

Early American Involvement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The War in Northern Laos

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

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

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

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

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

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

1983), p 38.

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

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

46. Lemmer, pp 40-59.

Early American Involvement

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

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

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

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

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

47. Lemmer, pp 40-59.

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

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

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