

## The War in Northern Laos

instructions stressed that these missions were being flown at Souvanna's request and that the United States deemed armed escorts necessary. Moreover, the need for these escorts had been explained to the satisfaction of the prime minister, and he understood that, in protecting the reconnaissance jets, the escorts might have to return hostile fire. Souvanna had raised no objection, but he had insisted on the need for silence about such retaliation. Thus, it became official policy to admit that reconnaissance was being conducted in Laos "as necessary," but no admission or announcement was made for specific missions. Press inquiries about escorts firing to protect the mission were answered with the official response: "We do not answer questions about operations." If an aircraft were shot down, just the bare facts were given; and if there were overriding reasons why the loss should not be disclosed, it would remain secret. Last, and perhaps more important, selected congressmen and certain allied ambassadors were briefed on Yankee Team operations ("strictly in private and on a need-to-know basis"), but at no time were suppressive tactics conceded. Escorts were depicted as firing only after being attacked by the enemy. It was permissible to say to a very restricted group (not identified in the instructions) that U.S. planes had attacked targets in Laos without having first been fired upon.<sup>52</sup>

By this time, it was clear Souvanna's attitude toward the Pathet Lao was growing more militant. At the meeting when he requested Yankee Team's resumption, he urged more use of the T-28s to interdict enemy supply lines, destroy Pathet Lao caches, and support ground forces. The RLAF now had twenty T-28s (fourteen "on loan") and thirteen qualified pilots. Operating under embassy control were [redacted] in an emergency, six Air America pilots; in addition, ten Laotian pilots were about to enter T-28 training at Water Pump.<sup>53</sup>

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In light of the potential of these air resources, the prime minister approved the FAR General Staff's Operation Triangle. Tentatively set for early July, this plan featured a combined FAR/neutralist/Meo assault on an enemy pocket at Sala Phou Khoun that threatened Route 13 and the rear of Kong Le's Muong Soui headquarters. Souvanna hoped this small offensive, supported by the T-28s, would serve as a springboard for the eventual recapture of the Plain of Jars. Unger was skeptical of the plan but agreed a rise in T-28 sorties was in order. Significantly, the ambassador further favored retaliatory air strikes on Samneua, Xieng Khouangville, Tchepone, and "perhaps against communists outside Laos."<sup>54</sup>

Responding to Souvanna's request for more T-28 missions, the RLAF flew seventeen sorties on June 13 against enemy antiaircraft and artillery positions east of Muong Soui near Phou Kout mountain. Five aircraft were launched against this target in the early morning, and six T-28s hit it again around midday. The results were unknown due to deteriorating weather. That afternoon, another three aircraft flew to the area but found the ground nearly obscured. Rather than return to Wattay, the flight commander dropped the ordnance through the overcast; it landed on friendly troops, wounding two soldiers. In investigating the short rounds, Colonel Tyrrell determined the individual acting as FAG knew next to nothing of air-ground control procedures and could not contact the flight on the briefed radio frequency. Similar incidents could occur since neither the FAR nor the RLAF had a system for controlling air strikes. Thao Ma still refused to furnish personnel for forward air control training or as ALOs to either the neutralists (whom he disliked intensely) or to the FAR (whose generals disliked him). After the Phou Kout incident, Thao Ma became moody and transferred nine T-28s from Wattay to Savannakhet. This left northern Laos almost completely under the purview of the [redacted] USAF air attaché.<sup>55</sup>

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52. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, Bangkok, Saigon, *et al*, 1189, Jun 12, 1964.

53. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, CX-332, 260935Z Jun 64.

54. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964.

55. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCSTRIKE, CSAF, DIA, *et al*, J-7-64, 132154Z Jun 64, AIRA Laos to

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