

The War in Northern Laos

MACTHAI from MACV and designating an Air Force lieutenant general as COMUSMACTHAI. The ambassador already knew the RTG would accede to this action. The entire question was brought up at the April Secretary of Defense Conference in Honolulu, but McNamara put off a decision for almost two months. On May 27, he approved the separation of MACTHAI from MACV and appointed General Easterbrook as COMUSMACTHAI in lieu of a USAF officer, but an Air Force brigadier general would serve as MACTHAI Chief of Staff. However, it was more important to the Air Force that MACTHAI—unlike MACV—would control none of the air units in Thailand.¹¹⁶

The upswing in strike operations in Laos and North Vietnam heightened the burden on search and rescue, causing authorities to take a closer look at the program. In February 1965, Air America had asked for an additional four H-34 helicopters, increasing its fleet to sixteen. The helicopters would not be used solely for rescue but in all phases of Air America operations. H-34s were short worldwide, and Admiral Sharp spent the better part of a month seeking a few. He eventually requested that the U.S. Navy supply them from a source outside the Pacific Command.¹¹⁷

Gen. John P. McConnell, the new Air Force chief of staff, objected to giving these helicopters to Air America for search and rescue. With more American air power deployed to Southeast Asia, it was time to bring in additional USAF rescue helicopters and personnel. Ambassador Sullivan rejected McConnell's views, stressing to Admiral Sharp that Air America's success in search and rescue stemmed from pilots knowing the Laotian hinterlands "like the back of their hand." Sullivan emphasized that Air Force crews would enter these operations "dangerously cold" and, by implication, not do as well. Further, Air Force crews were prohibited from operating regularly in Laos, because of the Geneva accords. Sharp sided with Sullivan, seeing no reason to change because of Air America's outstanding rescue performance.¹¹⁸

In the spring of 1965, the Air Force had two HU-16s and seven HH-43s in Thailand available for search and rescue. The airmen normally worked the panhandle, the contract pilots northern Laos; but this was not a hard and fast rule. Several times, Air America C-123 control/cargo ships and T-28s manned by the airline's pilots flew SAR missions in central and southern Laos; but since the C-123s lacked beacon homing equipment, they were generally less satisfactory. On April 3—the kickoff date for Steel Tiger—an Air America control ship conducting a panhandle search and rescue directed suppressive fire on what were thought to be enemy troops. The troops turned out to be friendly forces; four were killed, with five more wounded. Following this incident, Thao Ma decided that one of his officers must be on board the control ship during any Steel Tiger search and rescue and that the crews had to be briefed at Savannakhet before flying the mission. Since the control ships operating over the corridor were chiefly Air Force, Sullivan figured the only way he could comply was to place the HU-16 and its crew under Air America cover.¹¹⁹

Interwoven with the control ship problem was the difficulty with SAR missions flown in the northwestern part of North Vietnam near the Laotian border. Rescue aircraft going into this area were stationed in South Vietnam or with the Seventh Fleet in Tonkin Gulf. Forces based in Laos or Thailand would be closer and better, but Sullivan worried that the political risks might be more than Souvanna could accept. On the other hand, the ambassador did not want Air America flying into North Vietnam, even though the airline had pulled off a successful

116. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1456, Mar 31, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 2998, 272224Z May 65; hist, COMUSMACV, 1965, Annex A, p 102.

117. Msgs, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 100920Z Feb 65, CINCPAC to JCS, 121120Z Mar 65.

118. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 060002Z Mar 65, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 231155Z Feb 65, AmEmb Baguio (Amb Sullivan) to AmEmb Vientiane, 1, Mar 9, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 132125Z Mar 65.

119. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1620, Apr 7, 1965.

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SAR just over the border on April 5. One way out of this dilemma was an earlier SEACoord suggestion that USAF HH-43s stage to remote lima sites close to the North Vietnamese border. These sites were for the most part controlled [redacted] and there seemed slight chance of enemy detection. Sullivan proposed USAF-marked T-28s for helicopter escort, manned by Water Pump pilots flying out of either Nakhon Phanom or Udom. He further proposed that rescue combat air patrol as well as control ship support come from the Air Force or Navy.¹²⁰

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General Moore disliked all of these new ground rules and proposals. First, 2d Air Division regulations barred any search and rescue control ship from directing air strikes, and the unfortunate incident with the Air America C-123 could not be repeated with an HU-16. Consequently, there was no need to land at Savannakhet to pick up an RLAF officer and, above all, no need to sheep-dip USAF aircrews. If Thao Ma was adamant about having his personnel on the scene, Moore suggested that an Air America C-123 be sent to Savannakhet for pickup whenever a SAR was in progress and that the HU-16 continue to handle the rescue until this aircraft arrived. Moore further opposed having Water Pump pilots fly cover—jets based in Thailand or South Vietnam, with their responsiveness and firepower, were better for this mission. Last, he was only lukewarm to pre-positioning the HH-43s at remote sites because of logistic requirements and the helicopter's slow speed. Westmoreland backed him up.¹²¹

Ambassador Sullivan offered a rather complicated and time-consuming compromise. One of the two USAF HU-16s, with USAF marking and crew, was to work jointly with Air America in northern Laos, but it was to be the sole aircraft to respond if an American plane was downed within North Vietnam. During a panhandle SAR, this same Albatross could answer the first mayday but not carry out the SAR; this was the job of the second HU-16. This latter aircraft was to be based at Nakhon Phanom, stage through Savannakhet, and be flown by a sanitized USAF crew. As soon as this crew was briefed and the RLAF officer got on board, their role was that of scene commander, assuming this from the first HU-16. The ambassador implied he did not know what all the fuss was about—he believed the biggest problem was merely “an optical one of shifting some available USAF assets from Udom to stage through Savannakhet.” It did not entail any change in basic SAR control procedures.¹²²

Then General Harris, in turn, disagreed. The PACAF commander pointed out that the HU-16s were pre-positioned in orbit over the Laos-Thailand border each time the Air Force and Navy flew in Laos or North Vietnam. The crews were in continuous radio communication with rescue personnel in the deputy commander's ASOC, as well as with strike aircraft. Experience had shown that if a SAR was to have a chance of success, the HU-16 must be allowed to fly unrestricted to the distress scene, whether it be in Laos or across the border in North Vietnam. Sheep-dipping robbed the crews of the Geneva Convention's protection and confined them to Laos. Instead, to avoid Sullivan's complicated procedures, Harris suggested that Thao Ma be pressured to rescind his prohibitions. CINCPACAF was willing to turn over the search and rescue to the Air America C-123 (called the Victor control ship) as soon as it arrived on scene. He also preferred U.S. aircraft, with U.S. markings, flying cover for SAR helicopters, but he did not specify jet or prop-driven aircraft. After reviewing all the telegrams, Admiral Sharp sided completely with General Harris.¹²³

While Sullivan fenced with the military over SAR methods, Thao Ma and the FAR general staff anxiously watched the start of a Pathet Lao buildup opposite Muong Phalane. On April 13, the RLAF chief requested that U.S. jets strike two enemy troop concentrations about

120. *Ibid.*

121. Msgs, 2d AD to PACAF, 111000Z Apr 65, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 130800Z Apr 65.

122. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1666, Apr 13, 1965.

123. Msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 140150Z Apr 65, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 172210Z Apr 65.