. Airlift support would come primarily from Air America, although USAF helicopters would be available if needed.¹⁰

When the plan was explained to General Vang Pao, who had been despondent since Off Balance's failure, his enthusiasm returned and he immediately began drawing lines on his plotting chart. As an added sweetener, the embassy decided to reequip six of his best battalions with M-16 rifles. The FAR also agreed to send reinforcements from south Laos, even though one high Laotian official warned "battalions from other areas would not find fighting in MR II congenial."¹¹

The ground operation was planned to begin on July 24 and last three weeks. Record rains, however—forty-six inches compared to a norm of sixteen—caused a series of delays that held up the ground forces for nearly a month. In some respects the delay was fortuitous, since it allowed the cumulative effect of the bombing to build up before the ground forces started to move. Between July 15 and August 15, Seventh Air Force scheduled an average of 200 sorties a day into Barrel Roll (150 by day and 50 at night). As a rule, 30 sorties were assigned to strike such fixed targets as truck parks and storage and bivouac areas. Between 50 and 80 sorties were controlled by Raven forward air controllers for striking troop concentrations and targets of opportunity near friendly forces. The remainder conducted armed reconnaissance of the route running north and east of Ban Ban or hit the chokepoints on Route 7.

The weather proved less of a hindrance to the Air Force. On an average, 132 sorties were able to strike their targets. Air operations would have been hampered more except for the all-weather bombing techniques introduced the previous year. Of the 4,142 attack sorties flown over the period, 62 used Combat Skyspot¹² to hit their targets, 80 employed Loran D, and 532 utilized

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290138Z Jul 69, 311456Z Jul 69, 020103Z Aug 69.

10. Memo, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: About Face Operations Plan, n.d. [ca Aug 69]; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 46-47.

11. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 181155Z Jul 69.

12. A radar-controlled bombing system developed from a radar scoring system used to evaluate bombing

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offset aiming points (Commando Nail). These sorties destroyed 101 trucks, 1,848 structures, 45 antiaircraft positions, and accounted for 320 road cuts and 1,084 secondary explosions. The interdiction program was further enhanced by the addition of three AC-130s each night. These three gunships alone accounted for 63 of the trucks destroyed during the period. Besides the attack sorties, the Air Force flew nearly 2,000 combat support sorties. Included were forward air control, reconnaissance, airborne radio direction finding, search and rescue, ABCCC, tanker, and flare missions.¹³

While weather delayed the ground phase of About Face, a final planning meeting brought General Brown back to Udom on August 11 for his first face-to-face meeting with Ambassador Godley. (He also met and was very impressed with Vang Pao who was flown in especially for the occasion.) The meeting's main purpose was to simplify the rules of engagement in anticipation of the forthcoming Commando Hunt campaign in southern Laos (Commando Hunt III). The "simplified" rules, however, still ran to fifteen pages. The principal impact on Barrel Roll was elimination of the armed reconnaissance sectors. In their place, northern Laos was divided into three areas conforming more closely to the geographic and military situation.

In Barrel Roll North, an area generally covering the Chinese road, air strikes and reconnaissance missions were banned unless requested by the embassy and approved by CINCPAC and the JCS. Ground fire could be returned only when specifically authorized by the embassy, save for rescue and infiltration/exfiltration missions. These aircraft could return fire from any area except an active village, in which case embassy permission was required.

Barrel Roll East was the focus of the current About Face interdiction effort. Within this area, armed reconnaissance was authorized within 219 yards of any motorable road up to the North Vietnamese buffer zone. Beyond the 219-yard limit and outside the buffer zone, targets had to be validated by the embassy or a forward air controller/forward air guide and strikes had to be controlled by FAC, FAG, or be conducted using all-weather bombing techniques. Strikes inside the buffer zone were prohibited unless in support of friendly lima sites when requested by the embassy and authorized by Seventh Air Force. No strikes were permitted within 547 yards of an active village, unless receiving ground fire or supporting troops in contact. Ground fire could be returned from any area other than Samneua. Napalm could be used against any motorized vehicle, antiaircraft site, or when specifically allowed by the embassy. Sensors and area-denial munitions could be dropped on any motorable road. All strikes on Barrel Roll East would be monitored by College Eye EC-121 aircraft to ensure compliance with these rules and to prevent violation of the buffer zones.

In Barrel Roll West, all targets had to be validated by the embassy (usually by the air attaché) or by a Laotian observer either in the air or on the ground. Strikes had to be controlled by a forward air controller/forward air guide or by all-weather bombing systems. Napalm and area-denial munitions required specific authorization from the embassy. Ground fire could be returned only under FAC/FAG control, but search and rescue and infiltration/exfiltration missions could return fire received from any area other than an active village. The prohibited area around Vientiane was enlarged slightly, the area around Luang Prabang reduced, and Khangkhai and Phong Savan remained off limits.

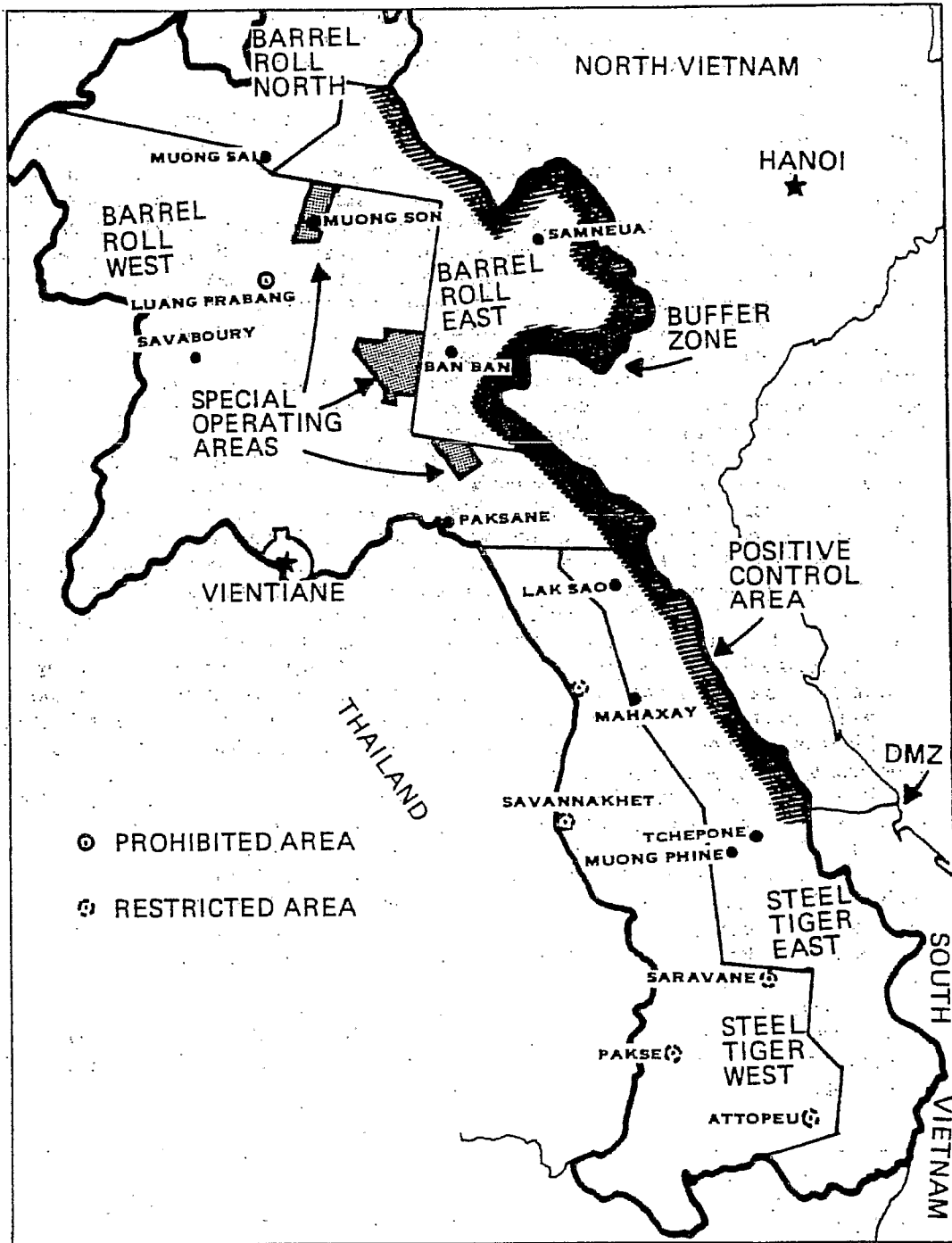
Several special operating areas were created in which strikes were permitted without FAC control against any military activity outside an active village. In essence these were armed reconnaissance areas, and napalm was permitted against any motorized vehicle, antiaircraft site, or when specifically authorized by the embassy.

accuracy.

13. Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LX, 2-1 thru 2-7, LXI, 2-1 thru 2-7; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 48-49; msg, 7th AF to CINCPACAF, 020610Z Aug 69, subj: Status and Analysis Report, BR/SL, Jul 16-31, 1969, 180742Z Aug 69, subj: Status and Analysis Report, BR/SL, Aug 1-15, 1969.

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Targets requiring validation fell into two types—preplanned and targets of opportunity. Preplanned targets included both hard and soft targets. The embassy validated hard targets—truck parks, bridges, bivouac and storage areas, and added them to the target list. Seventh Air Force then scheduled strikes on the basis of recommendations from the Barrel Roll Working Group and its own targeting division. Soft targets were usually acquired by visual or photo reconnaissance in conjunction with ground operations. They were suitable for a onetime strike and, when validated by the embassy, were passed to the Ravens or jet forward air controllers for the next day. (Hip-pocket targets fell into this category.) Targets of opportunity were perishable or fleeting ones like trucks, boats, or personnel. They had to be struck at once or be lost for good, so Laotian observers were authorized to validate them on the spot. If no Laotian was available the target could not be hit. These rules governed just U.S. aircraft; the Laotian were exempt because it was their country and their people. Even so, the air operations center commanders were told to encourage the Laotians to observe the American rules insofar as possible.¹⁴

The rules of engagement conference also laid plans for the much delayed ground operations now set for August 15. General Vang Pao was convinced the weather would clear on that date, though USAF forecasters predicted at least two more weeks of rain. General Brown consented to continue air operations as long as needed to achieve the ground objective. As Vang Pao foresaw, August 15 dawned bright and clear; and for the rest of the operation, only sporadic rain marred the otherwise clear skies. The interdiction forces immediately began to move toward Route 7. By August 19, the force from Lima Site 2 reached the base of Phou Nok Kok where they met their first resistance. Heavy air strikes by RLAFF T-28s broke up this opposition and by the twenty-first the guerrillas had secured the mountain. That same day the troops from Lima Site 32 walked into Lima Site 115. From these two positions teams were dispatched along Route 7, only to learn from villagers there had been no vehicles on the road since July 31. The Air Force had done its job well, and the road had been closed for three weeks before the ground contingent arrived.¹⁵

The Air Force also took advantage of the weather to establish three sensor strings (six sensors each) along Routes 7 and 61. An EC-121 was shifted north from Steel Tiger to relay data from the sensors to the infiltration surveillance center at Nakhon Phanom. Like so many other programs in northern Laos, the sensors had first been developed for use in the south. About Face marked their initial use in Barrel Roll. Data from the sensors confirmed the absence of traffic but did disclose considerable road repair and portering on trails that bypassed the road cuts. Nonetheless, a problem soon arose with the relay orbit. If the EC-121 flew far enough north to pick up the Barrel Roll sensors, it was too far from the southern fields to effectively relay their data, and vice versa. This drawback, together with the low level of vehicle traffic in the north, led the Air Force to discontinue the Barrel Roll sensors on September 20.¹⁶

The second phase of About Face got under way on August 20. Nine battalions (six Meo and three FAR) marched toward the Plain of Jars, as three battalions (two Meo and one neutralist) advanced on Muong Soui. During the first week, the communists held the government troops to just five miles. Some intelligence analysts said it was beginning to look like a repeat of Off Balance.¹⁷ Then, suddenly, resistance virtually collapsed. Only in the Muong Soui sector did the enemy continue to offer effective resistance. By the first of September, the original aims of About Face had been attained. Route 7 was interdicted and ground teams were in place to

14. Conference Report, PACAF, Rules of Engagement Conference, Laos, Aug 18, 1969; ltr, AIRA Vientiane to All AOCs, subj: Rules of Engagements and Targets, Sep 23, 1969; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXII, 2-5 thru 2-10.

15. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 48-49.

16. *Ibid*, pp 50-51.

17. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 210540Z Sep 69, subj: Situation Report, Enemy Reaction.

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harass enemy efforts to bypass or repair the road. Vang Pao's main force was poised on the edge of the Plain of Jars and Muong Soui was ringed on three sides. The reason for this dramatic reversal gradually emerged. The air campaign of the past six weeks had completely disrupted the enemy's over-extended lines of communication, making resupply of forward units well-nigh impossible. A North Vietnamese officer, captured on September 4, said his four-hundred-man unit with six tanks had only forty rounds of ammunition and fifty gallons of fuel when Vang Pao attacked. Another prisoner revealed that his unit had received no medical supplies or fresh food since August 18. A truck mechanic disclosed that his transportation company had been without fuel and spare parts since the end of July. Still others told of their units suffering from hunger and malaria, as well as a shortage of clothing, blankets, arms, and ammunition stemming from the interdiction strikes.

In describing the success of About Face, the embassy was effusive in its praise of the Air Force:

Department and others may have noted in recent communications references to efficacy of USAF air in recent operations in PDJ area. We may never know precisely the degree to which air contributed in sustaining the war-weary outnumbered and outgunned FAR forces. But all concerned here in Vientiane are convinced that without the USAF's remarkable effort the enemy would still be maintaining his pressure and from far, far deeper in friendly territory.

General Vang Pao added his praise in a letter to General Brown:

Operation About Face could have barely begun had it not been for the many and excellent United States Air Force strikes that overwhelmed the enemy and forced him to flee in terror. The fighting for the Plain of Jars would have been long and sanguine struggle had the enemy not been battered and demoralized by the airstrikes, and About Face is therefore a victory for the United States Air Force as well as for the Lao Government.

With the original objectives in hand and no opposition in sight the embassy decided to expand the operation to take in the capture of Muong Soui and the occupation of the plain. There was no intention to hold the plain indefinitely. Rather, the aim was to force the communists into the hills east of it, and keep supply lines closed, as long as possible to stave off the inevitable counterattack.

As friendly troops pushed out onto the plain, they met only scattered resistance. One forward air controller described it as "a fantastic sight—three thousand men walking upright across the Plain of Jars." The enemy recognized the danger to the exposed positions and ordered a general withdrawal, but the bombing that had stopped traffic entering the battle area now blocked the traffic trying to get out. The communists were caught in a trap, partly as a result of miscalculations on both sides, but chiefly due to the effective bombing campaign.

The bulk of the enemy infantry was able to withdraw to the hills, but most of the supplies and heavy equipment had to be abandoned. Precise casualty figures for the communists may never be known. Certainly some individuals succeeded in making their way on foot to secure areas in the north and east. Many others undoubtedly died in the mountains from starvation, disease, and exposure, or at the hand of hostile tribesmen. Still others were overrun by the Meo

18. Hist 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1, Dec 31, 1969, pp 54-56.
19. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 090348Z Sep 69.
20. Ltr, Maj Gen Vang Pao to Gen George S. Brown, Oct 7, 1969.
21. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Operation About Face, Sep 6, 1969.
22. Polifka, mbyw, Dec 17, 1974, p 27.

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before they had a chance to withdraw. In any event, it was another year before the North Vietnamese 316th Division again appeared in northern Laos.

The Meo captured Phong Savan and Khangkhai on September 9 after a token struggle. Three days later, they walked unopposed into Xieng Khouangville, and on the twenty-seventh the neutralists went into Muong Soui—the enemy had departed seven days before. As the Meo spread swiftly across the plain, they uncovered a vast amount of matériel left behind by the fleeing enemy. This included 5,000,000 rounds of ammunition, 6,000 weapons, 25 tanks, 113 other vehicles, 300 tons of medical supplies, and 200,000 gallons of fuel—enough to supply the communist forces for six months. Air strikes had not touched most of these supplies, but the communists could not distribute them due to the disruption of the road network and the absence of transportation.²³

Throughout September the Air Force and RLAFF continued to furnish close air support against isolated pockets of resistance. The Air Force alone flew 4,323 sorties and the RLAFF added 1,831.²⁴ To advance USAF effectiveness against enemy troop concentrations, the air attaché and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force planners, working with the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn, developed a tactic known as Snare Drum. Because most air strikes occurred during daylight, the communists used the period just before dawn and after dusk to wash, cook, and take care of biological needs. During these periods they did not envision any air attack. The idea of Snare Drum was to catch the foe by surprise with a single high-speed pass by sixteen to twenty-four F-4s. To produce the most lethal concentration over a wide area, a combination of CBU-24 antipersonnel bombs and five-hundred-pound general purpose bombs was used. A Laredo forward air controller from Udorn guided the strike formation to the target area, followed by a Bullwhip RF-4 to obtain poststrike photographs.

The first Snare Drum mission was flown on September 11, but poor weather in the target area prevented accurate bomb damage assessment. However, the second mission on September 18 was termed "a resounding success" by the Central Intelligence Agency. Agent reports revealed the attack inflicted "very heavy casualties" among about a thousand communists. In contrast, a mission on September 22 touched off only five secondary explosions. The attacks continued through October and November but with such mixed results that the Snare Drum tactic was abandoned.²⁵

With the rapid shifts of the ground situation in Barrel Roll, the recently revised rules of engagement were rendered obsolete before they went into force.²⁶ To keep pace with the ground force and avoid short rounds, a series of Raven "boxes" were formed around the major friendly units. Within these boxes, a Laotian observer could validate any target and the Ravens controlled all air strikes. (At night, A-1 FACs replaced the Ravens in the boxes while aircraft outside the boxes struck targets in accordance with the published rules.) This was the heyday of the Ravens. Never before or after did they enjoy the degree of authority or control the number of aircraft as they did during About Face. Even so, the heavier responsibility imposed greater demands and the Ravens pushed themselves well beyond the normal limit. In September, for example, the low man flew 156 hours and the high man had 210.²⁷ Moreover, the Ravens had a high attrition rate. During About Face, four of the eleven Ravens assigned to Long Tieng were shot down and only one was rescued.²⁸

23. *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, p 89.

24. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXII*, 2-3.

25. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 33-34.

26. The new rules of engagement were published on August 18 and became effective on September 27.

27. Regular Air Force crewmembers as a rule flew between 30 and 60 hours a month. Regulations set a limit of 100 hours a month, but in an emergency this could be extended to 125.

28. Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, pp 32-34.

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About Face also gave the Ravens a chance to get in their own licks as fighter pilots. Using rockets, grenades, and twenty-pound fragmentation bombs (carried inside the plane and dropped out the window), the "Raven Escadrille" attacked enemy pockets whenever other strike aircraft were not available. In late September, Colonel Tyrrell secured three T-28s for the Ravens. The T-28 offered obvious advantages over the O-1, greater endurance, more powerful engine, and armor around the cockpit. Fitted with two .50-caliber machineguns, the plane could carry bombs and marking rockets. However, its low-wing configuration limited visibility, and its faster speed was as much a handicap as an asset in the FAC role. Hence, most of the Ravens preferred to stay with the O-1. Nonetheless, three Ravens were sent to Udom for a quick checkout (three missions totaling four hours and thirty minutes) by Water Pump.

Officials at Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force opposed the use of T-28s by the Ravens. In the first place, they felt the temptation to exploit the aircraft's strike capability would detract from the primary forward air controller mission. Then, too, there was a legalistic problem. Technically, all unarmed FAC missions were classified as "combat support" (marking rockets were not considered "armament"). If the aircraft carried machineguns or bombs, however, it was classed as "combat." The Ravens, like all U.S. military personnel in Laos, were forbidden to take part in "combat"—but not "combat support." The Ravens asked, "What the hell is the difference," and there was no answer.²⁹

All the same, Maj. Joseph W. Potter, the Long Tieng AOC commander, tried to keep his men in line. He told them, "I will give you a couple of days to have fun shooting the guns and then don't do it anymore." As one FAC noted, "Of course he knew he was [talking to the wind] because none of us ever came back with any ammo."³⁰ Actually it was Major Potter who had the last word. When one of the Ravens, Capt. Michael E. Cavanaugh, gained a reputation for flouting the rules, Potter quietly brought him to heel. One day as Cavanaugh was preparing to taxi out on a mission, Potter walked up to the plane and downloaded the guns while a nonplussed pilot sat fuming in the cockpit. Cavanaugh later recalled: "Joe had a very effective way of saying, 'You are a FAC and not a fighter pilot.' He taught me to be conservative and stay within my role and remain a forward air controller and stay out of the hunter/killer business—but damn, it was a temptation."³¹

Coincident with, but not related to, About Face, government troops in southern Laos scored an equally surprising success. What started out as a minor probe in July gradually grew into a full-scale offensive to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the ground. A guerrilla company stole into Ban Tang Vai on July 29 to feel out the foe's strength in the area. When the communists failed to react, the rest of the battalion was flown in along with a company of regular Laotian troops. While the Laotians stayed to garrison the village, the guerrillas scoured the countryside where they met scattered opposition. Laotian T-28s and USAF A-1s flew cover for the operation, accruing two hundred sorties between July 28 and August 28. The tangible outcome of these strikes was secondary to their sustaining the morale of the friendly troops.³²

Owing to the light communist response, [REDACTED] decided to expand the operation, now christened "Junction City, Junior." The plan specified that three guerrilla battalions take over the village of Muong Phine at the junction of Routes 9 and 23. The village, marking the western fringe of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, had been in enemy hands since 1962. For air cover [REDACTED] asked for two FACs, twelve A-1s, and one flareship per day beginning on September 1. As usual, advance coordination was nil and the air support request went in at the last minute. This

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29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, p 17.

32. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 220135Z Sep 69, subj: Sitrep, Junction City Jr.

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caused a one-day delay, but the operation evolved smoothly thereafter. On September 7, the guerrillas entered Muong Phine, having encountered token opposition that was easily brushed aside by air strikes.³³

This action apparently surprised the foe; forty-five men were captured in Muong Phine, as well as two thousand tons of supplies and numerous documents. Perhaps more significant was the number of refugees who queued up at the airstrip for evacuation from the area. During the next week, Air America and USAF helicopters lifted over fifteen hundred of these people back to Muong Phalane and later to Savannakhet.³⁴

The easy success of the operation led to its extension. This time, the goal was to cut the main artery of the Ho Chi Minh Trail near Tchepone, while regular Laotian troops advanced northward to join the guerrillas in the vicinity of Tchepone and try to enter the city. If successful, this would block the trail and compel the North Vietnamese to bring in reinforcements that could be destroyed by air strikes. With many aircraft usually operating in the area, no extra air support was needed beyond two forward air controllers to handle diverted strike aircraft.³⁵

The guerrillas departed Muong Phine on September 29 and arrived at their objective two days later. Here the enemy drove them back to a ridge overlooking the road, where they waited for reinforcements. The thrust from Military Region IV had meanwhile got as far as Toumlane before being halted by the communists.³⁶ The friendly forces did not know it at the time, but Junction City, Junior, had reached its high-water mark.

Despite the apparent success of About Face and Junction City, Junior, the long-term outlook for Laos was no brighter than it had been a year before. To be sure, the communists had been surprised and dealt a serious blow, but the North Vietnamese had more than enough reserves to replace their losses. The government forces were scraping the bottom of the barrel, and Vang Pao was becoming overextended. There were simply too few Meo to hold the Plain of Jars or even to defend Long Tieng against a concerted enemy drive. If the government was to have a chance of "staying in the ball game," he said, "it must get more mileage from its regular forces."³⁷ Two days later, the ambassador unveiled a comprehensive "Blueprint for Improving RLG Military Forces." This plan called for a major reorganization of the armed forces, better pay and benefits, more training in Thailand, and modern equipment like tanks and heavy artillery.³⁸

The plan further specified the formal establishment of a Meo squadron and an increase in T-28s to 112: 15 aircraft for each of the four Laotian squadrons, 9 aircraft at Long Tieng, 22 for Water Pump training, 11 to the Ravens as replacements for O-1s, and 10 would be converted for photo reconnaissance. Once this expansion was complete, another 36 planes a year would be needed to replace combat losses. (This meant the embassy was projecting an attrition rate of fifty percent of the combat force each year!) To support the greater number of aircraft, the embassy proposed a step-up in pilot training. Classes would be reduced from eighteen to fifteen students and the training course compressed to three and a half months. This would turn out sixty pilots every fourteen months in lieu of the present thirty-six a year. As the RLAF attained full strength, the embassy recommended eliminating the Thai pilots. Over Colonel Tyrrell's objection, the plan envisioned a halt in the RLAF gunship program in favor of continued use of USAF AC-47s and AC-130s.³⁹

33. *Ibid.*

34. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 40-41.

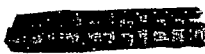
35. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 220135Z Sep 69.

36. Weekly Laos Summary, 7th AF/13th AF, Sep 27-Oct 30, 1969, Oct 4-10, 1969.

37. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131127Z Sep 69.

38. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 150833Z Sep 69, subj: Blueprint for Improving RLG Military Forces.

39. *Ibid*; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 250900Z Sep 69; Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, p 86.



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The "Blueprint" touched off another major policy review in Washington. In general, the State Department deemed Godley's proposal too expensive. It suggested instead that Thai participation on the ground be increased, beefing up both infantry and artillery. State also favored more Thai pilots and, in a reversal of its earlier position, the use of B-52s rather than building up the RLAF. The Joint Chiefs of Staff strongly opposed the employment of B-52s and any greater outside participation. They agreed with the ambassador that ultimately the Laotians would have to stand on their own feet. The JCS did recommend, however, that RLAF expansion be held to the seventy-seven aircraft originally requested by Ambassador Sullivan a year earlier, and that the RLAF gunship program be kept

[Redacted] in any case it could not be done without a formal request from Souvanna Phouma, something which Ambassador Godley said would not be forthcoming.⁴⁰

In the end, President Nixon accepted the JCS position. For the moment B-52s were out, the Meo squadron was in, and twenty-two additional T-28s were authorized for Laos. The planes would be part of the planned expansion of the RLAF; the Ravens would stay with the O-1s. The Laotian AC-47 program would be accelerated [Redacted]

[Redacted] The remainder of the "Blueprint" to improve the Laotian forces was endorsed, contingent upon congressional approval of the necessary funds.⁴¹

The Air Force portion of the plan proceeded smoothly. On October 19, the Meo squadron was officially established; by the end of the year, the new T-28s were in place at Udorn; and in November, Water Pump began the revised pilot training program. Ironically, the introduction of Thai irregulars did what Tyrrell had failed to do in two years of trying—the creation of a joint operations center at Long Tieng.

[Redacted] They also wanted an American air liaison officer to ensure adequate air support for their troops. In June 1970 a JOC was officially opened at Long Tieng.⁴²

The first five C-47s slated for gunship conversion had arrived at Bangkok in July where the Thai-Am company installed the guns. The conversion was complete by September 30, and the aircraft went into action on October 7; but several teething problems immediately surfaced. The Laotian crews had been trained on the MXU-470 minigun pod used by the Air Force, while their own gunships were equipped with the older SUU-11 pod. Further, the SUU-11's wet cell battery was so heavy it took four Laotians to lift it. Almost invariably they dropped the battery, spilling electrolyte all over themselves and the aircraft. When the planes did get into the air, the crews fired out all their ammunition in one long burst. This melted the gun barrels but provided plenty of brass casings that could be sold. The upshot was that in two days every gun was jammed or otherwise unserviceable.⁴³

Air Force response was swift and effective. In less than a week, replacement guns were on hand together with a technician to train the Laotian gunners. Ambassador Godley meantime suspended modifications of the three remaining C-47s. Rather than going on with the SUU-11

40. Memo, Mark S. Pratt to Charles T. Cross, Aug 20, 1969; JCSMs 2344/157-3, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157-4, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157-5, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157-6, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157-7, Oct 16, 1969; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 031307Z Sep 69; hist, CINCPAC, 1969, III, 188-214.

41. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 210-14.

42. Ibid.

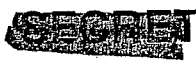
43. Ibid, 208-9; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, p 32; intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Charles Loucks, Asst Air Attache, Vientiane, Jan 26, 1970.

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Air Power Provides a Temporary Respite

program, he suggested a one-for-one swap for USAF AC-47s that would become available when the 4th Special Operations Squadron was inactivated in December.⁴⁴ PACAF concurred in the swap and also proposed to retain three USAF gunships at Udom to support General Vang Pao until the Laotians could take over this requirement. Three other gunships would be held in the Philippines to replace combat losses. The transfer was subsequently approved in Washington, but the Laotians were permitted to keep the five gunships fitted with SUU-11 minigun pods. The other three C-47s scheduled for modification were retained in their transport configuration.⁴⁵ These transfers were completed by January 6, 1970, bringing the Laotian gunship force to thirteen—five with SUU-11 and eight with MXU-470 minigun pods.⁴⁶

With aircraft procurement out of the way, attention shifted to operations. Most Laotian ground commanders liked watching the fireworks of the gunships—and the crews liked selling the spent casings—but neither grasped the concept of identifying and striking targets at night. In the following months, there were frequent reports of gunship crews not flying the assigned mission or striking the wrong target. Tyrrell and his staff worked long and hard with the Laotians to lick these deficiencies. Gradually, as both air and ground personnel acquired more experience, the gunships became a potent weapon in the RLAf arsenal.⁴⁷

Other problems stemmed from the RLAf's never having conducted night operations before. The crews had no facilities for sitting night alert, and their flight clothing could not keep out the chill of the night mountain air. The solution to these difficulties fell to the AOC commanders. In Vientiane, Maj. Jesse E. Scott, with the backing of the requirements office and the connivance of some of his Water Pump friends, was able to furnish his crews USAF flight jackets. Scott also learned that a number of cots had been stored pending construction of a military hospital. Feeling his own needs were more immediate, he and a group of his men "liberated" ample cots to take care of his crews. This last caper was a bit much even for Laos; the cots were subsequently returned; and the Laotians went back to sleeping on desk tops, in chairs, or on the floor. Nonetheless, they appreciated the American efforts.⁴⁸

The ground part of the Blueprint plan had tougher going. The Laotian high command was willing enough to accept the increase in benefits, training, and equipment, but less enthusiastic about the proposed reorganization that would severely curtail its influence. "These things take time," General Oudone advised the ambassador.⁴⁹ Then in October 1969, a Senate foreign relations subcommittee, chaired by Senator Stuart Symington, conducted hearings into U.S. involvement.⁵⁰ As a result, the fiscal year 1971 military assistance budget for Laos was limited to \$78 million. This amount could barely sustain the Laotian armed forces at their current level.⁵¹

While these events were taking place, About Face was grinding to a halt. The Meo came under their first serious attack on September 22, as the North Vietnamese tried to dislodge the blocking forces along Route 7. Clashes occurred more frequently during October, but there was very little change in the ground situation. Essentially, the Meo had reached the end of their tether and the communists were beginning to consolidate after their precipitous retreat. At the same time, there were recurring reports that a new division, the 312th, was on its way from North

44. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 209; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 6868, 071224Z Oct 69.

45. Msgs, CINCPACAF to CSAF, 140444Z Nov 69, CSAF to CINCPACAF, Dec 4, 1969.

46. Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 061033Z Jan 70.

47. Loucks intvw, Jan 26, 1970; msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 140730Z Jun 70, subj: Lao AC-47 Sorties in Barrel Roll; Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 9.

48. Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, pp 33-34.

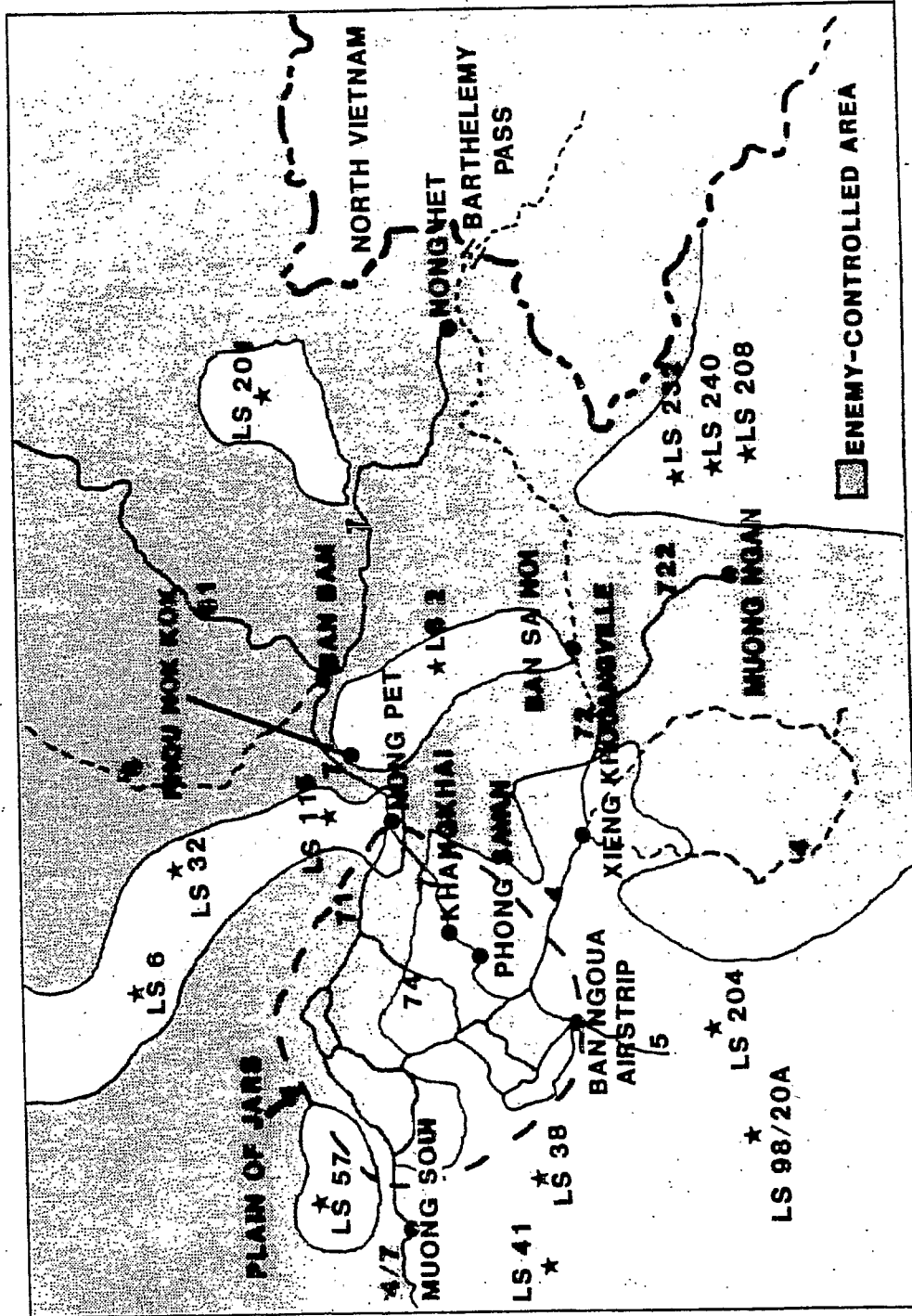
49. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131137Z Sep 69.

50. *Laos Hearings*.

51. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 266.

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Operation About Face
Ground Situation on October 31, 1969



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Air Power Provides a Temporary Respite

Vietnam to Laos. With their supply bases on the Plain of Jars gone, the North Vietnamese began a logistic buildup in the buffer zone (their one remaining sanctuary in Laos) to support the advance of the 312th. The JCS accordingly authorized a temporary relaxation of the buffer zone rules, and Seventh Air Force launched Operation West Wind. During October 12-17, 216 USAF aircraft hit targets in the special operating area. The strikes destroyed 282 structures and about 700 tons of supplies, triggering 160 secondary explosions and 146 secondary fires.⁵²

West Wind represented the high point of U.S. air operations in northern Laos. During October 1969, the Air Force flew 5,130 sorties—the highest ever in northern Laos and two-thirds of all USAF sorties flown in the country that month. In November the figure dipped to 3,075 as attention once more focused on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The embassy strongly protested this reduction, contending that “continued success of About Face is largely dependent upon [a] sustained high USAF sortie rate.”⁵³ In reply, General Brown reiterated that covering the American withdrawal from South Vietnam claimed first priority on air resources. He would nevertheless continue “to support Vang Pao to the maximum extent feasible, consistent with Steel Tiger requirements.” In any case, “air support necessary to keep Vang Pao from a decisive defeat will be provided.”⁵⁴

Perhaps even more significant was the simultaneous dismantling of the support structure that had made the About Face air campaign so successful. With more stress on Steel Tiger and fewer sorties in Barrel Roll, targeting and planning were again centralized in Saigon. The targeting and photo-interpretation sections of Seventh Air Force/ Thirteenth Air Force were cut back and eventually done away with, depriving the air attaché and the Central Intelligence Agency of a vital link to Seventh Air Force. Concurrently, the CIA reverted to its practice of keeping the Air Force in the dark regarding future plans.

Meanwhile, Junction City, Junior, had collapsed in southern Laos. On October 4, the Laotian commander at Muong Phine saw a crowd of refugees converging on the airstrip. Believing he was under assault by a vastly superior force, he ordered a hasty withdrawal. This allowed the communists to infiltrate into positions around the village. Two days later, USAF helicopters arrived with reinforcements. Not knowing the field had been abandoned, two were shot down by small-arms fire.⁵⁵ This debacle compelled the guerrillas to give up their positions around Tchepone, and at about the same time the Laotian force at Toumlane returned to Saravane. By the end of the month, the communists had recovered all the ground they held at the start of the operation.⁵⁶

During the last two months of 1969, the ground situation in northern Laos stayed basically the same. But as the ground began to dry out, the North Vietnamese doubled their efforts to reestablish supply lines. Truck sightings in November rose from 60 to 147 and construction crews were reported at work on all major roads. Through the first week of December, 205 trucks were detected along Route 7 between North Vietnam and Ban Ban. This was the most sightings since the beginning of About Face. Route 7 west of Ban Ban was still blocked by USAF interdiction and Meo ground teams. Even so, now that trail network had dried, alternate, though less desirable, routes bypassed the interdiction point.⁵⁷

A decrease in sorties and accelerated communist supply movements made Seventh Air Force modify its air operations. During Vang Pao's push across the plain, about fifty-five percent

52. *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, p 111.

53. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 060431Z Nov 69, subj: About Face.

54. Talking Paper, 7th AF, Reduced Strike Tactical Air Effort in Barrel Roll, Nov 26, 1969.

55. Weekly Laos Summary, 7th AF/13th AF, Oct 4-10, 1969.

56. Weekly Laos Summary, 7th AF/13th AF, Oct 25-31, 1969.

57. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXIV*, 2-10; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 78-79.

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of all sorties were allocated to the Ravens for direct support of the ground troops. Twenty percent were devoted to road interdiction and another twenty percent to night operations. What was left hit storage areas, truck parks, and bivouacs. In mid-December, Seventh Air Force reversed priorities. Approximately forty-three of the hundred sorties a day were scheduled against hard targets. Night operations took another twenty and the remainder struck interdiction points along the road network. Close air support for the ground forces was handled by divers from the other missions.⁵⁸

To assist the air campaign, the Joint Chiefs further relaxed the buffer zone restrictions. During West Wind, the special operation area had been rather small and all strikes needed to be controlled by a Raven forward air controller. On December 13, however, the rules were changed to permit strikes anywhere in the buffer zone to within four miles of the border under any FAC, jet or prop.

The Air Force likewise modified its approach to road interdiction. In lieu of hammering one or two interdiction points, the aircraft hit many widely dispersed ones. The idea was to give the enemy no choice but to bring in more repair crews and to lose time by shifting heavy equipment from one area to another. This change was brought about by three factors: the dry season rendered nearly all interdiction points suitable for bypass, repair crews were near enough to the few established points that they could repair damage in a matter of hours; and the dwindling sortie rate meant there were too few planes to keep any one point closed indefinitely.

To monitor enemy traffic and to direct strike aircraft to the most active routes, the Air Force reestablished the Barrel Roll sensor fields. By the end of 1969, seven strings were active in northern Laos. Over the last months of the year, these sensors recorded over three thousand truck movements, mostly shuttle traffic between interdiction points rather than through traffic. The results of this campaign were 320 trucks destroyed or damaged, 290 road cuts, 364 structures destroyed, and 1,412 secondary explosions. This surely slowed the communist buildup somewhat, but no one was under any illusion that the expected counteroffensive could long be delayed.⁵⁹

With the Air Force centering on interdiction targets, the RLAF handled most of the support for the ground forces. Through November and December 1969, Thai, Lao, and Meo pilots flew 4,629 sorties. This compared very favorably with the 6,984 USAF sorties during the same period, and was remarkable because the RLAF had only an average of twenty-eight planes available on any one day. Unfortunately RLAF losses were high. Since the beginning of About Face, twelve T-28s were lost and eight suffered severe battle damage; and the twenty-two aircraft delivered to Udom by the end of the year went to replace combat losses rather than to expand the force.⁶⁰

58. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXV, 2-6; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1969, pp 73-74.

59. See note above.

60. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011055Z Jan 70, subj: T-28s for Laos.

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Chapter XV

On the Doorstep of Long Tieng (U)

By the end of November 1969, About Face had reached its high-water mark, and the question of how to cope with the anticipated enemy counteroffensive arose. Originally, About Face had been conceived as a limited, three-week operation designed to reach the western edge of the Plain of Jars, but it turned out to be an offensive lasting three and a half months and extending to the plain's eastern edge. This very success contained its own cruel trap—the Meo were exhausted and overextended and the plain could not be defended. General Vang Pao, having come so far, could not give up the prize without a fight, and the prime minister, the king, and most American officials agreed. On November 30, Souvanna Phouma visited Vang Pao at Long Tieng and flew over the plain. After this tour, he expressed his and the king's desire that it be held. At the same time, he invited Prince Souphanouvong, the Pathet Lao leader, to discuss with him the plain's neutralization. He offered to halt American bombing in exchange for a North Vietnamese withdrawal. The communists rejected this overture, calling for a complete bombing halt prior to any negotiations.¹

American officials in Vientiane recognized that it was impossible to hold the whole plain. To face sixteen thousand North Vietnamese and six thousand Pathet Lao, Vang Pao could muster but fifty-five hundred men. Given this disparity and the condition of the Meo, the government could not expect to hold everything. Consequently, the embassy firmed up a plan for a phased withdrawal across the plain. Four defense "lines" (actually a series of strongpoints) would be formed to block the communist advance. The aim was to have the enemy mass in front of these strongpoints and be hit by air strikes.²

The embassy plan had several shortcomings. In the first place, the strongpoints were not within mutually supporting distance of one another and could be easily bypassed. Too, the very idea of holding a series of static positions was completely alien to the Meo's training and experience. Finally, the plan's success rested largely on close daily coordination of the air-ground battle. Colonel Tyrrell, the air attaché, wanted to establish a joint operations center at Long Tieng where USAF and CIA officials could follow the battle on a day-to-day basis. The CIA, however, never comfortable sharing any planning responsibility with the Air Force, was adamant in its refusal. It had participated in joint planning only in extreme circumstances, and even then, planning had been confined to the overall campaign, with day-to-day operations handled by its own "case officers" and Raven forward air controllers. This approach had worked well enough when Vang Pao pushed across the plain, but would not do for a defensive operation, especially one as intricate as a phased withdrawal.³

On the ground, the key to the whole plan was Phou Nok Kok overlooking Route 7. CIA officials described it as "the cork in the bottle." So long as it held, the North Vietnamese would be hard put to exert pressure on the remainder of the line. Once it fell, however, the communists could quickly and easily outflank the other positions and trap Vang Pao's troops on the plain.⁴

1. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011408Z Dec 69.
2. () Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, p 81; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 310826Z Dec 69, subj: Coordinated Mission Report on Military Planning for Dry Season.
3. () Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, pp 122–23.
4. () Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, p 82.

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Seemingly aware of this fact, the communists picked Phou Nok Kok as their first objective. On December 2, the North Vietnamese launched a four-day assault against the mountain, but gunships and tactical fighters helped the guerrillas beat off the attackers. On the 18th, the foe returned to the fray, making diversionary attacks on the town of Xieng Khouangville and Xieng Khouang airfield (Vang Pao's forward headquarters on the Plain of Jars), trying to divert attention from the main assault. The gambit failed and by the 21st, the communists once more pulled back. The enemy lost an estimated four hundred men killed and one thousand wounded in this futile attempt to "pop the cork." CIA reports attributed "a high percentage of these casualties" to the "continuous bombing and mining" by USAF aircraft.⁵ Indeed, one report said a North Vietnamese unit of three hundred men suffered over two hundred casualties while attempting to cross one of the minefields.⁶ The Air Force was using basically the same technique that had proved so successful during the defense of Thateng, and it appeared that as long as air power was at hand—and the guerrillas stood their ground—Phou Nok Nok could be held.

It was during the fighting for the mountain that Laotian AC-47s first appeared in Military Region II. General Vang Pao had at first opposed the idea of RLAF gunships and would not let them in his military region. His chief concern was their being used against his own troops—intentionally or inadvertently. He much preferred his air support to come from his own Meo, or the Air Force. Nevertheless, the earlier withdrawal of USAF AC-47s obliged him to turn to the RLAF. In the ensuing months, the Laotian Spookies dispelled these fears and became one of the mainstays in defending exposed lima sites, winning effusive praise from the previously skeptical general.⁷

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Unfortunately for the allies, the new year witnessed a deterioration in the weather. Ground haze, mixed with smoke from the Meo's slash-and-burn farming, obscured most of the plain. As a rule, the haze cleared just for a short period in the afternoon and on some days not at all. On only twelve days during January was the ceiling above five thousand feet and the visibility more than five miles (the normal required for close air support). Hence, many of the scheduled sorties could not hit their targets. From January 5 to January 10, for example, 219 of 691 sorties were diverted due to bad weather and the bulk of the remainder had to use all-weather techniques on area targets.⁸

The enemy capitalized on the weather to renew the offensive. From January 2 on, the communists pounded the mountain with a nearly continuous artillery bombardment that did slight physical damage but greatly demoralized the defenders. A ground assault on January 10 captured the summit, but the guerrillas clung to several positions around the mountain's base. Two days later the Meo withdrew completely. They had not been attacked since the 10th, but without air support their situation was untenable. While the victory was an important one for the communists, they had paid dearly for it. During the six-week battle an estimated six hundred North Vietnamese were killed—a number equal to the total of Meo defenders. In contrast, the guerrillas lost only twelve men.⁹

Following the loss of Phou Nok Kok, the Meo abandoned most of their remaining positions and withdrew to the western rim of the plain. This rapid collapse utterly upset the plan for a phased withdrawal and led to some bitter recriminations among the Americans. In general, the CIA blamed a lack of air support and the unwillingness of the Meo to defend their positions. As one CIA report put it:

5. JANAF Summary, Dec 12-19, 1969.
6. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 280200Z Dec 69, subj: Request for Special Ordnance.
7. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 240730Z Jun 70, subj: RLAF Gunship Support in Barrel Roll.
8. Msg, 7th AF to PACAF, 121416Z Jan 70, subj: Status and Analysis Report, BR/SL, Jan 5-10, 1970; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXVI, 2-3.*
9. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, p 32.

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On the Doorstep of Long Tieng

It is not known what impelled Vang Pao to decide on this withdrawal at this time. Although his troops have been under heavy pressure, recently, they have defended themselves well and their casualties have not been heavy, whereas the enemy has taken heavy losses.¹⁰

● We had a large defense plan which called for a fighting withdrawal, to hit them with air, then pull out. We mistakenly thought we could teach them defensive tactics overnight. But the idea of a phased withdrawal was alien to them.¹¹

● The Air Force tended to fault the persistent unwillingness [REDACTED] to coordinate ground movements with the Air Force, as well as reluctance of the Meo to hold static positions. Maj. Gen. Robert L. Petit, Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, said, "I don't see how we can help them defend a position if they don't stand up and fight."¹² However, Colonel Tyrrell pointed out that "the government forces wisely chose to withdraw and lose terrain in favor of the more precious commodity of fighting troops."¹³

● The entire plan had hinged on a willingness of the Meo to hold a series of static positions, close cooperation of air and ground forces, and the availability of air power. Unfortunately the first two conditions never did exist, and the weather effectively precluded the third. (During February, there were only thirteen days of favorable weather.)

● The Air Force could do very little about the first two problems, but did take steps to overcome the weather. On January 21, it introduced a program called Box Score targeting. In essence, this was an all-weather version of Snare Drum, using loran or radar in place of visual bombing. The [REDACTED] selected the targets based on the best available intelligence, but, as with Snare Drum, the results were mixed. The weather prevented aerial observation of results, and ground teams could rarely penetrate the target area to provide a firsthand assessment. The paucity of results and the failure of the strikes to slow the enemy did nothing to change the Air Force's low opinion [REDACTED] targeting.¹⁴

● To improve visual reconnaissance and to give some relief to the overworked Ravens, the Air Force sent a detachment of three OV-10s from Nakhon Phanom to Udom. These planes averaged two missions a day over the Plain of Jars. On February 17, the Air Force assigned three AC-119Ks to Udom to replace the AC-47s turned over to the RLA. The AC-119Ks added considerable punch to night interdiction and to the defense of lima sites.¹⁵

● Much more important, however, was the introduction of B-52s into Laos during February 1970. Ambassador Godley had first called for the big bombers in July 1969, but the proposal had not been favorably received. On January 23, 1970, with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Barrel Roll, the ambassador renewed his request. The Joint Chiefs now reversed their earlier position and supported the ambassador, although a firm decision was put off until it could be considered "at the highest level." In the meantime, SAC was ordered to conduct photo reconnaissance and accomplish the necessary planning in anticipation of presidential approval.¹⁶

● While the high-level discussions were going on, Godley sent another appeal, this time directly to Secretary of Defense Laird, stressing the urgency of the matter and furnishing detailed

10. [REDACTED] Msg, CAS FOV, 20, 131, 120734Z Jan 70.

11. [REDACTED] Intvw, Kenneth Sams and Lt Col John Schlight, Proj CHECO hist, with a senior CIA official, Mar 14, 1970.

12. [REDACTED] Briefing, Maj Gen Robert L. Petit, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Feb 21, 1970.

13. [REDACTED] JANAF Summary, Feb 20-27, 1970.

14. [REDACTED] Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, pp 43-45.

15. [REDACTED] Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXVII. The AC-119K featured two 20-mm cannon and four 7.62-mm miniguns, a computerized fire-control system, a night observation sight, infrared and side-looking radar, a 1.5 million-candlepower illuminator, a 20-kilowatt pencil beam, and twenty-four flares dispensed from a launcher.

16. [REDACTED] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 231214Z Jan 70, subj: Arclight Strike in PDJ Area, JCS to CINCPAC, 241559Z Jan 70, subj: Arclight Strike in Northern Laos.

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recommendations for six targets. Included in the message was a formal request for B-52 strikes from Souvanna Phouma.¹⁷ Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., USA, MACV commander, dispatched an Arc Light targeting team to Udom on February 14 to assess the ambassador's targets. The MACV planners were not impressed with Godley's nominations, since the "materiél value" of the targets fell far below that normally used for selecting targets in southern Laos. MACV further noted that, except for shock effect and all-weather delivery, tacair would be better than B-52s for striking targets in the Plain of Jars. Nevertheless, MACV recommended a strike of thirty-six B-52s on the most lucrative target—the suspected headquarters and staging area of the North Vietnamese 312th Division. The principal rationale for this strike was the psychological effect it would have on both friendly and enemy forces.¹⁸

In granting its approval on February 17, the JCS cautioned this was for a onetime strike only. Future requests would have to be reviewed singly, based on the ambassador's recommendations, MACV's validation, JCS concurrence, and approval by the Secretary of Defense. The Joint Chiefs also warned that favorable consideration of future targets needed "more substantive military basis" than the current request.¹⁹

The B-52s took off from U-Tapao Air Base, Thailand, on the night of February 17/18. Aircrews reported 130 secondary explosions ten times more powerful than the bomb explosions. The next day, [redacted] ground team entered the area and reported all bombs on target with numerous bunkers destroyed. Finding just twenty dead, the team assumed that "many others" had been buried in the bunkers or "fragmented" by the bombs. Despite the low number of enemy killed, ten more targets were hit between February and May; but B-52 operations in northern Laos were then suspended due to the incursion into Cambodia by American and South Vietnamese troops.²⁰

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As the North Vietnamese moved across the plain, the Seventh Air Force upped the sorties from an average of 100 to 180 a day. A one-day peak of 224 sorties was reached on February 18. Most of them were assigned to the Raven forward air controllers, but the pall of haze and smoke hanging over the plain permitted very few visual strikes. Thus, the majority of aircraft were diverted to other areas or dropped their bombs on rather dubious "area targets." The RLAF likewise went from 90 to 140 sorties a day with no better success than the Air Force. General Brown asserted: "We are still not as effective in putting ordnance on target in conditions of weather as we should be. We ask them [redacted] to give us firm targets which they can't always do, and they can't control all the sorties they get."²¹ The results of the increased air strikes, the Seventh Air Force commander said, were nowhere commensurate with the effort, and they did not significantly slow the communist drive. On February 20, the Meo abandoned the last friendly position on the plain. A week later the North Vietnamese reoccupied Muong Soui without firing a shot—the neutralists once again executing their favorite defensive maneuver.²²

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When Muong Soui fell, the lines were about where they had been the previous June. The main difference was that the attack of the communists on Long Tieng had been postponed eight months, their supply caches on the Plain of Jars had been destroyed, and they had suffered serious losses, variously estimated at between 3,500 and 6,000 men. In comparison, friendly casualties had been fairly light, 614 killed (520 Meo, 84 FAR, and 10 neutralists) and 1,436

17. (C) Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 160059Z Feb 70.
18. (C) Ibid.
19. (C) Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 170122Z Feb 70, subj: Arclight Strike in Barrel Roll.
20. (C) Hist, SAC, FY 72, III, 419.
21. (C) Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXVII, 2-5; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, p 15; intvw, Kenneth Sams and Lt Col Richard F. Kott, Proj CHECO hist, with Gen George S. Brown, Comdr, 7th AF, Mar 30, 1970.
22. (C) Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, p 35.



On the Doorstep of Long Tieng

wounded (1,130 Meo, 230 FAR, and 76 neutralists). Moreover, both sides were nearing the point of mutual exhaustion. General Vang Pao's troops were sapped from the long campaign and his losses could not be replaced. In the words of one longtime observer, "Forty percent of the Meo are over thirty-five years old, the other sixty percent are under fifteen—those in between are dead!"²³ The North Vietnamese had made up their personnel losses, but the supply caches on the plain were empty and everything had to be trucked all the way from Ban Ban. Though the haze layer afforded a measure of protection, any clearing of the weather would render this long logistics "tail" vulnerable to air strikes.²⁴

Following the loss of Muong Soui, there was a two-week break in the fighting as the communists ferried supplies across the plain in preparation for the assault on Long Tieng. General Vang Pao regrouped his forces to meet the attack. He deployed some fifteen hundred men in a line of hilltop sites (the Vang Pao line) between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars. The remainder, about a thousand men, were divided between Long Tieng itself and Sam Thong in the adjoining valley. The North Vietnamese had fifteen thousand men available, with nearly one-third of them facing Vang Pao.

The Seventh Air Force used the lull to shave its sorties and to redirect its effort to the lines of communication. Sorties averaged ninety-seven a day during the first week of March, but dropped to eighty-eight over the second week. There being no significant ground action, the bulk of these sorties struck Box Score targets or seeded mines on the routes leading into the plain.²⁵

Of course, the intense air activity of the past nine months had not gone unnoticed in the press. By 1970 there was a large and enterprising press corps in Saigon, adept at ferreting out a good story. In spite of the official policy of "no comment" on operations in northern Laos, the intrinsic details of About Face had appeared regularly in *The New York Times* and other papers. Press interest was heightened when the hearings of Senator Symington's foreign relations subcommittee brought the full scope of American activities into the open. In the view of American officials in Saigon, the "no comment" policy had lost its utility: "The rule cannot be carried out in a meaningful manner and it only serves to lessen our credibility with the press, Congress, and American people and results very often in exaggerated or inaccurate treatment of our air operations by the media."²⁶ What Saigon wanted was a series of low-key background briefings to the press, either in Saigon or Washington, so news reports could be kept in proper perspective.²⁷

Whether as a result of this prodding or for other reasons, President Nixon finally took the cover off U.S. operations on March 6 with a statement from the Key Biscayne White House. The statement traced North Vietnamese aggression since 1964 and acknowledged American efforts to counter it. According to the President, America's objectives were to ensure the neutrality of Laos, to protect the borders of Thailand, and to guarantee the safe withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam. He went on to say:

- The United States had no ground forces in Laos.
- No American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations.²⁸
- The U.S. flies reconnaissance and combat support missions for Laotian forces when

23. Edgar "Pop" Buell, quoted in *New York Times*, Oct 17, 1969, p 23.

24. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, pp 35-37.

25. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXVIII, 2-3; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, pp 36-38.

26. Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 230345Z Feb 70, subj: Publicity on US Air Operations in Laos.

27. *Ibid.*

28. This portion of the statement is in error. Seven Americans had lost their lives at Lima Site 85 and numerous AID officials had fallen victim to communist terrorism. The rest of the statement is correct in a narrow legalistic sense.

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requested by the Royal Laotian Government. Interdiction of enemy matériel occurs over areas held or contested by communist forces, and such flights occur only when requested by the RLG. The level of air response and U.S. aid has increased only as the number of NVA troops in Laos and their level of aggression has increased.²⁹

Although the Key Biscayne statement clarified American policy, it failed to lift the mantle of secrecy from the details of U.S. operations and did not assuage a skeptical Congress that was to impose increasingly stringent limits on American activities in Laos.

Back in Laos, the fighting flared on March 12, when the North Vietnamese hit the Vang Pao line. While weather curbed USAF sorties, the communists swiftly isolated and bypassed the Meo outposts to strike squarely at Long Tieng. It was soon apparent their objective was to destroy Vang Pao's forces rather than to occupy territory. By the 17th, the enemy had reached Skyline Ridge overlooking Long Tieng and was poised for the final thrust. Visibility in the Long Tieng area stayed at a mile or less, making air operations almost impossible. Nevertheless, twenty USAF aircraft flew through the haze to hit enemy positions. In Colonel Tyrrell's view, the greatest danger at this point was from midair collisions. Incredibly, two Meo pilots at Long Tieng completed thirty-one missions, taking off and dropping their bombs without straying from the traffic pattern.

With the North Vietnamese knocking on the door of Long Tieng, plans for a last-ditch stand were hastily drawn up. General Vang Pao deployed his remaining troops in a defensive perimeter around Long Tieng/Sam Thong and called back the guerrillas still holding portions of the Vang Pao line. The Thai government agreed to send a seven-hundred-man regimental combat team and three howitzers. The Laotian general staff in Vientiane ordered reinforcements sent from Military Regions III and IV, provoking objections from the two southern commanders, Maj. Gens. Phasouk Somly and Bounpone Maktheparak. Prince Boun Oum, political leader of the southern faction, in a rare display of statesmanship, told his generals in no uncertain terms to start acting like Laotian nationalists instead of warlords. For its part, Seventh Air Force jumped the number of sorties to two hundred a day, but warning that the weather would hamper their effectiveness, and added a fourth AC-119 to the Udon detachment. These gunships teamed with the Laotian AC-47s to afford all-night coverage of Long Tieng. To replace the AC-119s in their interdiction role, Seventh assigned three more AC-130s to the nightly schedule.³⁰

On March 18, the communists mounted their attack. The main blow fell on Sam Thong, and it was abandoned by midafternoon. The loss of Sam Thong broke Vang Pao's perimeter and left no defenses between there and Long Tieng. During the day the Air Force flew 163 sorties, but just 29 could penetrate the haze around Long Tieng. The rest used loran and radar to strike suspected enemy troop concentrations. That evening the first [redacted] contingent began to arrive, but with two communist battalions approaching from Sam Thong and two others pressing from the east, things looked bleak. Then, inexplicably, the communists halted for the night, giving Vang Pao time to patch together a new perimeter.

The next two days, weather hindered air operations as the enemy pushed ahead. By March 20, the communists were within a mile of Long Tieng and had artillery emplaced only two miles away. However, the Thai were in place and Laotian reinforcements were coming in. Guerrillas from outlying positions were likewise drifting back into the valley. Vang Pao had two thousand men inside his perimeter, but the North Vietnamese with six battalions (thirty-six

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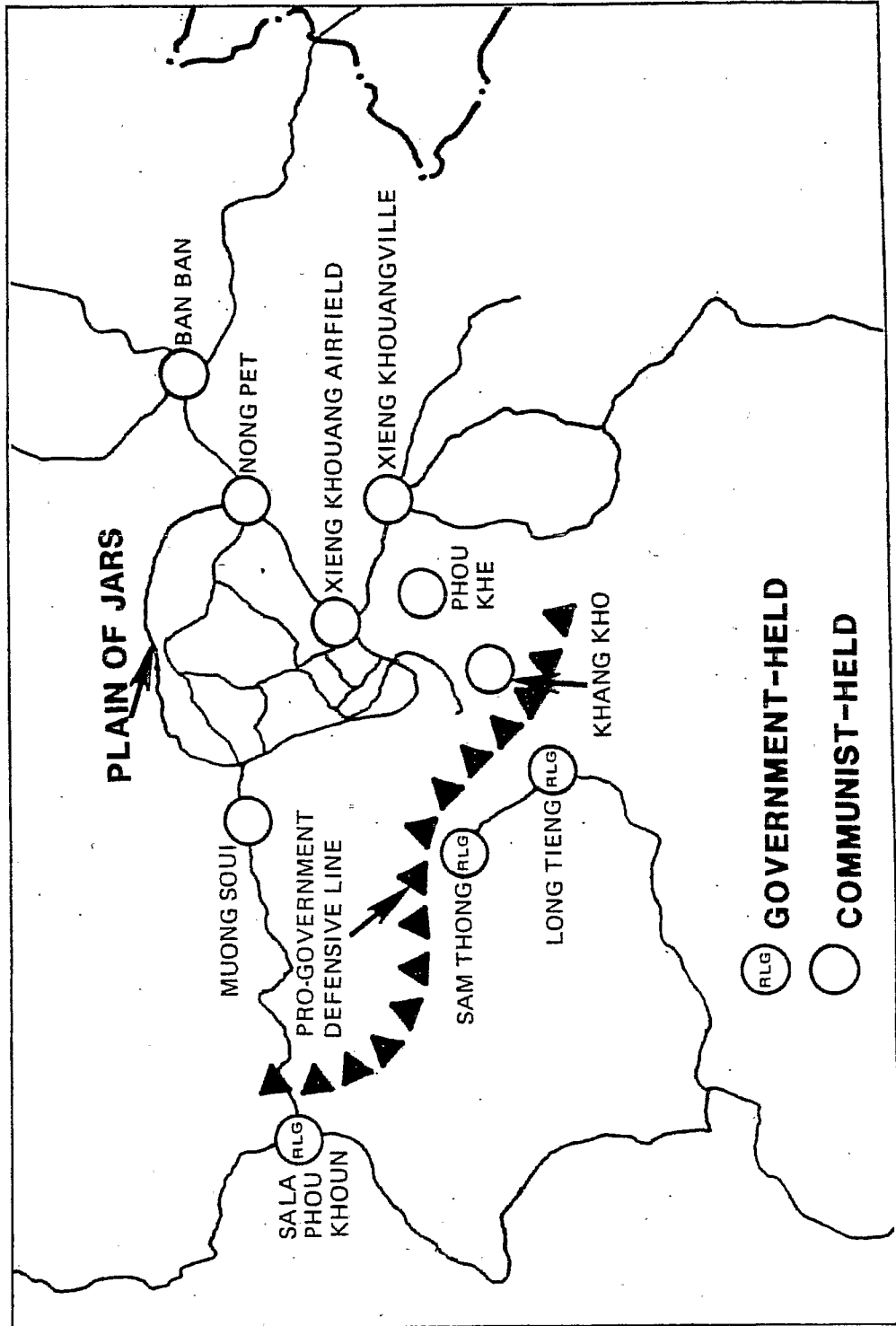
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29. President Richard M. Nixon, "The Situation in Laos: the Case for Escalation," in *Conflict in Laos*, eds: Marvin E. Gettleman, et al (New York, 1970), p 261.

30. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, pp 19-22; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171027Z Mar 70, subj: Enemy and Friendly Intentions and Capabilities Following the Fall of Tha Tam Bleung (Site 72); Summary of Air Operations Southeast Asia, LXVIII, 2-4.

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hundred men) still outnumbered the defenders. On the other hand, Vang Pao was building up his forces faster than the enemy, who seemed to be having some problems getting supplies to forward units.

There were no USAF sorties on March 21 due to a major search and rescue operation in Steel Tiger, but five Meo T-28s flew fifty sorties. Water Pump pilots also entered the fray by flying twelve strike sorties (these being officially listed as RLAf ones). A probe by Vang Pao's troops of enemy positions on Skyline Ridge was beaten back, but it was the first action initiated by the defenders and the first indication the tide had begun to turn.³¹

On March 22, a sudden burst of rain halted ground action, but the Air Force went on pummeling all-weather targets. The rain washed away much of the haze, and the 23d dawned bright and clear. For the next four days, air operations were intense and potent. An average of 185 sorties a day managed to hit their targets visually. Of these, 50 to 60 worked over the communists in front of Long Tieng while the others played havoc with exposed logistic lines. Air Force pilots sighted 259 enemy trucks, attacked 226 and destroyed or damaged 148. The RLAf had 65 sorties, all against targets in the Long Tieng area. These strikes held the enemy at bay while Vang Pao continued to receive reinforcements. By March 26, he had thirty-four hundred men, about equal to the communist strength. The next day, behind an intense aerial bombardment, these troops recaptured several points along Skyline Ridge. Another force moved on Sam Thong, which was retaken on March 30. The North Vietnamese were still in the area, but the initiative had clearly passed to the friendly forces—the siege of Long Tieng was over.

In commenting on the successful defense of Long Tieng, Ambassador Godley lavishly praised the Air Force. He wrote General Brown on April 1, "Certainly the fact that Long Tieng is still in friendly hands is due to your air support."³² In return, the Seventh Air Force commander credited the ground forces for standing their ground and forcing the enemy to focus on a fairly narrow front. There, despite the handicap of weather, the cumulative effect of the bombing devastated the communists' frontline units and reduced incoming supplies to a trickle.³³

During the following weeks, General Vang Pao pressed cautiously outward. The communists gave ground grudgingly and as a parting shot made a major assault on Lima Site 32. The attack, however, was smothered under one hundred sorties a day. By June, government forces had reoccupied the Vang Pao line, except for Ban Na (Lima Site 15), when rain ended the campaign.³⁴

In southern Laos, meanwhile, the ground situation had remained fairly stable since the fall of Thateng in April 1969. The North Vietnamese continued to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the government did not seriously try to interfere save for the short-lived Operation Junction City, Junior. Elsewhere, the sporadic and at times bitter clashes between government and Pathet Lao troops did little to change the status quo. Then on March 18, 1970, the situation took a dramatic turn when a coup d'etat toppled the government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia. The new government under Lt. Gen. Lon Nol at once canceled the transit rights the North Vietnamese had enjoyed under Prince Sihanouk. This obliged the North Vietnamese to depend almost totally on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to move supplies into South Vietnam. To counteract the loss of Cambodia, the North Vietnamese elected to reorganize and expand their supply routes in Laos. First, however, they needed to dispose of the government garrison still on the Bolovens Plateau.³⁵

31. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 19–22; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXVII*.

32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb G. McMurtrie Godley) to 7th AF (Gen George S. Brown), 011105Z Apr 70.

33. Brown intvw, Mar 30, 1970.

34. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 19–22; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXVIII*, 2–3 thru 2–4, LXIX, 2–2.

35. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Apr 15 and May 18, 1970.

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The blow fell on April 28 when the North Vietnamese assaulted the four hundred-man garrison at Attopeu. After an initial shelling, the enemy gave the defenders a chance to withdraw if they laid down their arms. The Laotian commander accepted these terms and evacuated the town the next day. Other garrisons were hastily abandoned, and on June 9 the government lowered its flag over Saravane.³⁶

The one bright spot of this dismal period was the RLAF squadron's performance at Pakse. In May, its ten T-28s averaged twenty-eight sorties a day, stiffening the sagging morale of the ground troops and covering their withdrawal. On the day Saravane fell, a Raven forward air controller dropped leaflets on the town, announcing it would be retaken "mainly by RLAF bombing" and urging the residents to "get away from the enemy."³⁷ Shortly afterward, pinpoint bombing by T-28s demolished three buildings housing the North Vietnamese command post. Later intelligence reports revealed a North Vietnamese general had been killed in this strike.³⁸

On June 12, two T-28s and an AC-47 from Vientiane augmented the Pakse squadron. This shifting of resources from one military region to another, though small in number, was an important first for the RLAF and marked the emergence of the combined operations center as a factor in military operations. (Until then, it had been confined to controlling transport aircraft.) As part of Ambassador Godley's Blueprint for Improving RLG Military Forces, the center expanded to an integrated command post that controlled all Laotian forces not actually committed to combat. On May 26, the combat operations center had moved into a new building, from which it could communicate directly with the regional joint operations centers. The Pakse action was its first shifting of resources to meet a specific threat. In the ensuing campaigns, this ability markedly improved the performance of Laotian military forces.³⁹

By the time the dry season ended in June 1970, the war in northern Laos had come to its final phase. Over the previous two years, the "quiet war" had given way to large-scale conventional operations as the North Vietnamese poured in more and more regular troops. The fighting climaxed during About Face—"the first major victory in the history of the Royal Laotian Government."⁴⁰ Even so, the resilience and determination of the North Vietnamese was depicted in their rapid recovery and subsequent drives on Long Tieng and the Bolovens Plateau. The Meo had done most of the fighting and had gradually changed from guerrillas to a conventional force. They faced exhaustion, if not outright extinction, for only during the end of the period did the regular Laotian army join the battle. It was clear that, in the future, the FAR would have to shoulder more of the burden if the government was to stay in the war. Ambassador Godley's Blueprint plan marked the first tentative steps in this direction. However, budget restrictions and the inherent limits of a feudal society slowed progress. Meantime, Laos had to place greater reliance on [redacted] continued support from the U.S. Air Force.⁴¹

In addition, the upturn in fighting between 1968 and 1970, coupled with the close of Rolling Thunder, induced a change in USAF operations. One aspect of this change was Colonel Tyrrell's program to build the RLAF that resulted in a new peak of performance and operational efficiency. From fifty-five hundred sorties in 1968, the figure climbed to ten thousand in 1969 and to twenty thousand in 1970. This rise is all the more remarkable since the Laotians had at most sixty T-28s, and very often less than half of them were ready for combat. In the process, however, the ideal of self-sufficiency had been sacrificed to operational necessity, and the RLAF depended more than ever on American aid. To come up with the needed sorties, the Americans

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36. JANAF Summary, Jun 20, 1970.

37. Khouang intvw, Jun 12, 1970.

38. *Ibid.*

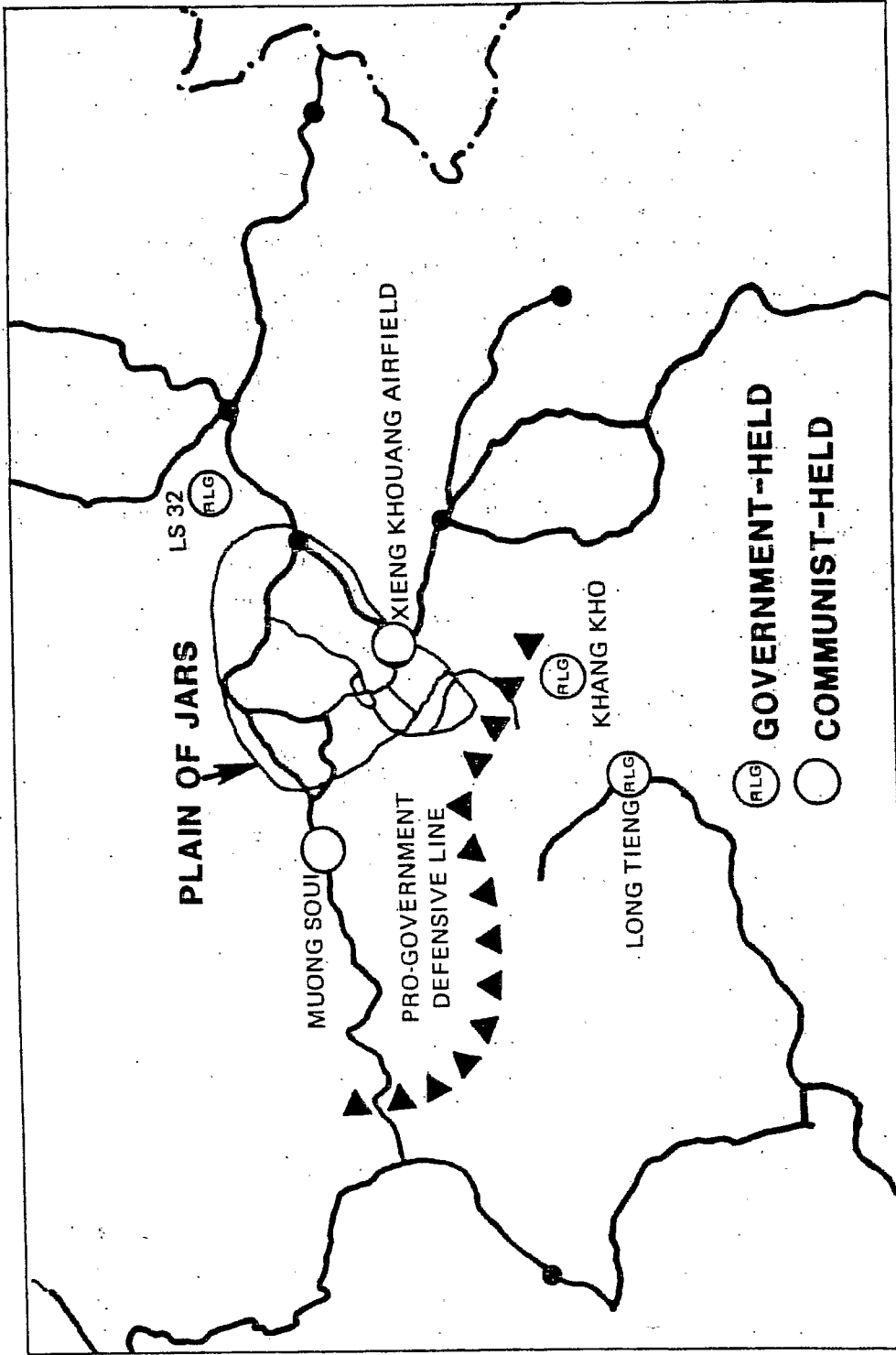
39. Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, AIRA Vientiane, Jun 13, 1970.

40. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Oct 29, 1969.

41. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 290614Z May 70, subj: Assessment of U.S. Policy in Laos.

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found themselves doing more and training less. Training output barely matched attrition, and seasoned pilots could not be spared from combat to serve as instructors or staff officers—"They fly until they die." In consequence the RLAF remained nearly completely devoid of any middle management. The drive to generate sorties also meant deferral of required repairs and aircraft modification. Aid dollars went for such expendables as fuel and ammunition and not for capital investment in the support facilities demanded to sustain the high sortie rate. The cumulative result was a near collapse of the RLAF in 1971.

● Between 1968 and 1970, USAF combat sorties peaked at over two hundred a day. At the height of the campaign (October 1969), Barrel Roll accounted for about two-thirds of all USAF sorties in Laos. A host of new programs accompanied this upswing, most developed for use in Steel Tiger, South Vietnam, or Rolling Thunder. The bombing halt over North Vietnam, the diminished activity in South Vietnam, and increased use of electronic sensors and gunships in Steel Tiger made introduction of these programs into northern Laos possible. During this period, the complex command and control arrangements were smoothed over and a brief interval of cooperation, culminating in About Face, emerged. Unfortunately, this fragile structure began to collapse under the stress of the renewed communist offensive.

● New budget restrictions and congressional opposition to the war whittled overall USAF sorties in Southeast Asia to ten thousand a month. Air Force units gradually withdrew from the theater and the remaining sorties were concentrated in Steel Tiger. The sortie allocation varied from month to month but as a rule a 70/10/10/10 ratio prevailed (70 percent to Steel Tiger and 10 percent each to Barrel Roll, South Vietnam, and Cambodia).

● Diplomatic and political moves in Laos and Washington heavily influenced operations in the final years of the war. Consequently, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a newly created special action group of the National Security Council took a more direct hand in running combat operations, breeding a whole new set of problems to be resolved.

● The summer of 1970 also saw the beginning of major USAF withdrawals from Thailand. The 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Udon was inactivated, the A-1s at Nakhon Phanom fell from seventy-five to twenty-five, and the sixty F-105s at Takhli returned to the United States. College Eye EC-121 air control and warning aircraft were likewise discontinued, and in November the AC-119s moved from Udon to Nakhon Phanom. The size of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force decreased from 176 to 88 people, mostly in the support and administrative areas. These reductions eliminated the tactical air control center, a loss that badly hurt Seventh/Thirteenth's ability to plan and monitor Barrel Roll operations.⁴²

● Of greater import than unit withdrawals was a congressionally imposed ceiling of ten thousand fighter sorties per month for all of Southeast Asia.⁴³ Most of the sorties were brought to bear on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, with but thirty a day (9 percent) planned for Barrel Roll. This distribution mirrored the relative priorities of the various theaters, the level of enemy action, and the amount of force needed to meet the different objectives. Since the embassy adopted a holding strategy for the wet season, the minimum number of USAF sorties was called for. If enemy action accelerated, Seventh Air Force stood ready to shift sufficient air power to the north to counter the threat but not to support offensive operations.⁴⁴

● Inherent in sortie allocation was Seventh Air Force's assumption (based on embassy projections) that the RLAF could furnish three thousand sorties a month. The RLAF had close air support, while the Americans provided "heavy sorties" for special situations and tactical emergencies. (The American aircraft carried a heavier load of bombs and more sophisticated

42. ● Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1970, pp 5-6.

43. ● Sorties not used in any one month could be added to the next month's allocation. Thus, Seventh Air Force was encouraged to "bank" sorties during slack periods in order to "surge" during a crisis.

44. ● 7th AF Oplan 715-71, Northeast Monsoon Plan, Sep 14, 1970, pp 1-2.

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warranted a strike, and, if so, which aircraft (A-1s, AC-119s, or F-4s) should carry it out. The Army, however, wanted to receive proper credit for any trucks destroyed and did not want its information "mixed" with other sources.

Deprived of a formal program, the Army and Air Force crews went on working together on an ad hoc basis through the rainy season. Coordination was completely dependent on direct contact between the crews. After the gunships moved to Nakhon Phanom in November 1970, that coordination was lost and the program gradually died. Later attempts to resurrect the hunter-killer idea came to naught.⁴⁸

The introduction in May 1970 of an F-4 quick reaction force at Udom, basically a revival of the old Bango/Whiplash program of 1965, was more successful. Each day twelve F-4s went on alert at Udom for tactical emergencies or lucrative targets discovered by forward air controllers. Previously, this need had been met by diverting aircraft from other missions; but with the whittling down of sorties, fewer planes were available for diverts. The method for launching the quick reaction force matched that for diverts. Information on a found target was passed to the ABCCC for relay to Seventh Air Force. If Seventh deemed the strike justified, it fixed the number of aircraft and directed them to take off. The ABCCC then coordinated between the flight and the requester (FAC or ground unit). It usually took twenty minutes to mount a quick reaction strike and another twenty to get to the target, so most Barrel Roll Targets could be hit in an hour. Since the short reaction time precluded arming the aircraft to suit each target, six five-hundred-pound bombs was the standard load. In addition, various aircraft in the flight carried high-drag bombs, cluster bomb units, or napalm.⁴⁹

The quick reaction force was never popular, even though it furnished a more reliable response than looking around for aircraft to divert. The crews disliked the long hours of boredom, and it tied up twelve planes all day, whether or not they ever took off. This complicated scheduling aircraft to ensure flying time was equally parceled out and that there were enough planes to meet other mission needs. Then, too, the twelve aircraft on alert were counted against the thirty to Barrel Roll. Hence, just eighteen were normally available to attack fixed targets. The CIA in particular preferred to have as many aircraft as possible overhead, and to hear the comforting thud of bombs even if there were no suitable targets. (The CIA believed that there were always suitable targets.) However, Seventh Air Force could no longer afford the luxury of simply scheduling aircraft and then flying them to meet the schedule. Every sortie had to count and was not flown unless it could be justified in terms of concrete results.⁵⁰

Along with the quick reaction force, Seventh insisted on more precise targeting in Barrel Roll. Fixed targets needed to be confirmed by at least two different intelligence sources (usually photo or electronic reconnaissance in addition to FAC or ground reports). Target nominations also had to include an analysis of the anticipated results, which elicited charges from the CIA that the Air Force was "hunting BDA" [bomb damage assessment] in lieu of considering the effect on the ground war. Nonetheless, with a static ground situation, the Air Force knew of no better way to measure success than by bomb damage assessment. They likewise felt the CIA often exaggerated results to justify more sorties, because poststrike photography rarely confirmed that agency's reports. The CIA rejoined that you could not count dead bodies from a photograph, and as long as the ground forces held their position the sortie should be counted a success.⁵¹

To assist in making every sortie count, Combat Skyspot was reintroduced into Barrel Roll. From the fall of Lima Site 85 in 1968, radar coverage of northern Laos had been limited

48. Richard R. Sexton and William M. Hodgson, *OV-119 Hunter-Killer Team* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972).

49. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1970, p 21.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Aug 31 and Oct 19, 1970.

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to the southernmost edge of Barrel Roll. To extend this coverage, an improved radar (TSQ-96) was installed at Udom in September 1970. The new set covered the whole Plain of Jars, including interdiction points on Route 7, and its accuracy surpassed both loran D and radar offset bombing.⁵²

A problem of both Combat Skyspot and loran D was the inaccuracy of available maps. In the summer of 1970, RF-4s out of Udom began photomapping the principal roads and large areas along the western Plain of Jars. The aircraft's computer recorded the loran coordinates at the point directly beneath the aircraft at the instant the photo was taken. Using this data, a photomap was made with a grid overlay that provided exact coordinates of every position on the map. These maps were distributed to the forward air controllers and major ground units. A chief advantage of the system (dubbed "It gap" for loran targeting, grid annotated photography) was that the pilot did not need a map. Once the target coordinates were determined, they could be passed either to the Skyspot site at Udom or straight to loran-equipped F-4s. In the case of Combat Skyspot, the radar controller vectored the aircraft to the proper release point. For F-4s fitted with loran, the target coordinates were set into the plane's bombing computer, which provided the same function. A series of tests held during November 1970 of one hundred drops on five targets produced an accuracy of ninety-eight yards from ninety-eight impacts; with two gross errors discounted.⁵³

The Air Force also brought two new types of ordnance into Barrel Roll during the 1970 wet season—the Snake Eye high-drag bomb and the CBU-38. The Snake Eye weapon, designed to increase the accuracy of high-speed jets, had flaps attached to a five-hundred-pound bomb. The flaps deployed when the bomb was released, slowing it and reducing the forward throw distance. In practice, the bomb proved to be accurate to within three hundred feet, about twice as accurate as slicks (low-drag bombs).

The CBU-38, a cluster bomb new to the theater, was a canister containing forty 14-pound bomblets. Each bomblet yielded bigger fragments, greater fragment velocity, and more incendiary effect than earlier cluster bombs. Unlike earlier CBUs, the canister holding the bomblets, which cost fourteen hundred dollars, remained attached to the aircraft. All bomblets could be ejected in two seconds, but the pilot could control the number of bomblets dropped by the length of time he held his thumb on the firing button. Most pilots preferred a one-second burst to allow a second run on the target. In one second, three canisters (the F-4's normal load) dispersed sixty bomblets in a one-hundred-foot by three-hundred-foot area.⁵⁴

With Snake Eye and the CBU-38, the Air Force had begun to employ every weapon of its Southeast Asia arsenal in Barrel Roll—though in smaller numbers than elsewhere; but the foremost question was how to best use these weapons. Because no major wet-season offensive was in the offing, the Air Force believed the bulk of its effort should center on the enemy logistic network. During the preceding dry season, with Route 7 closed, the communists had been unable to restock their supply bases on the Plain of Jars. With this in mind, two interdiction points were selected on Route 7. While the RLA and the quick reaction force were left to support Vang Pao, the rest of the sorties focused on the interdiction points in an attempt to again close Route 7. Between April and June, 844 sorties hammered these two road segments. The mixture of bombs and rain did the job. A roadwatch team reported that the route was closed for twenty-six days in April, twenty-nine days during May, and continuously from May 23 through the close of the rainy season.⁵⁵

52. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1970, p 42.

53. *Ibid*, pp 26–27.

54. *Ibid*, pp 27–28.

55. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 270111Z Nov 70, subj: Laos Sitrep, Northern Laos.

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The communists countered with a renewed road-building program. Prior to 1966, there were very few motorable roads in eastern Barrel Roll and none could carry traffic in the rainy season. This had largely determined the ebb-and-flow pattern of fighting over those early years. From 1966 to 1968, the North Vietnamese emphasized road improvement, upsetting the seesaw pattern during the 1968 dry season. However, Route 7 between Ban Ban and the Plain of Jars remained a bottleneck. For two years, the Air Force had succeeded in closing this road for a good part of the wet season, allowing Vang Pao to conduct his successful About Face campaign. The new road building effort aimed to settle this problem once and for all. In lieu of merely repairing existing roads, the North Vietnamese constructed a series of alternate routes that in general followed the trails previously used to bypass the bottleneck on Route 7. They also built two entirely new roads (Routes 72 and 73), affording direct access from North Vietnam to the southern Plain of Jars. These roads proved particularly nettlesome to the Air Force, since there were few points of the terrain that could not be easily bypassed. The North Vietnamese additionally brought in an array of antiaircraft weapons to stave off interdiction. While the roads were not completed in time to have much effect on the 1970-71 campaigns, they boded ill for the future.⁵⁶

As the Air Force pummeled Route 7, General Vang Pao laid plans for a limited wet-season offensive. His objectives were similar to those originally envisioned for About Face—a feint toward Muong Soui accompanied by a drive to the edge of the Plain of Jars. The specific goals were to retake Lima Site 15 and occupy Phou Seu overlooking the plain. Vang Pao's chief striking force would be Meo, but once the positions were secure he planned to move in [redacted] battalions to hold them. The Meo would then revert to their traditional roles as scouts and guerrillas to raid onto the plain and to act as a mobile reserve at Long Tieng.⁵⁷

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The operation got off to a shaky start on August 18 and ground to a halt with no appreciable gain by the end of the month. A combination of factors accounted for the failure: poor weather that held air support to thirty-six U.S. and eighty-two Laotian sorties, low troop morale, and stubborn communist resistance. In September the two sides sparred inconclusively as Vang Pao steadily built up his forces. With Route 7 closed, the Air Force shifted some sorties to the ground campaign. During September, 253 of 843 sorties performed close air support, 204 of them quick reaction strikes from Udon. The RLAf had 1,057 sorties, 848 in support of Vang Pao and the remainder distributed among the military regions. In October, 321 of 661 USAF sorties assisted the ground troops and in November the figure rose to 439 out of 763. The RLAf sorties peaked at 2,400 during October but fell to 1,500 in November as the wear and tear took its toll.⁵⁸

In October, as the North Vietnamese pulled back from their forward positions, Vang Pao's offensive finally gathered momentum. Muong Soui was taken on October 11, Lima Site 15 two weeks later, and Phou Seu by the last of the month. Meantime, the North Vietnamese formed a new defense line along Route 4 across the middle of the plain.

The enemy's unexpected withdrawal was due to several reasons. In the first place, USAF interdiction prevented full restocking of North Vietnamese supply depots on the Plain of Jars. Deprived of an adequate forward supply base, the communists could not sustain major operations west of the plain. Coupled to this was the cumulative pressure of Vang Pao's offensive that made the enemy consume the supplies on hand. Prisoner reports disclosed that one unit ran out of ammunition during the fight for Muong Soui, and there was a general dearth of supplies throughout the front. So, after repulsing the initial thrust, the communists of necessity pulled

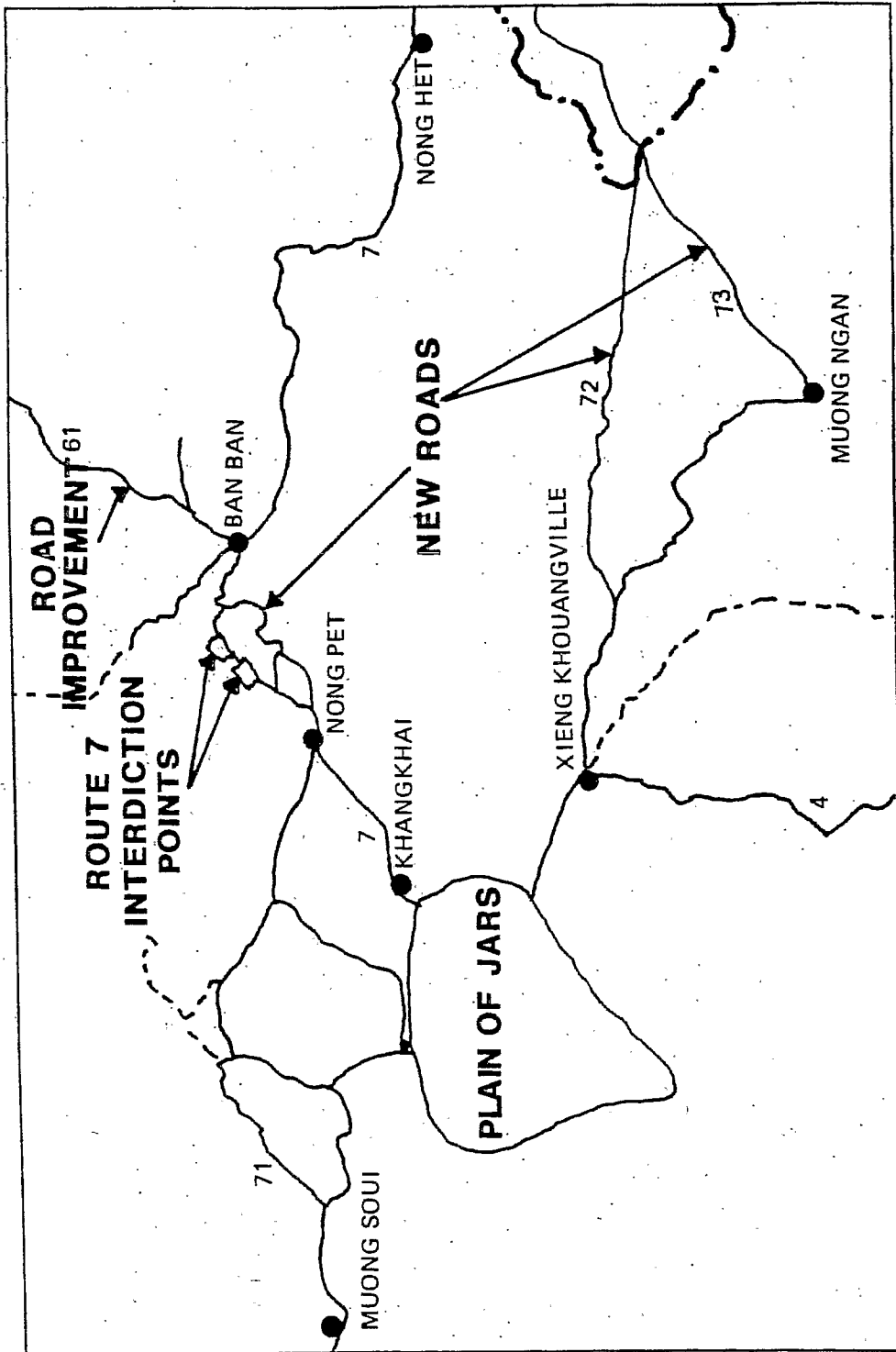
56. *Ibid.*

57. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 060605Z Sep 70.

58. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 241050Z Nov 70, subj: Air Support of RLGAF; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXXIV-LXXVI, Sec 2.*

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Enemy Road Construction
November 1970



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back and shortened their supply lines. However, the enemy may also have withdrawn early rather than risk being caught as in About Face the previous year.⁵⁹

Even though Vang Pao now had some maneuvering room, things were still "tense." The communists were just twenty miles from Long Tieng and by the end of November had restored their logistic network to the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao, backed by the king and the prime minister, wanted to move onto the plain. Ambassador Godley, noting that "the rains in Laos are dwindling almost as fast as USAF sorties," judged the move unrealistic. He did go along with a large-scale raid on Ban Ban to pinch off the main supply corridor and possibly lure the communists from the plain.⁶⁰

The operation, named Counterpunch III, got under way on November 26 but execution was fitful from the start. Low clouds and haze restricted air support and the ground troops did not move out aggressively. The operation was eventually called off on January 5, 1971, with minimal results. Only in the last week of December were friendly forces able to cross the Ban Ban valley. Even then, Route 7 was closed for just a few days, and the communists did not withdraw many men from the Plain of Jars.⁶¹

The principal outcome of Counterpunch III was the revival of the issue of joint planning. Typically, [] planned ground operations without telling either the air attaché or Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. After getting the ambassador's approval, the plan was sent through CIA channels to Washington. There, a CIA official briefed the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (none other than William H. Sullivan, former Ambassador to Laos). The State Department next passed its approval to Vientiane, again through CIA channels, without coordinating with the Defense Department. Only then was Seventh Air Force informed of the air support needs. Since this did not give Seventh enough time to integrate the [] request with its other requirements, only a reduced number of sorties were available. This prompted [] charges that the operation failed due to a dearth of air support.

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Gen. John D. Ryan, the new Air Force Chief of Staff, raised this issue with the other Joint Chiefs on December 17. What Ryan wanted was assurance that representatives of the CIA, the air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force met far enough in advance to discuss specific plans and support requirements. Only then would the plan be sent to the State Department. At the same time, the air plan would go to Seventh Air Force. After review in Saigon, the plan would be forwarded through CINCPAC to the JCS for final approval.

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The military chiefs sided with General Ryan, and asked Secretary of Defense Laird to seek State Department and CIA approval. Unfortunately, there is no record of any subsequent communication between Defense and State/CIA. A Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force operation plan dated February 1971 did set out Ryan's procedure, but it is not clear whether this had CIA concurrence or was a unilateral Air Force statement.⁶²

All
CIA

Meanwhile, Vang Pao was digging in to meet the communist dry-season offensive. The embassy estimated it would take twenty-nine hundred fighter sorties a month to stop the enemy; the Air Force was prepared to furnish nine hundred. A typical daily mission order consisted of four A-1s and ten F-4s for close air support, with another twelve F-4s scheduled against interdiction targets. The quick reaction force was reduced to four aircraft for striking fleeting targets. At night, four AC-119s (three for interdiction and one for close air support) would be

59. () Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 120650Z Oct 70, USIA, 131051Z Oct 70; Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Oct 26, 1970.

60. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130438Z Oct 70, subj: Air Support for RLGAF; Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Dec 7, 1970; CSAFM L-18-70 to J-3, Planning for Combined Operations, Dec 17, 1970.

61. () Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jan 18, 1971; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1970, p 21.

62. () CSAFM L-18-70, Dec 17, 1970; *Chronology of JCS Recommendations Concerning Military Involvement in Laos* (Washington, 1972); Barrel Roll Operations Plan, 7th AF/13th AF, Feb 71.

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in the air. Other sorties (reconnaissance, forward air control, flareship, search and rescue, and escort) were to be flown as need be. If a crisis occurred, the sorties could be doubled and the aircraft massed to cope with the threat. This accorded with the Air Force policy of shifting the chief responsibility for close air support to the Laotians, and limiting USAF participation to those missions the T-28s could not handle.⁶³

The embassy knew the RLAF was not up to the job. During October it had lost six out of forty-one planes and no replacements were due until April 1971. Even then, only nine aircraft were programmed over eighteen months against a projected attrition to sixteen aircraft. In the embassy view, the RLAF would "sag through" the dry season but could not be expected to generate more than fifteen hundred sorties, and half of these would be outside Barrel Roll.⁶⁴

To make up the difference, Ambassador Godley suggested forty [] T-28s be assigned to duty in Laos. These planes could fly nine hundred sorties a month at a cost of \$1.27 million. State seconded the suggestion but Defense objected to the price tag. Instead, the Defense Department recommended building the RLAF to eighty-six aircraft over eighteen months. This would let the Laotians reach their goal of three thousand sorties a month, and allow the Air Force to shut down Barrel Roll operations. As an interim measure, Defense advocated shifting all of the Laotian T-28s to Barrel Roll.⁶⁵

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Ambassador Godley endorsed the package of eighty-six aircraft for the RLAF but not any cutback in USAF sorties. He pointed out that the T-28 could carry only fifteen hundred pounds of bombs compared to six thousand pounds for the F-4. Besides being all-weather, the F-4 had a greater radius of action, could carry advanced munitions, and could operate in heavily defended areas that would be suicidal for the T-28. Thus, a one-for-one tradeoff would dilute overall capability and, no matter how many sorties the RLAF came up with, a minimum of nine hundred USAF sorties would still be needed. As to shifting all of the T-28s to Barrel Roll, the ambassador said existing facilities could not support that many planes, and in any event the regional commanders would be reluctant to part with any of their resources.⁶⁶

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In the end, the [] proposal was scrapped, the eighty-six aircraft program for Laos approved, USAF sorties continued at their present level, and for the 1971 dry season, the embassy had to make do with what it had.⁶⁷

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63. Barrel Roll Operations Plan, 7th AF/13th AF, Feb 71.

64. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 071608Z Nov 70, 241050Z Nov 70, subj: Air Support for RLAF; Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Dec 7, 1970.

65. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130438Z Oct 70, 241050Z Nov 70, CINCPAC to SECDEF, 301908Z Nov 70, subj: Air Support for RLAF.

66. See note above.

67. Hist, CINCPAC, 1970, II, 221.

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Chapter XVI

Staggering to a Cease-Fire (U)

Fortunately, the 1971 communist dry-season offensive lacked the intensity of the previous year. Although sorties were fewer, better weapons and delivery techniques and closer attention to targeting had hurt communist resupply. The depots on the Plain of Jars were only partially filled, and the North Vietnamese needed to use them judiciously. Prisoner reports revealed that medical supplies were especially hard to obtain. Each soldier carried less than the standard load of ammunition, and artillery rounds were carefully rationed. Nonetheless, the offensive posed a serious threat to government positions.

As soon as the rains slackened in November, the communists exerted more pressure on Vang Pao and drove him back from Phou Seu. Not until late January 1971, however, did the offensive really get under way. Muong Soui fell in early February and some enemy units again bypassed the Vang Pao line to strike directly at Long Tieng. The communists shelled the base periodically during February and March, but the one major attack took place on the night of February 13/14. The main action centered on Ban Na (Lima Site 15) and Tha Tam Bleung (Lima Site 72). By mid-February both sites were virtually surrounded and had to be resupplied by air. The communist attacks consisted chiefly of artillery fire and ground probes in lieu of massive infantry assaults. The defenders answered with counterbattery fire and occasional patrols to determine enemy strengths and dispositions.¹

While the communists tightened their noose around the lima sites, the T-28s surged from twenty-two to forty-four sorties a day due largely to round-the-clock effort by American advisors. Seventh Air Force also doubled its sorties to sixty a day, twelve being placed on the quick reaction force, but this was a far cry from the two hundred sorties a day flown in 1970. Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Seventh Air Force commander, therefore insisted that only targets that justified an A-1 or F-4 would be struck and only if suitable control was available. To ensure effective control, Col. Hayden C. Curry (Colonel Tyrell's successor as air attaché) established a designated battlefield area (DBA) covering every enemy position that could directly threaten the Long Tieng complex. Within this area, a series of IFR (instrument flight rules) boxes were created where aircraft could strike using all-weather methods. These boxes as a rule contained the principal enemy staging bases and artillery parks. Elsewhere in the designated battlefield area, all strikes had to be made visually under the control of a Raven FAC. East of the DBA were three special operating areas. One embraced the enemy supply bases on the Plain of Jars, a second took in Ban Ban and Route 7 to the North Vietnamese border, and a third linked the first two. These were in effect free-strike zones where planes hit any target without prior validation or the aid of a forward air controller. Outside of the designated battlefield area and special operating areas, the normal rules of engagement governed.²

The designated battlefield area received the most USAF sorties. Between February 11 and March 30, 1,525 sorties struck visual targets in the DBA (337 of these were quick reaction force). Another 1,025 hit the IFR boxes, 503 hammered targets in the special operating areas

1. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1971, pp 27-28.

2. EOTR, Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF (Oct 70-Jun 71), Jun 30, 1971, pp 8-9.

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(over half of these in the Plain of Jars area), and 135 attacked elsewhere in Barrel Roll. Night support in the DBA came from five AC-119s joined by a pair of Laotian AC-47s. Even though the gunships were the lima sites' sole assistance at night, the AC-119 crews believed their relatively sophisticated weapon system could be of more use along the lines of communication where the communists were pouring trucks into Barrel Roll.³

● Air Force preoccupation with the designated battle area offered the enemy some freedom of movement along the lines of communication. To restrict his restocking of supply depots, the B-52s returned to northern Laos in February. During the dry-season campaign 149 sorties were flown, mostly against supply depots on the plain. These strikes often achieved spectacular results, but the communists always had alternate routes and storage areas to turn to. Hence, they were somewhat better off at the end of the dry season than at the beginning.⁴

● The forceful application of air power in the designated battlefield area kept the enemy from converting logistic success to tactical victory. The North Vietnamese hauled many anti-aircraft guns right up to the frontlines. Even so, aircraft attacked the artillery sites almost as soon as they were set up, shattered troop concentrations, and constantly supplied the lima sites. When the rains began in April, the Meo gave up Lima Site 15 but the North Vietnamese made no move to take it over. Instead, they gradually withdrew to the east. Long Tieng was safe for another year.⁵

● In February, seventeen thousand South Vietnamese thrust into the panhandle of southern Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail by seizing the logistic hub of Tchepone. Coincident with this operation (Lam Son 719), [redacted] settled on another attempt at cutting the trail from the west. Known as Desert Rat, the operation involved four guerrilla battalions that were supposed to cut Route 23 north of Saravane and then link up with the South Vietnamese. This would completely sever the North Vietnamese supply corridor and isolate the communists on the Bolovens Plateau.

● Like the Junction City, Junior, operation in 1970, Desert Rat met slight opposition at first. By February 20 the guerrillas had retaken Muong Phine, and on the twenty-third reached Ban Tang Vai just seven miles from Tchepone. Here, the North Vietnamese counterattacked vigorously and forced the Laotians onto the defensive. At the same time, Lam Son 719 was running into serious trouble. Although the South Vietnamese did get to Tchepone on March 7, the guerrillas could not break through to join them. The subsequent collapse of Lam Son 719 likewise doomed Desert Rat. As the South Vietnamese retreated to the east, the Laotian troops pulled back from Ban Tang Vai and then from Muong Phine. On March 21, the day the last South Vietnamese soldier departed Laos, the Desert Rats went back to Savannakhet. Following the failure of Lam Son 719/Desert Rat, the North Vietnamese secured their grip on southern Laos by driving the government forces totally off the Bolovens Plateau. They afterwards returned to the east, leaving the Pathet Lao and three regular battalions to hold their newly won territory.⁶

● The question now was what action the allies should take during the wet season. In Washington the policy was one of disengagement and withdrawal, dictating that there be no major effort to regain lost territory. The approaches to Long Tieng would have to be cleared of the enemy, but beyond that Washington wanted the Laotians to center on securing the Mekong Valley and building up their own forces. In line with this policy, Seventh Air Force planned to reduce Barrel Roll sorties to thirty-two a day.⁷

3. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Mar 30, 1971.
4. Hists, SAC, FY 72, III, 419-20, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1971, p 20.
5. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1971, pp 22-23.
6. *Ibid*, pp 27-28; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXXIX, 1-12, LXXX, 1-11.
7. 7th AF OPlan 730/71, Southwest Monsoon Campaign Plan, May 5, 1971, Annex V, p 1.

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Staggering to a Cease-Fire

However, the thinking in Washington and Saigon did not take into account the political or military realities of Laos. During the previous six months, a series of political maneuvers had greatly strengthened the southern faction within Souvanna Phouma's government. The southerners had long resented the attention being paid to Military Region II. Now, with the loss of the Bolovens Plateau, they were clamoring for more attention to their interests. This kind of pressure Souvanna could not ignore.

Nor could Vang Pao simply sit on his hands. Though the immediate threat of Long Tieng had passed, the North Vietnamese had succeeded in restocking their supply depots on the Plain of Jars. Given the luxury of these forward bases, they could renew their offensive at an early date and make a lengthy defense of Long Tieng well-nigh impossible. Furthermore, intermittent negotiations between the government and the Pathet Lao had been going on since the beginning of the Paris peace talks. These discussions were clearly subordinate to the larger issues at stake in Paris. Still, both sides knew that once a settlement had been reached in South Vietnam a truce in Laos would follow. It was equally clear that such a truce would essentially freeze the situation along the existing battlelines. The king and prime minister had therefore ordered Vang Pao to seize as much territory as he could.

While realizing he could not regain all of Military Region II, the Meo general did want to sweep across the plain, destroy the enemy depots as he had in 1969, and seize strong positions in the hills east of the plain.⁸ At Udon Maj. Gen. Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, doubted if Vang Pao could carry out such an operation in view of the disparity in forces and the projected cutback in air support. He favored instead an air campaign against the communist supply bases, with Vang Pao occupying high ground to the north and southwest of the plain. From these strongpoints, he could send ground teams onto the plain to locate supply caches for air strikes.⁹

The embassy was in an awkward spot. On the one hand, it reflected Washington's policy of "no offensive" and told the State Department that Vang Pao would merely conduct an "active defense" of Long Tieng.¹⁰ On the other hand, the ambassador approved Vang Pao's plan and assured the prime minister of U.S. support. Finally, he apprised General Evans that if Vang Pao did go onto the Plain of Jars, he would be "off on his own" and no additional air support would be requested.¹¹

This competition over policy, strategy, and available resources cropped up in meetings of the Barrel Roll Working Group during the spring and early summer. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force had a list of over two hundred fixed targets that had been confirmed by two or more intelligence sources. General Evans proposed a modest but systematic campaign to destroy these targets before they could be used against Vang Pao and to harass resupply efforts. Under this proposal, twelve F-4s and four A-1s would continue to assist Vang Pao's actions to clear the approaches to Long Tieng. Two F-4s would fly anti-aircraft artillery suppression. Eight F-4s would hit fixed targets, with four more F-4s on ground alert (quick reaction force) for either close air support or fixed targets. At night, Evans wanted four AC-119s to patrol the roads leading into the Plain of Jars. Since these routes now bristled with anti-aircraft guns, six F-4s would escort the gunships to provide flak suppression. The Thai-based wing commanders went even further. They wished to shift entirely to interdiction,

8. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 081210Z Jun 71, subj: RLG Intentions in Plain of Jars, 291254Z Jun 71, subj: Military Planning Wet Season, 1971.

9. Evans EOTR, Jun 30, 1971, p 17.

10. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 081210Z Jun 71.

11. Intvw, Maj Richard R. Sexton, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Dec 24, 1971; msg, Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to Gen Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Comdr, 7th AF, 291100Z Jun 71, subj: Wet Season Operations in Northern Laos.

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leaving the Laotian T-28s and AC-47s to furnish close air support. Their plan specified twelve to sixteen F-4s to hit interdiction points and the rest to be used against fixed targets or for armed reconnaissance. They desired a change in the rules of engagement to permit strikes out to either 547 yards or 1,094 yards from a motorable road, since the communists were storing supplies in the open just beyond the present 219-yard limit.

The CIA member, however, recommended an increase to eighty sorties a day with all aircraft "dedicated" to close air support. Ostensibly these were required to counter "the continuing threat to Long Tieng," but in fact they would support Vang Pao's planned offensive. Colonel Curry, the air attaché, backed the CIA. He told the Thai-based wing commanders he was "not in the route structure business" and no change in the rules of engagement was contemplated.¹²

When the topic of a possible wet-season offensive came up, the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force director of operations interrupted to remind the CIA "we've got to know these things." The CIA representative replied that the Air Force would be informed of specific plans "sufficiently in advance" to adjust its own plans. When pressed for more facts on the objectives and duration of the offensive, the CIA official responded by relating the overall American goals in Laos:

1. To protect Souvanna Phouma's government by stabilizing the military situation along the lines of the 1962 Accords.
2. Inflict maximum damage on NVA forces occupying and transiting Laos.
3. Document how the U.S. helped defend a country without the infusion of massive American manpower.¹³ These were laudable aims in themselves but hardly the basis for planning a coherent air campaign.

Seventh Air Force eventually resolved the issue by agreeing to keep air support at the current level of sixty sorties a day until July 1. All aircraft, including gunships, were restricted to the designated battlefield area; twelve F-4s would be held on ground alert (quick reaction force) and the A-1s were given a dual mission. The A-1s principal role was search and rescue escort, and when not needed for this duty they were released to the Raven forward air controllers. Seventh Air Force did not put greater stress on lines of communication in northern Laos because the B-52s still covered the special operating areas, flying 270 sorties in these areas during the remainder of 1971.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Vang Pao did not wait on anyone. On April 15, he kicked off an offensive to secure the Vang Pao line. As in 1970, the North Vietnamese contested the initial advance, even bringing in helicopters to resupply their frontline troops. The helicopters flew only at night, but several of them were spotted in flight in early May and an AC-119 saw one land near Lima Site 15 on May 13. Nevertheless, it was not until ten days later that the embassy granted permission to engage the enemy helicopters. By that time, the communists had ceased their forward operations and stayed clear of the designated battlefield area.¹⁵

The communists also attacked Bouam Long (Lima Site 32). To counter this assault, the Air Force introduced yet another new weapon into Barrel Roll—a portable radar beacon whose signal could be picked up by a gunship's radar. A coded pulse let the operator pass information on the nature of a target (personnel, supplies, or vehicles) and its range and bearing, as well as the operator's location. This allowed a gunship to identify and attack enemy targets in any weather without need for voice communications. The combination of gunships,

12. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Mar 30, 1971, Apr 27, 1971, Jun 29, 1971.

13. See note above.

14. See note 12; hist, SAC, FY 72, III, 420.

15. JANAF Summary, May 26, 1971.

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tactical fighters, and stout ground defense beat back the assault. By the end of May, the enemy was forced to admit failure again.¹⁶

At this point, Vang Pao chose to ignore the three thousand North Vietnamese in the Long Tieng area and to strike directly for the Plain of Jars. In the three-pronged attack, one column moved south from Bouam Long, a second struck at the center, and a third advanced from the southwest. The operation was characterized as "defensive," but, in fact, marked the beginning of Vang Pao's attempt to seize the whole plain. In announcing the offensive to the Air Force, a CIA official noted:

At Long Tieng it's time for Vang Pao to move out—and he has. Friendlies are now astride an enemy corridor. The enemy will have to react . . . Vang Pao has the initiative. He can strike towards Xieng Khouangville . . . or the PDJ. The latter would cause consternation in Washington. Friendly activities in general will increase now and will require more, not less, air support.¹⁷

This elicited a strong protest from General Evans. On June 29, he informed General Clay, Seventh Air Force commander:

There has been a complete lack of coordination of the PDJ operation with 7/13 AF or your headquarters. I intend to discuss [the] subject with Ambassador Godley tomorrow on my farewell visit to Vientiane, but will have to leave followup action to General Searles.¹⁸ In view of the current policy to wind down the war and decommit air and ground forces whenever possible, I feel the wisdom of a ground effort by Vang Pao at this time should be questioned. In addition, the continuing use of USAF strike sorties in support of this operation is not in accord with Ambassador Godley's statement to me that Vang Pao was off on his own.¹⁹

Clay replied that his decision to cut Barrel Roll sorties to thirty-two a day on July 1 remained firm. In view of the continuing offensive, most of the sorties would be close air support. Actually, the typical mission order for July listed thirty-three sorties a day. Twenty F-4s and four A-1s supported Vang Pao (ten of the F-4s were on quick reaction force), four F-4s hit fixed targets, and five gunships flew night close air support. Enemy antiaircraft fire had decreased as the rains increased, and the gunships were not working the lines of communication (where most of the remaining guns were concentrated). Hence, fighters escorts were no longer needed. The ten T-28s aiding Vang Pao proceeded to average thirty-five sorties a day, with between one and two AC-47 sorties a night. As U.S. air support diminished, the Laotians were again flying more sorties than the Americans.²⁰

Despite less air support, Vang Pao advanced on the plain. He was now threatening their supply caches, so the North Vietnamese hastily withdrew from the Vang Pao line and assumed their old positions along Route 4/7. The enemy's 316th Division, mauled during About Face two years before, returned to Laos with many tanks. (The tanks normally served as mobile artillery rather than assault vehicles.) Such reinforcement in the wet season showed the extent of communist road building and the dearth of air activity over the lines of communication.

By mid-July, Vang Pao neared the main enemy positions and encountered stronger resistance. The battle swayed back and forth for the next six weeks, with neither side making

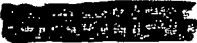
16. Richard R. Sexton, *Pave Mace/Combat Rendezvous* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972), p 47.

17. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jun 15, 1971.

18. Maj. Gen. Dewitt R. Searles, Evans' successor.

19. Msg, Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to Gen Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Comdr, 7th AF, 291100Z, subj: Wet Season Operations in Northern Laos.

20. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jun 15, 1971, Jun 29, 1971.



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headway. Vang Pao was in a very vulnerable spot—unable to advance and unwilling to retreat. He therefore dug in and awaited the enemy counterattack. How long that blow could be delayed depended in large part on how the Air Force applied its thirty-two sorties a day.²¹

Under these circumstances, the fighter wings again called for a shift to interdiction to slow the communist buildup. The Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force target list had nearly three hundred sites, and the enemy brought in more supplies every day. The twenty F-4 close air support sorties a day were insufficient to support either offensive or defensive ground operations. In consequence, the wing commanders felt the sorties could best be employed to destroy the communist supplies before they could be used against Vang Pao. The CIA and air attaché nonetheless stood firm in their belief that first priority must be given to the ground forces. They proposed an increase from thirty-two to thirty-six sorties a day.

General Searles, who had replaced General Evans at Udom on July 1, concurred. In lieu of fighting the ambassador as Evans had done, Searles tried to give him what he wanted. This was hard to do, for neither the ambassador nor the CIA would take Searles into their confidence. Even so, Searles pointed out to Seventh Air Force that the modest addition of four sorties a day would scarcely be felt in Steel Tiger, which received 250 sorties a day, while it would nearly double the firepower available to Vang Pao. Seventh Air Force assented to this request but put half of the sorties on quick reaction force.²²

With the situation in northern Laos essentially frozen, attention turned to the south where a large-scale offensive, Operation Sayasila, was under way to recover the Bolovens Plateau.²³ Planned jointly by the Laotian general staff and the CIA, this was conceived as an all-Laotian operation. Eleven government battalions (about four thousand men) would be pitted against three North Vietnamese battalions (nearly eleven hundred men). The anticipated air support (thirty-five T-28 and two AC-47 sorties a day) would come solely from the Royal Laotian Air Force. Sayasila was expected to last thirty days and would consist of two phases. Phase I, scheduled for July 28, was a helicopter assault on Saravane intended to draw enemy attention away from the real objective, Pak Song. Phase II was a two-pronged attack on Pak Song scheduled for July 29. One column would advance along Route 23 while another force was airlifted to Lao Ngam and would approach from the north. The planners believed these multiple attacks would prevent the enemy from reacting effectively.²⁴ However, they seriously underestimated General Minh, the North Vietnamese commander in southern Laos, who proved himself a master tactician during the campaign.

Three days before the operation was due to begin, the CIA requested twelve USAF sorties a day to supplement the RLAF. After much pleading by the air attaché and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, Seventh Air Force agreed to the request.²⁵ The offensive's first move was unopposed and by noon the government forces had occupied the deserted town of Saravane. The North Vietnamese reacted swiftly and in a matter of days isolated the Saravane troops, who took no further part in the campaign. The initial landing at Lao Ngam was also uncontested, but the friendly forces halted seven miles from Pak Song. Meantime, the third column advanced toward the main communist positions at Ban Nhik. Since neither column was within supporting distance of the other, Minh made excellent use of his interior position to

21. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1970, pp 12-13.

22. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jul 13, 1971, Jul 27, 1971; intvw, Maj Richard R. Sexton, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Gen DeWitt R. Searles, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Sep 15, 1971; EOTR, Maj Gen DeWitt R. Searles, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF (Jul 71-Sep 72), Sep 9, 1972, p 14.

23. For more extensive coverage of the Bolovens Campaign, see Donald G. Hukle, et al, *The Bolovens Campaign, July 28-December 28, 1971* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1974).

24. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 250415Z Jul 71, subj: Air Support Request—MR IV.

25. *Ibid*; msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 250600Z Jul 71, subj: Air Support Request—MR IV.



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strike each of them in turn. After checking the main column at Ban Nhik, he slipped away to deal with the northern force, which was sitting idle. On August 11, Minh hit these troops, driving them back toward Lao Ngam in confusion. He then returned to Ban Nhik where the main column had taken advantage of his absence to occupy the town. On the eighteenth, the communist routed this force and retook Ban Nhik. They next countermarched to deal with the northern force, which had resumed its advance. On August 25, the government troops suffered their third straight defeat. By the end of the month they were in utter disarray, having lost a thousand men and achieved very little. Enemy losses were put at 170 killed.²⁶

At this point, Colonel Curry, the air attaché, called for help. On August 31, he asked for forty-six sorties a day to blast a path for the friendly push that was set to restart on September 1. Because weather had hampered air operations in August, Curry set up a series of instrument flight rules bombing boxes over the principal communist positions.²⁷ With but eleven hours to fill their air request, Seventh Air Force diverted the additional aircraft from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The RLAf also upped its T-28 sorties to thirty-nine a day.

The combined weight of over seventy aircraft finally smothered the communist defenses. No matter which way Minh turned, his men were constantly hammered from the air. Behind this aerial barrage, the government troops moved forward. On September 15, they entered Pak Song as the North Vietnamese withdrew to the area of Thateng. The initial embassy report claimed that the government forces had fought their way into town "with the enemy offering tenacious resistance from heavily fortified positions beneath the houses."²⁸ Yet the next day the Army attaché visited Pak Song and found no sign of damage to any building.²⁹ Apparently the FAR had been able to do what armies had never been able to do before—destroy the cellars without destroying the house.

Even though Sayasila was counted a success, neither the planning nor execution justified optimism. Friendly casualties exceeded the total number of defenders, and only overwhelming air power had let the government troops achieve their objective. The repercussions of this operation were felt all the way to Washington, where the issue of joint planning had at last come to a head.

Vang Pao's offensive on the Plain of Jars and the Bolovens campaign raised serious questions as to who was running the war in Laos. Official U.S. policy was to hold a defensive position and limit American participation. Yet the embassy had approved two large offensives, albeit under considerable pressure from the Laotian government, and the Air Force was furnishing the air support.

On August 18 the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with CIA and State Department concurrence, issued a directive that any multibattalion operation requiring U.S. air support would need JCS approval at least ten days in advance. Requests had to include a detailed breakdown of the forces involved, objectives, duration, and specific air support requirements. Furthermore, the plan needed to be coordinated with Seventh Air Force and CINCPAC before being sent to Washington.³⁰

In truth, the directive showed more of a desire to curb U.S. involvement than a concern for joint planning. Nevertheless, it did impose a set of constraints that forced the Air Force and CIA closer together. The CIA became less concerned for "security" and more willing to take the Air Force into its confidence. In turn, the Air Force evinced more interest in Barrel Roll

26. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1971, pp 23-24.

27. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 311330Z Aug 71, subj: Special Air Request—MR III.

28. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 151210Z Sep 71, subj: Special Laos Sitrep: Paksong.

29. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171145Z Sep 71, subj: Materials Concerning Refugees and Related

Subjects

30. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 281548Z Aug 71, subj: Military Planning for Laos.

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operations. Still, the directive created as many problems as it solved. The time consumed in securing coordination, review, and approval meant that initial planning had to begin twenty to thirty days in advance of an operation. In a status situation this worked well enough, but not in the swiftly shifting conditions of the communist dry-season offensive. Nor could old habits and long-standing institutional prejudices be removed overnight. Not until a year later were these problems really overcome.³¹

A number of other significant changes occurred in Laos during 1971. These stemmed from the continued withdrawal of American forces, the financial limitations of the Symington amendment, and the Paris peace talks. After more than a year of backing and filling, Ambassador Godley's blueprint for enhancing the Laotian armed forces emerged as the Laotian self-sufficiency program. Besides supplying modern equipment (M-16 rifles, 155-mm howitzers, and armored cars), the program sought to break down the feudal military structure by forming a national strike force of two divisions, one for northern Laos and one for the south. The divisions would be manned by mobile troops and report directly to the general staff. Garrison troops would stay under the military region commanders and the CIA retained control of the irregular forces. At the same time, a National Training Center was established to provide individual and unit training, previously handled by each local commander. By November 1971, eleven hundred recruits had graduated from the training center. Each "division" consisted of five battalions with a planned expansion to nine battalions as men became available. However, these forces were not put into the field until the following summer.

The self-sufficiency program was accompanied and made possible by a major political and military reshuffling within the Laotian government. Sisouk na Champassak became defense minister and deputy prime minister in August 1970. As such, he was clearly in line to succeed Souvanna Phouma who had suffered a series of heart attacks. Sisouk set out to destroy the regionalism that had hamstrung the development of an effective national army. First, he moved the general staff into the ministry of defense building where he could oversee its daily operations. In March 1971, he engineered the retirement of Ouane Rathikone as commander in chief and Oudone Sananikone as chief of staff. Bounpone Makthepharak was shifted to the largely ceremonial post as commander in chief, while Phasouk Somly took over as chief of staff. This made way for the emergence of a group of young, American-trained, nationally oriented officers typified by Col. Thao Ly in Military Region III. Of the "troika" that had replaced Phoumi Nosavan in 1965, only Kouprasith Abhay kept his position as Military Region V commander, but his influence was sharply curtailed.

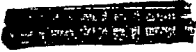
In general, members of the nationalist (right wing) faction strongly advocated the self-sufficiency program. They favored vigorous prosecution of the war and opposed a peace settlement that left the North Vietnamese in control of any part of their country or grant any recognition of the Pathet Lao. Nonetheless, their ambitions often outran their capabilities. Though the reorganization purged some of the regionalism from the upper echelons of the army, it did nothing to revamp the underlying social structure.³²

For the RLAF, the self-sufficiency program brought approval for expansion to eighty-six T-28s and the creation of a national strike squadron that could be shifted from one area to another. Consideration was given to replacing the T-28s with A-37s or F-5s, but these planes were too complex for the Laotians to operate, let alone maintain—they had a hard enough time just to keep the T-28s flying.³³

31. *JCS Chronology* (Washington, 1973), p 15; Searles EOTR, Sep 9, 1972, p 7.

32. Ltr, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Current Political Status, Aug 23, 1971; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 010612Z Dec 71, subj: *Forces Armée Royale* Improvement.

33. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 231224Z Jun 71.



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To inject real meaning into self-sufficiency and to make the RLAF stand on its own feet, Colonel Curry whittled down the air operations centers to four men each and gave strict instructions:

You will not fly their missions. They will maintain their own airplanes. Tell them, show them, explain it to them and then back off. If they fall on their ass, so be it. That is the only way they will learn. If you do it for them they will never get up from the table.³⁴

The results were predictable—the RLAF did “fall on its ass.” The Laotians could fly well enough, but they simply could not generate the structure to support even the relatively unsophisticated T-28s and Colonel Curry had to abandon the idea of self-sufficiency for the time being. With new aircraft on hand and the Americans again taking an active management role, the RLAF made a rapid recovery. By the end of 1971, they attained the long-sought goal of three thousand sorties a month and 1972 plans specified an increase to five thousand (a level never achieved).

Curry also got excellent results by having the Ravens control T-28 sorties. When the T-28 pilots had picked their own targets, they dropped all their bombs on one pass. The Ravens carefully selected multiple targets and eventually convinced the Laotian pilots to make passes using one or two bombs at a time. This refined the efficiency of the RLAF far beyond the mere upturn in sorties.³⁵

As part of the American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, the Air Force pared the number of Ravens from twenty-five to eight by December 1972. This prompted the founding of a Laotian FAC training program in November 1971. The air attaché chose the candidates from the best qualified T-28 pilots. In fact, the majority of the candidates had over three thousand combat missions! All candidates had to speak English; most were fluent in USAF terminology and jargon. The RLAF program contrasted with a similar one in South Vietnam. The Vietnamese had scant regard for forward air controllers, and therefore assigned their least qualified pilots to the program. In Laos Colonel Curry would have none of this. When General Sourith tried to palm off some of his liaison and transport pilots, Curry blocked the move.

Water Pump conducted the training that included sixty-four hours of flying the O-1 in a combat environment. After graduation, the Laotian FACs received a regional checkout from the senior Ravens at their assigned bases. The first class graduated in January 1972, and by December, twenty forward air controllers had been qualified. The Laotian FACs (called Nok Ka Tien) controlled solely RLAF sorties at first, but in September 1972, four were certified to control U.S. aircraft as well.³⁶

Colonel Curry also set up a program to train a middle management cadre for the RLAF. The absence of such a group had been a chief reason for the failure of his first try to make the Laotian air force self-sufficient. Again the air attaché handpicked only the best line personnel. These men received formal instruction and on-the-job-training with their U.S. counterparts. By April 1972, this program had progressed to the point where the Laotian were handling all of their own in-country maintenance and supply. Major repairs were still done at Udom, and the Americans controlled supplies until they were turned over to the Laotian supply people at the air bases. The final aspect of the self-sufficiency program was a plan to move the entire Water Pump program to Laos, and turn it over to the RLAF. No firm date was set up for this action, and it did not occur until the truce in February 1973.³⁷

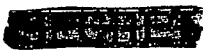
34. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Maj Roal S. Robinson, Jr., Nov 5, 1971, p 74.

35. Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 031230Z Dec 71.

36. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 280500Z Sep 72, subj: Rok Ka Tiens.

37. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 200730Z Apr 73, subj: Commando Cricket.





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Emphasis on self-sufficiency and the Symington amendment restrictions also fostered a major realignment of the Military Assistance Program. On June 8, 1971, the Secretary of Defense directed CINCPAC to submit a plan to improve the management of the Laotian assistance program. CINCPAC took this opportunity to renew its efforts to establish a MAAG in Laos and to carve out an operational role for the Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand. The CINCPAC plan (prepared by the deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI) called for changing the title to Military Assistance Coordinator, Laos (MACLAOS). The position would be filled by an Army general officer and the entire organization moved to Udom. According to the proposal, MACLAOS would be "the principal military advisor to the ambassador." He would "coordinate, validate, and provide U.S. support of indigenous military operations," and would "coordinate embassy/ CIA air support requirements with Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force."³⁸

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Army Chief of Staff, strongly supported the proposal, as did the Navy. Elsewhere it met a chilly reception. The Air Force wanted neither another general officer position for the Army nor a new organization interposed between the embassy and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. The embassy concurred in the move to Udom and had no objection to a general officer. However, it frowned upon the proposed title and functions. To the ambassador's ears, "MACLAOS" sounded too much like MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). Nor did Godley feel the need for a "principal military advisor." He was quite content with the advice he was getting from his CIA station chief and the military attachés. He further found it "unacceptable" to place one more bureaucratic layer between himself and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. As he informed the Secretary of State, "the present system of command and control of in-country operations, directed by the ambassador through the country team works satisfactorily in the unique politico/military environment of Laos."³⁹

Godley's biggest objection, however, was to the idea that the deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI would "validate" requests which the embassy passed on from the Royal Laotian Government. This, he warned, would destroy the ambassador's influence with that government. As an alternative, the embassy recommended that the role of deputy chief be limited to that of "principal logistic coordinator" for U.S. support to indigenous military operations.⁴⁰

After numerous exchanges, counterproposals, and reclaims, a joint State/Defense conference resolved the issue in the ambassador's favor. The deputy chief would move to Udom where he would "pull together U.S. logistic support of indigenous military operations in Laos and manage the Laos MASF (Military Assistance Service Funded) program" to ensure compliance with the Symington amendment. An Army general would be appointed to the post, but there would be no change in his title and he would have no control over military operations. The roles of the CIA, attachés, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force would remain unchanged.⁴¹

In November 1971, the move to Udom was completed; and in February 1972, Brig. Gen. John W. Vessey, Jr., USA, took over as deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI. While his charter was confined to coordinating logistic activities, Vessey did in fact become the ambassador's principal military advisor. This was due to his personality and his experience as a ground commander. He could comment with authority on CIA ground operations—something no USAF commander at Udom had been able to do. According to Maj. Gen. James D. Hughes, new Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force:

38. () Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 121235Z Jul 71; hist, CINCPAC, 1971, III, 422-24.

39. () Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 221025Z Jun 71, subj: US Support for Military Operations in Laos.

40. () *Ibid.*

41. () Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 041841Z Sep 71, subj: US Support for Military Operations in Laos.



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General Vessey's charter appoints him as the principal military advisor to the Ambassador. Initially, this position was probably not recognized either by the Ambassador or the other Country Team members. However, over the period of General Vessey's assignment, this attitude has gradually changed. I have been told in recent correspondence from the Ambassador to Washington, that the Ambassador did officially recognize and accept the DEPCHIEF as the principal military advisor.⁴²

Vessey succeeded where the Air Force had failed in achieving a greater degree of coordination between the embassy and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. Having commanded troops in Vietnam, he had a better appreciation than the CIA of the need for joint planning and close cooperation between air and ground forces. As he gained the confidence of the ambassador and CIA, Vessey showed them how their operations could be improved by bringing the Air Force into the planning process. During the final year of the war, this greatly enhanced the effectiveness of air/ground operations.⁴³

As the 1971 wet season drew to a close, the Laotian government seemed to be far stronger than in 1970. In the north, the communists had withdrawn about twelve miles from Luang Prabang. General Vang Pao had retrieved half of the Plain of Jars and sat facing the enemy along Route 4/7. To secure this site, a network of six mutually supporting infantry and artillery fire support bases were established. Behind this miniature Maginot Line lay the old Vang Pao line, with a final defensive point along Skyline Ridge between Sam Thong and Long Tieng. Manning the positions were about five thousand men formed into nineteen battalions (four Lao, and five Meo). The embassy thought these places could be held against the twelve thousand North Vietnamese, if "adequate" air support was available. To the south, Government troops had regained the Bolovens Plateau.⁴⁴

At the government level, the emergence of Sisouk na Champassak as Souvanna Phouma's heir-apparent marked the triumph of the "nationalists" over regional interests, and ended the political infighting that previously had crippled the government. Negotiations with the Pathet Lao had reopened and were progressing roughly parallel to the talks in South Vietnam. The self-sufficiency program had finally gotten under way and showed promise of furnishing a suitable military force by the summer of 1972.⁴⁵

On the other hand, the persistent withdrawal of U.S. units made any rise in USAF sorties very unlikely and the Laotian air force was still struggling to get back on its feet. Even with air support, the existing government forces could not meet the North Vietnamese on anything approaching equal terms, and troop dispositions were not as good as they looked on paper. The two prior campaigns had proved "lines" to be meaningless concept in Laos. On both occasions, the communists had penetrated the Vang Pao line, and the mini-Maginot Line was just as porous. The North Vietnamese enjoyed better than a two-to-one advantage in numbers, and were sitting virtually on top of their forward supply depots. More ominous were the reports in early September that the foe was moving 130-mm guns and T-34 tanks into northern Laos.⁴⁶

In the south, the government troops were scattered about the Bolovens Plateau, while the communists were concentrating around the town of Thateng. To strengthen and consolidate their position, the government forces tried to seize Thateng before the enemy began a counteroffensive. The plan envisioned a three-pronged assault, with two columns approaching from Saravane and Pak Song respectively while helicopters lifted a third force to a landing site

42. Intvw, Capt Peter A. W. Liebchen, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Gen James D. Hughes, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 8, 1973.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Military Planning—Laos Dry Season 1971/72, Dec 8, 1971.

45. *Ibid.*

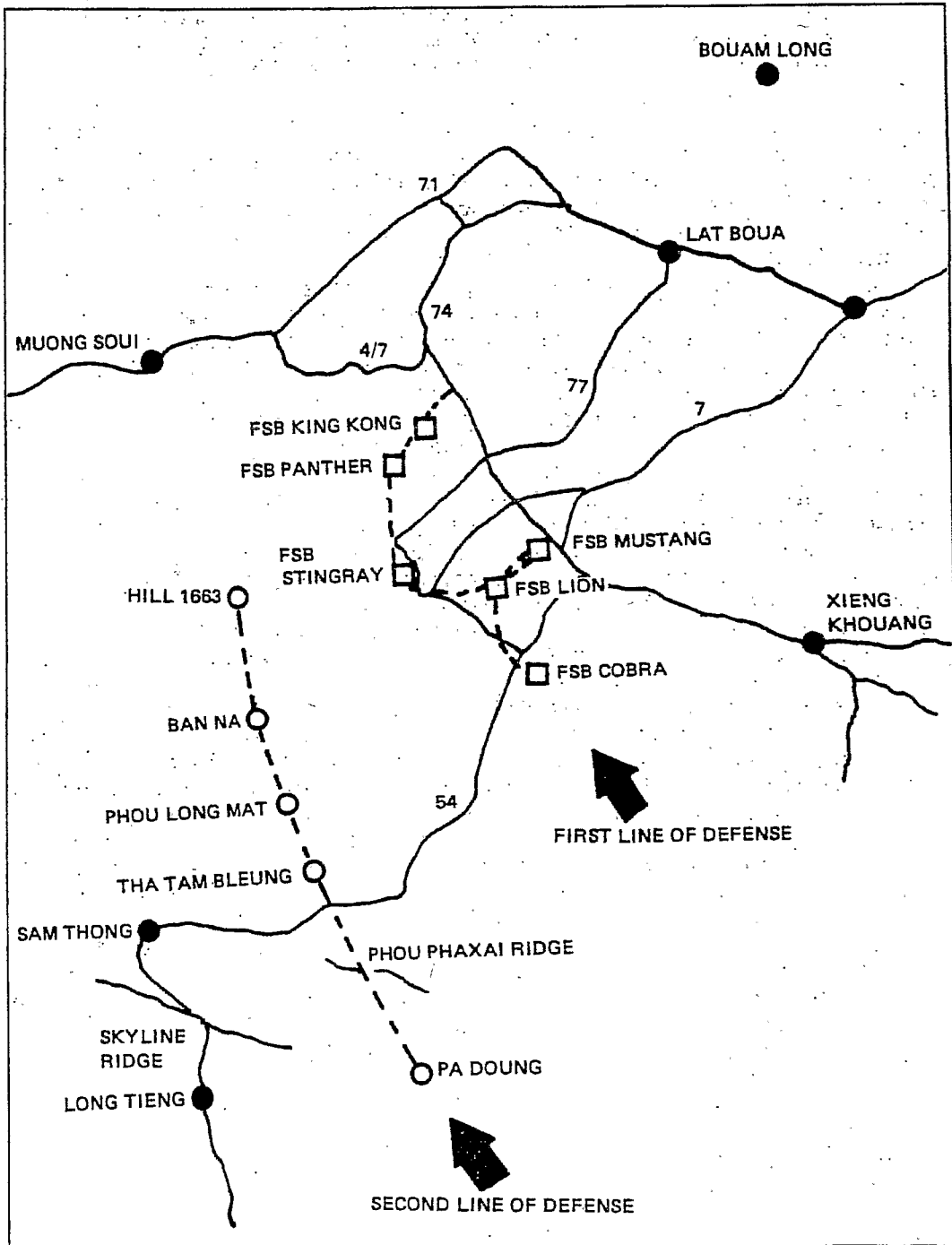
46. Searles EOTR, Sep 9, 1972, p 12.

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Plain of Jars Area
December 1971



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Staggering to a Cease-Fire

east of Thateng. The three forces would then converge on Thateng. Because of the JCS directive of August 28, planning was more thorough than for Operation Sayasila. The air support plan called for ten sorties on D-1 (November 20) to soften up enemy strongpoints. For the next two days, eighteen fighters and two gunships would fly cover for the helicopter landings. Thereafter, twenty-four fighters and two gunships were to furnish close air support for the attacking columns. The whole operation were supposed to last two weeks.⁴⁷

██████████ The Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the green light on November 15 and the operation kicked off as scheduled on November 21. The enemy put up a stiff fight against the first helicopter assault, but fell back in the face of repeated air strikes. On the twenty-sixth, government troops swept into a deserted Thateng, the foe having slipped away. However, the North Vietnamese had not gone far. On December 6 they seized Saravane, which had been lightly garrisoned during the push toward Thateng, and doubled back to capture that town as well. This triggered an all-out collapse of the government operation. On December 18, Colonel Curry asked for sixty sorties a day to stem the tide, but a communist sweep on the Plain of Jars had siphoned off every available sortie, leaving only four F-4s to support the Laotian forces on the Bolovens Plateau. Deprived of needed air support, the Laotians hastily gave up Pak Song; and by the end of 1971, the enemy had recaptured the entire plateau.⁴⁸

██████████ While the government positions on the plateau were collapsing in December, the communists loosed an assault on the Plain of Jars. Within seventy-two hours, every one of the fire support bases fell. Friendly casualties were 286 killed, 418 wounded, 1,500 missing, and 24 howitzers captured.⁴⁹

██████████ Three factors accounted for this fiasco. First, the positions were for the most part untenable, being exposed, isolated, and static. The communists had had three months to reconnoiter these sites, prepare their plans, and bring up supplies with little interference from the air. In spite of repeated Air Force warnings in the fall of 1971, the CIA clung to its "defensive lines" concept like a child to a newfound toy. This view was nurtured—perhaps made necessary—by pressure from the Laotian government to hold onto as much ground as possible to use as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Pathet Lao.

██████████ Second, the foe applied a simple but deadly tactic to neutralize the artillery sites. A heavy artillery barrage drove the defenders into their bunkers. Behind the barrage, the communists pushed right up to the perimeter. As the barrage lifted, they rushed the gun positions and shot the crews as they came out of their bunkers.

██████████ Last, the North Vietnamese covered their offensive by sending MiGs into northern Laos to challenge the bomb-laden USAF aircraft. At the approach of the MiGs, all propeller-driven planes withdrew to the west while the F-4s jettisoned their bombs and moved to intercept the intruders. In these initial engagements, the North Vietnamese pilots had a clear edge over the Americans. Since the 1968 bombing halt over North Vietnam, the American crews had concentrated on bombing at the expense of maintaining proficiency in air-to-air combat.⁵⁰ Hence, the U.S. pilots suffered from the equivalent of buck fever. Flight discipline was not kept, switches were improperly set, and missiles were fired while out of range. During the first engagement (December 17), three F-4s were lost due to inferior tactics and inexperience. The resulting rescue effort further diluted the number of aircraft available to support the ground forces.⁵¹

47. ██████████ Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 151013Z Nov 71, subj: Air Support—MR IV.

48. ██████████ Searles EOTR, Sep 9, 1972, pp 16-17.

49. ██████████ Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 210820Z Dec 71, subj: MR II Situation.

50. ██████████ The last air-to-air combat had occurred on February 14, 1968. [*U.S. Air Force Combat Victory Credits, Southeast Asia* (Washington, 1974), 22.]

51. ██████████ Commando Hunt VII, 7th AF, Jun 72, p 179; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, LXXXIX*.

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Seventh Air Force lost no time in countering this new threat. Specific crews in each unit were given the counterair mission. Old manuals were dusted off and practice missions flown to hone efficiency. In general these crews were held on ground alert. When radar detected MiGs heading for Barrel Roll, all propeller-driven aircraft were ordered to "clear the Barrel," and the interceptors took off to engage the enemy planes.⁵² In the ensuing engagements the Americans gradually gained the upper hand, but no aircraft were lost by either side. The North Vietnamese next switched their tactics from outright attack to feints designed to interrupt close air support operations. The MiGs would enter Laos and make the "slow movers" abort their missions, but withdrew at the approach of the F-4s. It was not until February 21, 1972, that Maj. Robert A. Lodge and 1st Lt. Roger C. Locher bagged their first MiG. A week later, Lt. Col. Joseph W. Kittenger, Jr., and 1st Lt. Leigh A. Hodgdon scored a second victory. On March 30, Capt. Frederick S. Olmsted, Jr., and Gerald R. Volloy downed a third MiG to even the score.⁵³ On April 8, large-scale bombing of North Vietnam resumed as a result of the North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam. With their homeland under attack, the MiGs were forced onto the defensive and the air threat to northern Laos was eventually removed. Before this, however, they had made a notable contribution to the communist success on the Plain of Jars.

Following the loss of the Plain of Jars in mid-December 1971, the government troops had retreated to the Vang Pao line. The air attaché requested thirty sorties a day to assist the withdrawal. Seventh Air Force responded by allocating forty-six fighters and six gunships. Ten of the fighters, however, were kept on ground alert while four to six F-4s were assigned to meet the MiG threat. Ground haze and harassment by MiGs hampered these operations somewhat, but during the next thirty days an average of thirty fighters and five gunships hit their targets. Even so, enemy gunners downed six T-28s and two F-4s. Another F-4 was shot down near the border of North Vietnam by a surface-to-air missile fired from inside North Vietnam. The communist offensive also brought the B-52s back to northern Laos. During December, 111 sorties bombed enemy supply bases on the Plain of Jars. In January, 188 sorties struck in the same general areas.⁵⁴

The air attacks did not deter the communists in their drive. On January 7, they attacked the Vang Pao line, and four days later the government troops abandoned these positions as well. In this assault, the North Vietnamese used 130-mm guns and T-34 tanks for the first time. The 130-mm gun fired a smaller shell and was less accurate than the 155-mm howitzer of the friendly forces, but it had a longer range (seventeen miles versus twelve). The communist guns did little physical damage, but the fact that they could remain outside the range of counterbattery fire demoralized the defenders. The T-34 tanks posed an even more serious threat. Formerly, the communists had used tanks as mobile artillery, but during the attack on the Vang Pao line they acted as assault vehicles. Since the government troops had no antitank weapons, the T-34s rolled right over their positions.

By the end of January, Vang Pao's forces had withdrawn to the Sam Thong/Long Tieng complex where they spent the next month preparing new defenses. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese spent most of their time building a road (Route 54) from the Plain of Jars toward Sam Thong. As the work progressed, the communists wheeled in an impressive array of antiaircraft artillery (including 86-mm guns) to protect the road crews.⁵⁵

Though ground action was light from late January to early March, the Air Force upped its sorties to focus on destroying the 130-mm guns and disrupting construction of Route 54. A typical mission order for this period included sixty-four aircraft:

52. F-4s on bombing missions continued on, since after jettisoning their bombs they could outrun the MiGs.

53. Hist, 432d TRW, Jan 1-Mar 31, 1972, pp 8-10; *U.S. Air Force Combat Victory Credits, Southeast Asia* (Washington, 1974), p 22.

54. Commando Hunt VII, 7th AF, Jun 72, p 181; hist, SAC, FY 72, III, 423.

55. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1972, p 14.

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Staggering to a Cease-Fire

Day

30 F-4s (10 on quick reaction force)	Interdiction/close air support
6 A-1s	Search and rescue escort/close air support
10 F-4s	MiG combat air patrol
2 RF-4s	Reconnaissance
4 OV-10s	Forward air control
2 OV-10s	Gun killing
4 F-4s	Gun killing

Night

4 AC-119s	Close air support/armed recce
2 AC-130s	Armed recce

(In addition, 111 B-52s struck targets in the special operating areas during February.)

As it turned out, the 130-mm guns were hard to find and harder to hit. The sites were well camouflaged and were protected by heavy antiaircraft fire. Even when a gun was pinpointed and the F-4s broke through the defending fire, their 500-pound bombs were usually too inaccurate to do the job. The Air Force turned to laser-guided bomb, using OV-10s fitted with laser illuminators to spot targets for F-4s carrying the bombs. The slow speed and low altitude of the OV-10 made it very vulnerable to antiaircraft fire, while smoke and haze limited the success of the laser beam. All the same, between January and March, the teams destroyed three of the 130-mm guns and destroyed four more of them in April. During May and June, more guns were sighted, but by then the North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam had drawn off most all of the aircraft from northern Laos.

Strikes on Route 54 were similarly impeded by poor visibility and antiaircraft fire. Most of the fighters had to drop their bombs by loran or radar, which did not seriously interfere with the road building. The gunships were more successful, destroying or damaging 349 trucks in January. In February the score dipped to 314, and dropped to 289 during March when attention turned to the defense of Long Tieng itself.⁵⁶

Back in Washington, State, Defense, and CIA officials met to consider conditions in northern Laos. Fearing another Dien Bien Phu, they believed it would be a mistake to try to hold Long Tieng. They favored a "forward defense" from positions in front of Long Tieng, forcing the enemy to mass so he could be hit by air strikes. When their positions could no longer be held without incurring undue casualties, the friendly forces would withdraw to points southwest of Long Tieng. From there they could conduct a "mobile defense" of Vientiane. This would compel the communists to stretch their lines of communication and expose them to further air attack.⁵⁷

No matter how comfortable this strategy was to Washington planners, it simply did not comport with the real situation in Laos. Words like "forward defense" and "mobile defense" had no more meaning in Laos than the concept of defensive "lines," and the only suitable positions in front of Long Tieng were already in enemy hands. Likewise, no suitable positions existed between Long Tieng and Vientiane; and, in any case, Vang Pao lacked the resources to pursue the strategy conceived in Washington. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese had long since learned the folly of massing in the face of air power. Their favorite tactic was to force the defenders to concentrate in a place that could be isolated. Their own troops were dispersed on at least three

56. *Ibid.*, pp 14-15; hist. SAC, FY 72, III, 423.

57. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF/CIA to AmEmb Vientiane, 219025, Jan 28, 1972.

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sides and made excellent use of weather, foliage, and camouflage to mask their movements. This sharply curtailed the worth of air strikes. The communists next softened up the defensive positions with artillery, rocket, and mortar fire. The effect of this fire was increased since they were firing into the center of a circle, while the return fire from the defenders was diffused since it was directed outward. The North Vietnamese infantry took up their final assault positions in small groups to avoid air strikes and converged only at the last moment.

The enemy surmounted the problem of exposed lines of communication by constructing alternate routes and redundant supply depots, all well defended by anti-aircraft guns. In light of the limited sorties given northern Laos, the Air Force could not sustain a systematic campaign against these lines of communication and come up with the desired level of close air support at the same time. Thus, in the final analysis, it was Long Tieng or nothing.

By early March, Route 54 was finished all the way up to the Sam Thong valley, and the North Vietnamese started to move up their armor and artillery. The battle erupted on March 11 with an artillery barrage followed by armor and infantry attacks on Sam Thong. Embassy dispatches depicted the fighting as "savage" and "bitter" and reported hand-to-hand combat throughout the valley as positions were lost, regained, and lost again. Until they exploded, burning tanks continued to fire their guns. The defenders attacked enemy armor with nothing more than rifles and grenades. Like the "fighting" at Pak Song, these reports may be somewhat exaggerated, but both sides probably did endure heavy casualties.

Gunships, tactical fighters, and B-52s added to the carnage by pummeling enemy forces close to the friendly positions. The battle's smoke and dust mixed with the normal ground haze to limit visibility, and the intermingling of government and enemy units further complicated target identification. However, U.S. and Laotian aircraft continued to pour bombs and bullets into the valley. Of particular note were the B-52 strikes. During March, the heavy bombers hit 106 targets in the Sam Thong/Long Tieng area, flying 318 sorties. Unlike early operations, which were confined to the special operating areas, most of these sorties directly supported the ground forces.⁵⁸

After a week of bitter fighting, Vang Pao had to give up Sam Thong, but it was another Pyrrhic victory for the enemy. Momentum carried the North Vietnamese onto Skyline Ridge, but they could go no farther. By the end of March the battle had largely burned itself out. The communists owned Sam Thong and Skyline Ridge, while ground action shrunk to minor clashes and sporadic 130-mm fire. During April and May, the onset of the rainy season slowed resupply to their forward units and the North Vietnamese began to pull back toward the Plain of Jars.

At this point, Colonel Curry suggested it was time to shift the air effort to interdiction. If Route 54 could be blocked between Sam Thong and the Plain of Jars, the communists might be trapped in the valley. At least they could not get their 130-mm guns out. He accordingly proposed that in April thirty-six sorties a day be used to choke off Route 54.⁵⁹

On March 30, 1972, however, the war in Southeast Asia took a dramatic turn as the North Vietnamese openly invaded South Vietnam. In the following months, every available aircraft was used to repel the invasion or to strike North Vietnam. (The bombing of North Vietnam resumed on April 6.) Only an occasional divert was sent to Barrel Roll, so the communists were able to leave Long Tieng with relative ease. Vang Pao trailed the retreating enemy cautiously, and by June, the government troops secured the Long Tieng/Sam Thong complex and seized the Vang Pao line. There they rested while the embassy planned a wet-season offensive.

⁵⁸ Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 140625Z Mar 72, subj: Defense of Long Tieng/Sam Thong; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1972, pp 19-20.

⁵⁹ Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 051400Z Apr 72, subj: Air Support Request.

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Staggering to a Cease-Fire

Since the Meo had ceased to exist as an effective fighting force, the main brunt of the offensive would be carried by eight thousand [] "irregulars" formed into five task forces (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Echo). One group (Alpha) was to secure the Long Tieng area as the other four approached the Plain of Jars from separate directions. Embassy officials hoped this maneuver would saturate the enemy defenses and prevent a strong reaction to any of the columns. The air support plan specified twenty F-4s and six A-1s to aid the ground advance and ten F-4s to hit supply areas and lines of communication. At night, four AC-119s would assist the ground forces while a single AC-130 patrolled the lines of communication. In addition, the embassy asked for one B-52 strike of three aircraft a day with a surge to three strikes a day if needed. Daily, the RLAf was to fly between sixty and eighty T-28 sorties and three to four AC-47 ones.⁶⁰

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The operation got under way on August 15. Conditions in South Vietnam had calmed down enough that Seventh Air Force could furnish the requested sorties, but weather proved to be the sticking point. Through the rest of the wet season, tactical air strikes averaged but eighteen a day. The B-52s took up some of the slack by flying an average of six sorties a day, but most of them were against supply areas and did not contribute directly to the ground campaign.

Early on, the troop deployments were virtually unopposed, [] then took up defensive positions instead of advancing onto the plain. When the various units did begin to move, their actions were uncoordinated and they were not in supporting distance of one another. Part of the problem lay in Vang Pao's leadership style. He relied upon personal charisma and instinct rather than orderly staff work and military structure. Consequently, he excelled as a guerrilla leader but could not coordinate the movement of large bodies of regular troops. Then, too, the [] did not display the initiative that would have been expected from the Meo in a similar situation. Thus, the communists succeeded in shifting their forces to defeat each task force in turn. On September 16, General Hughes, deputy commander of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force reported:

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Looks like Vang Pao has his units out of sync. They have not been able to mount a five-front attack. Thus the enemy, with superior discipline, leadership, etc., has been able to use their assault forces and systematically take on each unit one at a time (Delta, then Echo, and now Bravo) and chew them up. We could see this coming over the last few days as enemy units were repositioned around Bravo. Task Force Bravo is Vang Pao's best. If they go down the tubes, there is little chance of Vang Pao making any significant gains this season.⁶¹

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Vang Pao, backed by the CIA, tried to blame inadequate air support for his lack of success. Meeting with Gen. John W. Vogt, Jr., Seventh Air Force commander, Vang Pao said he would have to decide in the next few days whether to continue the offensive. He warned that his decision would depend in large measure on the extent of U.S. air support.⁶² General Vogt later reported:

I explained to General Vang Pao that all the Tacair in the world couldn't help them in the kind of weather we had encountered up there in the last two weeks. As a matter of fact, we had an F-4 and O-1 Raven FAC collide yesterday, trying to work under these difficult conditions. On top of all that Vang Pao's forces are simply no match for the NVA. After extensive discussions, I am convinced Vang Pao's plans are far too

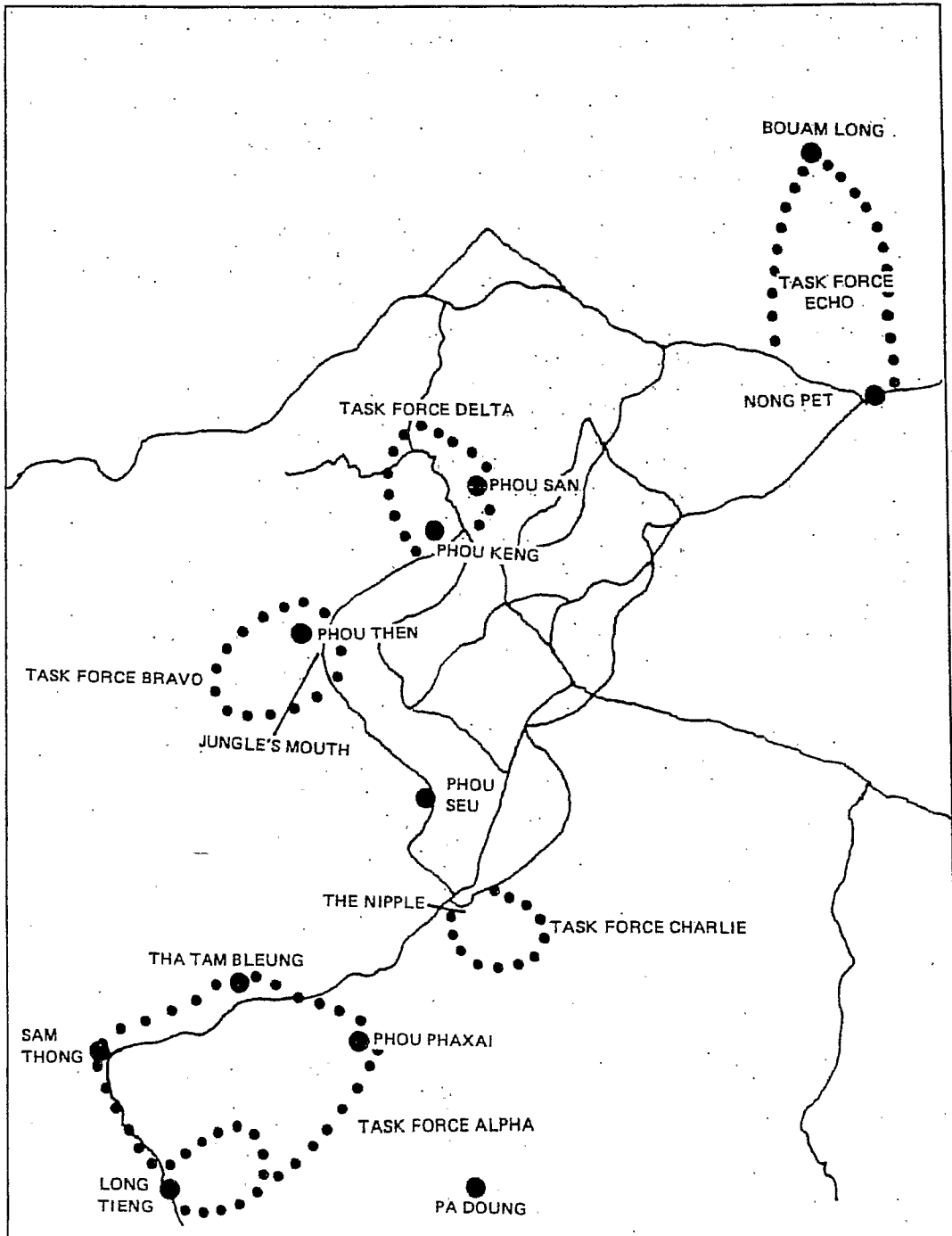
60. [] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 250700Z Jul 72, SECSTATE/SECDEF/CIA to AmEmb Vientiane, 120300Z Aug 72, subj: Approval of Operation Phou Phiang, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 120300Z Aug 72, subj: Air Support Request.

61. [] Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 161055Z Sep 72, subj: Operation Phou Phiang.

62. [] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011505Z Oct 72, subj: Operation Phou Phiang.

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ambitious for his capability. He insists he can retake the PDJ if we give him air support, while I believe the best we can hope for is to secure some limited objective. We will attempt to give him whatever air can be profitably used since, if nothing else, he needs a morale boost. He does need to pare down his ambitious plans, however, since as the rout of his two Groupes Mobiles so vividly demonstrated, his troops are simply not capable of handling NVA regulars.⁶³

In the end, Vang Pao did renew the offensive but with no more success than before. Perhaps the most significant action occurred on October 9 when two North Vietnamese Il-28 Beagles⁶⁴ bombed Bouam Long. The attack did little physical damage but acutely embarrassed the Americans, since the planes had not been picked up on radar until after they had dropped their bombs. The main result of the incident was that the Air Force enlarged its combat air patrol, leaving fewer aircraft to support the ground forces. Vang Pao finally called off the offensive on November 18, and ordered his units to take up defensive positions around Long Tieng. During December both sides rested, refitted, and repositioned supplies for the dry-season campaign.⁶⁵

With ground action at a standstill, the Air Force focused on interdiction. A major innovation was the coming of F-111s to northern Laos. These planes had appeared briefly in Southeast Asia just before the 1969 bombing halt. They were reintroduced in the summer of 1972 as part of the Linebacker I strikes against North Vietnam. When that operation wound down, the F-111s conducted missions in Barrel Roll. To enhance the F-111s, a series of radar beacons were deployed to various sites in northern Laos, and the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing used them in a photomapping project. Designated Sentinel Lock, the new program produced photomaps referenced to the beacon location. From November 11, 1972, to the cease-fire on February 22, 1973, the F-111s flew 2,392 missions using Sentinel Lock. Of these, 2,183 (91 percent) were successful, with extremely high delivery accuracy.

The B-52s achieved comparable accuracy with Sentinel Lock, which was by far the best all-weather delivery technique used during the war. During mid-November to mid-December, B-52s and F-111s joined F-4s and A-7s in pounding the enemy lines of communication and supply depots on the Plain of Jars. (A-7s had replaced the A-1s at Nakhon Phanom on November 7.) It was impossible to gauge the precise effect of this bombing, but through the following dry season, the communists could not sustain a drive on Long Tieng.⁶⁶

In southern Laos, the government's wet-season offensive was more successful than in the north. This all-Laotian operation constituted the first major test of the self-sufficiency program. Surprisingly, the FAR did quite well, for the first time showing a clear superiority over the Pathet Lao, although the results might have been different had the North Vietnamese not been fully committed to the invasion of South Vietnam and been able to take part in the campaign. By early December, the government troops had reoccupied the Bolovens Plateau, including the towns of Saravane, Thateng, and Pak Song. However, the return of North Vietnamese regulars during December boded ill for the widely dispersed government units.⁶⁷

In northern Laos, the North Vietnamese offensive got under way on December 12 when the communists again slipped past the Vang Pao line to hit Long Tieng. As enemy infantry and artillery units entered the area, F-4s, A-7s, and AC-130s attacked troop concentrations, artillery sites, and other targets of opportunity. When bad weather closed in, B-52s and F-111s took over and used the Sentinel Lock beacons. In December, the Air Force flew 957 strike sorties in Barrel Roll (522 F-111, 230 F-4, 116 A-7, 57 B-52, and 32 AC-130). The RLAFF contributed 2,200

63. Msg, 7th AF to CSAF, 151015Z Nov 72 subj: Daily Situation Report.

64. The Il-28 was a twin-engine jet bomber built by the Russians during the 1950s.

65. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1972, pp 42-43.

66. Study, 7th AF/13th AF, F-111/AN/PPN-18 Beacon Employment in Southeast Asia, Mar 19, 1973.

67. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 081114Z Dec 72, subj: Enemy Intentions for Dry Season Campaign.

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T-28 sorties. This huge air effort smothered the attackers. After a week of punishment from the air, the North Vietnamese pulled back from Long Tieng and attacked Bouam Long.⁶⁸

Three North Vietnamese regiments began the assault on Christmas night, and the Air Force adjusted its missions to meet the new threat. Once more the communists made no headway, and by year's end had settled down to a conventional siege. The end of operations against North Vietnam (January 15, 1973) released more aircraft to Laos. In January, USAF sorties rose to 2,098 (837 F-111, 827 A-7, 235 F-4, 126 B-52, and 73 AC-130). These strikes prevented any further ground attacks.

The chief problem for Bouam Long's defenders was the steady bombardment from the 130-mm and 122-mm guns. As during the previous year, the guns were well camouflaged and protected by antiaircraft guns. On December 17, a special meeting at Udom covered ways of silencing these guns. During the conference Colonel Curry observed, "They [the North Vietnamese] are just as oriented as we are in doing the same thing over and over again." He therefore suggested that the logical starting place to search for the guns should be their earlier locations. Acting on this assumption, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force prepared a chart showing the location of every gun sighted during the past campaign. The Ravens and photo-reconnaissance crews gave these positions special attention, and found the guns still there. The Air Force started destroying them one by one with laser-guided bombs and hit seven of the big guns during December. In January, the count rose to eleven 130-mm and seven 122-mm guns, with seven more 130-mm and four 122-mm guns destroyed in the final month of the war.⁶⁹ It should be noted that the number of guns destroyed represents the number claimed. As with truck kills, this may be subject to some inaccuracies and multiple counting.

Having failed to take a single friendly position, the communists called an early halt to their offensive on February 1. As the North Vietnamese fell back to consolidate their hold on the Plain of Jars, the Pathet Lao made their first substantive proposal for negotiations.⁷⁰ They suggested: "1) A private meeting between Souvanna and Souphanouvong, 2) Resumption of confidential procedural talks, and 3) An immediate meeting of a subcommittee of the government and Pathet Lao in restricted secret talks."⁷¹ Notably absent from this proposal was the earlier demand for a halt to U.S. bombing as a precondition for negotiations.

While these talks went on, sporadic clashes continued but relatively little ground changed hands. Air Force operations over this period declined slightly as 1,978 sorties struck targets throughout Barrel Roll (778 F-4, 475 A-7, 325 F-111, 275 B-52, 89 A-6 [U.S. Marine Corps] and 36 AC-130s.) In its final effort, the RLAf added 4,418 sorties! The Laotians eventually agreed to a cease-fire on February 21 that took effect at noon the following day.⁷²

In the south, the communist offensive did not get under way until December 22, 1972, but it swiftly gathered momentum. Thateng, Saravane, and Lao Ngam were lost in January 1973, and the enemy massed for an assault on Pak Song. On the night of February 8, the North Vietnamese mounted their attack, spearheaded by six tanks. The Laotian commander called for air support, and an AC-130 Spectre was diverted to the scene. The gunship picked up the tanks on its sensors and asked for clearance to fire. The ground commander granted his permission, even though he did not have the authority to validate targets. Because of the sensitivity of the political negotiations, Ambassador Godley had decreed that only the assistant air attaché at

68. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1-Dec 31, 1972, pp 44-45.

69. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1973, pp 12-13; intvw, Maj William W. Lofgren, Jr., Proj CHECO hist, with Col Hayden C. Curry, AIRA Vientiane, May 30, 1973.

70. The start of the cease-fire in South Vietnam on January 28 might have played a part in this decision.

71. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 061025Z Feb 73, subj: Immediate Problems Relating to Cease-fire in Laos.

72. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1-Jun 30, 1973, p 23.

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Savannakhet could validate targets in southern Laos and then solely in line with very strict guidance. General Vogt, Seventh Air Force commander, later described what happened:

The Spectre began the laborious process of contacting the guy in Savannakhet, trying to describe the ground situation in the area, trying to assure him that all the rules of engagement were being observed, and ultimately trying to get authority to hit those tanks. It took him 27 minutes to get this authority. In the meantime he had exhausted his fuel and had to return to base. He was never able to attack the tanks and, as a result, the tanks came in and overran the positions.⁷³

Understandably, the Laotian commanders were upset, blaming the Air Force for the debacle. When word of this reached Saigon, General Vogt flew to Pakse to look into the matter first hand. At a meeting with Brig. Gen. Soutchay Vongsavanh, the Military Region IV commander, Vogt put his finger squarely on the problem. "The restrictions imposed by our Embassy in Laos led to this rout and the loss of these forces." He added that he did not intend to place blame for the fiasco but rather try to salvage the situation. General Vogt told General Soutchay there was no use belaboring the past. Instead they needed to devise a plan to retake Pak Song. The CIA representative objected to this suggestion:

General, there is no way you can retake Paksong! We're through! That's a crack NVA outfit and these guys are no match for that kind of force! The enemy has moved up 122-mm guns and they are pounding the friendlies to pieces just as they did the other day when they attacked Paksong! There is no way we can destroy them. These little guys have been fighting for a long time. They are exhausted and their casualties are high. We have to forget about retaking Paksong.⁷⁴

General Vogt replied: "I refuse to accept this. We have all this air capability, and I am willing to employ it if it is used properly." He asked General Soutchay if his troops could make the effort, and Soutchay agreed to try. Vogt depicted the ensuing events:

We laid out a detailed plan. I put B-52s in there in advance of the execute date of the operation and softened up the area. I put FACs in the areas where the 122-mm guns were known to be and although we didn't know the exact gun positions, the FACs were there waiting for them to fire. As soon as they opened fire, they revealed their positions! TACAIR was hanging on tankers just waiting for the word to strike and destroy this artillery. We likewise had TACAIR overhead the day the operation kicked off and within two days we had retaken Paksong! It was the greatest victory they had ever received in southern Laos! It completely revitalized all the fighting forces in Laos. News of the victory spread like wildfire through every echelon of command throughout the entire country. The number one fighting force of the NVA in [southern] Laos had been whipped! The troops had tremendous pride in what they had done, and rightly so.⁷⁵

During the operation, 155 F-4s, 76 B-52s, 50 A-7s, and 49 F-111s supported the friendly forces. They simply blew the defenders away and on February 12 the government flag again flew over Pak Song.

Unfortunately, the story had an unhappy ending. After the victory, General Vogt warned the ambassador that if there was a cease-fire and air power was withdrawn, the enemy would retake Pak Song. The CIA station chief replied: "They wouldn't dare do that after a cease-fire goes into effect! That would be an open and flagrant violation of the agreement! They wouldn't think of doing that."⁷⁶ At noon on February 22, General Vogt withdrew all U.S. air power from

73. Intvw, Maj William W. Lofgren, Proj CHECO hist, with Gen John W. Vogt, Comdr, 7th AF, May 28, 1973.

74. *Ibid.*


75. *Ibid.*


76. *Ibid.*




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Laos in agreement with the terms of the cease-fire. Fifteen minutes later, the North Vietnamese drove the government forces out of Pak Song and off the Bolovens Plateau for the final time. In retaliation, nine B-52s struck communist positions around Pak Song on February 23 but there was no follow-up ground action. This was the last USAF mission in southern Laos.⁷⁷

 Sparring went on in the north until mid-April, in spite of the cease-fire, as each side engaged in a last-minute land grab. In general, the North Vietnamese got the better of this exchange, seizing Muong Soui, Sala Phou Khoun, and Tha Viang. In retaliation, the Air Force flew forty B-52 and twenty-four F-111 sorties on April 15, 16, and 17, 1973—the last USAF bombing sorties in Laos.⁷⁸

77.  *Ibid*; hist, 7th AF/13th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1973, pp 26–30.

78.  Hists, 7th AF/13th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1973, p 23, SAC, FY 73, I, 279–280, CINCPAC, 1973, I, 210.

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Epilogue

1973-1975 (U)

The cease-fire agreement of February 21, 1973, essentially confirmed the 1962 Geneva accords and called for the establishment of a provisional Government of National Union to organize elections for a permanent government. Within sixty days after formation of the provisional government, all foreign military forces would have to withdraw from Laos.¹ Negotiations on the specific composition of the provisional government dragged on for over a year, punctuated by occasional armed clashes. During this period, the embassy drew up plans for the peacetime structure of the Laotian armed forces.

At the time of the cease-fire, government forces stood at 89,650 men. The Royal Laotian Army, including the 2,300-man air force, consisted of 48,150 men. Tribal irregulars numbered 25,500 (about half of them Meo), and the remaining 16,000 were [REDACTED] Supporting the Laotian forces were 1,711 Americans, with an additional 474, including the CIA and requirements office, assigned to the embassy. The military attachés accounted for 184, and the two airlines, Air America and Continental Air Service, employed 519 people. At Udom, 316 personnel were assigned to the Water Pump detachment and 218 to the Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand.

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Communist forces totaled 108,500—37,000 Pathet Lao and 71,500 North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese forces were made up of 50,000 combat and support troops formed into three divisions (312th, 315th, and 316th) and three independent regiments (184th, 335th, and 336th), with 21,500 "advisors" assigned to Pathet Lao units. The communists controlled about two-thirds of the territory in Laos and one-third of the population.²

Embassy officials believed that once a provisional government was set up, most of the North Vietnamese combat forces would leave. However, the advisors and some combat troops were expected to stay in Laos to ensure the Pathet Lao's adherence to Hanoi and to sustain its military structure, which was as fragile as the government's. For the Americans, the task was to see that the government forces remained strong enough to balance the communist side. Cutting the military assistance budget for fiscal year 1974 from \$300 million to \$100 million made this harder to achieve. Indeed, money and not military necessity played the greater role in fashioning the Laotian military structure.

In view of the limited financing, embassy plans specified a peacetime military establishment of forty-six thousand men. The [REDACTED] irregulars would be withdrawn and most of the tribal irregulars disbanded. Marginal army units would likewise be dissolved and the remaining tribesmen integrated into the regular component. The Americans felt that this force could be supported on a yearly budget of from \$60 million to \$80 million, and hoped that it would be able to handle the Pathet Lao.

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The embassy also planned to diminish its own size by over 50 percent. The biggest change was to be in the attaché setup. The separate attachés would be replaced by a defense attaché office of thirty military and fifteen civilian personnel. The surplus people would be

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1. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 211324Z Feb 73, subj: Laos Situation Report.
2. Msgs, JANAF Attaches Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 240500Z Feb 73, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 221131Z May 73, subj: Quarterly Report to SFRC on Laos.

The War in Northern Laos

transferred to the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief, who would report directly to the defense attaché as would the Water Pump detachment. The requirements office would likewise be assigned to the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief and redesignated a forward supply element.

This was in essence the structure that had been proposed by the Defense Department for ten years. Embassy objections during that time had always been based on the 1962 Geneva accords. Although the cease-fire agreement confirmed these accords, they seemed to no longer stand in the way of creating a defense attaché office in Vientiane.

Along with slight cutbacks in the staffs of the Agency for International Development and the United States Information Service, the changes included phasing out Air America and Continental Air Service. To avoid a precipitous collapse of government forces, the embassy plan would be implemented in stages. These would be geared to the negotiations on a provisional government and would be finished within sixty days after that government had been organized.

On August 8, the defense attaché office was formally created, with Brig. Gen. Richard G. Trefry, USA, as defense attaché. Col. Albert J. DeGroot took over as air attaché and assistant defense attaché. In spite of this paper change, the old air attaché and Army attaché organizations continued intact as did the requirements office, JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief, and Water Pump. Trefry and DeGroot's first job was to meld these separate and at times antagonistic activities into one coherent structure. They further needed to redirect the Military Assistance Program from support of combat operations to building a peacetime armed force. To do this the separate Army attaché and air attaché offices were replaced by an integrated one. In addition, the operations centers of the Army attaché and the air attaché were closed, the remaining Ravens sent home, and USAF personnel transferred from the air operations centers. Concurrently, the defense attaché started to exercise direct supervision over the whole Military Assistance Program including the actions of the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief, Water Pump, and the requirements office. This was not done without some resistance from entrenched interests. By April 1974, however, the defense attaché office was functioning fairly smoothly.

The second job was to develop the ability of the Royal Laotian Air Force, so it could sustain itself without American involvement. This effort was interrupted by a final quixotic attempt to overthrow the government. On the morning of August 21, 1974, Brig. Gen. Thao Ma (the exiled air force commander) and a group of followers crossed to Vientiane. They drove to the airport where Thao Ma announced a revolutionary government to head off a communist takeover of the country. Rumors of the coup had been circulating for weeks and blue scarves had been passed out to potential supporters. Hence the actual coup came as no surprise. Despite Thao Ma's professed goal of preventing a communist takeover, his sole specific objective seemed to have been the elimination of his archenemy, Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, since his first order was to bomb Army headquarters in Vientiane. (Thao Ma was never much of a planner.) Many of the T-28 pilots retained affection for their former commander and were willing to do his bidding. Yet, like Thao Ma's earlier effort, the bombing did little damage and there was no widespread support for the coup.

When word of the bombing reached the embassy, John G. Dean, the chargé d'affaires, rushed to air force headquarters to find Brig. Gen. Sourith Don Sasorith. Dean had shaped the terms of the cease-fire and was currently masterminding the negotiations on creating a

3. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 061025Z Feb 73, subj: Immediate Problems Relating to the Ceasefire in Laos, 241230Z Feb 73, subj: Mission Planning in Problems Relating to the Ceasefire in Laos.

4. EOTR, Col Albert J. DeGroot, AIRA Vientiane (Aug 73-May 75), May 5, 1975, pp 13-19; intvw, Lt Col Richard R. Sexton with Col Albert J. DeGroot, Mar 14, 1977.

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Epilogue: 1973-1975

provisional government, and the coup threatened to upset his plans. Sourith was not at his headquarters, so Dean drove to the general's home and spotted the RLAF commander cowering under a table, a blue scarf in his pocket—just in case. The chargé literally dragged the protesting Sourith to his feet and insisted he go to the airport to stop the coup. Sourith refused, claiming it was too dangerous. A disgusted Dean left Sourith and went to the airport himself.

By this time, Thao Ma had returned from his bombing mission and was aimlessly buzzing the airport—there being nothing better to do. On one of these passes, his airplane was hit by small-arms fire and crashed near the runway. Thao Ma survived the crash but was pulled from the wreckage and taken to Kouprasith's headquarters where he was summarily shot. Thus ended the feud between the two generals and Thao Ma's last tragic effort to preserve a noncommunist Laos.⁵

With Thao Ma out of the way, the last obstacle to negotiations had been removed and work on building a peacetime air force could proceed. At the time of the cease-fire, the RLAF had 75 T-28s, 26 H-34s, 24 O-1s, 21 C-47s, and 10 AC-47s, apportioned among six squadrons. Embassy plans envisioned a reduction to five squadrons with 25 T-28s,⁶ 30 H-34s, 15 O-1s, 10 C-47s, 5 AC-47s, and 10 C-123s. Since the chief peacetime role of the RLAF was to be resupply of government forces rather than combat operations, the transport arm received greater emphasis than the T-28s. The Americans believed that with the additional four H-34s and ten C-123s furnished by Air America the Laotians could meet from 70 percent to 80 percent of their normal peacetime requirements.⁷ The smaller force of T-28s could handle minor truce violations without placing too great a strain on Laotian maintenance and supply.

The biggest question mark was whether the Laotians could support and operate even this reduced force without direct American support. The RLAF was already providing its own forward air controllers and handling minor maintenance and base supply. It was deficient, however, in administration, management, logistics, heavy maintenance, command and control, and pilot training. Tackling these deficiencies, the Americans gave more courses in administration, management, and logistics but progress proved agonizingly slow. The Americans also began building a major maintenance facility at Vientiane. They estimated that, after its completion in 1977, the Laotians could handle 70 percent of all maintenance demands. There was very little the U.S. personnel could do about the decentralized control of the RLAF—this was something they just had to live with. One improvement did occur in the high command. Because of his ambivalence (not to say abject cowardice) during the Thao Ma coup, General Sourith was removed as air force commander and put on the general staff as army chief of logistics. Brig. Gen. Bouathong Phothivongsa, another nonflying officer, became RLAF commander. He worked diligently, took flying lessons, and cooperated with Colonel DeGroot in developing the self-sufficiency program.⁸ The falloff in combat operations allowed some seasoned T-28 pilots to be taken off the line and used as instructor pilots. These men were adept at imparting the rudiments of flying, though their students lacked some of the polish of Water Pump graduates. For example one of the new graduates on a flight from Udom to Pakse combined inexperience with a faulty heading indicator, bad weather, and a dose of panic to come up with one of the most gargantuan navigation errors in aviation history. He ended up out of fuel over the South China Sea. Successfully bailing out, he was picked up by the Chinese who ultimately repatriated him.⁹

5. DeGroot interview, Mar 14, 1977; Peter Muncie, "The Downfall of General Ma," *The Washington Post*, Aug 22, 1973, p 20.

6. The remaining T-28s would be retained by Water Pump for use as training and replacement aircraft.

7. Available documents are not clear on how the budget would be made up. Apparently this was all the budget would support, although some contract support may have been envisaged if funds could be found.

8. When the government collapsed in 1975, General Bouathong fled to Thailand. He eventually came to the United States under the sponsorship of Colonel DeGroot.

9. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 241230Z Feb 73; DeGroot EOTR, May 5, 1965, pp 19-22; POM for Laos, FY 74-77, CINCPAC, Feb 4, 1973.

The War in Northern Laos

The greatest post-truce success was in the airlift program. Air America turned over its C-123s in March 1973, and the first Laotian pilots graduated in June. Even so, the resupply system itself was a mess. As the air attaché recalled:

Nobody was handling it! It came under the aegis of USAID but we had Air America doing it, Continental Air Service doing it, anybody with an airplane was doing it. There was no system at all. If you needed a bag of rice delivered to Site 32, just hire a guy to drop it. Problems were solved simply by more money and more contracts. We found that Air America would come in and drop some rice sacks and Continental would come in the same damn place a half hour later and drop off some more. Then suddenly it was dropped in our lap.¹⁰

Colonel DeGroot assigned the problem to one of his assistants, Capt. James Quinn, who set about at once to bring order out of chaos. Quinn began by flying with the remaining Air America crews to see how they did things. He found out where the sites were, who was in charge, and what they needed. He created a system for funneling all requests into a central point where they could be consolidated and priorities determined. More important, he drew the Laotians into the system, showing them how to process requests and to schedule aircraft for pickup and delivery. Quinn also flew with the RLAf crews, exposing them to the nuts and bolts of aerial resupply. Much to everyone's surprise, the Laotians mastered the system and in a few months were operating on their own with virtually no complaints from the field.

The T-28 operation did not go as well. When the American air operations center personnel were withdrawn, the T-28s simply quit flying. DeGroot remembered:

When the American supervisors left, everybody just went out and took a three-hour siesta. They figured we would be back in a couple of months—we always had in the past. So things went way down until they couldn't seem to keep an airplane in commission. Finally we went to them and said: "Look, these airplanes are turning to junk. If you don't fly them we are going to take them back and give them to somebody else." Eventually, it dawned on them that we were not coming back and they started cranking themselves up again. They weren't setting any sortie records by a long shot but they were flying the airplanes every day and learning to maintain them.¹¹

By the time the provisional government was formed on April 4, 1974, the attachés were reasonably satisfied with the condition of the Laotian armed forces—the most serious weakness being in the top command. Maj. Gen. Bounpone Makthepharak, the commander in chief, was described as "a bad joke—corrupt, stupid, and lazy; his only saving grace is that he never makes a decision and thus never makes a poor one." His deputy, Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, was likewise tainted with corruption. However, right below them were comparatively honest and capable generals, Brig. Gen. Thao Ly Liddhiluja being a case in point. General Vang Pao, of course, retained his charisma among the Meo. The army itself had fought well in the closing months of the war, and went on holding its own against the Pathet Lao. Still, a visit to an army post could be sobering. Waste and thievery were rampant and equipment maintenance appalling. Fortunately the Pathet Lao were no better off. The lines of once-shiny Soviet equipment now littered their own compounds—mute evidence that the Americans were not alone in their frustration.

In all of this, the RLAf remained the brightest spot. A noticeable upswing in smuggling and pilferage followed the withdrawal of American supervision, but not enough to interfere with combat or resupply operations. In particular, the airlift branch was doing an outstanding job of

10. DeGroot intvw, Mar 14, 1977.

11. *Ibid.*

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Epilogue: 1973-1975

picking up where the American contract lines had left off. The T-28s continued to command the respect of the Pathet Lao and were the most frequent target of communist propaganda. If a truce violation seemed to be getting out of hand, the RLAf could always send up half a dozen planes to drop some 500-pound bombs. This usually sufficed to quiet things down.¹²

The provisional government itself consisted of equal numbers of communist and noncommunist representatives. Souvanna Phouma stayed as premier with Souphanouvong as vice premier. The Vientiane side also kept the defense and interior ministries while the communists held the portfolios of foreign affairs and education. One key provision of the truce agreement required all decisions to be unanimous. This ensured government paralysis on any major issue, a situation that seemed to favor the status quo. At this point, the Americans were not worried about the North Vietnamese overrunning the country (they appeared to be pulling out most of their troops in accord with the cease-fire), and figured the noncommunist troops could hold their positions against the Pathet Lao.

The overriding problem for the U.S. personnel was financial. In lieu of the \$60-\$80 million the embassy felt was needed to support the armed forces, the fiscal year 1975 budget called for just \$40 million. According to the air attaché, this was barely sufficient to furnish uniforms and rice to the friendly troops. Even then, Congress failed to fund the needed money, and the embassy had to fall back on continuing resolution authority.¹³ Colonel DeGroot was chosen to explain things to General Vang Pao. After listening intently to the air attaché, Vang Pao was still puzzled. "I don't think I understand you," he told DeGroot, "would you try it again, in French." DeGroot repeated his explanation, this time in French. When he had finished, Vang Pao stood up and said: "Colonel DeGroot, I don't believe you. America is a great country; it would never run its finances that way."¹⁴ But it did.

In the teeth of these difficulties, the pro-Western faction managed to hang on, and the Americans sensed there were grounds for cautious optimism. However, the collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975 changed the picture completely. Shortly after the fall of Saigon, the communist staged a series of well-organized demonstrations in Vientiane and most of the other major towns in Laos. The army responded at first; but on May 9, Souvanna announced that Laos would have to accept the "new realities" in Southeast Asia. He soon ordered the army not to return fire, signaling the complete collapse of the Vientiane side. Souvanna stepped down as premier in favor of Souphanouvong, and the principal noncommunist leaders began to leave en masse. Those who remained were quickly rounded up and sent to a "reeducation" center at Samneua.

With the communists firmly in control of the government, there was no longer any purpose for the U.S. aid program. When the Pathet Lao began to confiscate all American property, the embassy decided to withdraw all nonessential personnel and the remaining property. Only a chargé d'affaires stayed behind with a staff of twenty people. The attachés went to Udon leaving one man, an Army major, as military representative. Finally, in July 1976 the Pathet Lao ordered all western military personnel out of the country—British, French, and American. Two decades of American effort in Laos ended eight months later, on March 14, 1977, when the communists arrested King Savang Vatthana and declared Souphanouvong president of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

12. *Ibid*; DeGroot EOTR, May 5, 1975, pp 24-31.

13. Authority to continue spending at a previously established level pending approval of current appropriations.

14. DeGroot intvw, Mar 14, 1977.

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