

*A glimpse of a  
"bamboo Bastogne"*

## FIVE WEEKS AT PHALANE

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Between 24 March 1971 and 4 May 1971, two understrength paramilitary battalions of ethnic lowland Lao captured, occupied, defended, and finally lost the Route 9 town of Muang Phalane in southern Laos. During those five weeks, their operations encompassed a little bit of counterintelligence, a considerable amount of covert action, some effective intelligence collection, and some very hard fighting. They took heavy casualties, and in the end were overrun and shattered. But the survivors came back with their honor, and with a smug conviction that they had actually won the battle. These were not the feeble Lao troops made infamous by the press. Their story should be told.

In 1970, Muang Phalane was a small district capital and market center on Route 9, about midway between Savannakhet and Tchepone. It was the last stop on the taxi bus run from Savannakhet, and the easternmost point in the bulge of territory controlled by the Royal Lao Government which is loosely called the Savannakhet Plain. There was a District Chief's office, a new U.S. AID dispensary, a three-building school, a small Lao Army (FAR) garrison, and a string of shops on both sides of the main street. Main Street was also Route 9, and was shady and neat. The Se Sang Soi River flowed southward on the east edge of town, spanned by a defunct metal bridge. The town had changed hands a few times in the past, but for two years had been more or less firmly in government hands.

During December 1970, North Vietnamese Army forces began to operate closer and closer to Muang Phalane, and in January 1971, they rocketed and burned the FAR position southwest of town. The garrison withdrew, followed by public officials and traders. Most of the farmers in the district stayed with their land. One irregular battalion (Bataillon Guerrilla, or "BG") continued to operate in the neighborhood, but by mid-March had been forced back toward Dong Hene, 30 kilometers west of Muang Phalane.

In mid-March, rockets and recoilless rifle fire began falling on the airstrip and FAR garrison at Dong Hene, and it appeared that the NVA seriously intended to drive westward through Dong Hene toward Seno. Traders in Dong Hene began preparing to evacuate, and the FAR garrison nervously shuffled its feet.

A newly formed irregular battalion took to the field with the mission of cooperating with FAR and the irregular battalion still east of Dong Hene, in a joint effort to retake Muang Phalane. This green battalion quickly fragmented with leadership problems. Further, the original irregular battalion was itself close to exhaustion, and had to be relieved in place by BG 302, commanded by Major Thong Khoun. A sister battalion, BG 301, commanded by Major Mouy, joined BG 302 four days later. The two battalions together made up half of Groupement Mobile ("GM") 30, and the GM 30 deputy, Major Vathsana ("Vath"), assumed overall command. The two-battalion task force totaled about 540 men.



At this time, the joint FAR irregular attack was still on the books, but prospects looked bleaker after the FAR commander at Dong Hene bet Major Vath seven cows that the attack would never reach its objective. When he told Major Mouy that he expected to see Mouy back in three days with his "feet in his ears," it was clear that if any attack was to be made on Phalane, it would be made by the irregulars alone.

Late March is in the middle of the Laotian dry season, when streams dry up and fires in the woods burn unchecked for days. In the late afternoon of 23 March, Vath told [REDACTED] that he intended to kick off before dawn, and that he would move until he found water or was stopped by the enemy. By 10:30 in the morning, advance elements had moved nine kilometers and were still moving. As expected, the FAR unit on the right flank limited its attack to leaning forward in its foxholes, and the joint operation became a purely irregular one.

#### *Muang Phalane Retaken*

At 8 p.m., the GM 30 Commander, Colonel Touane Boudahara, and the GM 30 [REDACTED] overflowed the two battalions in a light plane and found the main force poised at the old Muang Phalane airstrip, three kilometers northwest of the town, and 17 kilometers east of the morning's jump off point. Vath reported, "My children are visiting the town, and everything is quite." [REDACTED] then dropped a string of homemade firefight simulators to the northeast of Muang Phalane and laid a string south of town for good measure. By sunup on the 25th, the task force was dug in at the school yard, and company-sized units were east of the Se Sang Soi, flushing demoralized NVA companies out of the villages. Villagers told Vath that the sudden move into Phalane had taken the NVA totally by surprise, and that the air-dropped simulators had turned their faces (and their defenses) toward the northeast.

By the morning of the 26th, however, the NVA had regained their poise. They counter-attacked with an excess of confidence. They came with three battalions totaling 1,800 men, attacking straight across open paddy fields. The irregular outposts were driven in, but joined the main position in town without difficulty. Lao Air Force T-28's and some U.S. fighter bombers hit the enemy in the open, and began to take a heavy toll. Vath later said that it was as if the enemy were taking shelter from the air strikes by crowding right up against the irregular perimeter. They came nose to nose with the irregulars, couldn't breach the perimeter, and couldn't withdraw back across those open fields. The North Vietnamese had advanced their three 75-millimeter recoilless rifles abnormally close to the irregular position, losing one to air strikes and leaving a second behind when they finally disengaged. Two Porter aircraft dropped ammunition into the irregular position throughout the day, and drew small arms fire on every pass. One aircraft, with Colonel Touane aboard, was hit, and landed back at Savannakhet with a hole in the belly and a flat tire.

During the night of 26/27 March, the NVA were active around the perimeter retrieving their dead and wounded, while Lao Air Force AC-47 "Spooky" gunships fired into them. On the morning of 27 March the enemy tapped the irregular positions again, but without enthusiasm, and by noon had broken all contact. The irregulars had suffered 10 killed and about twice that number wounded, and reported that they had killed about 50 enemy. The GM commander [REDACTED] went into Phalane by chopper, picked up the casualties and about 30 captured weapons, and raised the Lao flag over the town. Colonel Touane stayed in Phalane to assume command, and [REDACTED] brought a lightly wounded NVA prisoner back to Savannakhet, where he promptly and perversely died.

Three days later, a former Pathet Lao lieutenant attached to the task force overheard the NVA commander radioing a report that he had lost 375 men killed and "many" wounded. Later, airborne tactical radio intercept picked up the same report. The retreating enemy told villagers that they had been repulsed not by Lao soldiers but by a "special SEATO force" brought in especially to recover Muang Phalane. The irregular troopers told and retold this story with great relish. With Phalane in friendly hands, the shelling of Dong Hene of course promptly stopped.

In early March, the world's 'sloppiest (and unluckiest) intelligence officer had been killed by GM 33 about 30 kilometers southeast of Muang Phalane. This officer, an NVA lieutenant, had been carrying among other things a list of 21 names under the heading "Secret Agents to Contact in the Muang Phalane Area." The list obligingly contained each agent's home village, the Laotian equivalent of street address. This document emerged from the Savannakhet translation mill at about the same time the GM 30 task force was establishing an outpost line at a radius of eight kilometers around Muang Phalane. Every village on the list fell within this radius, and in a matter of days 15 agents on the list had been detained and the other six accounted for. ("Went away with the Pathet Lao last year. . . . Married and moved away" . . . etc.) All but one admitted to being NVA informants. One woman insisted throughout that she had been pointed out by her village because she was a chronic borrower and troublemaker. The interrogation center where she was kept came, sadly, to agree. The irregulars never located the real agent; she probably had faded away when the troops entered the village.

#### *NVA Problems*

Without an intact informant system, the NVA had to rely even more heavily than usual upon reconnaissance patrols. As these patrols reported copiously by radio, the irregulars were able to make good use of tactical radio intercept throughout the weeks of their occupation. The intercept radio flew aloft in the back seat of a Piper Cub, two sorties per day, for the duration of the operation. The second sortie each day landed at Savannakhet by sundown, and the translators pounced on the take. By 11 p.m. most nights, ██████████ could pick up a clear-text English version of the enemy's transmissions of the day. When he choppered into Phalane at 7 a.m. the next morning, he could hand the task force commander a sterilized resume. When it appeared from the traffic that the NVA had finally pinpointed an irregular position, the task force commander shifted the position a kilometer or more. Some testy exchanges often appeared in enemy traffic following these shifts (to the glee of the task force officers), and to the end, the enemy never had information good enough to make heavy weapons fire really effective.

The villagers of the Muang Phalane area welcomed the GM 30 task force as heroes and spoiled them with gifts of food, Lao Lao (moonshine), and pretty girls. They also brought the gift of information. Usually the irregulars had prompt notification of enemy moves as far away as 10 or 15 kilometers. Villagers some distance from Muang Phalane would send information by a relay of runners who passed the information by word-of-mouth to the runner in the next village. In mid-April, villager information placed two NVA battalions in an assembly area along a stream south of Phalane. T-28's struck the position the same day, and that night ██████████ hit it twice with firefight simulators. The next morning, two companies of BG 301 approached the position, and saw fires and smoke.

Thinking they had found the NVA cooking breakfast, the irregulars fired off a magazine apiece and advanced. They found piles of field equipment and medical supplies burning in an empty position, with many tracks heading southeastward. The enemy had cut about 90 bamboo poles on the site which the irregulars hoped were to carry dead and wounded. The combination of good information and timely air strikes worked well several times, and the irregulars began to talk about the possibility of holding Phalane until the rains came in July.

What was really needed was a spoiling attack to the east, to disrupt enemy preparations for the big attack they were virtually obliged to make. But no additional troops could be spared, and GM 30 had to be satisfied with the two battalions it already had in the field. Colonel Touane continued his patrols and ambushes, and threw out limited sweeps outside his eight-kilometer radius.

After a small patrol action near Ban Kengchip, five kilometers north of Phalane, villagers told a company of BG 302 that their opponents had been Pathet Lao troops of the 27th Ekarath (Regional) company. Savannakhet units had encountered the 27th again and again over the years, and had always found it to be a nuisance but a pushover in a fair fight. [REDACTED] broke into a Savannakhet FAR office on a Sunday afternoon and mimeographed 500 copies of an open letter to the 27th Ekarath. The letter offered amnesty and jobs with the irregulars, and was distributed in villages, left alongside trails, and conspicuously hung on bushes. There was one taker: a squad leader who wanted to bring his eight men to join the irregulars. But first, he wanted to talk to his brother, who was a lieutenant in BG 306, another of GM's four battalions. BG 306 was just finishing a retraining cycle outside of Savannakhet, and the brother was duly sent, with a four-man bodyguard, to talk the 27th into crossing the line. But he never found them.

A 27th Ekarath soldier (who hadn't seen the letter) later walked into Phalane, and said that the 27th had just been withdrawn from the Kengchip area and sent east to help prepare for "the big attack." He also said that he was 20 years old, had been a PL soldier since he was 13, had never been paid, and was damned sick of it. After release from the interrogation center, he joined GM 30 and began drawing his pay on schedule.

Villagers continued to visit GM 30's "official" command post in the USAID dispensary building. (After the villagers left, in time to walk home before dark, the GM 30 staff would retire to the real command post 600 meters north of town.) During one of the gossip sessions, villagers from Ban Klong, four kilometers southwest of town, described some enemy misbehavior in the village wat (pagoda) during the NVA occupation just ended. Two Pho Bans (village chiefs) from the Klong area volunteered to tell the story on the radio. A chopper picked them up and flew them to Savannakhet, where they taped a 45-minute interview. They described how the NVA had burned wooden images of Buddha for firewood, how they had dipped bronze Buddhas in paint of various colors and hung them upside down in trees, how they used the holy books for toilet paper. All in all, pretty strong stuff, particularly as it was broadcast, and hopefully replayed, on the eve of the world Buddhist conference in Ceylon. The two old men were wine and dined under the electric lights of Savannakhet, and then taken home by chopper.

In addition to gossiping visits, the villagers paid several more formal calls on GM 30. On the occasion of Phi Mai (Lao New Year) they staged a full-scale bacci (a fairly alcoholic semi-religious ceremony). In attendance was a former

informant of Colonel Touane's, who hated Americans and Vietnamese alike, and who was also the PL-appointed Pho Ban of Ban Kengxai, 12 kilometers south of Muang Phalane. He thought that Colonel Touane ought to know that the North Vietnamese had sent a white-haired general, also named Tuan, to recapture Muang Phalane.

#### *The Enemy Counterattack*

The Kengxai Pho Ban described a rally at which General Tuan said that the NVA had lost a lot of men and a lot of face at Phalane, and that he was coming with a large enough force to take it back, or else he wouldn't go back to North Vietnam himself. The Pho Ban filled in some other details, and accepted a gift of five sacks of salt for his people. As it turned out, the Pho Ban's information was good: General Tuan used six identified infantry battalions, an anti-aircraft battalion, and other attachments, and he did indeed take Phalane back.

On 28 April, BG 306 finally was made available to reinforce the two battalions in Phalane. On 29 April, the battalion was mustered and equipped, but the trucks failed to appear. On 30 April, it disembarked west of Phalane and started walking to Ban Klong to join GM 30. It ran into an enemy force that night, and recoiled with five dead and 11 wounded. At about the same time, outposts of BG 301 and 302 reported enemy contact, and "the big attack" was under way. BG 306 was just one day too late and wouldn't be any help.

By 6 a.m. on 1 May, all five major outposts of BG 301 and 302 were engaged. Captain Inthesorn's company (Co. 2, BG 301) at Bung Thale and Ban Napho, five kilometers southeast of Phalane, found itself surrounded and heavily pressured. Company 3, BG 301, left its position south of the east end of the old metal bridge and counterattacked to spring Company 2 free. Company 3 then returned to its old position near the bridge, and Company 2 dug in just to the south of them. On 2 May, an NVA battalion advanced on them across those same open paddy fields. They came in parade ground formation, at sling arms, with three hand-held bull horns blaring. Three T-28's and a flight of US F-4's caught them in the fields and laid CBU bomblets directly on them. Not many reached the safety of the ditches along Route 9. A later intercept identified this unit as the 2nd NVA battalion, and said that the survivors had "bad morale and would have to be re-educated."

With the 2nd battalion laid to rest, the T-28's and F-4's wheeled for home. They were no more than out of sight when another battalion emerged from the tree line and came across the paddy field. By sundown on 2 May, both Companies 2 and 3 of BG 301 were surrounded again. Their perimeters were small, and ground fire was intense. Resupply aircraft tried to drop supplies to them with ground-impact-delay parachutes, but half of the 'chutes failed, and all but one of the rest missed and went to the enemy.

During the night of 1 May, the NVA had moved large quantities of anti-aircraft guns into the area with the infantry units, and on 2 May these guns were to reap a harvest unprecedented in Savannakhet irregular operations.

During the day four Lao T-28's and one U.S. F-4 were hit. One T-28 made one final pass at the enemy in the paddy field. His guns were empty, and he said that he would try to bluff the remaining enemy into the ditches. He must also have been curious about the results of his previous runs because his last transmission was a count of enemy dead. "There's more than a hundred of them lying there!" He was hit by a 37MM round and fell burning west of Ban Klong. A BG 306 patrol recovered his remains later in the day. Of the other T-28's, one reached Savannakhet streaming oil, another landed safely at Seno, and the third

belled in on the old Phalane Southwest airstrip, 12 kilometers southwest of the battlefield. An Air America chopper picked up the pilot, but the enemy burned the aircraft during the night. The USAF F-4 was hit by a 23MM while on a CBU run against the tree line east of the big rice paddy. He landed safely in Thailand with one wing afire.

#### *The Breakout Begins*

North of Phalane, Company 3 of BG 302 moved eastward to Ban Sopou, four kilometers due north of Phalane, where one of its platoons was pinned down. The company managed to extricate its platoon, but then found that its way south to the main position was blocked by about one enemy battalion. The next day, 3 May, Colonel Touane ordered Company 3 to break out to the northwest, and start for Dong Hene.

Meanwhile, south of town, 3 May found Companies 2 and 3 of BG 301 in real difficulty. The companies were separated, and each was surrounded. When Touane ordered them to rejoin the main position, Company 2 was able to break free and cross the Se Sang Soi, but found its way north blocked by about 200 NVA dug in around the school yard. Touane then ordered Inthesorn to take Company 2 back across the river and try to free Company 3. Inthesorn made his try at a bend in the river just south of town, and was beaten back. At that point Touane ordered Company 2 to make for Dong Hene. Later in the day, the [REDACTED] located Inthesorn west of Ban Klong. He asked for orders, and the [REDACTED] sent him north to Route 9 with instructions to hold the back door open.

Company 3 was running out of ammunition and not making any headway towards a breakout. At 11 a.m., 3 May, their last transmission was: "We're fighting hand to hand. No ammunition. We will call you back later." They never called back. About 15 men escaped, seven of whom made it back to safety. In all, 62 men of Company 3 were killed or captured on the position.

During the morning of 3 May, when it was needed most, tactical air support dried up and stopped. USAF aircraft were busy farther east over the Trail, and the four remaining T-28's in Savannakhet took the morning off while the pilots attended a memorial service for the pilot killed the day before. On the night of 2 May, the Air Attaché in Vientiane had ruled that the skies over Phalane were too hostile for the O-1 spotter aircraft, and there was a hitch in the rules that forbade the American Forward Air Controllers from working from a T-28. By the afternoon, things had been ironed out, and the fighters came back to work.

At the GM 30 command post, 600 meters north of town, there was a goodly amount of incoming fire but the enemy still had not made a ground attack. Most of the incoming fire was absorbed by a highly conspicuous dummy CP made of parachute tents on the bank of the river. The enemy poured fire into these empty tents, and never really zeroed in on the real CP until after it had been evacuated. There had been a small firebase 400 meters southwest of the CP, but it had been overrun on the morning of 3 May. Somchan, the former PL lieutenant, and an irregular master sergeant were captured there. Captain Southeng, commander of Company 1, BG 301, had been cut off there as well, but Southeng's brother had brought a platoon to his aid, getting wounded in the process.

At 1400, 3 May, it still appeared to Touane that the situation could be saved. Most of the outposts had come in, or escaped to the west, or had been written off. BG 306 was lost and panicky, but was nearby and maybe could be found and brought into the main perimeter. Touane told BG 306 to fire one round of M-79, so he could guide them toward the CP. BG 306 fired the round

(they were two kilometers to the north), and immediately came under heavy mortar and recoilless rifle fire. BG 306 broke and dissolved completely, and there were no more serious thoughts of repelling the attack, except—perhaps—in the mind of the GM deputy, Major Vath. At 1600, the GM [REDACTED] overhead raised Vath on the radio.

"If I can get an air strike . . ."

"Vath, what do you think?"

"Ah, well, sir," Vath answered. "I would like to try just one more time. If I can get an air strike on those guys in the school yard . . ."

"Vath, my good old friend, get out of there. You can come out with honor now. Never mind the school yard. Come home."

"Well, sir, I'll go see what the Colonel says."

There would be no strikes on any school yards. The rules of engagement forbade an air strike anywhere near a structure of any kind, and there definitely would be no air strikes on that school yard. And there weren't.

At that moment, there were three Porter aircraft overhead, all loaded with ammunition. T-28's were supposed to have covered them while they dropped their supplies into the position, but the T-28's had come and found something to bomb (not the school yard), and had flown away. The three civilian Porter pilots, one American and two Thai, discussed the situation by radio in English. Then Captain Lickett broke into Thai, and told Captain Mi: "Screw it. They need this stuff." Mi said, "OK." And they dived through the ground fire and put all four parachutes directly on the position.

[REDACTED], sitting beside the American pilot, said, "OK. Let's go drop." "Where are the T-28's?" was the answer, and they carried their ammo back to Savannakhet. A few days later, Captains Lickett and Mi found bottles of good Scotch whiskey in their lockers.

The NVA made three heavy ground attacks on the CP position during the afternoon, each preceded by a harangue on a bullhorn. The NVA called the GM 30 officers by name, urging them to surrender or be killed. As Touane told the story later, some irregular troops in the line shouted back: "Bo mi ban-ha! No problem!" The bullhorn answered, "OK. Here we come!"

The people on the CP began preparing to slip away, intending to make their break at 8 p.m. At 6 p.m., a very heavy attack fell upon the CP, supported by 82-millimeter mortars, 75-mm. recoilless rifles, and 12 B-40 rocket launchers firing in salvo. The 12.7-mm. anti-aircraft guns around the perimeter depressed their muzzles and raked the position, but fired too high to do any real damage. The attacking NVA took casualties from their own supporting fire, and the irregulars could hear them cursing their gunners. The irregulars had plenty of ammunition, thanks to Lickett and Mi, but they just couldn't stop this attack.

The CP force broke out in three parties. Captain Southeng, carrying his wounded brother, led his company. Major Mouy led another group, and Colonel Touane led a third. As Southeng left the perimeter, he was shot through both legs and fell to the ground with his brother. Survivors later reported seeing Southeng pull the pin on a grenade and hold it, destroying himself and his brother, and knocking down several converging NVA troops. Mouy was knocked down by a B-40 round, and reported killed. He showed up at Inthesorn's "back door" position at noon the next day, exhausted and scratched up, with his trouser legs full of holes from the B-40 fragments.

As the irregulars fled, NVA troops swarmed over the position, but their supporting fires did not lift. The irregulars could hear them, still cursing their



gunners, as their own rounds dropped among them. In the rapidly falling darkness, the irregulars were able to mingle with the enemy. They crossed three separate skirmish lines. Most of the enemy troops held their fire, uncertain of their targets. Civilian Operations Assistant Som said that he jumped over a foxhole and a crouching enemy soldier. The man shouted but did not fire. At this point, Som dropped his knapsack full of captured documents, and ran a little faster.

There were many enemy bodies along the escape route, some of them at least two days old. Enemy weapons were scattered about the field, but there were no wounded on the ground.

By noon on 4 May, most of the survivors had passed through Inthesorn's position, and Major Mouy had been accounted for. Air America choppers landed along Route 9, picked up the wounded, and tried to pick up stragglers. The chopper pilots later said that they were surprised by many of the unwounded who refused rides, telling the flight mechanics that the choppers were for wounded, and they could walk very well, thank you. The choppers were able to pick up Inthesorn and the remaining 17 men of Company 2, BG 301. As he disembarked at Dong Hene, Inthesorn flashed his cocky grin and shouted [REDACTED] that "Company two is Number One!"

In the days that followed, GM 30 men continued to trickle back. On 5 May Somchan, the former PL, walked into Dong Hene. He and the master sergeant had been tied up on the firebase, and marched away guarded by a wounded NVA who had lost an eye and whose weapon was empty. The sergeant refused to try an escape, but Somchan broke away and hid for three hours while he worked his ropes loose. He was caught again on the bank of a stream, and claimed he was a farmer. One of the NVA said that they were looking for a fat guy anyway, and that Somchan was too skinny. They turned him loose, and he started walking west.

It is hard to say what had been accomplished by it all. General Tuan had Phalane. He had probably paid more for it than he intended, but he did, after all, have it. Colonel Touane's GM was a shambles, but was thoroughly pleased with itself. The NVA eventually made their grab for Dong Hene, but too late in the dry season to consolidate before they were washed away by the rains. Probably those five weeks in Phalane had made the difference. Maybe five weeks were just long enough.