

## The War in Northern Laos

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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