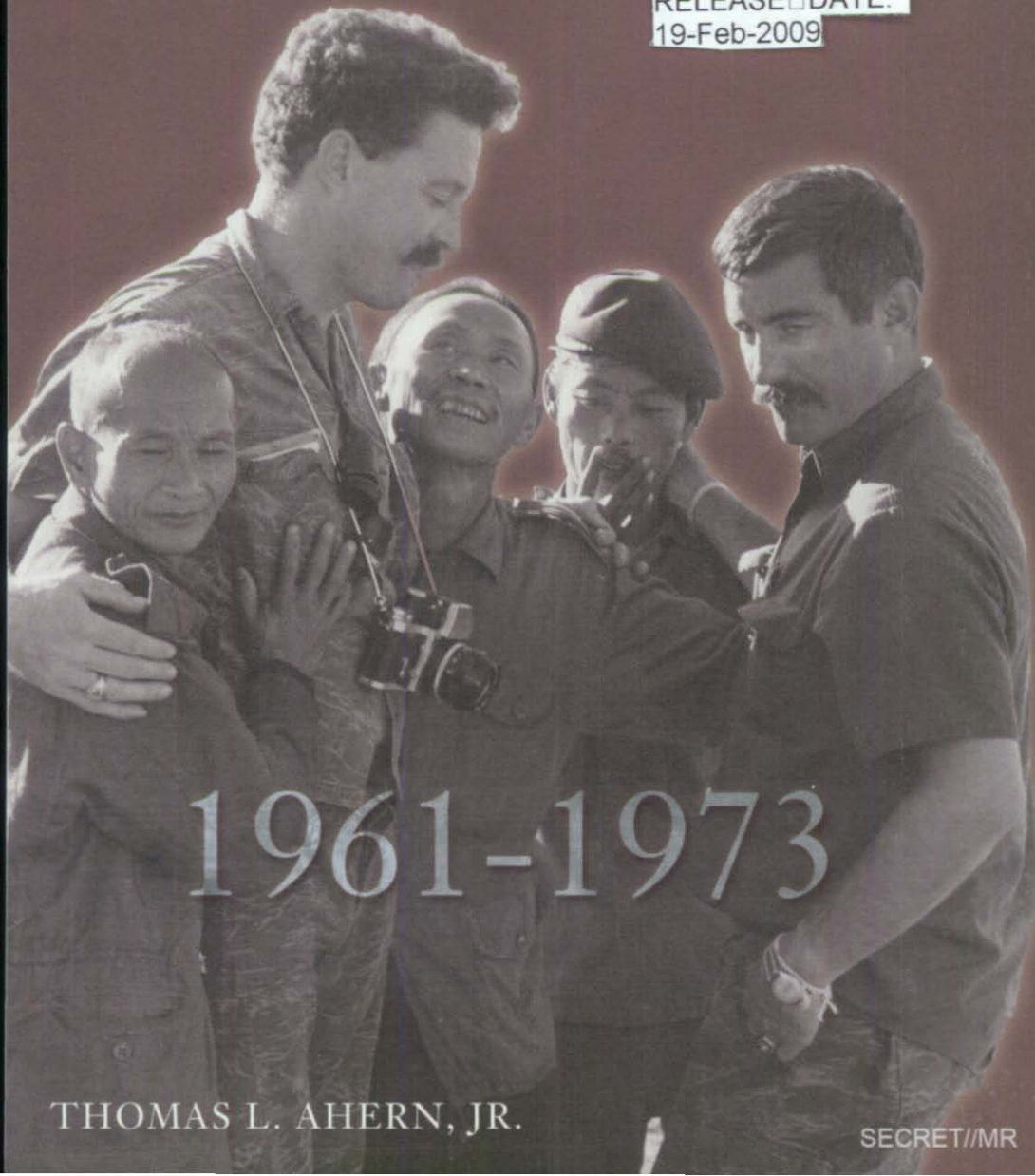


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UNDERCOVER ARMIES

CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos

APPROVED FOR
RELEASE DATE:
19-Feb-2009



1961-1973

THOMAS L. AHERN, JR.

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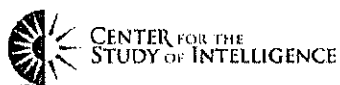
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UNDERCOVER ARMIES:
CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos
1961-1973

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.
CIA History Staff



Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC
2006

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~~SECRET//MR~~**ABBREVIATIONS**

BG	<i>Bataillon Guerrilla</i> , the renamed SGU battalion
CASI	Continental Air Services International
CAT	Civil Air Transport, the Taiwan-based airline that grew out of Gen. Claire Chennault's "Flying Tigers"
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific of US armed forces
CDNI	Committee for the Defense of the National Interest, an informal association of anticommunist Lao political and military leaders
COS	Chief of Station
DDP	Deputy Director for Plans
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAR	<i>Forces Armées Royales</i> (Royal [Laotian] Armed Forces)
Helio	Helio-Courier, a single-engine, fixed-wing STOL aircraft
ICC	International Control Commission
KMT	Kuomintang, the political party of Gen. Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalists
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NLHS	Neo Lao Hak Sat, the political front of the communist Pathet Lao

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NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
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PEO	Program Evaluation Office of the US Operations Mission in Vientiane
PGNU	Provisional Government of National Union
RLG	Royal Laotian Government
RTA	Royal Thai Army
SEACORD	Southeast Asia Coordination Committee, composed of the MACV commander and the US ambassadors to South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit
SNIE	Special National Intelligence Estimate
SOG	Special Operations Group, a MACV element staffed by the US Army Special Forces
SOT	Special Operations Team
STOL	Short-takeoff-and-landing
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USOM	United States Operations Mission, a field office of the Agency for International Development
WSAG	Washington Special Action Group, the interagency body charged with oversight of covert action

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INTRODUCTION

The Cork in the Bottle

The day before his inauguration as president of the United States, John F. Kennedy met President Dwight D. Eisenhower and several cabinet officers at the White House. Kennedy had solicited the meeting, partly for cosmetic reasons—"reassuring the public as to the harmony of the transition"—but also because he was, in his own words, "anxious to get some commitment from the outgoing administration as to how they would deal with Laos." Receiving Kennedy in the Cabinet Room on 19 January 1961, Eisenhower and his advisers had more to say about the tiny country's strategic importance than about specific means of keeping the "cork in the bottle," as they put it, to prevent communist dominion over most of the Far East.¹

The Western-oriented Royal Laotian Government (RLG) was threatened both by an army mutiny and by a North Vietnamese-sponsored communist insurgent movement, the Pathet Lao. The mutinous RLG units were the army's best, certainly capable of taking on the best of the dissident forces. But most of the army reflected the lethargy of its officer corps, which was drawn from the colonial elite that had served the French, and now lacked either the energy or the legitimacy for effective leadership.

Well aware of its own military impotence, the RLG feared that asking the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to intercede would only provoke further North Vietnamese incursions. Eisenhower recognized Laotian anxiety, but thought that if the country fell to the communists, "it would bring unbelievable pressure to bear on Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam." He considered Laos so important that, in the words of one Kennedy adviser, "If it reached the stage where we could not persuade others to act with us, then he would be willing, *as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally.*"²

It seems that Kennedy had to wait until he took office to learn of the airlift of weapons and equipment already on its way to a tiny village perched on one

¹ Memoranda by participants at the meeting, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, The Laos Crisis* (hereafter cited as *FRUS 1961-1963*), 19-25

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of the mountains covering northern Laos. In fact, the departing administration had already come upon a partial solution to the dilemma posed by its twin objectives, keeping the "cork in the bottle" while avoiding the risks of overt military intervention. Kennedy now accepted the Eisenhower formula: If neither the RLG nor America's SEATO partners wanted joint action, Washington would find surrogates to take up this latest challenge by the Sino-Soviet axis.

Two such surrogates appeared in the conjunction of an Iron Age tribe, then known to outsiders as the Meo, and [redacted]

[redacted] The Meo, a bitterly anti-Vietnamese mountain people, had migrated from Yunnan Province in southern China. Numbering perhaps 500,000 in Laos, they became the core of an irregular force that fought the North Vietnamese Army until February 1973, when a Laotian cease-fire followed the agreement with Hanoi on terms to end the war in South Vietnam. Under their charismatic, mercurial leader Vang Pao, the Meo—more properly known as the Hmong—evolved from a hit-and-run guerrilla outfit into light infantry operating in regimental strength.³ [redacted]

² Ibid., 25. Emphasis in original. Secretary of Defense McNamara, in a note to Kennedy on 24 January, recalled Eisenhower as having "advised against unilateral action by the United States in connection with Laos." (See *FRUS 1961-1963*, 41.) More generally, this episode illustrates how complicated and elusive the truth can be even about an apparently straightforward point of fact. Kennedy, too, recalled the president as having favored military intervention, and so did Dean Rusk. Even more indeterminate is what Eisenhower's words, whatever they were, signaled about what he would have done were he not leaving office. Richard Nixon, then his vice president, noted how the president's frequent "enthusias[m] about half-baked ideas in the discussion stage" contrasted with his decisionmaking style, that of the "coldest, most unemotional and analytical man in the world." (Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy About Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 [September 1992].) [redacted]

³ [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

The Agency initially aimed its paramilitary activity in Laos at saving that country from domination by North Vietnam and by Hanoi's own Laotian surrogate, the Pathet Lao. Indeed, the preservation of a noncommunist Laos remained an American objective until the collapse of South Vietnam rendered the question moot in May 1975. But the emphasis changed over time. Until 1964, the main point of contention arose from North Vietnam's failure to withdraw any significant forces from Laos, while US-supported military programs there sought to resist Hanoi's encroachments. [REDACTED]

As the United States committed airpower to South Vietnam in 1964, and then ground troops in 1965, American policymakers increasingly saw Laos as a sideshow to the larger struggle between Saigon and Hanoi. In this secondary theater of operations, the antagonists' strategic positions reversed the situation found in Vietnam. In South Vietnam, mobile Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units bedeviled Saigon's road-bound heavy infantry, while in Laos, Hmong irregulars flitted over mountain trails or moved by air to occupy key high ground and to harass Hanoi's tanks and artillery. This reversal of roles also reversed the seasonal alternation of tactical advantage in Laos. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) advanced during the dry season, usually early November to late May, and gave ground to Hmong operations when the rains washed out the primitive road system.⁵ [REDACTED]

Expanded Hmong forces [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] defended Hmong territory in the mountains of the northeast and diverted substantial North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Meanwhile, with the creation of ethnic Lao guerrilla battalions in the Laotian Panhandle, CIA began in 1968 to contest Hanoi's use of Laotian territory as a supply route to South Vietnam and Cambodia. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The CIA station in Vientiane functioned as the ambassador's executive agent for the conduct of the war. Its role stemmed from reluctance in both

⁴ Between 1996 and 2000, Bill Lair provided voluminous information, in the form of interviews and written notes, on his own [REDACTED] participation in the war in Laos. Subsequent references to this material cite "Bill Lair." [REDACTED]

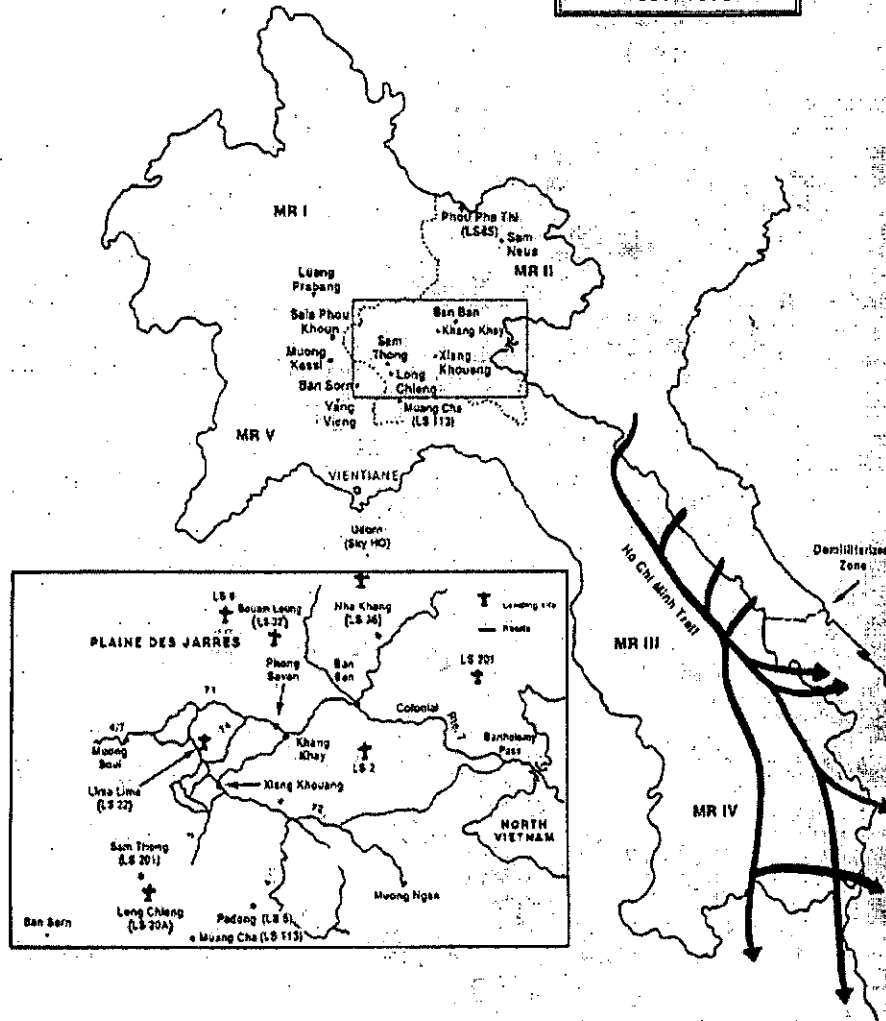
⁵ The official name of Hanoi's army is the People's Army of Vietnam. The term was seldom used by US officials during the war, and this volume follows their practice of referring to it as the NVA. [REDACTED]

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**Laos: The Ground War
1961-1975**



Laos ground war, 1961-75.

Washington and Vientiane to end Laotian neutrality. This would have abrogated the 1962 Geneva Agreements, which prohibited all foreign powers but the French from maintaining a military presence in Laos. Overtly committing US combat forces or even military advisers would imperil the basis for a negotiated peace, something the Kennedy administration shrank from doing. The upshot was that, in addition to deploying its own paramilitary resources, CIA often found itself mediating between the Vientiane embassy and MACV in Saigon. In this capacity, it worked to preserve the ambassador's authority

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over covert Laotian operations while also trying to get MACV to support them, especially with combat air. []

These efforts were generally successful, though occasionally only with White House intervention. The US Air Force and Navy provided indispensable air support to the irregulars, who bore most of the burden of ground combat in Laos. Together, they compensated for the lassitude and incompetence, born of weak, corrupt leadership, of the government's regular army, the *Forces Armées Royales (FAR)*. When large-scale operations ended with the cease-fire of February 1973, the Royal Laotian Government controlled nearly as much of its territory as it had in 1962, at the time of the Geneva Agreements. Irregulars in the north had tied down as many as two divisions of Hanoi's troops while those in the Panhandle had supplemented massive US Air Force bombing with vigorous, if brief, forays into the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. []

The 1973 status quo in Laos survived until the fall of Saigon in May 1975, which brought collapse also in Vientiane and in Phnom Penh. But ultimate failure, in Laos at least, is an inadequate criterion by which to judge the quality of the effort devoted to a lost cause. CIA's performance there was certainly not without flaws, but the story of the "secret war" in Laos reveals an admirable record of flexible, economical management and sound tactical judgment. An even more remarkable aspect of that record is the Agency's steady, pragmatic accommodation of cultural sensitivities and of amorphous, competitive command relationships—Laotian, [] and American. Finally—though doubtless important only to those who were there—the program became for nearly all its CIA participants the adventure of their professional lives.⁷ []

⁷ [] who ran one of the Panhandle programs, expressed the consensus: An entry-level officer found it "pretty heady stuff" to be out at the end of the line in Laos. He was his own boss, with his own airplane, and had cargo aircraft and helicopters on call to support the thousand-odd irregulars who depended on him for everything—pay, food and supplies, training, ordnance, communications, and tactical direction. []

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SELECTED MAPS

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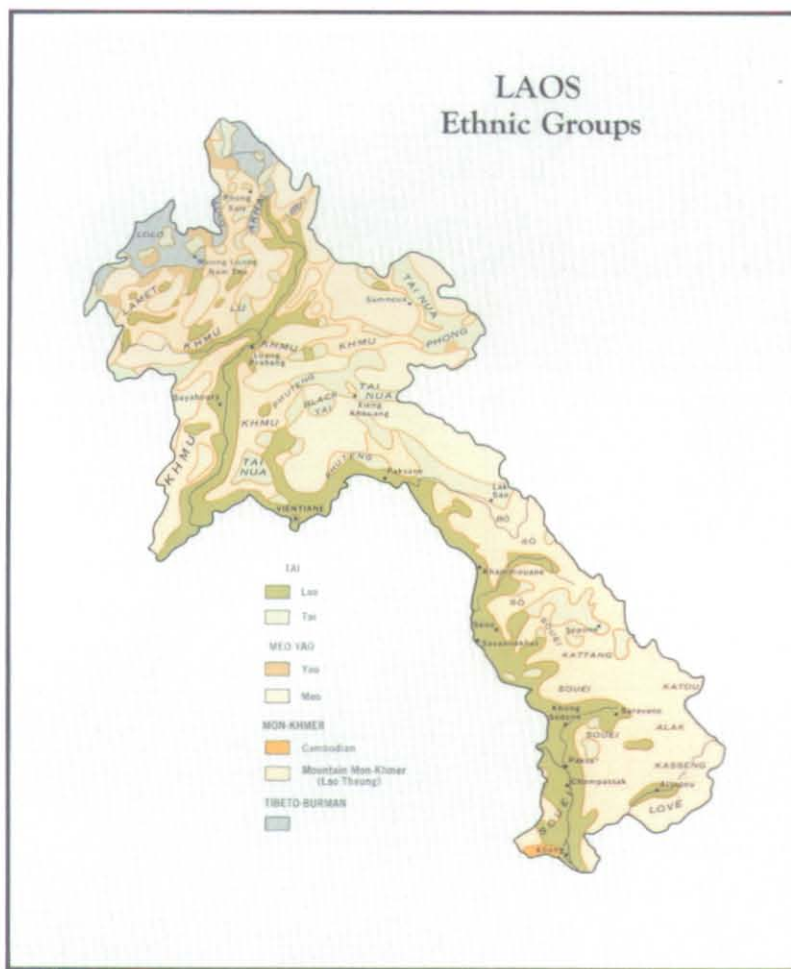
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Laos topographical map.

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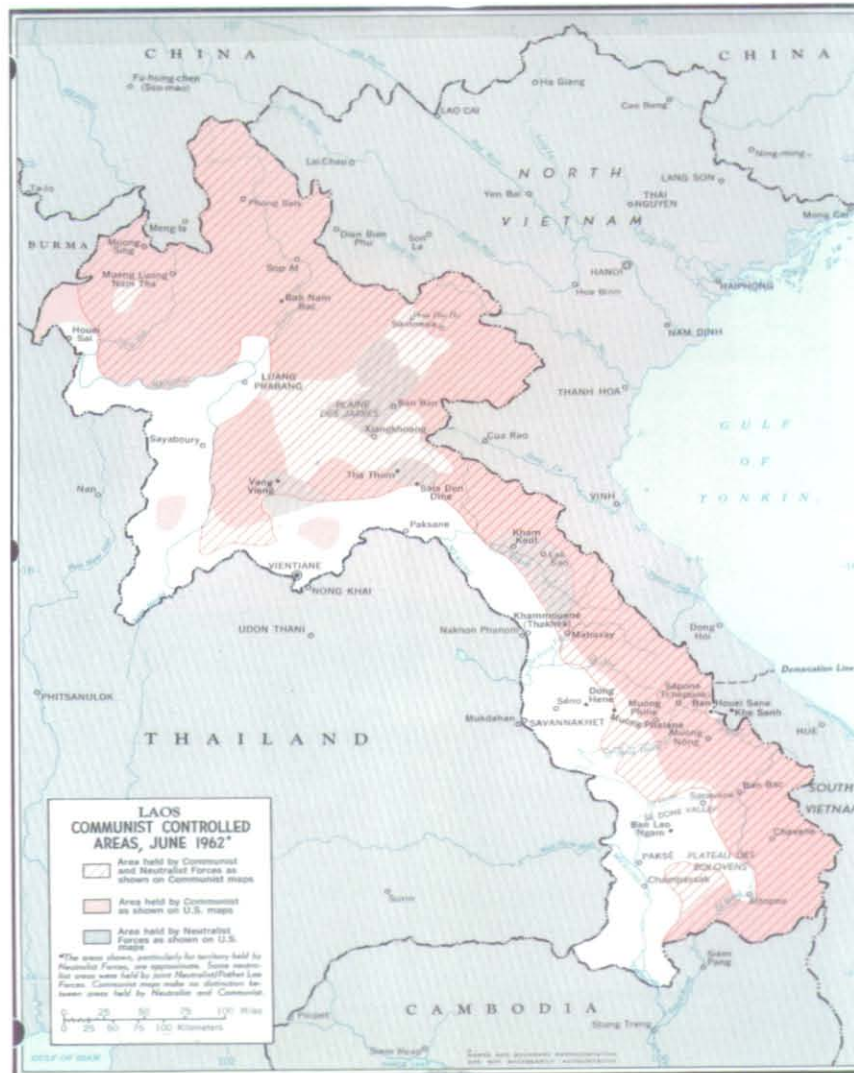
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Distribution of ethnic groups in Laos, 1967

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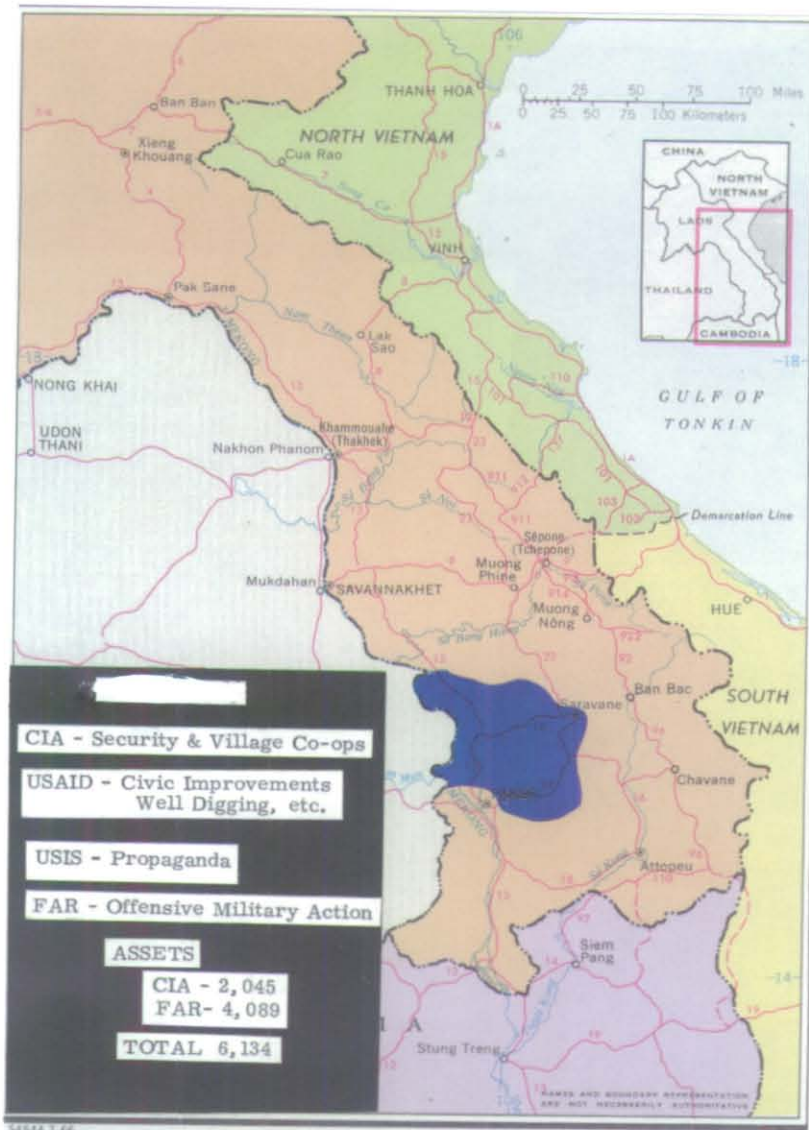
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Communist-controlled areas in Laos, 1962

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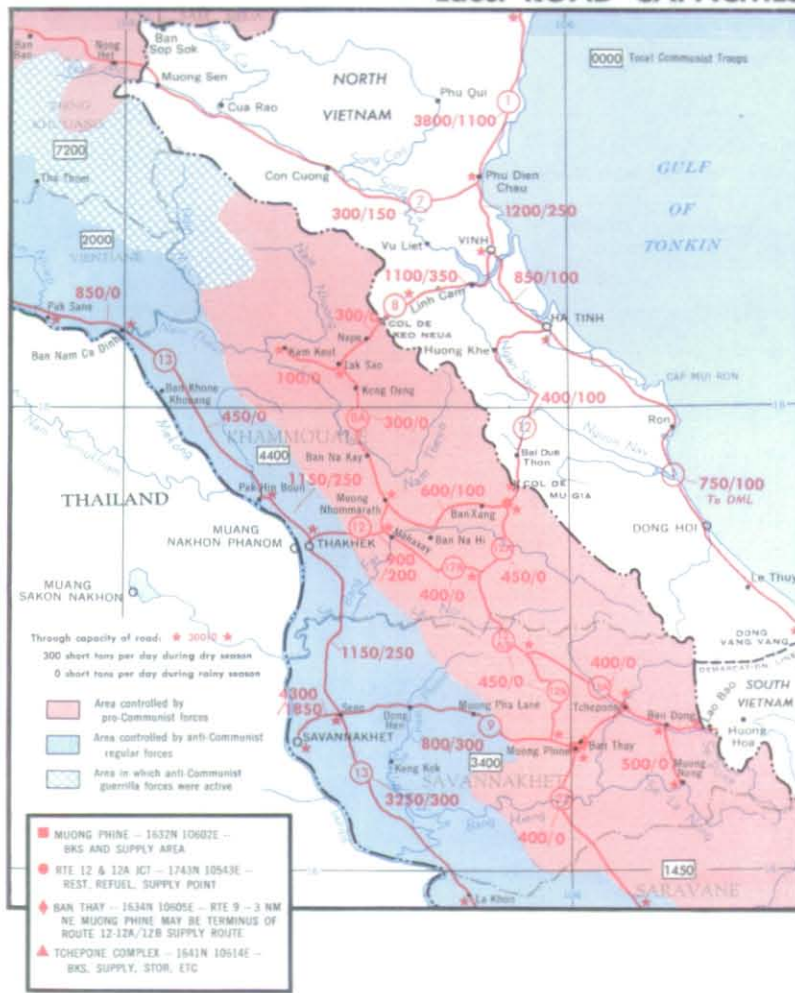


Southern Laos village security program, mid-1966

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Laos: ROAD CAPACITIES



Communist-controlled roads, c. May 1964

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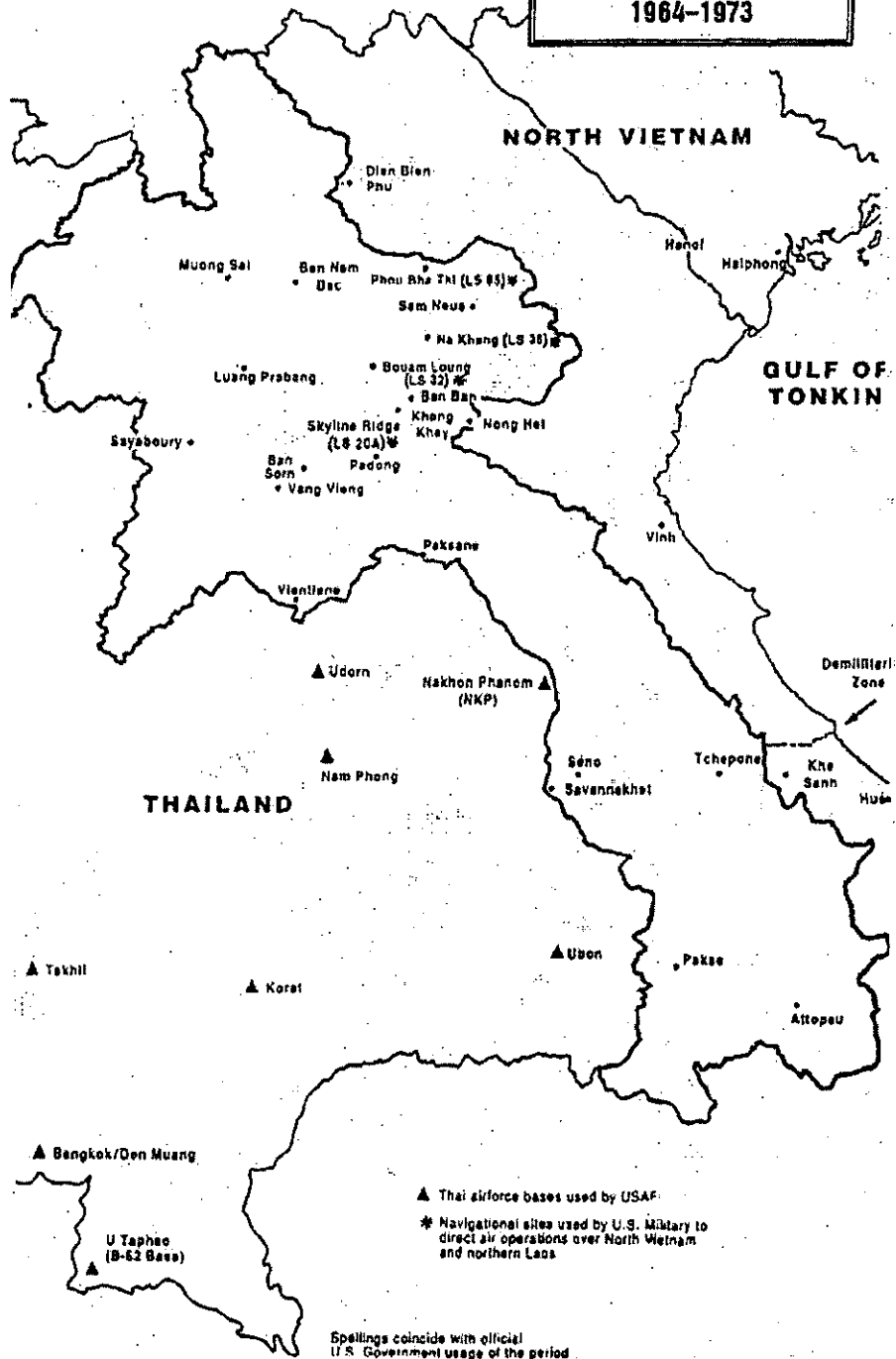


Principal features of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, early 1972

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**Laos: The Air War
1964-1973**

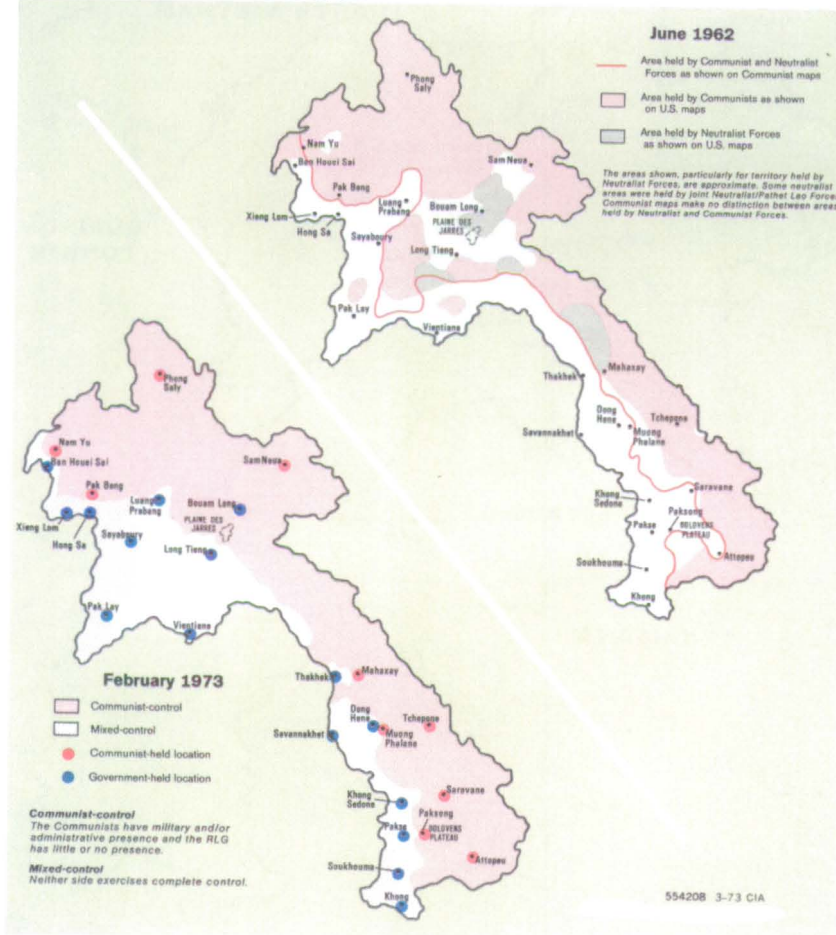


Support facilities for combat air operations over Laos and North Vietnam

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LAOS: Communist Controlled Areas



Comparison of controlled areas, 1962 vs. 1973

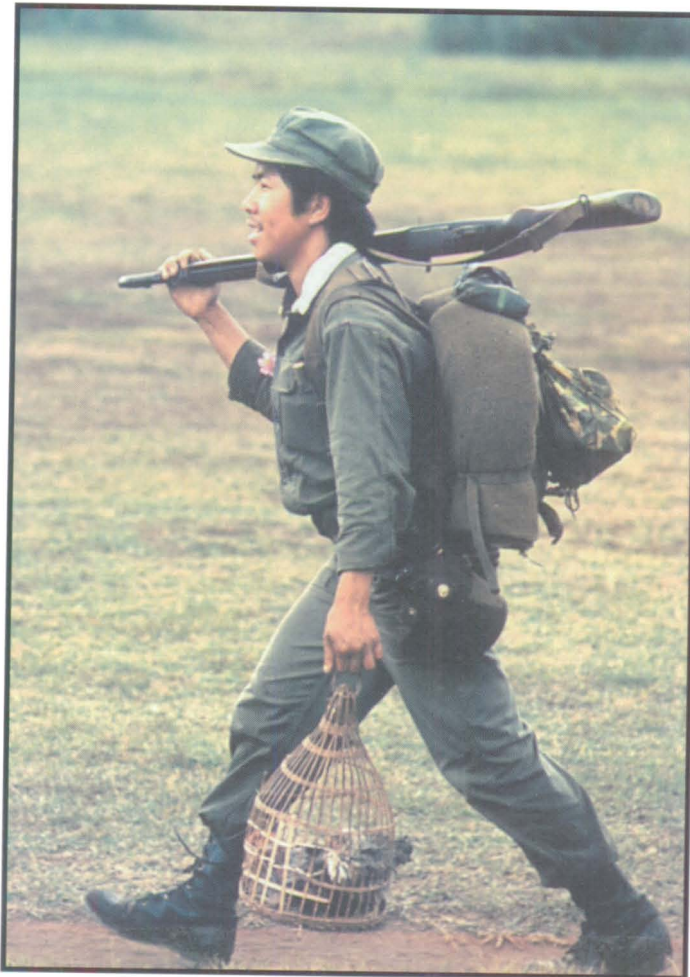
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PROLOGUE



Despite a chronic, uneasy sense of the fragility of their creation, US policy-makers saw the first five years of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime as an unqualified success. North Vietnamese invasion had been deterred, and Diem was consolidating his control of the South Vietnamese countryside. The little kingdom of Laos mattered only as a potential domino, threatening its neighbors only in the event of North Vietnamese or communist Chinese invasion or subversion.

In January 1960, what might be called the first Tet offensive challenged these illusions when coordinated Viet Cong attacks on rural outposts began a process of whittling away at Diem's hold on the countryside. By this time, in Laos, a government far weaker than Diem's was losing ground to the communist Pathet Lao. In August 1960, the army's best combat unit mutinied. The coup created a base of military support for neutralist elements led by Prince Souvanna Phouma and set the stage for the conflict that followed.

From 1955 until the 1960 coup, CIA covert action in Laos had concentrated on the search for enlightened elements within the traditional elite that it could support in a process of political modernization. This effort, like the one in South Vietnam, aimed at developing leadership whose genuine nationalism would not prevent it from accepting Agency guidance as it set out to win the consent of the governed. The 1960 coup nullified these efforts, and CIA, along with the rest of the US foreign policy establishment, now devoted itself to supporting military resistance to the threat of a communist takeover.

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CHAPTER ONE

Everybody's Pawn

Dien Bien Phu, where Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh defeated the French Expeditionary Force in May 1954, lies only a few miles from Vietnam's border with northeastern Laos. Once a substantial power on the Indochinese peninsula, the Kingdom of Laos collapsed in the 18th century, splintering into three petty kingdoms that survived by appeasing their stronger Vietnamese and Thai neighbors. The French reassembled the country when they imposed a protectorate in 1893 and ruled it until 1950, when they gave it independence more nominal than real. At the end of the First Indochina War, four years later, the tiny country had not ruled itself in more than 200 years.¹

By mid-1954, the Laotian communist front, the Pathet Lao, with help from Hanoi, had taken over de facto control of the two northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua.² Backed and essentially controlled by the Viet Minh, the Pathet Lao soon dominated parts of other provinces as well. There were as yet few signs of tension between the Soviets and the Chinese, and international communism still loomed as an alarming ideological specter, monolithic and full of revolutionary fervor. From this perspective, vulnerable Laos represented a potential "domino," which, if toppled by either North Vietnam or the People's Republic of China, could fall on any of its four non-communist neighbors.³

The Geneva Accords of July 1954, which accepted Viet Minh control of North Vietnam, neutralized Laos under a regime to be monitored by an International Control Commission (ICC). The United States refused to sign the accords, which it regarded as unduly accommodating to the communists, but it promised to observe them and to help punish anyone who did not.⁴

¹ Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, entry on Laos.

² Sam Neua was also known as Houa Phan. Contemporary transliterations are Phong Sali and Hua Phan.

³ Two authorities on Laotian politics in the 1950s and 1960s are Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, and Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos since 1954*.

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An early test of the neutrality formula came when the intransigent Pathet Lao regrouped its forces in the north, adding overt military occupation to its political control of Phong Saly and Sam Neua. The Laotian cabinet, the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma among its members, unanimously requested Western military intervention to recover the two provinces. The French and the British "raised such a howl," as a Senate staff report put it, that the secretary of state John Foster Dulles declined to comply. Nevertheless, although ruling out direct intervention, Washington now decided on a major effort to turn Laos into a buffer, confining the communists to the mountains of the north while a friendly government controlled the Mekong Valley borders with Thailand and Cambodia.⁵ []

This effort took the form of a military assistance and advisory program that circumvented the provisions of the Geneva Accords prohibiting any foreign military presence other than a residual French mission. Called the Program Evaluation Office (PEO) and nominally a part of the economic aid program, it surreptitiously equipped and trained regular units of the *Forces Armées Royales*. [] in these early years, operated more in the political arena, concentrating on covert action designed to popularize the Vientiane government. But it kept a weather eye out for opportunities in the paramilitary sphere, and in 1955 had already considered clandestine support to the Hmong, mountain tribesmen previously allied with the French against the Viet Minh.⁶ []

[]
[] After some success with harassment operations in Pathet Lao-controlled Phong Saly and Sam Neua Provinces, the program was suspended in November 1957 when new Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma reached a short-lived agreement with the Pathet Lao.⁷ []

4 []

5 []

Regarding pronunciation: the "ph" in a Laotian name or word approximates the hard "p" in English. Thus, Souvanna Phouma's last name is pronounced "Pooma." The "th" sound is also hard; "Thong" is pronounced "Tong." []

6 []

For a time, the Laotian military was known as the *Forces Armées Laotiennes* (FAL), but after 1960, it came to be referred to as the *Forces Armées Royales* (FAR). The latter term is used throughout this volume. []

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The deal would have restored the authority of the RLG in the two northern provinces in exchange for the admission of 1,500 Pathet Lao troops into the Royal Lao Army. But the presence of Souvanna's half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, in the Pathet Lao leadership did not suffice to allay mutual suspicion. When the arrangement collapsed, the indefatigable Souvanna tried another tack, proposing to set up diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and to accept Pathet Lao in the Vientiane government. US objections to this faded, in the absence of a workable replacement for Souvanna, who over the next year negotiated an arrangement with the Pathet Lao that called for a coalition government and an expanded National Assembly with 21 new seats.⁸

American acquiescence did not imply approval, but there was no alternative to trying to make the new arrangement work. In early 1958, assistant secretary of state Walter Robertson proposed to exploit CIA's flexibility with a "crash program of village-level political impact projects," designed to display both Vientiane's concern for its people and the "reality of American aid." The Agency responded with two programs, one to ensure an anticommunist parliamentary majority, and the other to resist increasing Pathet Lao military pressure.⁹

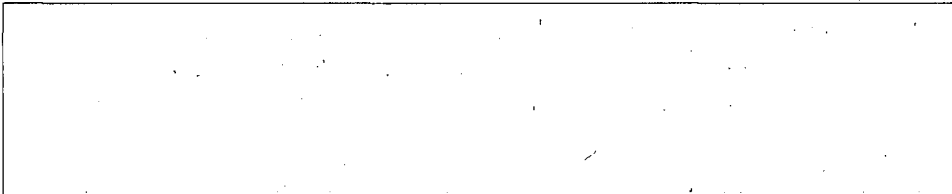
These efforts reflected CIA's core beliefs about Cold War strategy not only in Southeast Asia but generally in the postcolonial world. On the political side, the Agency thought it imperative for a threatened anticommunist government, typically dominated by a traditional elite, to establish its benevolent—even paternalistic—concern for the welfare of a predominantly rural population. The military aspect focused on small, mobile units designed to operate in enemy-held territory, challenging communist control and organizing civilian resistance. The two might be combined, using military resources in rural civic action programs designed to popularize the government and its army. ¹⁰

⁸
Both Thai and Lao are customarily addressed by their given names.

⁹
Letter from Deputy Under Secretary of State Dillon to the [DCI], 15 February 1958, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, Volume XVI, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos (hereafter cited as *FRUS 1958-1960*), 429.

¹⁰ CIA never promulgated a formal doctrine for operations in the Third World. The working assumptions that guided such activity in Laos and Vietnam were shaped first by the tradition of OSS support to partisan warfare in World War II and second by the experience of Edward Lansdale, an air force officer detailed to CIA, in the campaign against the Huk rebellion in the Philippines in the early 1950s. Agency practice in Third World conflict often featured a search for a charismatic leader who could mobilize his country's political and military resources to defeat the communists. Ed Lansdale recalled Allen Dulles's admonition, on sending him to Saigon, to "find another [Ramon] Magsaysay," the Filipino leader with whom Lansdale had worked to defeat the Huk insurgents.

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The communists' 1958 victory did not, however, reflect popular enthusiasm for the Pathet Lao. The government had undermined its own prospects by allowing several candidates to oppose the single Pathet Lao running in a given district. At the same time, the very connection between the RLG's sudden largesse and the electoral campaign seemed lost on some of its constituents. One defeated candidate berated a group of voters for their ingratitude, only to hear them complain, "You never told us we should vote for you."¹²

Meanwhile, at least initially, the paramilitary effort enjoyed better results. A joint effort with PEO, it began with so-called Scout Ranger teams formed from regular army personnel. While they contested Pathet Lao consolidation of the northern provinces, these evolved into FAR's 1st and 2nd Parachute Battalions. The most effective units in the army, they were as politically volatile as the government they served; one of them would spark the 1960 mutiny that led to the largest, most innovative program of irregular warfare ever conducted by CIA.¹³

A House Divided 

Called the Committee for the Defense of the National Interest (CDNI), it purported to represent a new spirit in Laotian politics, immune to corruption and independent of the family-based factions that treated the country as their private preserve. Although Phoui Sananikone, approved by Washington to succeed Souvanna, was himself a prominent member of one of these factions, he claimed to share the CDNI "young Turks'" commitment to transforming Laotian politics. More important to Washington, he and the CDNI supplied the ardent anticommunism that Souvanna seemed to lack.¹⁴

The new movement, however, did not command enough National Assembly votes to remove Souvanna, and Washington decided to intervene directly.

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under "centralized coordination," and all the witnesses interviewed by the team asserted North Vietnamese support for the campaign.¹⁸

Whatever Hanoi's role, the level of violence receded in September, giving the RLG and its allies a respite to try to deal with political turmoil in Vientiane. A year of special powers granted to Phoui in early 1959 was coming to an end, along with the term of the National Assembly. The Assembly's conservative majority wanted Phoui's special mandate prolonged, in order to avoid an election and the possible defeat of incumbent deputies. The CDNI, by contrast, wanted to challenge the leftists, and one of its most politically ambitious members, Col. Phoumi Nosavan, told American diplomats in early November that he had offered to run an election for Phoui, promising him, in State's words, a "tame Assembly."¹⁹

Impatient with the paralyzing factionalism of traditional Laotian politics, Phoumi proposed to follow electoral success with a "directed democracy," one that preserved a constitutional, parliamentary system while compensating for the limitations of "masses too ignorant for normal democracy." State saw the dangers of both the status quo and the authoritarian bent displayed by CDNI's impatient reformers. It accepted the need for a strong executive but worried that the young Turks might "kick over all constitutional traces and establish [a] quasi-dictatorial regime." How the Lao were to go about squaring this circle was left undefined.²⁰

One reason for this omission may well have been the disarray among US officials responsible for Laotian matters. The foreign affairs bureaucracy, with each department or agency promoting its own agenda while guarding its jurisdictional turf, paid little more than lip service to coordinating the farrago of political, economic, military, and psychological programs. Worse, the US Mission in Vientiane found itself working at cross-purposes. PEO and CIA supported the CDNI reformers while the ambassador—only nominally in charge of Mission elements from other US agencies—and the economic aid office backed Phoui Sananikone and his conservative allies.²¹

Phoumi Nosavan looked like the potential anticommunist strongman his country needed. In their view—shared by the military in PEO—only a complete RLG shakeup stood a chance of instilling in the RLG enough energy and discipline to compete with the

¹⁸ Editorial Note. *FRUS 1958-1960*, 649.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Telegram 970 From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 2 November 1959, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 645.

²⁰ State Telegram 970.

²¹ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1300, 8 November 1959, summarized in *FRUS 1958-1960*, 656-57.

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communists. Ambassador Smith, however, maintained that extending Phoui's mandate for a year would give the anticommunist elements time to coalesce into a coherent, progressive front. The Lao contenders saw and exploited this disarray for their respective partisan purposes.

In early November, Ambassador Smith relayed to State a complaint from Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone voicing his fear of a CDNI-army coup supported by CIA. Smith and new economic aid chief John Tobler then collaborated on a telegram that, among other things, judged Agency efforts to be undermining the Phoui government and US prestige in Laos. The situation, they thought, threatened to lead to the "most dangerous and potentially disastrous course of events" for the future of Laos.²²

The partisan zeal that drove relationships in Vientiane had never been echoed at Foggy Bottom or Langley. Accordingly, State assured Ambassador Smith of his authority over Mission subordinates; Smith was to "confine operational relationships with CDNI to appropriate operational measures fully coordinated by you." At the same time, State wanted Smith to understand Washington's view of the CDNI as a constructive and necessary presence on the Laotian political scene. In this context, State suggested that Smith consider himself a possible target of manipulation by the "astute" prime minister.²³

The same message adopted a device that became a standard refuge of American officials frustrated by the factionalism of their Indochinese clients. The United States would not take sides, it suggested, nor would it urge on any party a distasteful course of action. Instead, it would try to reduce the friction by encouraging a town meeting atmosphere, in which "all patriotic elements discuss their problems among themselves and work together in [the] greater interest of [their] country." The Lao, "if they are true patriots," would acknowledge their dependence on the United States, the United Nations, and the Geneva signatories.²⁴

Ambassador Smith replied with a bitter complaint about CDNI's— —"wrecking policy." He defended Phoui and the "older [and] wiser" conservatives around him, and adopted the prime minister's arguments about the illegality of CDNI's posture as a de facto political party.

²² Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State Parsons to the Secretary of State, "Situation in Laos," 16 November 1959, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 667-69;

²³ State Telegram 1095 to Vientiane, 21 November 1959, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 675-77.

²⁴ *Ibid.* The empty appeal to Lao patriotism, twice in one paragraph, suggests the depths of Washington's despair.

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"Friction between young and old would be much easier to neutralize" if [] activities were "confined to 'appropriate operational measures fully coordinated' by me."²⁵ []

In this atmosphere, the mandate of the National Assembly expired on 25 December 1959. The army obtained the blessing of King Savang Vatthana—a constitutional monarch who played his largely ceremonial role at the royal capital at Luang Prabang—for a declaration of military rule until the creation of a new government. []

New Comity, Old Discord []

Whatever his sympathy for the CDNI, King Savang named only one member, Brig. Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, to the new provisional government in early 1960, and the embassy still saw a "profound" breach between anticommunist elements in Vientiane. []

[] and Ambassador Smith proposed to [] a joint effort to reconcile the CDNI and Phoui's Rally for the Lao People. No one, however, saw the provisional government as capable of real leadership, and Washington abandoned its preference for a year's delay in holding a national election.²⁷ []

US officials thought the anticommunist slate perfectly capable of winning a fair election. [] rather naively believed that General Phoumi and other CDNI leaders shared that view, but case officer Stuart Methven was disabused of the notion when he visited the RLG's election headquarters during the vote count in late April 1960. There he found a Phoumi aide, Capt. Siho Lanphouthacoul, recording the official count at the chalkboard. The numbers were clearly tainted, for communist candidates were ostensibly running far behind even in the Pathet Lao-dominated province of Phong Saly.²⁸ []

²⁵ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1491, 30 November 1959, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 680-83. []

²⁶ Editorial Note; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1904, 2 January 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 722-24; []

²⁷ Editorial Note; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 2005, 13 January 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 728, 731-32. The Laotian name of Phoui's party was the Lao Hom Lao. []

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Siho met Methven's reproach for this blatant fraud with a jaunty question, "What is your year of birth?" The startled Methven gave it to him, and Siho erased the number of Pathet Lao votes—a three-digit figure, at most—and replaced it with a more generous 1,927. Methven assumed that Siho's fraudulent count was taking place with Phoumi's acquiescence; at best, the general had clearly done nothing to ensure the integrity of the electoral process.²⁹

The Department of State worried that the vote-rigging would invalidate the election in the international arena, but DCI Allen Dulles was inclined to treat it more as a youthful prank. The end result was a new National Assembly entirely without Pathet Lao representation, a desirable outcome certainly, but a better omen had it demonstrably represented voter preferences.³⁰

In concert with the British, French, and Australians, the US Mission in Vientiane plunged into maneuvers designed to keep the CDNI from what it saw as a potentially destructive bid by the military to dominate the new government. The noncontroversial Tiao Somsanith became prime minister, Phoumi Nosavan settled for the defense minister's portfolio, and the summer began in relative tranquility.³¹

Ambassador Smith left in May. His replacement, the genteel, judicious Winthrop Brown,

Nevertheless, the two quickly disposed of any residue of ill feeling left behind by their predecessors and established a relationship of mutual trust.³²

Under new management and in a more cooperative atmosphere, began to expand its political organizing efforts to reach ethnic minority groups traditionally despised by the dominant Lao. Stuart Methven later recalled that, although nominally sponsored by the CDNI, the effort was

²⁸ State Telegram 1921 to Vientiane, 26 April 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 751; Stuart Methven, interview by the author, McLean, VA, 26 November 1996 (hereafter cited as Methven interview). Methven was case officer who provided advice and support to CDNI leaders.

²⁹ Methven interview. Methven recalled that continued to support CDNI organizing efforts during the summer, and progress extended beyond provincial capitals into at least some district towns. This provoked several instances of Pathet Lao harassment, but the fate of the effort may have been presaged by a rally in the late spring at which the crowd was to symbolize its call to "burn out corruption" by burning posters bearing that slogan. A sudden, unseasonably early monsoon shower dampened the crowd and got the posters wet enough to prevent their being set afire.

³⁰ State Telegram 1921 to Vientiane, 26 April 1960, and Editorial Note, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 51-52.

³¹ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 2850, 7 May 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 762-65 and passim.

³² Author's recollection.

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an essentially unilateral CIA move to make Laotian politics more inclusive. It soon led to contact with one of the few Hmong officers in FAR, a French-trained captain named Vang Pao. Methven remembered making a goodwill gesture of US Army surplus sweaters and blankets, 5,000 of each, obtained from [] [] and dropped by Air America at Vang Pao's sector headquarters at Nong Het, on the border with North Vietnam.³³ []

The Kong Le Mutiny []

The Vang Pao contact had had no time to mature when a new crisis shattered the government so recently cobbled together. On 9 August 1960, the 26-year-old commander of the elite 2nd Parachute Battalion, Capt. Kong Le, staged a mutiny that quickly grew into a full-fledged coup d'etat. The Lao concealed their planning from [] paramilitary adviser, to whom the rebellion looked like the result of exhaustingly frequent deployment and niggardly material support.³⁴ []

But Kong Le now set out a larger set of grievances. These included not only the familiar theme of corrupt government by a privileged class but also resentment at a heavy American hand in Laos and dismay at the internecine conflict between the RLG and the Pathet Lao.³⁵ []

Kong Le, in uncontested control of Vientiane, demanded the government's resignation, and on 14 August Tiao Somsanith obliged him. Only the defense minister, Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, refused to accept the government's dissolution. He then began lobbying for US aid to help him crush the rebellion; first from Bangkok, where he took refuge after the coup, and then from his base in the Laotian panhandle at Savannakhet.³⁶ []

At this point, Phoumi had no more legitimate claim to power than did Kong Le. Washington shrank from military action against a group of mutineers

³³ Methven interview. []

³⁴ Ibid. The White House understood Kong Le's complaints to include two months of arrears in the unit's pay. (John S.D. Eisenhower, "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material Reported to the President," 15 August 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 793.) []

³⁵ Methven interview. []

³⁶ State Telegram 172 to Bangkok, 15 August 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 794-95 and passim. []

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whom no one had accused of communist leanings, and who had not yet made common cause with the Pathet Lao. Meanwhile, King Savang Vatthana accepted Kong Le's dissolution of the old order when he named the ever-resilient Souvanna Phouma to set up a new government. The working level at State thought this a prescription for the speedy communization of Laos, but it feared also that a Phoumi attack on Vientiane would antagonize other anticommunist elements. It would also alienate the British and the French, and it risked armed Pathet Lao intervention on behalf of Kong Le. Perhaps unwilling to admit, even to itself, that it wanted Phoumi simply to wait things out, State's Office of Southeast Asian Affairs recommended that he confine himself to "political maneuvering from a position of strength."³⁷

The Lao might prefer a bloodless resolution, but Washington found its patience tested by a growing perception that Kong Le was, in Under Secretary Dillon's words, "a Castro communist-type individual." No government he controlled could be trusted, and State wanted to get rid of him. But unleashing Phoumi was still not the answer, for a military thrust toward Vientiane might bring in the Thai and the South Vietnamese on his side, with Hanoi intervening on behalf of Souvanna, Kong Le, and the Pathet Lao. This would only spark the civil war, and perhaps the division of the country, which so far had been avoided.³⁸

The only alternative seemed to be to broker some kind of accommodation between Phoumi and Souvanna. On 23 August, a joint message from State, Defense, and CIA directed to assure Phoumi that Washington regarded him as the principal deterrent to a commu-

Kong Le *(Courtesy of Bill Lair)*

³⁷ Eisenhower, "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material," 16 August 1960; Memorandum from Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Anderson) to Assistant Secretary of State (Parsons), "US Policy for Present Situation in Laos," 17 August 1960; *FRUS 1958-1960*, 802-05. The Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to support a Phoumi military move to unseat Souvanna, whom Adm. Arleigh Burke described as a "weak sister" (p. 813). Allen Dulles, by contrast, called Graham Parsons to say that he had "lived with a situation before where he was supporting someone against [the government] constitutionally in office." The United States should at least avoid telling "other governments that we regarded the Souvanna Phouma government as fully invested constitutionally." (p. 812)

³⁸ Memorandum of Discussion, 456th Meeting of the National Security Council, 18 August 1960, and State Telegram 275, 5 September 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 808-811, 831-32.

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nist takeover. CIA was to promise Phoumi that he could count on the United States to meet any reasonable request for financial and logistical support.³⁹ [redacted]

These assurances stoked the fervent pro-Phoumi bias of the military [redacted] officers in Savannakhet. [redacted] had fought with the French Foreign Legion early in World War II and had suffered a throat wound that reduced his voice to a rasping half-whisper. He had come to know Phoumi at a French staff college after the war, and now, [redacted] had been sent to Savannakhet expressly to capitalize on their friendship. He and the PEO man saw Phoumi as the only Lao capable of saving the country from neutralism and eventual absorption into the communist bloc. But his troops had not been paid for months, and 8 million kip promised by Washington was late. In an apocalyptic cable of 21 August, [redacted] proclaimed that, "without immediate financial support [Phoumi's] movement will collapse within one week."⁴⁰ [redacted]

Deliveries of money and rice staved off that fate, while the Lao continued their intricate factional maneuvers. In a move that partly compensated for Souvanna's greater popularity in the countryside, Phoumi acquired a major ally from the south. His new partner was Prince Boun Oum na Champassak, heir to the petty kingdom that had ruled the lower Laotian Panhandle. On 10 September, they declared their intention to oppose Souvanna as founders of a Revolutionary Committee. [redacted]

Having repudiated Souvanna Phouma, General Phoumi replaced Kong Le as mutineer against a legally established government. Despite its distrust of Souvanna and its nominal endorsement of Phoumi, official Washington recoiled from sponsoring an insurgent to lead a sovereign, noncommunist regime. Over the next three weeks, the United States looked for a compro-

³⁹ Letter from the Chargé in Thailand (Unger) to Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, 24 August 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 823-24. [redacted]

⁴¹ "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material Reported to the President," 13 September 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 840-41; [redacted]

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mise formula, perhaps involving a royal convocation of the "principal personages of [the] realm" to form a coalition government that would exclude Kong Le. ⁴²

Shortly after the Kong Le coup, Phoumi had occupied Paksane, on the Mekong River east of Vientiane. The fragility of his troops' morale was exposed on 21 September, when Kong Le loyalists scattered the numerically superior defenders, driving them back toward Savannakhet. Kong Le and, by some accounts, the Pathet Lao were on the offensive elsewhere as well. Washington now began to fear that its relatively evenhanded approach to the Laotian factions might actually promote the disintegration of the anticommunist side. Accordingly, on 1 October, State instructed Ambassador Brown to implore the king to "take authority into his own hands and appoint [a] caretaker government under royal decree." If this appeal failed, Brown "should know that there is strong and growing sentiment here [in Washington] to give exclusive and all-out support to those able and willing to salvage at least that portion of the country centered in Savannakhet."⁴³

The ambassador called on King Savang Vatthana at Luang Prabang, the royal capital, on 6 October. Characteristically hesitant, the king declined to remove Souvanna, and a frustrated Washington mandated one "last desperate ploy" to "work through and with Souvanna Phouma as the legal façade of [the] legitimate government and at the same time supporting Phoumi and other anticommunist forces." Souvanna was to get an ultimatum whose terms included moving the government temporarily to Luang Prabang, doing what he could to restrain Kong Le, and avoiding any negotiations with the Pathet Lao until his position improved. Meanwhile, the United States would unilaterally pay and supply Phoumi's forces in Savannakhet and northern Laos.⁴⁴

⁴² State Telegrams 316 to Vientiane (16 September 1960) and 322 to Vientiane (19 September 1960), *FRUS 1958-1960*, 848-50, 856.

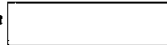
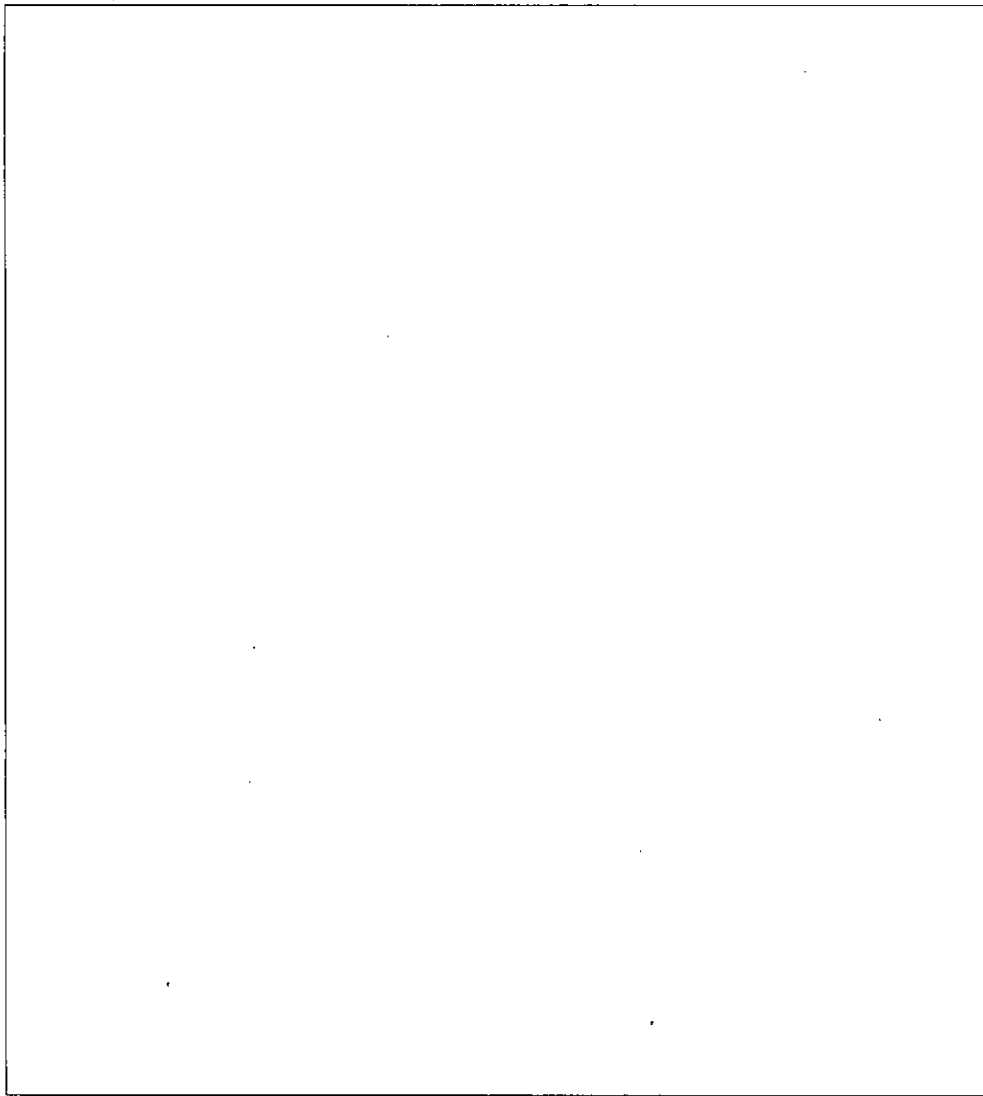
⁴³ Memorandum of Discussion, 460th Meeting of the National Security Council, 21 September 1960, and State Telegram 365 to Vientiane, "Eyes Only Ambassador," 1 October 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 859-60, 869-71. Under Secretary Dillon said on 29 September that "it had now been admitted that three companies of Pathet Lao" had joined the Kong Le units at Paksane. (Memorandum of Discussion, 461st Meeting of the NSC, 29 September 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 868.)

⁴⁴ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 683, 6 October 1960, and State Telegram 384 to Vientiane, 8 October 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 883-88.

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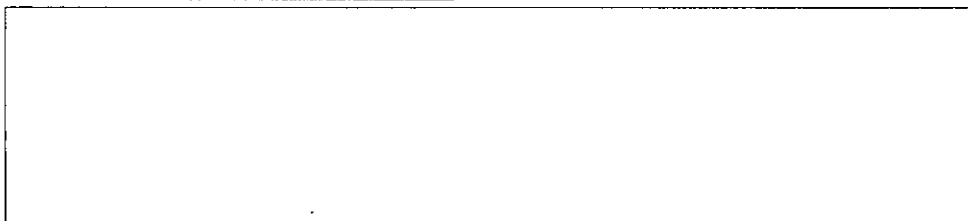
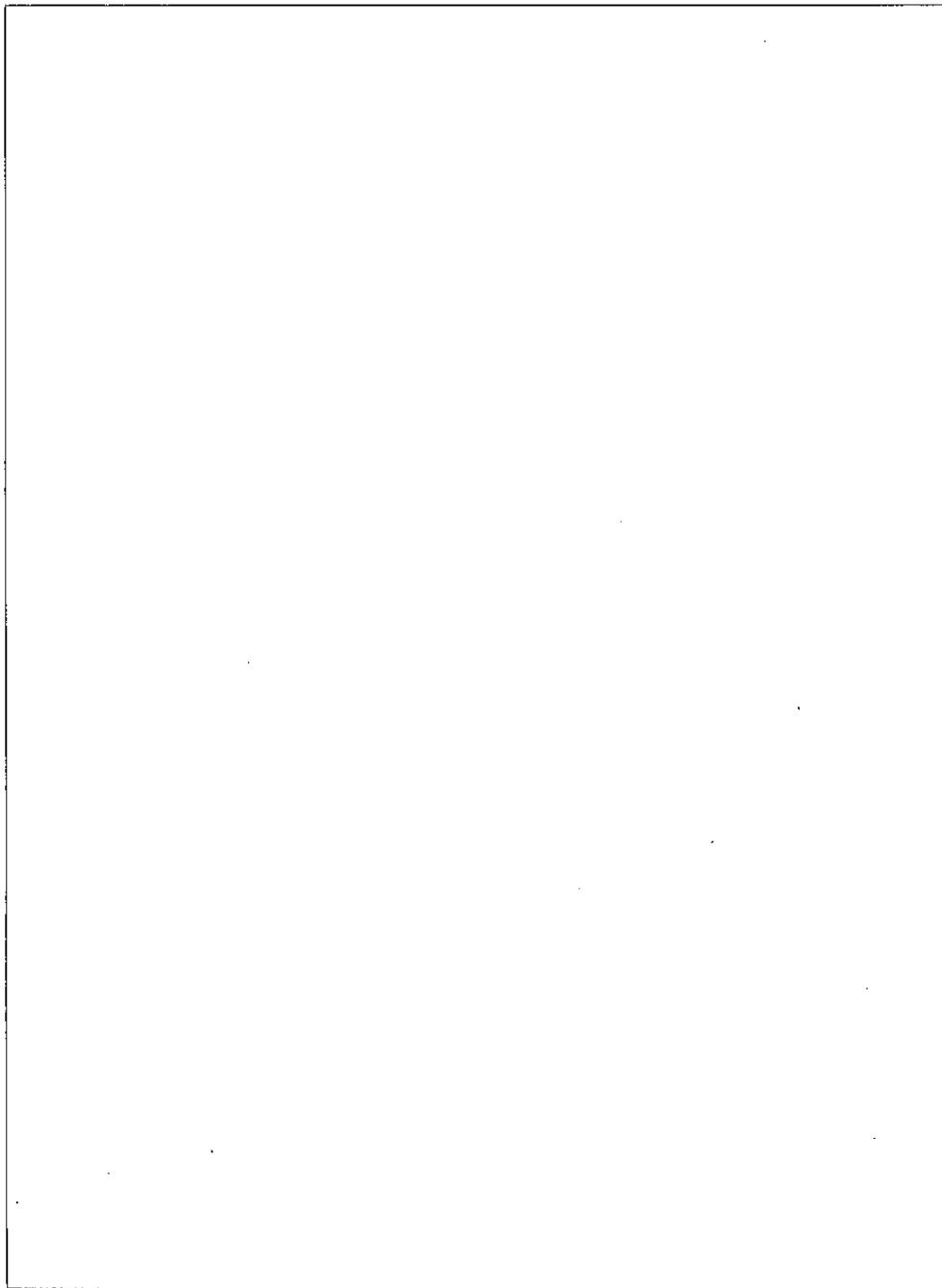
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CHAPTER TWO
Choreography by CIA



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American hostility to neutrality for Laos was offset, for the moment, by lingering hopes of bringing Souvanna into line. In addition, Winthrop Brown and Gordon Jorgensen questioned Phoumi's ability to hold the nation—or even the south—against Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. Unless the United States was prepared for war in Laos, Brown advised, Washington should now just cut its losses, and “make [the] best of Souvanna” as the only “alternative to chaos or division.”⁵

Disagreements and Miscommunication

Meanwhile, pursuing a “last desperate effort” to avoid a military solution, Washington sent the assistant secretary of state J. Graham Parsons and the assistant secretary of defense John Irwin to Vientiane. There, they pressed Souvanna to bring Kong Le to heel and to terminate all overtures to the Soviets. The prime minister was to halt negotiations with the Pathet Lao, resume talks with Phoumi, and move the government to the royal capital at Luang Prabang. Souvanna apparently allowed his visitors to think he would comply, and Irwin proceeded to Ubon, Thailand, where on 17 October he encouraged Phoumi to expect at least secret US support for a march on Vientiane and the seizure of the government.⁷

By the time Parsons and Irwin got back to Washington, it was clear that Souvanna was pursuing his usual ambiguous course. Once again, “for reasons of expediency,” as a State telegram put it, the reluctant decision favored con-

⁵ Bill Lair; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 680, 5 October 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 876-78.

⁶

⁷ State Telegram 384 to Vientiane, 8 October 1960; Memorandum for the Record, 8 October 1960; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 883, 8 November 1960; Editorial Note; all *FRUS 1958-1960*, 886-91, 940, 913.

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tinuing to try to work with Souvanna "as the constitutional and legally installed Prime Minister."⁸ []

One thing that made it expedient to maintain the status quo in Laos was the confrontation with the Soviets over the civil war in Congo. At the United Nations, President Eisenhower had just slapped Moscow over Soviet support to a Congolese rebel faction, and Assistant Secretary Parsons, usually a hawk on matters Laotian, thought it "would be tragic at this moment to have US actions belie its words." Even so, State wanted Vientiane to know that "this expedient may turn out to be . . . temporary."⁹ []

As State told Brown, leaving Souvanna in office was intended to "solve our awkward political situation" while preventing him from manipulating Washington against US interests. Accordingly, on 19 October, Washington lifted the ban on aid to Souvanna's government after getting the prime minister to allow direct US support of Phoumi's troops. At the same time, aware of Brown's— []—uncertain control over the Americans in Savannakhet, the Department sent a foreign service officer to represent the ambassador there.¹⁰ []

It took only nine days for Washington to conclude that it had made a bad deal. It now appeared that Souvanna was maneuvering to eliminate Phoumi. Even if he wasn't, State saw US support to Souvanna as destructive of anti-communist morale in the face of a likely Pathet Lao offensive. When Ambassador Brown finally acceded, on 17 November, to Souvanna's removal,

[]

On 18 November 1960, Souvanna flew to Sam Neua, where he and Prince Souphanouvong agreed to set up a coalition that included all factions, but denied Phoumi and Boun Oum any access to cabinet positions. On the 20th, the embassy reported Souvanna's departure at the head of troops intending to rendezvous with Pathet Lao forces and capture Luang Prabang. This may well have been a false alarm—the notion of Souvanna at the vanguard of an attacking army challenged the imagination, and no confirmation followed the

⁸ State Telegram 425, 18 October 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 915-18. It appears that Vientiane never did explicitly repudiate, to Phoumi, Irwin's intimations of support for a countercoup. []

⁹ *Ibid.*; Bangkok Embassy Telegram 668, 15 October 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 904-08. []

¹⁰ State Telegram 428 to Vientiane (19 October 1960) and 466 to Vientiane (28 October 1960), *FRUS 1958-1960*, 919, 934-37; []

¹¹ State Telegram 466; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 938, 17 November 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 966-69; []

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reported troop movement—but Washington had had enough. Phoumi's troops once again would get pay and supplies, and all "military restraints" on him were lifted. Brown was instructed to solicit a request from the king that would lead to a "substitute legal government or at least cover of legality" for a regime change.¹²

The State Department officer at Savannakhet briefed Phoumi on Washington's new line, advising him to consult with Phoui Sananikone—prime minister when Kong Le mutinied—about setting up a legal government that the United States could support. Ambassador Brown protested that taking Phoumi's side would simply drive Souvanna—still the most substantial political figure in Laos—into the arms of the Pathet Lao and the Soviets.¹³

This clash of competing goals roiled policy deliberations in Washington. Defense sent instructions to PEO to encourage Phoumi to advance up the Mekong toward Paksane, and Winthrop Brown implicitly threatened to quit if State failed to put a stop to such end runs around the embassy. Foggy Bottom, caught in the middle, fought with Defense about protocol even as it reminded Brown that the military had to be ready for a US role in a possible Laotian civil war.¹⁴

The quarreling concerned protocol and mechanics, not goals. With Washington now irrevocably committed to Phoumi, Winthrop Brown loyally rejoined the team. He focused on the danger of inconclusive action leaving two competing governments, "with [the] United States supporting one and everybody else the other." Accordingly, he endorsed a JCS directive encouraging Phoumi to combine military pressure on Kong Le with preparations for a coup in Vientiane.¹⁵

Meanwhile, was busy trying to ensure, on behalf of Ambassador Brown, that a successor government would meet American specifications. Stuart Methven, main contact with CDNI, was instructed to tell his contacts in Luang Prabang that the United States wanted no Pathet Lao representation in a new cabinet. Souvanna could stay, if there seemed to be no alternative, but not as head of government. And Methven was to get word to assembly deputies still in Vientiane to find their way to Savannakhet, where they could proceed to Luang Prabang by air.¹⁶

¹² Editorial Note; Memorandum of Telephone Conversations, 21 November 1960; State Telegram 539, 21 November 1960; all *FRUS 1958-1960*, 972-75.

¹³ Editorial Notes, and Vientiane Embassy Telegram 983, 24 November 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 977-80, 982.

¹⁴ Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 1042 and 1043, 2 December 1960; State Telegram 578 to Vientiane, 2 December 1960; all *FRUS 1958-1960*, 986-88.

¹⁵ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1081, 7 December 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, 991-93.

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The maneuvering to force Souvanna's resignation stoked [redacted] partisanship on Phoumi's behalf and led him into what [redacted] regarded as outright insubordination. [redacted] had instructed him to postpone the dispatch to Luang Prabang of the national assemblymen then at Savannakhet. [redacted] sent them anyway, via Air America, earning from Jorgensen a stern though remarkably temperate rebuke.¹⁷ [redacted]

Events now removed the cause of the friction between [redacted]. On 8 December, the State Department set in motion the coordinated moves necessary to replace Souvanna with Phoumi Nosavan. It instructed Brown to move the rest of the anti-Souvanna assemblymen from Savannakhet to Luang Prabang. Arms and ammunition to Phoumi-led forces would follow, and another payroll would go to Savannakhet. On 9 December, Souvanna fled to neighboring Cambodia, leaving the government in the hands of Quinim Pholsena, a communist-leaning member of his cabinet.¹⁸ [redacted]

The Soviets moved to exploit their opening, and President Eisenhower was informed that, on 11 December, four howitzers were unloaded from Soviet cargo planes at Wat Tay Airport. But the US Mission in Vientiane had finally delivered a National Assembly quorum to Luang Prabang, where, on the 12th, it passed a no-confidence motion in Souvanna's government and endorsed Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee.¹⁹ [redacted]

Until the king issued a royal ordinance approving the new regime, the country had no functioning government, a situation that the Pathet Lao and its Soviet and Vietnamese patrons would surely try to exploit. But State still had no officer in Luang Prabang, and it fell to [redacted] there to execute Brown's order to get the royal ordinance and get it at once. The well-connected Stu Methven contacted three anticommunist Assembly deputies and impressed them with the matter's urgency. The next day, 12 December, they met him at noon, smiling at his palpable anxiety. "Is this fast enough and legal enough for you?" they inquired, as they flourished a copy of Royal

16

[redacted] Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front) adopted by the Pathet Lao in 1956. The term *Pathet Lao* remained in common use, a practice followed in this book. [redacted]

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Ordinance 282, transferring governmental power to General Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee.²⁰

The Battle for Vientiane (U)

With Thai support, Phoumi had already begun dropping elements of the 1st Parachute Battalion at Chinaimo, a FAR garrison outside Vientiane. Deposed Prime Minister Quinim Pholsena decamped for Hanoi, but Kong Le's forces still held Wat Tay Airport and the city. Phoumi's forces reached the outskirts of the capital on 13 December, and the city came under sporadic artillery and other heavy weapons fire. Embassy families had been evacuated after the August coup, but some staff were caught in housing scattered around Vientiane. Ambassador Brown passed a perilous night as Kong Le and Phoumi infantry twice "see-sawed through my front yard," and had his house commandeered by Kong Le artillerymen who set up their howitzer on his lawn.²¹

Most of the Mission staff finally assembled at the embassy and at the compound belonging to the economic aid mission, USOM. The chancery became more a target than a shelter, because much of Phoumi's fire was directed at the Ministry of Defense, just next door. As Savannakhet forces pushed nearer and .50-caliber bullets scarred the embassy walls, a recoilless rifle round demolished office moments after had left it to see the ambassador. The embassy was hastily evacuated, most of the staff crossing the Mekong for the trip to Bangkok, and no one remained in the embassy when the shelling set it on fire.²²

On the morning of 16 December, teeming Vientiane had become an eerie ghost town. Kong Le's forces had abandoned the city, retreating to the north, but Phoumi's men were still nowhere to be seen on the streets, and the entire civilian population had either fled or remained in hiding. Even the stray dogs that infested the city had taken refuge. But the embassy was back at work in its shattered building, using the emergency generator for power, and

²⁰ Methven had a genius for establishing, on very short acquaintance, relationships of trust with Third World officials.

²¹ State Telegram 617 to Vientiane, 10 December 1960, and "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material," 12 December 1960, both *FRUS 1958-1960*, 1002-04;

²² at home near Wat Tay when the firing started, spent three days alternately observing enemy activity at the airport and taking cover from incoming "friendly" artillery.

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Chapter Two

Vientiane, Mid-December 1960



Fires in Vientiane as seen from near Wat Tay Airport



Phoumi armored car patrolling Vientiane

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CHOREOGRAPHY BY CIA

Vientiane, Mid-December 1960



US embassy chancery



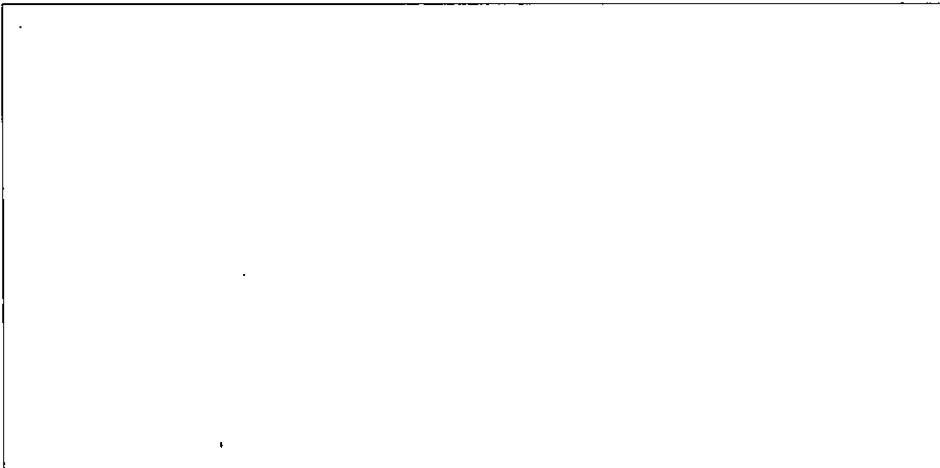
COS Jorgensen's office after the battle for Vientiane

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[] participated in the Mission effort to spark vigorous pursuit of the retreating neutralists.²³ []

This effort included acerbic instructions from Brown to the Americans at Savannakhet, where State's man had joined [] PEO as a Phoumi admirer. They were to treat Phoumi's reporting—veering from the giddily optimistic to the grimly defeatist—with more reserve. Meanwhile, Phoumi should push his lagging field commanders into quick and complete implementation of the tactical plan.²⁴ []



Souvanna had yet to resign, something the Soviets exploited to justify stepped-up aerial resupply of Kong Le's columns. President Eisenhower, declaring that "we should act vigorously, now that we have the cover of legality," favored using US [] aircraft to supply Phoumi's advance.²⁶ []

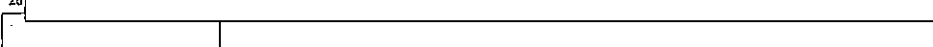
²³ Author's recollection. []

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In the week after Vientiane fell to Phoumi's battalions, intelligence reports described continuing Soviet airdrops to Kong Le forces still moving north along Route 13. An Air America twin Beechcraft with [] and a photographer on board searched the skies over Kong Le's columns, and on 21 December found a twin-engine Soviet supply craft approaching a neutralist drop zone. Photos showing the tail number and the "CCCP" initials of the Soviet Union soon appeared in newspapers around the world. If the publicity did not deter the Soviets, it did help to quiet the British and the French, whose single-minded concern for political accommodation had led them to discount the extent of Moscow's intervention. (Recollection of the author, who was [] on the Air America C-45.) []

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Kong Le, still retreating, reached the junction with Route 7. Instead of proceeding north toward Luang Prabang, or using Soviet materiel deliveries to turn on Phoumi's desultory pursuit, he and allied Pathet Lao forces veered east. On New Year's Day, 1961, they drove the unprepared FAR defenders off the Plain of Jars, the 500-square-mile plateau that comprises the most valuable real estate in northeastern Laos. Soviet supply aircraft began landing there, at the military airfield built by the French, and supply drops continued to dissident forces still bivouacked along the main roads.²⁷

By this time, in early January, had accumulated considerable evidence not only of Soviet supply activity but also of North Vietnamese troop incursions. North Vietnamese infantry was reported to have attacked Nong Het, on Route 7 just west of the border. The loss of the Plain of Jars brought the realization that the communist and neutralist forces now threatened to expel the RLG from the entire northeast quadrant of the country.²⁸

Kong Le's surprise dash to the Plain of Jars exploited the vulnerability of northeastern Laos—essentially, Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces. Except for concentrations of Lao on the Plain of Jars and in valley settlements, this unending succession of vertiginous mountain ranges (the highest peak reached 10,000 feet) was populated by tribes driven up from the lowlands, over the centuries, by more numerous and better organized competitors. The most cohesive of them, the Hmong—still commonly known as Meo—were also the most combatively anti-Vietnamese. They had been chosen by PEO and the Pentagon for a delivery of 2,000 light weapons to protect their villages from Pathet Lao or neutralist pressure after the Kong Le coup of 9 August 1960.²⁹

By January 1961, the threat had metastasized, as Kong Le consolidated his hold on the Plain of Jars while isolated FAR units wandered the mountain trails around it. The French, ordinarily blasé about any allegation of communist designs on Laos, told a meeting of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Bangkok that their sources in Hanoi reported 20 Soviet cargo air-

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One later study said that, as of mid-January 1961, the 925th Independent Battalion of the NVA had entered Laos, joining elements of the 325th Division that had chased FAR elements south from the Plain of Jars. (See Kenneth Conboy, with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*, 50.

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The term *Meo* had no pejorative connotation for the Americans who used it, but they were aware of reported Hmong sensitivity about it. In the spring of 1961, asked by the author about proper usage, Vang Pao dismissed the concern. *Meo* was just fine, he said, and the name remained current for several more years.

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craft shuttling war materiel from China to Laos via Hanoi. The French also offered evidence of a NVA presence in Laos, reporting that, on 5 January, one of these Soviet planes had evacuated a wounded NVA officer from the Plain of Jars to Hanoi. While the French could not document the presence of North Vietnamese troop units, their SEATO representative had no doubt that technicians and advisers now accompanied both neutralist and Pathet Lao units.³⁰

The only prospect for effective resistance in the northeast now lay with the Hmong. With Souvanna's departure, the question of a uniformed American presence had lost much of its sensitivity, but the Military Assistance Program, with its long-term planning and rigid schedules, lacked the flexibility to exploit the Hmong potential. The Pentagon had required CIA help to provide even the 2,000 carbines delivered in late 1960. For PEO to launch a larger, continuing program, with a leadtime of only weeks, was out of the question. The US Mission in Vientiane did not even suggest this; instead, on 5 January, it asked the Pentagon simply to provide World War II-vintage B-26 aircraft to fly armed reconnaissance over Laos and perhaps to execute "sneak" photographic missions over North Vietnam.³¹

Defense assented and set up Project MILLPOND, which also offered the potential to bomb enemy concentrations on the Plain of Jars and elsewhere in northern Laos. But Ambassador Brown and his PEO took a sober—even alarmist—view of what overt military intervention might mean. They saw it as leading to a "Korea-type limited war" and perhaps ultimately even to World War III. They recognized that, whatever the scale of combat, not much could be expected from the Lao, who "suffered from disorganization and lack of common purpose within the government, the Army, and the society generally." The Mission admonished Washington to reexamine the situation before entering upon either limited or total war. If the United States were to take that risk, it would have to do so knowing that "half measures will not deter [the] Commies."³²

The Eisenhower administration, with less than three weeks left in office, was not planning anything so ambitious as even the Korean war, let alone World War III. Nevertheless, it saw the situation as a looming calamity. On 3 January, just two days before the cautionary cable from Vientiane, Eisenhower had said, "If the communists establish a strong position in Laos, the West is finished in the whole southeast Asian area." Meeting with his national security team that day, he also urged a continuing search for peaceful means to keep Laos under Western protection. As we have already seen, however, Eisenhower intimated

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CHOREOGRAPHY BY CIA []

to Kennedy just over two weeks later that unilateral action might be the only, if desperate, hope.³³ []

Talking to the Hmong: Enter Vang Pao []

Whether Eisenhower would have taken the risk he seemed to recommend to John F. Kennedy is, of course, unknowable. Certainly, both preferred something less fateful than the commitment of US ground troops to Laos. While Washington awaited the arrival of the new administration, [] engaged in informal discussions with Vang Pao. Then the deputy commander of FAR's Xieng Khouang district, he was about to replace the timorous commander who had presided over the flight from the Plain of Jars.³⁴ []

As a Hmong, Vang Pao was one of the rare ethnic minority members of the FAR officer corps. He had been a member of the French Expeditionary Force that fought the Viet Minh and, now a major, was the highest-ranking Hmong in the army. Also, he had emerged as one of the most influential figures in the loose federation of Hmong clans inhabiting the mountains of northern Laos. These credentials had made him the obvious choice to supervise distribution of the carbines furnished by PEO in late 1960.³⁵ []

Vang Pao was also the obvious candidate to lead any effort—political or military—to keep Xieng Khouang Province under Vientiane's control. Having proved his good will with the gift of sweaters and blankets late the previous summer, Stuart Methven followed up with an offer of a military radio linking Vang Pao with []. The radio link was never activated, but when [] began looking for Vang Pao in early January, it had in Methven an emissary in good standing.³⁶ []

[] From a joint command post with the Royal Thai Army in a house near Wat Tay Airport, they were ready to exploit Methven's opening to this most promising of the Hmong leaders. The debris had not been entirely cleared from [] demolished office when Lair began importuning [] for authority to explore with Vang Pao the Hmong tribe's potential for irregular warfare against Kong Le and the Pathet Lao.³⁷ []

³³ Brig. Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, "Memorandum of Conference With President Eisenhower," 3 January 1961 (drafted 7 January), *FRUS 1961-1963*, 5. []

³⁴ []

³⁵ []

³⁶ [] Methven interview []

³⁷ Bill Lair []

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At this point, Stu Methven encountered Vang Pao at the Luang Prabang airstrip, and Vang Pao asked for a Helio-Courier mission to locate a missing friendly column. With Methven aboard, they flew southeast past the Plain of Jars until they saw a signal panel at Ta Viang, not far from where Soviet aircraft were dropping supplies to Kong Le forces. The pilot found a rice field long enough to land the Helio and, after the little plane bounced to a halt, Vang Pao climbed out to rejoin his men.³⁸ [redacted]

Before Methven left, Vang Pao eagerly accepted his offer to introduce a colleague, an expert in matters of irregular warfare. The next day (probably 10 January) Methven brought Bill Lair to the bivouac site. They conducted a bilingual session, Vang Pao using Laotian—comprehensible to a speaker of Thai—with Lair, and French with Methven. Lair had as yet no authority to discuss a program of military support to the Hmong but offered to drop rice to Vang Pao's beleaguered men.³⁹ [redacted]

Lair's questions exposed his interest in Hmong resistance potential, and this provoked Vang Pao to confide to Methven—still in French—the Hmong's fear of being abandoned by the Americans as they had been by the French in 1954. Would the United States stay the course, if it began helping the Hmong, or did he risk having aid cut off, at some point, and his people left to the mercy of the North Vietnamese? To Methven, renegeing on such a fateful commitment was simply unimaginable, and he assured Vang Pao that any American commitment would be honored as long as it was needed.⁴⁰ [redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] On 14 January, Lair finally succeeded in scheduling a mission for one of the newly arrived H-34 helicopters. Its pilot, [redacted] an Air America pilot, had no knowledge of the terrain, and Lair feigned intimate familiarity with it in order to calm the young man's evident nervousness. At takeoff in midafternoon, Lair [redacted] were startled by the Sikorsky's shuddering roar; even in level flight, it seemed to be trying to shake itself apart.⁴¹ [redacted]

³⁸ Methven interview. The exact chronology of the first contacts with Vang Pao in January 1961 is uncertain. One cable says that Lair—no mention of Methven—was at Ta Viang on 9 January. Other references give 10 January as the first meeting with Vang Pao in the context of a Hmong resistance. Thirty-five years later, Lair did not remember being introduced to Vang Pao by Methven; he recalled instead flying to Ta Viang in an H-34 [redacted]

³⁹ Methven interview; [redacted]

⁴⁰ [redacted]
⁴¹ Bill Lair. [redacted]

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As the H-34 hovered over the Ta Viang landing pad, its main rotor kicked up a choking cloud of dust that almost obscured the setting sun. Lair had strict orders not to stay overnight, and the pilot was threatening to leave without him, so he left to find Vang Pao as he returned to Vientiane.⁴²

He and Vang Pao had talked nearly all night, and joined the consensus about Vang Pao: "This is the man we've been looking for." Lair confirmed that now he could discuss the specifics of an armed Hmong resistance and boarded the helicopter for another flight, this time to a new and more secure bivouac at Muong Om.⁴³

Vang Pao greeted Lair, who was again struck by the boyishness of the Hmong leader's animated face, with its round shape and narrow, Mongolian eyes. After a characteristically voluble welcome, Vang Pao led the way to the meeting site, on a bank high over the Nam Sane. The meeting exhibited the collective quality of Hmong life. His FAR subordinates, village elders, and ordinary mountain men crowded around Vang Pao as he introduced his visitor. He began the proceedings with a stemwinding oration—in the Hmong language, but with enough Lao vocabulary for Lair to follow its thrust—about the imperative for the Hmong people to preserve their way of life against the predatory Vietnamese.

The oration called up memories of Vietnamese abuses, and Vang Pao told of Hmong old women he had seen forced to drag logs to a sawmill. One listener, overcome with emotion, leaped to his feet, lost his balance, and fell to his death into the torrent below. This seemed only to intensify the emotion generated by Vang Pao's fiery rhetoric, and, when the speech came to an end, Lair already knew the answer to his first question: With the communists and neutralists installed on the Plain of Jars, what exactly did the Hmong people want to do?

Vang Pao made it explicit. The Hmong had just two alternatives, either flee to the west or stay and fight, and he and his people wanted to stay. He had 10,000 men, he said. Adequately armed and trained, they could hold the mountains in most of Xieng Khouang and even Sam Neua Provinces, harassing enemy activity along the roads and in the valleys. He described the distribution of the Hmong population throughout the area, and it appeared to Lair that he might well command the manpower he claimed.

But arms given to fight the communists might be turned against the government, and Lair wanted to know how the United States could be sure that this

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

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did not occur. Vang Pao responded that, despite lingering mutual suspicion, the Lao had not practiced any of the forced assimilation that had driven many Hmong out of China and that now oppressed them in North Vietnam. The National Assembly had a Hmong member, Touby Lyfoung, and Vang Pao's own status demonstrated the possibilities of assimilation for those who wanted it. Far from promoting separatism, said Vang Pao, he wanted his people accepted as part of the Laotian polity. []

All of this accorded with Lair's understanding of Hmong aspirations, and Vang Pao's own motivation. But gratification at having these theories confirmed was tempered with some misgivings. On the one hand, Lair saw a Hmong resistance organization on the scale proposed by Vang Pao as a formidable impediment to Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese consolidation of the northeast. On the other, he doubted that Agency management would give the idea a serious hearing. []

[] he had little reason to anticipate any enthusiasm for an effort to arm, train, and support a force approaching the size of a light infantry division. Concealing his apprehension, he promised Vang Pao to recommend to his superiors that they help the Hmong to stay and fight.⁴⁴ []

Over dinner, [] questioned Lair closely about Vang Pao, his manpower base, and the current tactical balance on the Plain of Jars and in Hmong country. Lair thought he had satisfactory answers, but his superiors remained noncommittal, []

Arming the Hmong []

[] proposal detailed the requirements for a force of 5,000 men, to be armed in increments of 1,000 each if initial results justified expansion. []

⁴⁴ Ibid. []

⁴⁵ Ibid. []

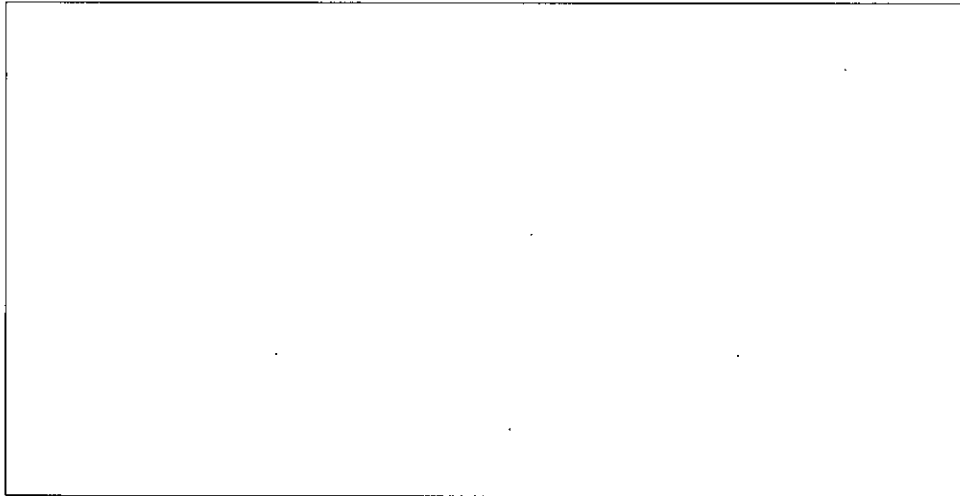
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CHOREOGRAPHY BY CIA [redacted]

[redacted] left open the question of revealing the project to the Vientiane government. It might be as well, [redacted] thought, first to get started and then explain it to General Phoumi as an extension, justified by military necessity, of the support that Phoumi had promised to deliver through regular channels.⁴⁶ [redacted]

[redacted] had good reason to hesitate about making a new approach. Earlier, he and PEO chief Gen. John Heintges had encountered only stony resistance to their pleas for direct American support to the Hmong. As of 11 January, not even the Hmong armed in October 1960 were to get any help except through regular FAR channels. The Hmong were "crybabies," Phoumi said, both too primitive to undertake the raid and sabotage missions that the PEO chief had proposed and too treacherous to be indulged in their incessant demands for help. Finally, on the 14th, Phoumi acceded, allowing an airdrop of rice and ammunition to Hmong militia at Ban Khang Kho, south of the Plain of Jars. But [redacted] still expected him to veto the provision of weapons to tribesmen not already under arms.⁴⁷ [redacted]



Headquarters had just one concern, and it was not that of Vientiane government approval: CIA would be hard-pressed to provide experienced paramilitary advisers for the program, especially if it expanded. [redacted] backed by Ambassador Brown, replied that [redacted] supported by Lair and his assistants, could certainly handle the initial endeavor, supervising weapons distribution

⁴⁶ [redacted]
⁴⁷ [redacted]
⁴⁸ [redacted]
⁴⁹ [redacted]

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and providing training, communications, and tactical advice. Washington acceded, setting a pattern that endured for almost three years.⁵⁰ []

Lair flew to Ta Viang to deliver the news in person. Vang Pao's round face lit up in delight, and [] was equally pleased, but he understood perhaps better than the Hmong leader how small a window of opportunity they had all been given. The Laotian army task force that General Phoumi had ordered to pursue and engage Kong Le had just abandoned the junction of Routes 7 and 13. This left Luang Prabang isolated and the neutralists and their communist allies free to attack any nascent opposition in Xieng Khouang. The outposts around Ta Viang were even then under pressure, and the new program needed a training site secure enough to assemble and train the initial group of volunteers. Should this fail, the enemy would nip the whole thing in the bud and be free to conduct reprisals on the Hmong population at large.⁵¹ []

Neither time nor airlift capability permitted exfiltrating volunteers to a training facility in government-held territory. In any case, the Hmong, whose abiding motivation was to protect their families, would not have consented to leave them to the mercies of the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Training would have to take place under the enemy's nose, and Vang Pao proposed bringing the first 300 volunteers to Ban (Village) Pa Dong, a tiny Hmong hamlet about 8 miles south of the Plain of Jars. The rugged terrain would prevent any instantaneous enemy reaction, and he promised at least three days of training before Kong Le or his allies could attack.⁵² []

Three days was cutting it fine. The Hmong were fine marksmen with their homemade flintlock rifles, and some had been trained as militia by the French, but they would have to master new weapons and at least the basics of guerrilla tactics. But Lair [] had anticipated just such a contingency in their development of a training syllabus, and they told Vang Pao to assemble his 300 volunteers. []

Back in Vientiane, Lair briefed [] who, although taken aback by the tiny margin for error the training schedule allowed, agreed to take the chance that 300 men would appear where and when Vang Pao said they would. Lair radioed [] to start off on the two-day march to Pa Dong, then he set to work on a requisition of weapons and equipment [] []

The Hmong could easily outpace an enemy pursuit, but the [] with Vang Pao would be slowed by the bulky radio and generator—relics of

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52 Bill Lair. Except as noted, the rest of this account is based on Lair's recollection. []

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OSS operations in World War II—and a day later, Lair decided to pick them up in an Air America H-34 and fly them the rest of the way to Pa Dong.

His pilot on this mission was Clarence “Chuck” Abadie, an adventurous ex-marine—later Air America’s chief helicopter pilot in Laos—who seemed to thrive on flying into the unknown. This trait made him susceptible to Lair’s tactic of feigning greater familiarity with conditions on the ground than, in fact, he had.

Everything worked fine, at first. A white panel in the form of the letter “H” and a smoke signal appeared at the spot on a ridgeline specified in a radio message, and the H-34 lit on a tiny improvised pad in the usual cyclone of dust. The size of the party and Pa Dong’s high elevation, which reduced the aircraft’s lift, meant that the H-34 would have to make two trips to Pa Dong. Lair took off with leaving Vang Pao and the communicators for the second shuttle.

Higher ridgelines obstructed the way northwest toward Pa Dong, but the H-34 succeeded in cresting all but the last. Abadie realized, too late to turn away, that he was headed for the trees. Bill Lair, in the copilot’s seat, could only brace himself as Abadie applied full throttle and yanked back on the stick, struggling to climb. Perhaps caught in one of the fierce downdrafts so common in these mountains, perhaps overloaded, he failed. The helicopter brushed the treetops with its landing gear, then stalled, dropping onto the reverse slope.

Still upright, it careened down the hill, ricocheting off trees until it hit one large enough to flip it on its side and bring it to a halt. The sharp smell of 145-octane aviation fuel signaled the prospect of incineration if a spark should reach the leak. Lair having escaped with cuts and bruises, scrambled to get the semiconscious Abadie out of his harness and up through the window that now faced the sky. But no one was gravely injured; their problem now was communicating their plight to Vientiane.

Serendipity appeared in the person of a Hmong tribesman, who jogged up the slope in the tireless gait of mountain people, running on the leathery feet and splayed toes of a man who had never worn shoes. He turned out to be the chief (*naiban*) of the village just below and, as commander of a Xieng Khouang militia unit under Vang Pao, the possessor of an antique military radio. The operator screamed into a microphone until Vientiane responded, at which point he sent out by key a message describing the accident.

Lair expected the report to be garbled, and it was; an hour later, a radioed reply asked what repair parts he needed. But just before sundown, an Air America C-47 circled overhead, and those on the ground could be sure at least that their location had been accurately conveyed.

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A night as guests in the *naiban's* hut passed uneventfully until about four in the morning, when a blood-curdling scream just outside sent Lair [] frantically scrambling for their weapons. But it was only breakfast; the village women had just slaughtered a pig to be grilled in honor of distinguished company. Another H-34 arrived shortly after sunrise, and the party continued on to Pa Dong. []

Ban Pa Dong, 4,500 feet above sea level, epitomized the eerie attraction that Laos—especially upcountry Laos—held for nearly all the Americans who worked there. With neighboring peaks hidden behind towers of cumulus clouds, the village stood in crystalline air on a ridgeline that sloped, first gradually and then precipitously, until it disappeared in the stratus clouds that concealed the valley below. The dying swish of the helicopter's main rotor only emphasized the stillness of a perfectly calm day.⁵³ []

A Surrogate for a Surrogate []

The H-34 soon left to pick up Vang Pao and the radiomen. When they returned, Lair proceeded to [] to meet the first increment of weapons and equipment. At this point, both he and [] saw the Hmong resistance as a supplement to FAR in the northeast, not as a substitute for it. They understood that creating a Hmong guerrilla force would not by itself offer the means of expelling neutralist and communist forces from the Plain of Jars, let alone from the rest of northeastern Laos. But it might at least prevent the enemy from consolidating his control while the United States and the RLG struggled to make the regular army a fighting force.⁵⁴ []

Unfortunately for the prospects of this strategy, Phoumi's army—its leader had managed to become a petty warlord without being a real soldier—reverted to its customary lethargy immediately after the capture of Vientiane. [] [] the US military recognized that only more American support offered the chance of infusing some combat effectiveness. Accordingly, CINCPAC was arranging beefed-up aerial reconnaissance and adding to the 107 Special Forces men already advising FAR down to the battalion level. The Pentagon was making contingency plans for an American combat presence as well: as of 18 January, naval Joint Task Force 116 had been alerted, and some of its ships, carrying helicopters and a marine battalion, were already in position in the South China Sea.⁵⁵ []

On 19 January, the eve of John F. Kennedy's inauguration, the deputy director for plans Richard Bissell made plain his understanding that the "ultimate

⁵³ Author's recollection of his first visit to Ban Pa Dong, c. February 1961. []

⁵⁴ Bill Lair. []

⁵⁵ []

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objective" was not military victory. Meeting that day with State and Defense, he joined a consensus on a vague formula that he described to Vientiane as calling for "some stabilization of [the] situation on terms acceptable to [the] United States, presumably as [the] result of political moves." But the prospects for any such stabilization would recede if the military situation continued to decay. Washington therefore thought it an urgent necessity to proceed with the Hmong resistance program while trying to make FAR a more effective instrument of combat.⁵⁶

The Vientiane Mission shared the sense of urgency but once again pointed out the risk of escalation posed by more overt intervention. Accordingly, it emphasized the desirability of using

for such jobs as aircraft and radio repair. Implicitly acknowledging the incorrigible weakness of the Laotian officer corps,

But the FAR campaign up Route 13 was still stumbling, and on 21 January Headquarters lamented that the morale of Phoumi's forces seemed to be "deteriorating across the board." The new administration was already concentrating on Laos, and several of its "key members" had met with an interagency group to find some way to stiffen the pliant FAR.

In all of this, the Kennedy administration was pursuing the effort of its predecessor to achieve through surrogates what it hesitated to attempt with US combat forces, to ensure a noncommunist government in Laos. Meanwhile, other players—Souvanna, the RLG, the Pathet Lao, the British, and the French—exploited as best they could the available instruments of international diplomacy. In exile at Phnom Penh, Souvanna welcomed a Pathet Lao representative arriving from Hanoi. The British urged the RLG to accept the return of the long-defunct International Control Commission, with Poland, its invariably obstructionist communist bloc member. Meanwhile, the RLG tried to inveigle the United Nations into sending a commission to Laos to investigate the Soviet and North Vietnamese presence. The North Vietnamese, in turn, buttressed the Pathet Lao with advisers and specialists, but undertook no

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offensive operations of their own. Thus, all the combatants, both direct and indirect, chose to limit their investment and their risks. It was in this climate that CIA began arming Vang Pao's Hmong volunteers.⁵⁹

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The Eisenhower administration's vision of Laos as the "cork in the bottle" survived into the Kennedy administration and into that of Lyndon B. Johnson. For all of them, the fate of Laos was intimately connected with the survival of an anticommunist government in South Vietnam. But they also saw Laos as, in the more familiar metaphor, a domino in its own right, one whose fall could lead to communist success throughout Southeast Asia. Accordingly, the early programs, both in Hmong country and in the Panhandle, were primarily aimed at helping preserve Laotian territorial integrity within the framework of a cease-fire agreement.

Laotian territorial integrity was still the goal of the Kennedy administration when it signed the Geneva Agreements in July 1962. These called for a cease-fire and the creation of a neutralist coalition government, a formula acceptable to Washington as an alternative to direct military engagement in Laos. The Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam was not yet seen as an imminent threat to the government there, and Washington accepted the risk created by tacitly conceding to Hanoi uncontested control of the infiltration route through Laos that became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or as it was sometimes called, the "Corridor."

Preserving Laotian neutrality in the face of mounting North Vietnamese violations of the agreements remained the driving US purpose in Laos until late 1964. During this period, intelligence collection and tactical response to communist cease-fire violations constituted the principal tasking of CIA irregulars in Laos. Only when the new military regime in Saigon approached collapse did Washington begin to exploit its Laotian irregulars as assets in the larger struggle.

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CHAPTER THREE

Iron Age Guerrillas

The arming of the first 300 Hmong volunteers began on 24 January 1961 when three C-46 cargo planes crossed the Mekong into Laos carrying weapons and equipment. In the two weeks since Bill Lair's first meeting with Vang Pao, the government's military position had continued to decay. Enemy gains meant that the flight to Pa Dong now covered terrain that might conceal communist or neutralist anti-aircraft weapons.¹

Fearful that early loss of an aircraft would end the project before it started, Bill Lair rode in the cockpit of the lead aircraft, guiding it as best he could between pockets of enemy-held territory. The C-46s drew no fire, and when they reached Pa Dong, the smoke and panel signals displayed by were almost superfluous. The site was crowded not only with the 300 volunteers but also with families, all in holiday finery, from the surrounding hamlets.²

The first plane made its pass, and crates of weapons began floating to the ground under their cargo parachutes. Watching them fall, Bill Lair thought with satisfaction that things were proceeding just as he had always envisioned such an operation: there were no Americans on the ground, For the moment, at least, CIA could play a purely supporting role.

¹

² Bill Lair,

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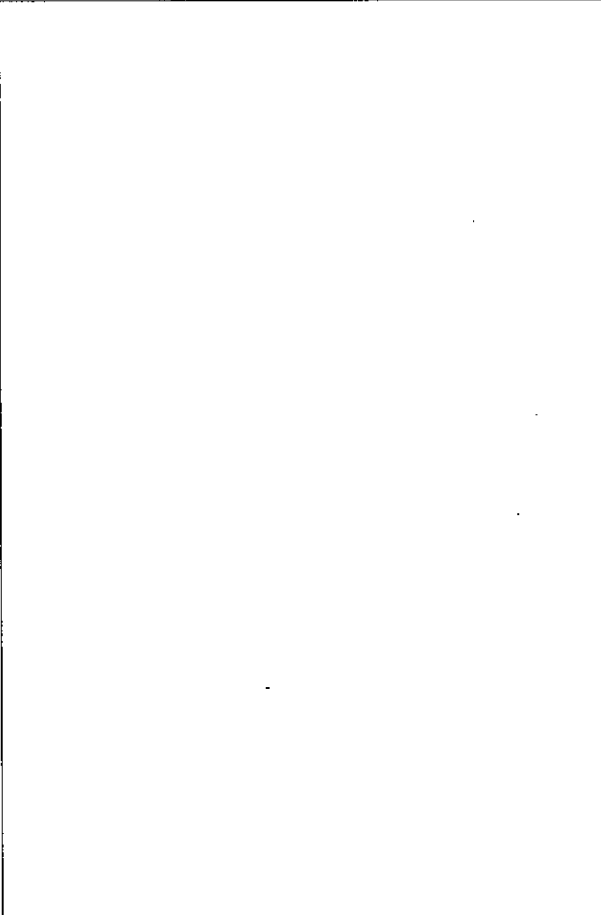
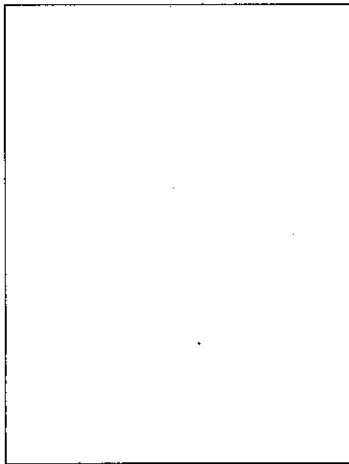
Chapter Three



Local clan leader—called a "naikhong"—in uniform and women in holiday dress assembled at Ban Pa Dong for first munitions drop to the Hmong, late January 1961
(Courtesy of Bill Lair)



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Together, and Vang Pao dashed from one group to another,

were getting through to their trainees. Vang Pao, the most hands-on leader Lair had ever seen, would kneel with the occasional slow student, helping him take apart his weapon, clean it, and reassemble it. But only a few needed help; as a

group, these Iron Age tribesmen were the best natural riflemen that Lair had ever seen. Within minutes nearly all of them knew how to clean and maintain their rifles and carbines.⁴

The challenge for was to exert the necessary influence without damaging the integrity of the Hmong leadership structure. Lair had already decided that Hmong leaders must command Hmong fighters; Americans were there, not to motivate the Hmong or to take over the fight, but to enable a people to defend itself as long as it wished to do so. applied this principle from the start, respecting Vang Pao's attention to political equities in selecting unit commanders while ensured due regard to their capacity for military leadership. In this way, consolidated the instant rapport that Lair had observed at their first joint meeting near Ta Viang. Almost from the beginning, became Vang Pao's alter ego, not

⁴ Bill Lair;

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just an adviser but a working partner sharing the risks and responsibilities of a growing program.⁵ []

One small miscalculation had affected the choice of weapons. Lair had assumed that the tiny Hmong soldier would prefer the lightweight carbine, and he had included a few M-1 rifles only for the larger or hardier volunteers. But the trainees, some of whom had never seen anything more advanced than a flintlock musket, instantly recognized the rifle's superior range and accuracy. [] had to help Vang Pao mediate some squabbling over distribution when the first delivery arrived, and Lair increased the proportion of M-1s in subsequent drops.⁶ []

Whether firing a carbine or an M-1, nearly every Hmong volunteer needed only a few hours at the improvised firing range before the training team moved on to combat organization and tactics. The Hmong would not be mounting company or even platoon-size operations, at first, and [] [] trained them to operate in three-man fire teams. They immediately grasped the principle of fire-and-maneuver, in which one man or element fires from cover while the other advances, in a kind of leapfrog approach toward the enemy's position.⁷ []

The communists—it appears that Kong Le's neutralists seldom if ever moved against the Hmong—wasted little time reacting to the activity at Pa Dong. A Pathet Lao unit of reported battalion strength moved to within 2 miles of the training base, and the Hmong irregulars went into action within a week of the first weapons drop. The guerrillas ambushed the advancing Pathet Lao, and in the two days of combat that followed killed a reported 17 enemy. Never to be renowned for their fire discipline, the Hmong exhausted their ammunition supply during this action, and Lair flashed a requirement [] [] for more.⁸ []

By 31 January, a Hmong unit had ranged some 18 miles into contested territory, where it encountered an enemy patrol, killing 12 and returning with eight captured weapons. Vang Pao and his advisers expected the communists to return in force, but early successes like these boosted morale and created a respite for the rapid expansion about to take place.⁹ []

In the next few days, Vang Pao [] visited outlying villages, where the Hmong leader explained the American offer of support, and promised weapons where local leadership looked committed and strong. Kong Le and

⁵ Bill Lair, []

⁶ Ibid. []

⁷ []

⁸ []

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his allies—including the Soviets, who were still heavily engaged in airdrops of materiel—were preoccupied for the moment with the key road junction west of the Plain of Jars.

Vang Pao then deployed them in an arc south and west of the Plain of Jars.¹⁰

Presidential Endorsement and Policy Restraint

These early territorial gains encouraged Washington to raise the ante. On 8 February, President Kennedy authorized CIA to arm as many Hmong irregulars as Vang Pao could recruit, though Headquarters put a cap of 5,000 in its message advising the field. The only sticking point had to do with money. The Agency tried to exploit the leverage of a presidential mandate when it asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to assume the cost of the larger program, as they had done with the first 1,000-man increment. The frosty reply signaled the beginning of a tug of war that endured for the duration of the conflict in Laos: the Hmong resistance was a CIA operation, and if the Agency wanted the "most expeditious processing" of its requests for materiel, it would have to pay. The JCS prevailed, in this instance, and the Agency bore the cost of equipping the next 4,000 Hmong.¹¹

The administration did not, in any case, regard military escalation, even by surrogates, as an end in itself.

Both of them knew that Washington still wanted a political settlement; its support of the Hmong program meant that it wanted to help the RLG negotiate from strength, not to seek a decision on the

⁹ Bill Lair;

¹⁰ Bill Lair;

¹¹

It took another round of correspondence to clarify responsibility for the 2,000 Hmong armed by PEO in late 1960. Headquarters told the field that the Defense Department positively desired to keep these combatants as part of the official RLG defense establishment and that they were not to be included, for accounting purposes, in the 5,000-man force being armed by CIA.

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Three*battlefield. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Company-level advisers would help achieve this, and so would decentralization, to be achieved by setting up base areas, each with its own tactical commander [REDACTED]. Accordingly, Vang Pao and his two principal advisers, Bill Lair [REDACTED] set up two new command posts. Overlooking Route 7 on opposite sides of the Plain of Jars, they would harass the enemy's use of this strategic road, which led out of North Vietnam and proceeded through the Plain of Jars to the junction with Route 13.¹³ [REDACTED]

The imminent creation of a dispersed command structure intensified the need for reliable, secure field communications. Lair and [REDACTED] had foreseen this and had already developed a training regime for students of minimal education and technological sophistication. Vang Pao chose a dozen literate young Hmong to serve as the first communicators, and Lair flew them to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] In principle, [REDACTED] needed official sanction for the program, but Bill Lair feared the obstruction of the notoriously sluggish RLG bureaucracy. On the other hand, neither he nor the US Mission wanted to provoke further Laotian suspicion of US partisanship on behalf of the Hmong. Lair, therefore, finessed the issue by suggesting that Vang Pao should take care of it. Vang Pao cheerfully agreed, but never confided just how he had handled the matter, and Lair suspected that he had acted unilaterally.¹⁴ [REDACTED]

Even at this early stage, however, both Lair and Vang Pao were determined not only to avoid the appearance of supporting Hmong autonomy but to encourage and promote the tribe's assimilation into the Laotian nation. Language was one key to this, [REDACTED] devised a numerical code for the Laotian alphabet. As a

12 [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]¹³ Bill Lair [REDACTED]¹⁴ Ibid. [REDACTED]~~SECRET//MR~~

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result, the Hmong radio network began using the national language while FAR communications still relied on French.¹⁵

The tasking of teams to be assigned upcountry reflected Lair's confidence in their competence and their capacity to operate in an alien culture. Only the team leader, two radio operators, and a medic would remain at the command post. The riflemen—privates and corporals—would be assigned one to each of the new volunteer companies.

During this early period, sketchy intelligence suggested both a heavy admixture of North Vietnamese in Pathet Lao military formations and a gritty determination to resist them on the part of Hmong villagers in the northeast. Two French missionaries, escorted by Hmong sympathizers along mountain trails from Sam Neua town to Luang Prabang, reported in convincing detail the Vietnamese presence. Their Hmong protectors, who risked severe reprisals for rescuing them, insisted that Hanoi's troops comprised up to one-half the personnel in some Pathet Lao units.¹⁷

A Question of Jurisdiction

To the Americans on the scene, information like this illustrated both the threat of North Vietnamese domination, at least in the northeast, and Hmong opposition to it.

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¹⁵ Ibid.; Lair recalled numerous instances, over the years, in which he pointed this out to FAR officers who disparaged the Hmong for their alleged separatist aims.

¹⁶ Ibid.;

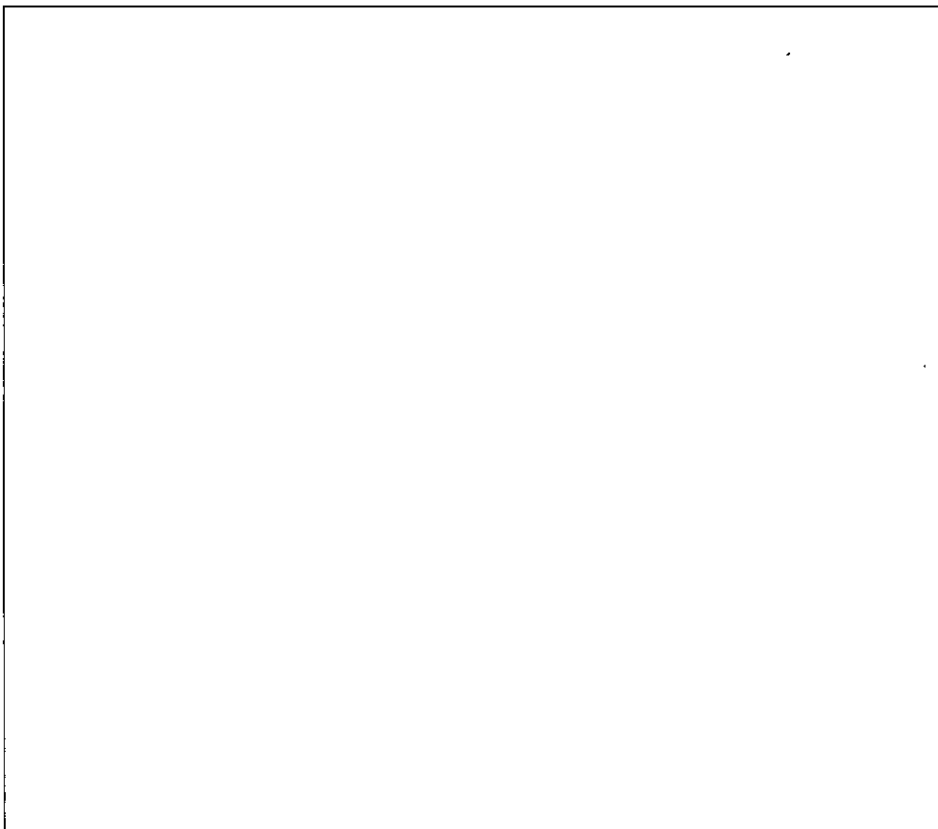
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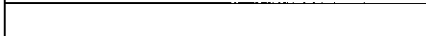
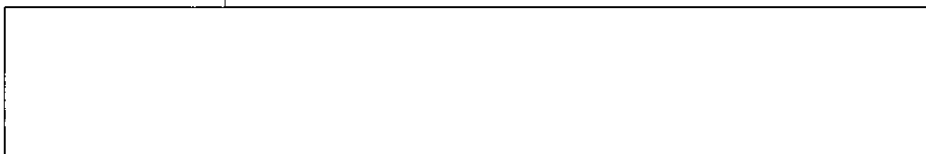
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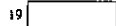
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[redacted] responded with a promise to find a role for [redacted] in "special operations" but insisted that by virtue of "temperament, judgment, language, and existing confidence of [the] Meo," Lair possessed the best qualifications for this tactical liaison. When more aircraft became available, he could spend the requisite time at Ban Pa Dong and still manage the support and coordination in Vientiane. [redacted]



19



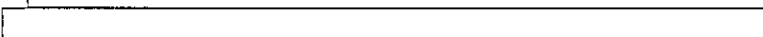
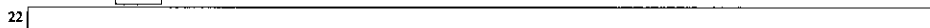
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[redacted] Bill Lair. [redacted]

21

Bill Lair. [redacted]

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~~SECRET//MR~~IRON AGE GUERRILLAS **Target: Kong Le**

Doing something about Kong Le had not lost its attraction for Washington, and Headquarters sent a peevish cable reminding of his failure to reply to "repeated queries re possibility of ambushing or capturing Kong Le." Had the ambassador disapproved? If not, why had regular contacts with Vang Pao not produced some planning? Returning to the point three days later, Headquarters complained of being embarrassed in interagency meetings by its inability to promise action to "negate" the rebel leader's position.²³

reply hinted that he saw this preoccupation as little more than a distraction from the essential task of creating a force capable of holding the surrounding hills while FAR recaptured the Plain of Jars. Kong Le had been "on our list," he said, since the beginning of the Hmong program, but problems remained to be solved. One was that of persuading the Hmong to enter the Plain of Jars, which hosted Kong Le's headquarters, to gather information on his location and movements. "So far, Meos evince much more enthusiasm for shooting up isolated convoys than for entering [the] enemy's main camp." was offering bounties for prisoners, for example, but had as yet no results. And no operation against Kong Le ever did take place. His gradual disenchantment with his communist allies would eventually bring him into de facto alliance with the American-supported RLG.²⁴

The Chinese Connection

Agency efforts to help shore up the Laotian government's military position were not restricted to the northeast. In February, authorized Stu Methven, in Luang Prabang, to help FAR challenge the neutralist and communist forces west and north of the royal capital. With the help of he proceeded to organize three irregular units, totaling about 150 members, of several local highland tribes.²⁵

23 24

The fortunes of war had put the United States, and therefore CIA, in the position of favoring a "bad guy" over a "good guy." Many anticommunist Lao regarded Phoumi as "a crook," though they tended to see this as mitigated by his pro-American stance. Kong Le, in CIA's own judgment, was a "highly competent professional soldier," an essentially apolitical "born leader" whose motivation when he staged the August 1960 coup was hostility toward the admittedly "corrupt bureaucracy" of his own government.

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This initiative led to complications involving remnants of the Kuomintang (KMT) forces expelled from China in 1949. Some of these still roamed north-west Laos, and Nam Tha Province, bordering the People's Republic of China, harbored a sizable number. They led an uneasy existence, stronger than their Lao hosts but always risking overwhelming retaliation if they provoked Beijing with activity aimed at reestablishing themselves in China. [redacted]

The Lao, faced with a Hanoi-supported insurgency, tended to look on the KMT remnants as a potential ally against the Pathet Lao. Methven's FAR counterpart in Nam Tha advanced an idea—he said it originated with his boss, Military Region 1 commander Gen. Ouane Rathikoun—to recruit a battalion of KMT irregulars to help retake the Plain of Jars. Headquarters' alarmed response to Methven's reporting on this emphasized Washington's determination to avoid provoking the PRC into an intervention like the one in Korea a decade earlier. It ordered Methven to "explain [the] folly" of such ventures whenever the Lao proposed them. Methven assured Headquarters that he would and that his own irregulars would contain only indigenous tribals.²⁶ [redacted]

But this did not dispose of the issue. Methven wanted to set up "commando" units in Sayaboury Province, lying west of the Mekong River, and his planning for that locale seems to have been less scrupulous about sealing off his operations from the Chinese. A peremptory cable [redacted] in late February told him that the United States was trying to get the Nationalist government in Taipei to repatriate its troops in northern Laos; accordingly, it instructed him not to use [redacted] with KMT "volunteers." The KMT was not even to know about the [redacted] presence. [redacted] was willing to cancel the Sayaboury program: "If you can't separate [the] Sayaboury commando effort from [the] KMT volunteers, then drop [it]."²⁷ [redacted]

Nervousness about Chinese intervention reflected Washington's painful recollection of Chinese armies rolling down into North Korea only a decade earlier. Now, the United States would do what it could to preserve a Laotian buffer state, but it would do so while avoiding even the appearance of an intention to challenge Beijing's territorial integrity. Guided by this imperative, Washington continued trying to find a neutralization formula to supplement military efforts to improve the RLG's bargaining position. Accordingly, the United States announced its support for King Savang Vatthana's 19 February declaration of neutrality. An effort began to wear down Soviet and Chinese resistance to the regional commission proposed by the king to monitor the ter-

26 [redacted]

27 [redacted]

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IRON AGE GUERRILLAS []

mination of all foreign military intervention deemed "inconsistent with the country's neutral status."²⁸ []

CIA saw Souvanna Phouma as the key to success in such an effort, and injected itself into the policy arena when it urged the Department of State to keep the communists from using him to sabotage the king's neutralization bid. The Agency saw no prospect of successful neutralization if the communists were to inveigle Souvanna into joining or even visiting the rump government just established in his name by the communist-neutralist alliance at Xieng Khouang. Accordingly, CIA recommended that State undertake to get Souvanna to repudiate the Xieng Khouang regime. CIA also wanted a joint effort with State to intervene in Vientiane politics, this time by brokering the new coalition cabinet it saw as an indispensable adjunct to Souvanna's eventual return to the capital.²⁹ []

[]

A political gambit of this kind needed help on the military front, for the communists would have little incentive to deal with a Vientiane government incapable of holding its own in northern Laos. Washington looked to the Hmong guerrillas for help, but their still-modest numbers and limited combat skills and discipline precluded trying to use them to retake the Plain of Jars or definitively interdict the main roads. Motivated almost exclusively by the urge to protect their families, these irregulars, even with more training than time and resources allowed, would never be regular infantry capable of a frontal assault. [] had already acknowledged this, in the context of Washington's pressure to neutralize Kong Le. He and Bill Lair now turned to the best available supplement to guerrilla raids and ambushes—harassment by indirect fire using heavy mortars.³⁰ []

Hoping to avoid provoking another bout of General Phoumi's paranoia about Hmong duplicity, [] wanted to maintain [] US control of such weaponry. Some of the [] in Laos were trained in high-angle fire, and he proposed using them to serve the requested mortars. In doing so he accepted, to a point, [] prescription to allow [] a direct combat as well as an advisory role.³¹ []

²⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, "Laos," 20 February 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 56-58. []

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³¹ []

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On 1 March, [redacted] to man 81mm mortars in fire missions against the Plain of Jars. [redacted] had been reluctant to supply 4.2-inch mortars, fearing they were too heavy, but Lair [redacted] insisted that the Hmong could move them. With a range of 8,000 yards, a few of them in the right places could bring the entire plain under fire. Ambassador Brown and Chief PEO supported the idea, and Headquarters acceded.³² [redacted]

[redacted]

No one expected [redacted] and the Hmong to do more than harass the enemy and force him to divert resources otherwise available to thwart Phoumi's campaign to retake the Plain of Jars. Thus, the burden of dislodging Kong Le and the communists remained a FAR responsibility. But despite accelerated deliveries of materiel under the US Military Assistance Program, the Laotian army continued to distinguish itself primarily by its lassitude and incompetence. On 9 March, having failed with a drive east toward the Plain of Jars, General Phoumi's forces retreated in the face of a counterattack and lost the critical junction of Routes 7 and 13.³⁴ [redacted]

Leaning Toward Unilateral Military Action [redacted]

Recovering the Plain of Jars had formed the keystone of the US policy aimed at negotiations from strength. Relatively populous and agriculturally productive, it also served as the nexus of the road system in northeastern Laos. Now, as the headquarters of both Kong Le's neutralists and the regional Pathet Lao command, it also represented a challenge to government efforts to reclaim it. The fact remained that, except for Kong Le's own airborne battalion, the

32 [redacted]

33 [redacted]

34 [redacted]

Also see Memorandum from the President's Military Aide (Clifton) to President Kennedy, 10 March 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 84-85. The then chief of PEO told a White House military aide that "every time a battalion commander becomes too aggressive, Phoumi relieves him of command. He doesn't want any one personality to develop as a [competing] military leader." In a curiously self-contradictory estimate of Phoumi's forces, the PEO chief noted that they had "folded" under random artillery fire at Sala Phou Khoun, even as he assessed their morale as good. [redacted]

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IRON AGE GUERRILLAS []

neutralists had displayed little more appetite for combat than had the government's forces. Washington also expected well-supplied FAR units to crush Pathet Lao resistance. The surprise setback at the junction of Routes 7 and 13, guarding the western approach to the plain, had generated near panic among Washington policymakers. In mid-March 1961, they went into a spasm of preparation for unilateral US military intervention. Twin-engine B-26 attack bombers, []

[] would serve as the initial tool of this more aggressive stance.³⁵ []

Top PEO officers, then visiting Washington, assured the president's military aide, Gen. C.V. Clifton, that the Pathet Lao would "bug out" when the first bombs fell, and the Plain of Jars would belong to Phoumi. Activation of the plan, called Operation MILLPOND, awaited only the conclusion of an imminent SEATO meeting. Meanwhile, [] was to accelerate the recruitment of Hmong volunteers, with a goal of 4,000 under arms by 1 April. Air transport resources being assembled for an airborne and air-landed assault—possibly including American troops—would include two H-34 helicopters [] for use in the Hmong program.³⁶ []

The administration proceeded to send B-26 bombers [] [] But it gradually backed away from unilateral intervention, perhaps discouraged by the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimate that this would require 60,000 American troops with tactical air cover and maybe even the use of nuclear weapons. Such considerations outweighed the reservations expressed by [] whose earlier anxiety about Laos as a tripwire to general war now collided with his belief that a settlement negotiated under existing circumstances would "at best . . . only partially guarantee a divided Laos and, at worst, will certainly facilitate communist takeover." His 20 March cable to Headquarters acknowledged only transitory gains from a settlement: the "temporary avoidance" of a risk of war, the "temporary plaudits of our allies for reasons that have little to do with [the] merits of [the] situation in Laos, . . . and likewise [the] praise of such neutrals as India."³⁷ []

³⁵ Clifton memorandum to Kennedy. The 4,000 figure appears in a formal presidential restatement of the authorization given in February. As of 1 April 1961, [] was authorized to support a guerrilla force of 7,000, including the 2,000 armed by PEO and the initial [] increment of 1,000 in January. The political counterpart to the military preparations came in messages from Secretary of State Rusk, one to Vientiane instructing the ambassador to assure General Phoumi that the United States did not expect any concessions from him that would endanger Laotian independence; the other, to Phnom Penh, was an appeal to Souvanna to repudiate the rump government in Xieng Khouang that claimed to represent him. (See State Telegrams 951 to Vientiane [11 March 1961] and 805 to Phnom Penh [12 March 1961], *FRUS 1961-1963*, 85, 89-90.) []

³⁶ []

³⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 332-33, quoted in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 94n. []

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The local military situation would probably continue to deteriorate, after negotiations from weakness, and [] predicted that the fading credibility of the United States would undermine its allies' willingness to "take positions independent of Russian or Chicom desires." If Washington wanted negotiations to serve a purpose more substantial than mere face-saving, it would first have to restore a favorable military balance. [] went on to list what he thought could be done, without "inviting [the] enemy to retaliate in nuclear fashion," in order to prevent a FAR collapse and lay the basis for a "slow but steady rollback of enemy forces."³⁸ []

[] proposals included B-26 bomber raids against enemy installations on the Plain of Jars and supply convoys entering Laos from North Vietnam. He also proposed using helicopters to move heavy weapons and guerrilla teams into enemy rear areas and to hit "PL bands operating in friendly rear areas." In this context, he wanted the Hmong to instigate their compatriots in border areas of North Vietnam to sabotage the communists' interior lines of communication. Meanwhile, the United States should make a conspicuous deployment of troops and aircraft, under SEATO auspices, to South Vietnam and Thailand.³⁹ []

[] said that the ambassador had endorsed his proposals, which included numerous measures to expand both the Hmong and the regular Laotian military, and [] expected Brown to repeat them in his own correspondence. No reply to this message has been found, and, in fact, the die was already cast. On 23 March 1961, President Kennedy accepted the risks of negotiating from military weakness when he endorsed the British proposal for a cease-fire and an international conference aimed at reestablishing a neutral Laos. On the subject of military action, Kennedy confined himself to asserting that, if armed attack by "externally supported communists" did not cease, the United States and its SEATO allies would have to "consider their response."⁴⁰ []

Protracted debate ensued, with allies and adversaries alike, over the ground rules for the reactivation of the Geneva Conference. As these discussions wore on, communist forces pressed the attack in Laos. The Hmong continued to acquit themselves well, but [] effort at this time emphasized expanding the guerrilla force and securing mountain terrain and population. Meanwhile, FAR was losing key geography, including Vang Vieng, south of the Sala Phou Khoun intersection that had marked the high-water mark of General Phoumi's advance. Even more dangerous to the Hmong resistance was the passivity of the FAR units covering the southeastern quadrant of the Plain of Jars perimeter. Vang Pao complained to Bill Lair that Col. Kham

³⁸³⁹⁴⁰ Editorial Note, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 100. []~~SECRET//MR~~

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Khong, commanding at Paksane, was allowing Pathet Lao reinforcements to infiltrate into the hills between the Plain of Jars and the Vientiane Plain.⁴¹

were still attached to FAR regular units in this sector, and one of them, along with a US Special Forces team, paid the price of the characteristic FAR distaste for combat. The incident occurred at Tha Thom, in a narrow valley downstream from the site of Bill Lair's mid-January meeting with Vang Pao. The safety of the regimental headquarters there depended on two infantry battalions to defend the heights flanking the valley in which it lay. One of these got word on 30 March that it would be relieved the next day by a unit from Paksane. Without a word to the command post below, it decamped that night, leaving its position to the enemy. The enemy promptly accepted the gift, and in the morning, the unsuspecting defenders below were swept with artillery, small arms, and recoilless rifle fire.⁴²

The Lao broke and fled, leaving behind all their arms and equipment, and their American advisers as well. Trying to extricate themselves under fire, paused to burn their one-time code pads. Fleeing with the Special Forces team, they heard small arms fire and grenades exploding as the enemy wiped out any Lao survivors.⁴³

Other FAR units might not be so determined to avoid contact, but, even so, the question arose whether the army might simply abandon the Hmong to the mercies of the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Before the Tha Thom debacle, had been able to assure Washington only that the government had "indicated" it would fight to keep a military presence between the Mekong and the highlands. And that presence did survive after the Tha Thom debacle, if only because the enemy did not press the attack. But Vang Pao's guerrillas, and the scattered regular units under his command, had now emerged as the only active opposition to communist and neutralist control of northeast Laos.⁴⁴

Vang Pao pushed the recruitment of new volunteers, including some 200 from the vulnerable southeastern quadrant, and by early April, CIA had equipped 3,500 of the 4,000 men authorized in February. At the same time, made plans to recruit up to 5,000 additional irregulars—Hmong in Sam Neua Province and a mixture of Hmong and other tribal groups in Luang Prabang Province. Headquarters promptly

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accommodated part of this by authorizing support to another 1,000 guerrillas, and [] responded with a plan to link the Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang irregulars.⁴⁵ []

Military Support to a Civilian Program []

The rapid evolution of the Hmong as the main barrier to communist encroachment from the northeast reversed the normal relationships between US military and civilian components operating in a war zone. PEO still controlled aid to the 30,000 troops of FAR, but now found itself supporting CIA in directing a Hmong force whose relatively small size belied its growing importance to the survival of a noncommunist Laos. []

Agency paramilitary activities in these circumstances would normally have been subordinated to a US military command. But this would have conflicted with the administration's commitment to restored neutrality for Laos. Even CINCPAC Adm. Harry D. Felt saw overt military participation in the unacknowledged Hmong project as subversive of the administration's diplomatic strategy. Accordingly, he objected when the Pentagon now proposed to take it over. He lobbied the JCS, the secretary of defense, and the White House against the idea and managed to prevent either the assignment of a military commander or the program's subordination to PEO chief Brig. Gen. Andrew Boyle in Vientiane.⁴⁶ []

Other things being equal, this would have entirely suited the Agency's preferences. But not everything was equal, for Admiral Felt's position left open the question of Agency access to the military helicopters being surreptitiously deployed [] for use in Laos. The admiral wanted no air operations center in PEO, preferring to continue the informal coordination between General Boyle and []. The problem with this, from the CIA perspective, was that it left [] in the position of supplicants, begging helicopter time from General Boyle.⁴⁷ []

Headquarters thought to solve this by telling [] to "take a very hard line in demanding our share" of helicopter time, and [] had to point out that these aircraft, nominally belonging to CIA proprietary Air America, were being paid for by the military, on whose behalf General Boyle was already giving [] a very fair shake. Among other favors, he had allowed the replacement at Defense Department expense of the H-34 in which Bill Lair had crashed trying to reach Ban Pa Dong in January. The problem for

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was resources, not command arrangements, and he saw no alternative to a helicopter capability . Meanwhile, he had to rely on his own and Bill Lair's cordial relationships with their military colleagues to meet minimum needs for helicopter support.⁴⁸

The resort to aircraft and crews in the helicopter program reflected the self-imposed obligation to observe the forms of the 1954 Geneva proscription of armed intervention in Laos. That obligation created another problem for US management of the Hmong resistance. If the program were to serve the political purpose of expanding RLG territorial holdings before a cease-fire, the Hmong would require some formal status as part of FAR. Irregulars unilaterally supported by CIA would have no legal standing, yet making them part of the regular military assistance program would subject them to time-consuming programming on the American side and to government obstructionism on the Laotian. With preparations for the Geneva conference still under way, US officials in Vientiane and Washington began looking for a formula that incorporated the guerrillas into FAR—probably as a militia—while leaving support and guidance in CIA hands.⁴⁹

Washington's attempt to strengthen the RLG's bargaining position while preserving a workable atmosphere for negotiations produced a third, entirely intractable, difficulty. Arming and training a guerrilla army, already several thousand strong and still growing, could not be entirely concealed. As early as March 1961, American journalists were digging for the facts of US support of the Hmong.

The solution was threefold: first, to acknowledge some US Mission support of Col. Vang Pao, in his capacity as a FAR commander; secondly, to play down the importance of the Hmong militia as a factor in Xieng Khouang Province; and finally, to avoid confirming an Agency role. It was an uneasy compromise, leading eventually to allegations—sometimes by people who knew better—of a rogue CIA running its own "secret war" in Laos. But it sufficed, in the less volatile atmosphere of early 1961, to minimize publicity about the origin and extent of support to the Hmong.⁵¹

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Three***The Right Stuff** []

By the middle of March 1961, [] had implicitly accepted [] earlier prescription for a resident American presence in Hmong country. Bill Lair was still making almost daily visits to Vang Pao's headquarters at Pa Dong, but the training and communications programs needed full-time supervision. And with plans for more guerrilla camps and a force of 8,000 men, CIA case officers on site would be indispensable if the Agency was to discharge its duty to account for the ordnance being supplied to the Hmong and to control its use. Finally, if negotiations failed and the United States occupied the Plain of Jars, CIA would have to have someone with Vang Pao or risk seeing the US military usurp its liaison with him. Direction by the military, [] Lair believed, would have fatally disruptive effects on the guerrilla program.⁵² []

Under these pressures, [] gave in—though not on the jurisdictional question—and sent [] to Pa Dong while he awaited the arrival of several other veteran paramilitary officers to staff the new sites. [] assignment provided an early example why officers working upcountry needed a balanced set of qualifications, both professional and personal. Far removed from both the constraints and support of work among peers in a familiar setting, these men dealt with the combined burden and challenge of working alone among people of a radically different culture. In some cases, moreover, they had to do this through interpreters of uneven competence.⁵³ []

[] had no foreign language, and he brought with him the trilingual interpreter needed for an English-speaker to deal competently with Hmong, Lao, [] at Pa Dong. This was [] son of American Protestant missionaries working among the hill tribes of Burma and northern Thailand. Handsome, personable, and well-spoken, his manner was that of the businesslike young professional. But [] had acquired some of the practices, as well as the languages, of the people among whom his parents worked. These included a certain indifference to punctuality and organizational discipline, and his style soon collided with that of the compulsively organized []

Despite their disparate styles, [] might have succeeded as a team had not the older man found the Hmong even more antipathetic than he

⁵² Bill Lair. The figure 8,000 includes the 2,000 armed by PEO. []

⁵³ Bill Lair; [] interview by the author at Falls Church, VA, 10 May 1999 (hereafter cited as [] interview); []

⁵⁴ Bill Lair. []

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did his interpreter. Dedicated and intense, saw Vang Pao's one-man-band style of leadership as hopelessly inadequate, involving an impossibly broad span of control. His constant hectoring of Vang Pao to set up a conventional four-part military staff strained the relationship between the two, especially when it took place with Hmong or Lao subordinates present. In fact, Vang Pao lacked people qualified to function like professionals in a Western army. More importantly, the Hmong leader was as much tribal leader as military commander, and his political authority rested on a charisma that needed constant exercise if it were not to decay.⁵⁵

An adviser had to deal not only with Vang Pao and his rudimentary staff but with the volunteer irregulars as well. Nearly all illiterate and with only rudimentary training, they displayed astonishing speed and endurance as they traversed mountain ridges carrying weapons and ammunition. Their cheerful acceptance of extraordinarily harsh conditions and their abiding hatred of the Vietnamese had to compensate for their lack of conventional military discipline and their indifference to any goal broader than securing their families and their way of life.⁵⁶

For a few advisers, cultural disparities like these were to be ignored—eradicated, if possible—as they converted their tribal clients into a smaller version of US Marines. attempt to do this ran up against both the cultural barrier and a charismatic leader's need never to lose face with his inferiors.

The officers who followed, most of them requested by Bill Lair, had a better capacity for cross-cultural empathy and, required only cursory briefing before being dispatched into the mountains. Several had been recruited, like Lair in the early 1950s, out of Texas A&M University, where two or three—including Lloyd "Pat" Landry—had played varsity football. Another, had been a master sergeant in the US Army Special Forces before joining the Agency. Still another, Jack Shirley, was a New England native who, like Lair, had married a Thai girl and made a career of paramilitary work

⁵⁵ Ibid.; interview.

⁵⁶ Bill Lair,

⁵⁷ Ibid.; interview; author's recollection. One of the A&M men, played briefly for the NFL's Detroit Lions before joining the Agency. (interview.) Both Lair and Shirley married into the families of prominent members of the Free Thai resistance to the Japanese occupation in World War II.

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Three***Clockwise Around the Plain of Jars** [redacted]

With direct US military intervention still an option in Washington, the Agency raced to try to encircle the Plain of Jars with new guerrilla bases. [redacted] served briefly with Vang Pao at Pa Dong, and expansion began with Pat Landry, who was infiltrated by helicopter into Ban Na, some 10 miles west of the Plain of Jars. Landry shortly fell victim to amoebic dysentery, and [redacted] replaced him.⁵⁸ [redacted]

Lair and [redacted] capacity for gentle persuasion had made a success of an informal, [redacted] command arrangement at Pa Dong. Vang Pao was never seen by his men to be overridden by his advisers, and the advisers never tried to force upon him any operational proposal. He reciprocated by

encouraging them often to deal with the Hmong in his name. This formula was replicated at Ban Na—indeed, wherever [redacted] worked with the Hmong—and [redacted] and clan leader Tu Nghia together prepared to expand to the north and east. They built an airstrip and began training volunteers to use the weapons dropped to them by Air America C-46s.⁵⁹ [redacted]

With [redacted] and Tu Nghia, [redacted] trained several hundred Hmong volunteers at Ban Na and, in the process, learned something of the Hmong approach to security. The scarcity of air transport in those early days often had [redacted] advisers trekking to outlying sites, and on one occasion [redacted] accompanied a party of Hmong north across the Nam (River) Ngum. En route, he learned that security, to the Hmong, was a function of elevation. Walking the ridgelines, they set a quick pace and kept up a

⁵⁸ [redacted] interview. [redacted]

⁵⁹ Ibid. [redacted] recalled that [redacted] chose the letter *K* for the team's designation in honor of President Kennedy. [redacted]

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carefree chatter among themselves. In the valleys, where enemy patrols might lurk, they silently scouted the terrain before the main body crossed on the way to the next slope.⁶⁰ []

Like their compatriots at other sites, [] wanted to do more than merely secure Hmong settlements in the mountains; the enemy should know that he could be hurt. Accordingly, they called for one of the 4.2-inch mortars that [] had authorized two months earlier. The heaviest of its three components weighed about 200 pounds, but the Hmong cheerfully lugged the weapon and a dozen high-explosive shells up and down the intervening mountain slopes until they reached the foot of the last ridgeline before the Plain of Jars.⁶¹ []

With the weapon assembled, [] gunners lobbed shells over the mountain in the direction of an enemy camp. The damage, if any, was doubtless slight, but even so modest an offensive action served notice that the communists did not enjoy uncontested control of the plain. More importantly, it gave both the Hmong and their advisers a sense of taking the fight to the enemy at a time when the military effectiveness of the resistance had yet to be established. []

Training had just begun at Ban Na when a Lao Theung chief named Somboon came in from Xieng Dat, west of the Plain of Jars, asking for arms for several hundred villagers. Such overtures from non-Hmong groups—in this case a hill people living at elevations about 1,000 feet lower than the Hmong—had to be carefully scrutinized. No one at Ban Na, even Tu Nghia, knew the man well enough to evaluate his sincerity. Ban Na, therefore, vetted the request with Vang Pao, who rejected it, saying that the anticommunist convictions of the Lao Theung were too weak; under pressure from the Pathet Lao, they would defect to the other side. Tu Nghia accordingly sent Somboon home empty-handed.⁶² []

The wisdom of this caution became clear some weeks later, after [] had moved on to set up another guerrilla site. [], a US Military Academy graduate and now a CIA contractor, had become the adviser at Ban Na, and he took up Somboon's cause so vigorously that Vang Pao finally gave in. [] but no Agency adviser, proceeded to Xieng Dat, organized the equipment drop, and began training. []

Helio pilot Bill Andresevic spotted the first sign of treachery when he circled the camp one day and saw only one [] trooper come out to lay the signal panel. Another [] stood at the entrance to the team's hut in a strange

⁶⁰ Ibid. []

⁶¹ Ibid. []

⁶² Ibid.; Bill Lair. []

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posture, as if he were being held from inside. The scene looked suspicious enough to make Andresevic decide to abort the landing and return to Pa Dong for further instructions. His caution turned out to have been well advised, for three of [] and several Hmong were already dead, murdered in their sleep either by Pathet Lao infiltrators or by turncoat Lao Theung.⁶³ []

The Lao Theung decamped for communist-held territory, taking the surviving two [] as prisoners and eventually turning them over for interrogation by North Vietnamese Army officers. By way of reprisal, the embarrassed Vang Pao burned nine Lao Theung villages in the area, scattering their inhabitants. He spared one Lao Theung village, located near Ban Na; its population was Catholic, and even though Vang Pao had been unable to enlist it into the resistance movement, he feared no treachery from it.⁶⁴ []

But the damage was done. The [] prisoners were not seen again until after the Geneva agreement was signed in 1962, when they appeared at Wat Tay Airport in Vientiane as part of the prisoner exchange. Emaciated and weak, with huge welts on their wrists from having been bound with parachute cord throughout their captivity, they got a hero's welcome []
[]⁶⁵ []

In the spring of 1961, at about the time of the abortive Xieng Dat experiment with the Lao Theung, some of the volunteers at Ban Na had headed back to their home villages around Phou (Mount) Fa, north of Route 7. Arriving at the Nam Ngum, they found it swollen by early monsoon rains, but they managed to ford it and went on to set up a guerrilla base on the mountain. There they were joined by [] a veteran of an earlier program that had armed []
[] Even then, years before lapsing into a caricature of paramilitary machismo, [] did not have the capacity for empathy with non-Western peoples that characterized officers like Lair and Shirley. But he was competent and courageous and always ready—too ready, his supervisors sometimes thought—to risk death or capture leading his men in combat.⁶⁶ []

Lair knew [] less well than he did the other officers arriving during this period but had heard of his reputation as a hard-bitten practitioner. []
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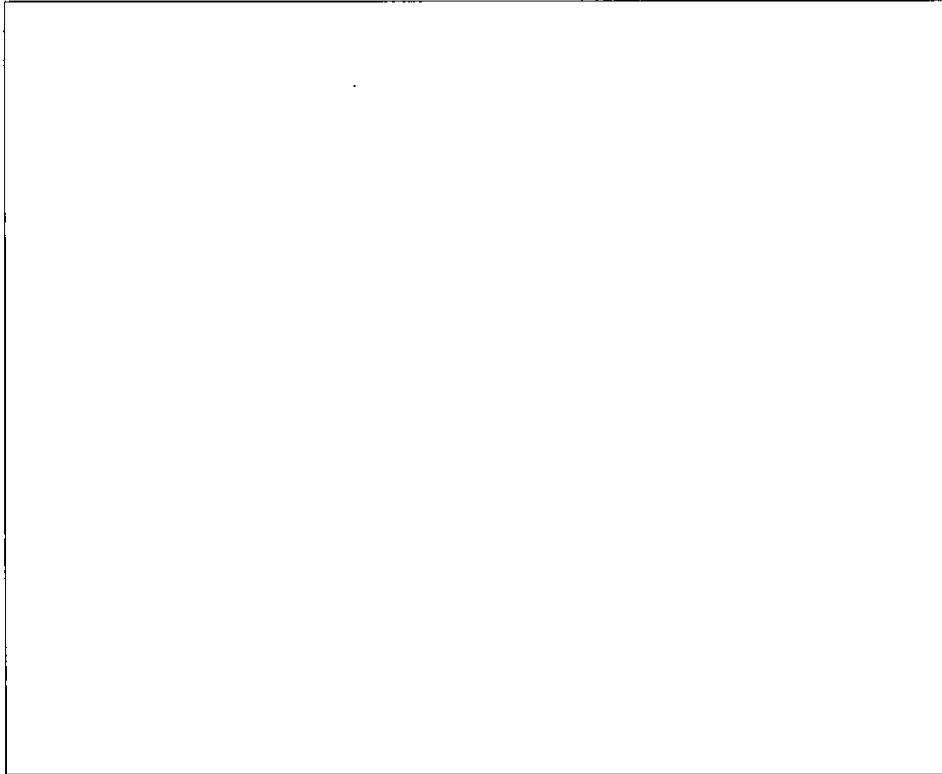
⁶³ [] interview. []

⁶⁴ Ibid.; []

⁶⁵ Bill Lair, []

⁶⁶ Ibid.; [] interview. []

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Vang Pao, Helio pilot Bill Andresevic, c. 1964

Expert at reading people, he knew how to ingratiate himself even with difficult or demanding personalities. In addition, his professional skills commanded respect, and they developed a fully cooperative working relationship before moved to Pa Dong to replace as training officer.⁶⁷

A New Instrument of Guerrilla Warfare

Neither the number nor the performance of Air America's helicopters sufficed to meet air support requirements, and already in the first months of the program Bill Lair impressed on Vang Pao that visits to outlying sites would depend on the availability of landing strips for the nimble Helio-Courier. These strips would facilitate not only Vang Pao's ability to maintain personal contact with his commanders but also the speedy evacuation of wounded.

⁶⁷ Bill Lair,

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Accordingly, every Hmong command post boasted a Helio strip. Some of these defied all the safety rules even of military aviation, and Phou Fa provided a dramatic example. The strip there followed a sharply sloping ridgeline near the summit. It also sloped to one side, near the downhill end, where the Hmong reduced the angle by building a log retaining wall and filling earth in behind it. The result was something that resembled a ski jump, and when [] [] visiting Laos again in mid-1961, insisted on seeing a couple of upcountry sites, Bill Lair decided to acquaint him with the most innovative aspect of the new guerrilla program.⁶⁸ []

Introduced to it only a few months earlier, when he took the FAR payroll to Savannakhet, Lair had recognized the potential of the new, Agency-developed Helio-Courier STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft. It would extend the reach of Vang Pao's thin leadership cadre— [] and US advisers—to the smallest Hmong operational bases. It would also transport sensitive and valuable cargos (payrolls, medicines, and radio gear, for example) and allow speedy evacuation of the wounded. More of these craft would be needed to supplement the slow—and scarce—H-34 helicopter, and Lair wanted [] support. []

He assigned Bill Andresevic, perhaps the most accomplished of Air America's Helio pilots, to make the trip, and Lair sat in the back to let him brief [] on the terrain as they made their way up from Vientiane. Approaching the Phou Fa strip, Andresevic maintained flying speed until the landing gear hit the sloping runway. As the plane slowed under the force of gravity, Andresevic had to apply more power to keep it from rolling backward, and the Helio clawed its way to the level spot at the top. []

Over the years, the Hmong—and other irregulars in the Laotian Panhandle—cut dozens of the tiny landing strips that allowed them to exploit this ungainly but superbly adapted machine. None of those who built or used the STOL strips were deterred by the unforgiving terrain, of which Phou Fa represented an extreme example. Many of them followed ridgelines that ended in a precipice at one end and a nearly vertical mountainside at the other. Landings were always made going uphill, and the approach had to be right the first time, for if an unanticipated downdraft or other mischance forced a pilot to break off an approach as he neared touchdown, he might collide with the mountain before he completed his turn.⁶⁹ []

Flying the Helio, as it was always called, demanded steady nerves, superior coordination, and a certain native optimism. The pilots who stayed came to

⁶⁸ Bill Lair []

⁶⁹ Ibid.; author's recollection; descriptions of other strips by officers including [] []

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rely on the capacities of the weird little craft, which took off in the length of a football field and landed at 35 miles an hour. At such slow speeds, nearly every pilot and all the passengers—the plane carried as many as three Americans, but five or six of the much smaller Hmong—survived the numerous crash landings during the years that followed.⁷⁰ []

In taking [] to Phou Fa, Lair had more in mind than mere thrills, for it was an article of faith with him that, however much a program of irregular warfare in Laos needed American material aid, it did not require Americans to run it on the ground. Phou Fa, he thought, demonstrated the point.⁷¹ []

The point had mainly to do with leadership. No American was stationed at Phou Fa. The operation there was being run by the exceptionally capable [] and the able and influential leader of the local Catholic Hmong. [] did the briefing—the Hmong leader, of course, spoke no English—and Lair characteristically stayed in the background, letting [] get his information and impressions directly from the men on site. When the visitors finally roared down the slope for takeoff, Lair was confident that [] had absorbed the message.⁷² []

Completing the Arc []

The encirclement of the Plain of Jars continued when a [] team leap-frogged Phou Fa to set up a base directly north of the plain. [] then pushed farther to the east. Joined by a [] team, he set up a command post at a village known as Ban Tha Northeast, about 11 miles north of the key road junction at Ban Ban.⁷³ []

Vang Pao had guaranteed 1,000 volunteers from the area around Ban Tha Northeast, but when [] arrived, local Hmong leader Nghia Tong had perhaps 30 men waiting to be equipped and trained. Many more were on the way, he kept assuring the advisers, but after three weeks no more than 300 had showed up. There was, fortunately, no immediate enemy reaction, and the standard training regime got under way.⁷⁴ []

Ban Tha Northeast straddled a ridge on which the volunteers cleared a Helio strip. Even more than most, this one mocked all safety prescriptions. Nearly all guerrilla bases were located on mountain slopes, usually at eleva-

⁷⁰ Despite the theoretical disadvantage of its single engine, the Helio-Courier was involved in no fatal accidents in its first five years of operation in Laos; the only fatalities occurred when one was downed by enemy ground fire. []

⁷¹ Bill Lair, []

⁷² Ibid, []

⁷³ [] interview, []

⁷⁴ Ibid, []

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tions over 4,000 feet. The strip at Ban Tha Northeast, at 4,600 feet, resembled the ski jump at Ban Na. But it rose even more sharply, and a Helio, landing uphill, required full power to taxi to the end. The dangers of the airstrip and Vang Pao's uncharacteristic mistake about recruiting potential, combined with the proximity of two enemy battalions at Ban Ban, made Ban Tha Northeast a marginal site, at best. A light machine gun and a 60mm mortar were the biggest weapons in its arsenal, and the Hmong guerrillas could not be expected to defend against an infantry assault, which, if it came, would almost certainly be supported by the North Vietnamese Army. []

When [] asked for a .50-caliber machinegun, it was not the North Vietnamese he had in mind. The Soviet pilots who flew the IL-12 and IL-14 supply flights from Hanoi to the Plain of Jars sometimes dipped incautiously low over Ban Tha as they approached Phongsavan. When one of them dropped down for a closer look at the camp one day, [] and Hmong leader Nghia Tong had their men ready. As the IL-12 came directly overhead, the .50 caliber and the rest of the garrison opened up. The Soviet banked and fled, and arriving volunteers reported that it had crashed. But Air America reconnaissance and [] never knew for sure whether he was the one American to shoot down a Soviet cargo plane in Laos.⁷⁵ []

There was a little less uncertainty about the work of the one-eyed Hmong who with his M-1 rifle—and a very lucky shot—downed another Soviet transport that imprudently followed a ridgeline offering a clear field of fire. Vang Pao claimed to have verified that feat, which earned the marksman a new rifle and 1,000 rounds of ammunition.⁷⁶ []

Two more sites opened by mid-April 1961. In late March, Jack Shirley, the easy-going paramilitary officer who, [] was preparing for a weapons drop at San Tiau, 10 miles south of Ban Ban. Shortly thereafter, [] set up a guerrilla training camp farther east, at an abandoned French outpost just south of Route 7 and only a few thousand yards from the North Vietnamese border.⁷⁷ []

At this point, guerrilla bases covered all exits from the Plain of Jars except the southeast, where skittish FAR units still provided the main barrier to a possible communist drive to the Mekong. Headquarters estimated that the Hmong were tying down at least six, maybe nine, Pathet Lao battalions, and reporting [] detailed the skirmishes and ambushes that were keeping the enemy on the defensive. Even the North Vietnamese were, at first,

⁷⁵ Ibid.; Strip elevation from Joint Operations Graphic (Air), NE 48-1, 1983. []

⁷⁶ Ibid. []

⁷⁷ Ibid.; [] interview. []

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intimidated by the ubiquitous threat of raid or ambush. Intercepted messages testified to the anxiety of NVA units about the security of roads they had previously used with impunity, as [] discovered on a visit to Vientiane when [] excitedly instructed him to "read this!"⁷⁸—it was an NVA order to devote more resources to route security. []

Dozens of guerrilla camps, some more or less permanent and others constructed only to support a particular operation, were to appear in succeeding years. But the structure of the Hmong guerrilla movement was now in place. It matured just as the great powers agreed to an informal cease-fire while they worked on a neutralization formula designed to keep the conflict over Laos from detonating a general war. []

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CHAPTER FOUR

A Contentious Cease-Fire

CIA was still racing to complete its guerrilla organization in northern Laos when its operation at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba came to a catastrophic end on 19 April 1961. In the wake of this disaster, Washington finally abandoned the direct US military action to retake the Plain of Jars that had been an option four weeks earlier when the United States had endorsed the British proposal for negotiations. Instead, it now pressed for convening the proposed 14-nation conference on the future of Laos.¹

The change in emphasis in Washington was echoed in Vientiane. There, was preoccupied with completing the command, logistic, and communications arrangements necessary for the Hmong resistance to survive a supervised cease-fire. But immediate tactical issues also demanded attention. The guerrilla camp at San Tiau, was coming under pressure and might have to be evacuated. At the same time, on the other side of the Plain of Jars, saw an opportunity to claim more territory for the Royal Laotian Government by linking Hmong irregulars in Luang Prabang Province with those directed by Vang Pao.²

By mid-April the explosive growth of the program had modified view of staffing requirements. Despite the possibility that a Geneva agreement might eliminate American advisers altogether, he now wanted more American military personnel than the Program Evaluation Office and CINCPAC were prepared to give him. At the same time, recognized the validity of Bill Lair's concern about with the Hmong "If US personnel move in on [a] large scale, attempt [to] usurp Meo command and commanders, and appear [to] be relegating to [the] relatively menial role of communicators or interpreters, [the] United States will

¹ Douglas Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970*, 7.

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lose both Meo and []' For that reason, [] wanted to follow a "gradualist approach" that ensured CIA control over the integration of American military personnel and the preservation of [] effectiveness as an autonomous advisory element. But Headquarters could not furnish even the modest numbers [] believed were required, [] went to PEO for help.³ []

As it happened, the loss of Tha Thom and other FAR reverses had persuaded PEO chief General Boyle that his Special Forces teams were most urgently required as advisers to the Laotian regulars. There might have been room for compromise, [] but Lt. Col. John Little, working for Boyle as the capable but "dogmatic" chief of the US Special Forces detachment, muddied the waters with a jurisdictional issue. If [] wanted Special Forces involved with the Hmong irregulars, he should give them an area of control—Little proposed Sam Neua Province—with CIA responsible for funding and logistics.⁴ []

Left to his own devices, General Boyle might have been more accommodating, but he did not overrule his Special Forces commander. And [] thought the army ill-prepared to handle the tribesmen's cultural idiosyncrasies and the tension between them and the majority Lao. The result was that, with the exception of Bill Chance's team at the Pa Dong command post, any Special Forces support to CIA irregulars came thereafter on an ad hoc basis, arranged between Little's team leaders in the field and their CIA counterparts.⁵ []

The Territorial Imperative []

The prospect of a cease-fire impelled both sides to put a high premium on securing as much territory as possible before talks began on the formation of a coalition government. For that reason, [] did not let the impasse with Little prevent some additional expansion. Nevertheless, the shortage of supervisory personnel induced some skepticism about individual proposals that he might otherwise have entertained. []

In mid-April, Stuart Methven reported from the royal capital at Luang Prabang that numerous mountain tribesmen in his area were volunteering to the local FAR commander, Colonel Siboravong. Some of them were Hmong, already aware of the support to Vang Pao, and Methven wanted to exploit the opportunity both to link up with Vang Pao and to claim additional mountain territory around the royal capital. Other volunteers, including 400 Kha Mou

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A CONTENTIOUS CEASE-FIRE [redacted]

from Phong Saly Province in the far north, represented tribes of whose history and political loyalties [redacted] knew little.⁶ [redacted]

The few Hmong volunteers already armed in Luang Prabang were acquitting themselves well, and [redacted] had no serious qualms about supporting more. But he worried about control of the Kha Mou, and about the ability of Methven's volunteers to attract others. "Before embarking on this type effort, you must know whether you have a single leader with enough prestige to command [the] loyalty of [the] recruitable Kha Mou in [the] vicinity of any base" that might be established. And the possession of a secure base area was more important to [redacted] than harassing enemy forces. Methven should concentrate more on developing irregular units behind enemy lines and less on helping FAR build commando units for sporadic forays from friendly territory. Meanwhile, [redacted] wanted Washington approval to recruit 4,000 more tribal irregulars who could lay claim to additional territory not only in Luang Prabang and Phong Saly but also in Sam Neua Province, in the northeast.⁷ [redacted]

Headquarters thought most of these potential volunteers too scattered to allow effective communications. Any CIA officers deployed with them would run too great a risk of capture, and the [redacted] assigned to them would have to be withdrawn from support of Vang Pao. Permission was withheld for the moment, though Methven could support the Hmong tribesmen in Luang Prabang Province whose bona fides he had established. Even these, however, would not be included in [redacted] effort to integrate the Hmong irregulars into FAR in anticipation of a cease-fire inspection regime. Methven could give them "what they need to fight and only as much as necessary to get them to fight."⁸ [redacted]

Three days later, on 21 April, Washington's reservations had increased. A cable to Vientiane repeated earlier concerns about an effective chain of command and about the prospect of successfully imposing CIA conditions on the use of US-supplied ordnance. There was also the potential problem of supplies to the irregulars being cut off after a cease-fire, something that the Hmong might "interpret as failure to fulfill commitments."⁹ [redacted]

More alarming, [redacted] was the rapid decay of the RLG's military position in the Panhandle, where communist forces now threatened Thakhek, on the Mekong River border with Thailand. Farther south, in

⁶ [redacted]
[redacted]
⁷ [redacted]
[redacted]
⁸ [redacted]
⁹ [redacted]

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Savannakhet Province, Pathet Lao advances threatened not only Thailand but also the approaches to South Vietnam. The communists had just taken Muong Phine, on the road between Savannakhet town and the South Vietnamese border, and further advance to the east would expose that border to North Vietnamese infiltration. The Laotian Ministry of Defense renewed its appeal for a cease-fire, but the Pathet Lao made no reply.¹⁰ []

The communists may have wanted time to deal with the Hmong expansion that threatened their southern flank in MR 2, for they followed their obdurate stance at the bargaining table with attacks on irregular units south of Route 7. For several weeks, Vang Pao and his advisers had anticipated a concerted reaction to the Hmong guerrillas then spreading east from the Plain of Jars. Headquarters shared this apprehension and, as early as 20 April, had asked [] about the threat to Vang Pao's headquarters at Ban Pa Dong and about the vulnerability of case officers and US military personnel there and at outposts like Ban Na.¹¹ []

The timing of Washington's query coincided with the first major attack on a Hmong guerrilla base. [] reported that, as of 21 April, enemy infantry and artillery had Ban San Tiau, east of the Plain of Jars, "under heavy attack." Two case officers—Jack Shirley was the senior of them—[] [] were supporting the Hmong volunteers and a FAR territorial unit under Vang Pao's command. [] said it had instructed Shirley to withdraw, if necessary, to avoid encirclement and had sent two H-34 helicopters to Pa Dong to meet the possible need for evacuation.¹² []

Shirley reported next day that the initial attacks had been beaten back—the command post itself was not yet under fire—and that patrols indicated no enemy presence south or east of San Tiau. Concerned about the defenders' morale, he urged against evacuating the advisers by helicopter. But on the 23rd, Hmong scouts around San Tiau reported North Vietnamese infantry moving to cut off all escape routes. It was too late to call for H-34 support, and the advisers joined their troops in a withdrawal over the precipitous ridges to the south.¹³ []

The CIA advisers carried the rifles [] who alternated lugging the cumbersome RS-1 radio up and down the tortuous slopes of a Hmong trail to a tiny hamlet about 5 miles from San Tiau. A message to []

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The author was the second CIA officer at San Tiau. []

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triggered an evacuation mission next morning, and the advisers enjoyed several minutes of suspense watching two H-34s droning up the valley toward them. The helicopters were not yet within range of Shirley's tiny emergency transmitter, but their pilots could be heard debating whether they would fly any farther into hostile terrain. About to give up and turn back, they finally heard Shirley's call and proceeded until the panel signaling the landing pad came into view.¹⁴

The withdrawal from San Tiau with only a few casualties reflected the successful application of live-to-fight-another-day guerrilla doctrine. Advisers and the indigenous commander flew to Pa Dong for consultation with Bill Lair and Vang Pao. Meanwhile, the San Tiau irregulars set up a new base 10 miles to the west.¹⁵

Divided Counsels

At an administration briefing for congressional leaders on 27 April, Adm. Arleigh Burke, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "strongly and repeatedly" insisted that unless the United States was prepared to intervene militarily in Laos, all of Southeast Asia would be lost. But he acknowledged that such intervention meant a "tough, long, and hard war" that might very well bring in the communist Chinese. The prospect of such a conflict daunted even the legislators who agreed with the domino interpretation. They endorsed the judgment of the acting secretary of state that, "even recognizing [the] possible consequences to our position in [the] remainder [of] Southeast Asia, we should not introduce US forces into Laos."¹⁶

This reluctance was reinforced by the belief, prevalent on Capitol Hill, that the Lao were unwilling to fight to save themselves. In fact, the kingdom had no martial tradition. Its armed forces were little more than the shell of an institution imposed by the colonial French. With an officer corps inexperienced in combat and devoid of *èlan*, the army displayed an endemic lassitude that, as we have seen, shaped the US decision to turn to tribal irregulars to restore the balance.¹⁷

The impression of FAR passivity was intensified by the understanding in Congress that FAR outnumbered enemy forces by more than two to one—the

¹⁴ Author's recollection.

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¹⁶ Chester Bowles, Telegram to Secretary of State Rusk, 27 April 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 146-47.

¹⁷ Memorandum from Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff (Breitweiser) to the President's Military Aide (Clifton), "Comparative Forces in Laos," 1 May 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 157.

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ratio rising to more than three to one when local militias and the Hmong irregulars were included. But the Pathet Lao now benefited from the presence of perhaps as many as 1,500 North Vietnamese advisers and specialists, and its combat effectiveness had grown in proportion. With the enemy active on several fronts, Vientiane had no reserves, and the prospect was one of further reverses.¹⁸

The unfavorable military balance left Congress and the State Department hunting for a formula that would preserve a noncommunist Laos while leaving the ground combat to indigenous forces. A State telegram of 27 April defined the problem as one of finding a way to stop the communist military advance without destroying the possibility of a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement. The Department doubted that the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese sought to conquer all of Laos, but it emphatically disclaimed any certain knowledge of their intentions. Accordingly, it recommended calling a UN Security Council meeting to mediate between the Laotian factions while SEATO troops—no Americans, presumably, among them—moved into Vientiane and southern Laos.¹⁹

In another telegram, on 28 April, State continued to wrestle with the issue of ends and means. Part of the dilemma arose from uncertainty about the intentions of the Sino-Soviet Bloc, and Washington's call for more intelligence implied that, whatever the United States might choose to do, it would risk general war over Laos only with great reluctance. Behind this, finally, lay the question of the importance to the United States of a noncommunist Laos. State saw it as contingent in part on the attitudes of Asian governments. "Our national interest is heavy but [only] part of [the] collective interest in security in Southeast Asia." If SEATO allies hesitated to participate in collective action, the United States would have to rethink its responsibilities in the area. For Asian neutrals as well, the time had come to decide whether the umbrella of US power required at least their political support in the conflict over Laos.²⁰

The defense establishment took a harder line. Secretary of Defense McNamara thought it essential that Laos not become another in the "present Soviet chain of successes," and that the United States demonstrate its unwillingness "to concede world leadership to the communists." In a memorandum to President Kennedy, he and Deputy Defense Secretary Gilpatric recommended a deadline for the conclusion of a cease-fire. Laos might represent

¹⁸ Ibid. The JCS figures included, on the government side, a 38,500-man regular army, almost 14,000 militiamen, and 6,000 Hmong guerrillas. The enemy's forces included the 1,500 North Vietnamese, 4,000 Kong Le neutralists, and 11,000 Pathet Lao.

¹⁹ Dean Rusk, Telegram to Department of State, 27 April 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 147n.

²⁰ Telegram from Secretary Rusk to the Department of State, 28 April 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 148-49.

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"one of the least favorable places in the world for direct US military intervention," but American prestige was now engaged. Failing an agreement, American troops should be deployed to Laos both to preserve the kingdom and to meet US obligations to SEATO. Washington would have to accept the possibility of escalation into general war, including an attack on southern China "if Chinese volunteers intervene."²¹

Looking at the problem from a more localized perspective, came to a similar conclusion. Ambassador Brown was looking for ways to strengthen the American bargaining position, and thought it was time to fish or cut bait. The only solution was a "real show of force," not just to get a cease-fire, but to "establish clearly and unmistakably in the enemy's mind . . . the fact that the United States means business about its stated objectives in Laos." Failing this, Washington could expect at the conference table what it was seeing on the battlefield, namely,

a rapid erosion of [the] US and RLG position. We are almost pathetically anxious to strengthen the RLG's political position prior to the opening of any conference, but we fail to do what is most needed for this purpose, namely, to strengthen its military position to do so.

US and SEATO forces would be needed for this, as well as Marshal Sarit's agreement to move them into staging areas in Thailand. The only alternative was an RLG retreat into the Panhandle, below the Nam Ca Dinh, but doubted that this would provide a durable solution. More likely, it would only "prolong the death agony and therefore US embarrassments and distress."²²

Even if a cease-fire could be arranged, there remained the question of the subsequent relationship with the Hmong. Headquarters wanted reassurance on several points. Did exercise enough control to ensure their compliance? A corollary to this: Would Vang Pao's authority over them survive the political opposition to be expected from General Phoumi and Hmong clan elder Touby Lyfoung? Finally, did Hmong combat effectiveness justify the political risks of continuing support?²³

disclaimed any command authority over the irregulars; exercised "influence" on them through Col. Vang Pao, whose approval

²¹ Robert McNamara and Roswell Gilpatric, Memorandum to President Kennedy, "Alternative Courses of Action in Laos," 2 May 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 166-69. Air Force chief of staff Gen. Thomas D. White believed that intervention should be limited to airstrikes; commitment of US ground forces into Laos would be a "maldeployment." But war with China was "inevitable" if the United States took the decisive action necessary to avoid the mistakes of the Korean war. (Editorial Note, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 169-70.)

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had to precede all Hmong guerrilla operations. Conversion to a purely intelligence effort was out of the question, for the entire operation rested on physically securing Hmong settlements in the mountains from the hated Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. But [] expected their regard for the king, and their dependence on the United States for the means to resist, to keep them responsive to tactical guidance. As for combat effectiveness, the COS rated it as better than he had hoped. The Hmong were showing "courage, [a] capacity [to] take losses," the ability to "survive despite hardships and meager rations," and a "considerable instinct and enthusiasm for ambushing and harassing."²⁴ []

Addressing the use of US-supplied equipment, [] said he found its effectiveness hard to judge. He noted some excessive ammunition consumption but expected experience and more training to improve fire discipline. At best, the Hmong were "not going to win the war themselves," but they represented the principal RLG asset in Xieng Khouang Province and potentially in Sam Neua and northern Luang Prabang as well. [] advised that, in separate discussions held in late April, the ambassador, the army attaché, and the chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) had all endorsed the program's expansion. Vang Pao had offered another 3,000 volunteers—for a total of 9,000 since the first deliveries at Ban Pa Dong—and [] wanted to arm them before a cease-fire was signed and an inspection regime installed.²⁵ []

This preference collided with Headquarters' nervousness about the security of its field officers. Meanwhile, just after the San Tiau evacuation, Headquarters worried that the possibility of an imminent cease-fire might provoke a more concerted communist effort against Vang Pao's other bases. Growing pressure on the Hmong "may signal an all out drive against them within [the] next 48 hours." Accordingly, [] should recall all CIA men assigned to guerrilla sites, and PEO should do likewise with its upcountry people.²⁶ []

[] appealed this, asserting that nothing would be better calculated to break the back of the resistance than to abandon the Hmong under fire. Headquarters acceded, for the moment, but told [] it thought the prospects for a long-term upcountry presence were very poor. Its pessimistic forecast saw either a political settlement leading to a "strongly pro-Commie government," or a "Lao military defeat resulting in [the US government] being ousted from Laos."²⁷ []

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On 1 May 1961, Kong Le and the Pathet Lao offered a cease-fire, to go into effect two days later. Why they did so, with FAR on the ropes, remains mysterious, but Washington jumped at the opportunity. There was, for now, no more talk of US military intervention, as Dean Rusk wired Ambassador Brown saying he assumed the ambassador would "counsel [the] RLG to cooperate without raising complicating issues on picayune details."²⁸

Among the details Rusk wanted omitted was the formal delineation of territory to be controlled by the contesting parties. This expedient would permit continuing competition for real estate and population everywhere except where major troop concentrations faced each other. Verification of compliance would be complicated, moreover, by the ideological divisions among the members—Canada, India, and Poland—of the International Control Commission, which was to be reactivated for the purpose. And it could be assumed that the Pathet Lao would quickly demonstrate a highly restrictive approach to ICC inspections on its turf. Nevertheless, the agreement met the one irreducible US policy imperative, to prevent the collapse of the armed forces of the RLG without the commitment of American troops.²⁹

King Savang Vatthana, General Phoumi, and the civilian elite shared Washington's foreboding about their country's future, and all of them acknowledged FAR's impotence against what they saw as an invasion by the North Vietnamese. Whether or not they agreed with Rusk about territorial boundaries, they had no better chance of influencing Washington than of resisting Hanoi, and an informal and partial cease-fire came into effect on 3 May.³⁰

There ensued two weeks of procedural maneuvering by the signatories, during which Headquarters authorized to help the Hmong defend themselves. Offensive operations were prohibited, as was "any other provocation which could upset [the] cease-fire." On 9 May, State Department instructions authorized ammunition and food supplies to the Hmong

But new volunteers in scattered enclaves were not to be armed.³¹

²⁸ Memorandum from Secretary Rusk to President Kennedy, 1 May 1961; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1985, "Eyes Only President and Secretary from Harriman," 1 May 1961; State Telegram 1207 to Vientiane, "For Ambassador from Secretary," 3 May 1961; all *FRUS 1961-1963*, 159, 165, 171-72.

²⁹ Blaufarb, *War in Laos*, 7!

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Rusk's preference to forgo a precise delineation of territorial holdings had the effect of giving the advantage to Hanoi's highly trained and well-disciplined infantry. That advantage multiplied when the NVA exploited tactical surprise, something it had not achieved at San Tiau but which led to a painful defeat shortly after the cease-fire stabilized the points of contact between the communists and FAR. [redacted]

The attack on San Tiau had come with ample warning. Several days earlier, the CIA advisers, casually inspecting the prehistoric jars in the valley several hundred feet below the command post, had been startled to find themselves under harassing fire from a 105mm howitzer that the enemy had dragged south from Route 7. Hmong patrols had then begun reporting flanking movements by battalion-strength NVA elements, and the emerging picture allowed a prudent reaction. Two weeks later, near the border with North Vietnam, the absence of such warning would exact a very high price.³² [redacted]

Whether for lack of manpower or because of Washington's anxiety about CIA officers in the field—risk of capture was always the main issue—there was no CIA officer at Muong Ngat. Some 25 miles east of San Tiau and less than 6 miles from the North Vietnamese border, it had served as a French outpost during the First Indochina War. Now, Muong Ngat harbored friendly forces that included both new Hmong volunteers and a company of territorial forces, mostly ethnic Lao, under Vang Pao's Military Region 2. [redacted]

[redacted]³³

Before dawn on 13 May, heavy weapons opened up on Muong Ngat, tearing up the buildings of the old French installation. At 0700 hours, two battalions of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese assaulted the defenders' positions, where the largest bunker was occupied by [redacted] and the territorials. During the first of at least two hand-to-hand engagements, the [redacted] radioman was shot through the head and killed. With that attack repelled, [redacted] gunners launched 4.2-inch mortar shells at the regrouping enemy until their ammunition ran out.³⁴ [redacted]

The territorials had a .50-caliber machinegun on an anti-aircraft mount. Its crew dead or dispersed, [redacted] took it over, sweeping the advancing enemy while the remainder of his team rallied the demoralized Hmong defenders. A recoilless rifle round struck the exposed machinegun, disabling it and knocking [redacted] to the ground. Suffering chest and face wounds, and with the attack-

³² Author's recollection. [redacted]

³³ [redacted]

Bill Lair. [redacted]

³⁴ [redacted]

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ers again at the bunker, [] picked up enemy grenades and hurled them back at the communists.³⁵ []

The North Vietnamese fell back once again. But the defenders were nearly surrounded, and their alternatives were limited: escape or be killed. [] and the territorials' commander agreed to make a break for it, heading for a wooded area that looked like the only spot on the perimeter not yet occupied by the enemy. They alerted as many of the defenders as they could and dashed out of their bunkers and foxholes.³⁶ []

North Vietnamese fire mowed down dozens of the desperate Hmong and Lao, and [] An enemy party—unaccountably unarmed—intercepted them before they reached the tree line and seized [] The men with him fought off the attackers with rifle butts and pointblank fire, and the remaining defenders finally reached the relative safety of the forest. There, the Hmong's endurance and superior knowledge of the terrain allowed them to elude the pursuing enemy. Having been separated during their escape, the surviving [] and their Hmong guides headed for the rallying point that [] had designated before the attack.³⁷ []

Two days later, they reached an outpost manned by Hmong irregulars. Meanwhile, Bill Lair [] alerted by an emergency message from [] on the morning of the attack, had spent the daylight hours in the air, searching for survivors. They had begun early on 14 May, flying over the eerily calm Muong Ngat, where the dead littering the landscape displayed the ferocity of the previous day's battle. But it was not until 17 May, after a message from the Hmong outpost harboring [] and his men, that Lair and [] found and retrieved them.³⁸ []

[] meanwhile, drew a lesson from the disaster there. Bill Lair concluded that, in his eagerness to expand Vang Pao's forces, he had given too little weight to the skill and determination of the NVA, which he knew had perhaps the finest light infantry in the world. Now, looking at the heavy casualties at Muong Ngat, he resolved never again

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38 Bill Lair; []

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to give the NVA an opportunity to overwhelm the Hmong with a conventional, concentrated assault.³⁹ []

Scaling Back the Objective []

The North Vietnamese assault on Muong Ngat was still a few days away when on 9 May the State Department sent new instructions to Ambassador Brown. Washington—including CIA Headquarters, presumably—had become apprehensive about what it apparently considered a potentially dangerous practice of arming scattered bands of volunteers in vulnerable areas, especially east of the Plain of Jars. It decreed that, while all parties awaited the arrival of an international inspection team, [] could supply food and ammunition to existing forces; but no additional weapons. And ordnance on hand could be used only for defensive purposes. Meanwhile, the RLG should claim Xieng Khouang as a combat front subject to inspection and insist on a cease-fire verification process there. At the same time, PEO—now converted into a uniformed MAAG—should help validate the government's claim to the province by supporting, through FAR channels, the scattering of official militia and territorial units under Vang Pao's command.⁴⁰ []

The ambassador's response accepted the imprudence of any new guerrilla sites east of the Plain of Jars but took issue with several assumptions, most emphatically the apparent expectation of an effective cease-fire inspection regime. Replying just after the fall of Muong Ngat, he noted that the 3 May cease-fire had freed enemy units in the sectors where combat had been suspended. These were now available to assist the enemy's "widespread and determined" campaign to locate and "disperse or destroy" the Hmong guerrillas.⁴¹ []

Hmong irregulars and their families were already moving from the exposed eastern sector, which would remove the provocation of a guerrilla presence on the high ground commanding the routes into North Vietnam. Nevertheless, enemy probes or attacks into Vang Pao's territory would certainly inspire resistance, or even counterattack, "directly or indirectly by attempting to create counter- or diversionary pressures in other sectors." Enemy pressure on Pa Dong had already compelled the ambassador to approve reinforcing it with automatic weapons and light artillery, and he thought it essential to continue arming new volunteers in areas where Hmong guerrillas were gradually concentrating. If the Geneva conference were to award Hmong-occupied territory

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to the Pathet Lao later, arbitrary restrictions on the supply of weapons and ammunition would be even more destructive of Hmong security.⁴²

From Honolulu, Admiral Felt weighed in with a passionate endorsement of Ambassador Brown's reservations about reasonable expectations of a cease-fire. More basically, he wanted to "urge that every possible influence be exerted to keep Laos from being negotiated away to the communists." Our local allies, not just the Lao and Prime Minister Sarit but also President Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, already doubted our resolve, and Washington had to ensure that the communists understood that the United States would fight to preserve Laotian neutrality. This meant, in practical terms, that "some agreement has got to be reached in Washington on the point beyond which we will not be pushed."⁴³

Such an agreement was not to be achieved, as the administration implicitly rejected the calls to action emanating from the defense establishment. Instead, the State Department continued searching for a formula that would ensure the survival of the RLG and the Hmong without requiring the commitment of American troops. At Geneva, where talks began on 16 May, the United States argued for cease-fire terms that would secure the Mekong River valley and Hmong-controlled portions of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua. At the same time, Washington continued trying to square the circle in its dealings with the Hmong, hoping to minimize its still-undeclared support while preserving their ability to defend themselves against communist incursions.⁴⁴

At this point, in late May 1961, the Hmong had become the principal instrument of a continued RLG presence in northeastern Laos. But they were now also a client whose dependence on continued US support constituted the single greatest impediment to a settlement at Geneva. Some at State already regretted the commitment to the Hmong, but the Department accepted that the United States had both the "moral obligation and practical need" to protect the Hmong with material support and with diplomatic efforts on their behalf at Geneva.⁴⁵

In Vientiane, the focus remained fixed on protecting the irregulars from a concerted enemy drive. While Washington treated the conclusion of a permanent, "watertight" agreement as if it presented a real possibility, and

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listened to State Department colleagues deploring the Hmong resistance as an impediment to speedy agreement at Geneva. (Douglas Blaufarb, interview by the author, Three Churches, WV, 22 July 1999 [hereafter cited as Blaufarb interview].)

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Lair, sobered by the Muong Ngat experience, now doubted that even a reconstituted International Control Commission would prevent Hanoi from "methodically eliminating organized Meo defensive positions in remote isolated pockets [in the vicinity of the] North Vietnam border." In line with Washington's guidance of 9 May, they were now putting increased emphasis on consolidating the areas already held by Hmong irregulars north, west, and south of the Plain of Jars. The San Tiau units and the Muong Ngat survivors would join Vang Pao's forces south of the plain, and new units would protect refugee centers populated by civilians from isolated villages.⁴⁶ []

The recommendation for new units reflected Vientiane's belief that, even after ceding the area east of the Plain of Jars, other localities, more important to the integrity of the resistance movement, required weapons if they were to survive. Undeterred by Washington's reluctance, [] asked for arms and equipment for another 1,000 volunteers. Headquarters resisted, drawing a distinction between Hmong villagers "under attack who must be armed to prevent their being annihilated" and those neither armed nor immediately threatened. In addition—introducing a theme that would intermittently recur throughout the course of the conflict—Headquarters feared that an expanded program would "invite attack by Commies on newly armed units."⁴⁷ []

[] reply surfaced another enduring theme, the military superiority of the North Vietnamese that forced any Hmong resistance, no matter what its size, into an essentially defensive stance. Vientiane could not, of course, guarantee that the communists would not attack; from the beginning, the resistance had anticipated enemy moves to conquer the Hmong, and one of its purposes was to defeat these moves when it could not deter them.⁴⁸ []

[] foresaw serious degradation of Hmong morale in the north and west if he were forbidden to equip five companies that had formed themselves and recently walked in looking for arms. In addition, more forces were needed to guard two exposed flanks. One was Vang Pao's "back door," the upper valley of the Nam Ngum, a major river that rose near the northern edge of the Plain of Jars and flowed through Hmong country down toward Vientiane. The other flank, even more critical to the program's survival, was the area south of Pa Dong, exposed to enemy infiltration from the east.⁴⁹ []

Headquarters acknowledged that [] argument posed a "serious dilemma" in Washington. If failure to arm more Hmong risked "defeat and dispersal," arming more tribesmen raised problems not just of "additional commitments, [the] end of which [is] not in sight, but also probably invites

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attack on those given arms." To Headquarters, it seemed that the communists could and would eventually "eliminate organized armed Meo . . . although at great cost."⁵⁰ [redacted]

But [redacted] point about the probable vagaries of cease-fire enforcement had struck home. Retreating from its earlier suggestion about the effectiveness of an inspection regime, Headquarters now hoped for no more from it than "some form of inhibition" against "Commie destruction of the Meo." The security of the tribesmen would depend mainly on force of arms. [redacted]

Throughout this discussion of the policy dilemma, the communists accelerated their military pressure on Ban Pa Dong. Not only Headquarters [redacted] [redacted]—the local chiefs of the agencies and departments represented in the US Mission—entertained some doubt that Pa Dong or the resistance as a whole would survive a concerted communist attack. Embassy officer George Roberts, visiting Vang Pao's headquarters, saw one problem arising from the various and sometimes competing pressures on the Hmong irregulars. They were supposed to disrupt communist administration and supply lines and protect their families and villages, all while trying to expand Hmong territorial control. At the same time, Vang Pao's leadership style reflected his need to "perpetuate and advance his reputation for invulnerability."⁵² [redacted]

Achieving any, let alone all, of these objectives had to come in the face of the guerrillas' limited ability to defend against the superbly disciplined infantry and highly proficient artillery of the NVA. Despite Pa Dong's virtues as a defensive position, [redacted] had no desire to stake the survival of the resistance on repelling a full-scale assault there. The country team message that endorsed the latest expansion agreed, but it also cast implicit doubt on the viability of the resistance, after a nominal cease-fire, even if it clung to a classical guerrilla strategy.⁵³ [redacted]

The ambassador, [redacted] foresaw an eventual Hmong migration as perhaps the only escape from extermination. In that event, he suggested, the United States should try to persuade the Hmong to settle in the mountains of the Annamite Chain in an area extending both north and south

⁵⁰ [redacted]
⁵¹ [redacted]
⁵² [redacted]
⁵³ [redacted]

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of the 17th parallel, separating North and South Vietnam. There, they would find relative safety while serving as an "effective screen against [North Vietnamese] probes, infiltration, and subversion against both Laos and [South Vietnam]." ⁵⁴ []

Headquarters leaped at the idea, and proposed sending a small Hmong reconnaissance team to explore the area as a possible refuge. Perhaps [] [] had not seen the ambassador's proposal, for he now summarily rejected it as an idea whose time had not yet come. It would hurt Hmong morale, and unless confronted with the immediate threat of being overrun, the tribesmen would surely look at migration with a "very jaundiced eye." [] was prepared only to send a case officer, familiar with the Hmong villages and way of life, to do an aerial reconnaissance "when [he] can be spared." ⁵⁵ []

Pa Dong at Vienna []

Unconstrained inspection by an autonomous international team would either deter an attack on Pa Dong or place the responsibility for it on the communists and the Kong Le neutralists. But appeals to Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at Geneva failed to break Soviet insistence that inspections take place only when requested by both sides. In a cable to Secretary Rusk, US delegation chief Averell Harriman complained that "Soviet maneuvers have placed us in exact position we earlier declined to accept, namely, attending [the] conference before [a] cease-fire [becomes] effective." With the inspection issue unresolved, the enemy was free to intensify the artillery bombardment of Vang Pao's command post. ⁵⁶ []

Harriman apparently hoped that Kennedy and Khrushchev might resolve the standoff at Geneva when they met in Vienna on 3 June. In a briefing paper for the president, he noted, "The Pathet Lao are deliberately violating the de facto cease-fire agreement with continuous attacks in the Pa Dong area." They were also "refusing access to International Control Commission teams

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A Hmong migration toward the 17th parallel was suggested at a time well before Hanoi's expansion of the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail and the infiltration of NVA combat units into South Vietnam. Even so, it seems naive to have hoped for safe haven for the Hmong in an area even closer to North Vietnam and directly athwart Hanoi's communications routes to the south. []

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Bill Lair remembered suggesting to Vang Pao that he consider scouting out a safehaven to the west, across the Mekong River in Sayaboury Province. There followed some tentative exploration by the Hmong, but the same inhibitions applied to this, more sensible, idea as to the Annamite Chain proposal. []

⁵⁶ Telegram from the Delegation to the Conference on Laos to State, "For Secretary from Harriman," 24 May 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 206, and passim. []

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attempting to investigate" these violations. Harriman believed that the cease-fire issue had to be resolved "in our favor" if the conference was to succeed, and suggested that Kennedy might help achieve this with "a broader discussion . . . on Laos questions." The goal would be "Khrushchev's assurance that he is genuinely interested in a neutral Laos," to be demonstrated by agreement on several points, including an effective ICC.⁵⁷

At his famously contentious meeting with Khrushchev, Kennedy made Harriman's argument that only an independent body could ensure an effective cease-fire. Khrushchev summarily dismissed it; the Soviet Union, he insisted, would not accept an inspection regime that amounted to a "supragovernment." On this, as on other points, they could agree only to disagree, and the communists continued their preparations to take over the approaches to the Plain of Jars.⁵⁸

On 3 June, the day of the president's meeting with Khrushchev, bad weather set in around Ban Pa Dong. Three days of dense fog gave the enemy—a combination of Pathet Lao, neutralists, and North Vietnamese—a chance to bring up more artillery and infiltrate infantry past Hmong outposts. Throughout the day on 6 June, accurate fire from several 75mm and 85mm howitzers kept the defenders in their foxholes and the helicopter pad unusable. At three in the afternoon, Jack Shirley, got a radio message from Vientiane warning of an imminent attack on the Hmong company guarding the southern approaches some 2,000 yards south of the airstrip.⁵⁹

Presumably derived from a radio intercept, the warning came too late to prevent a surprise attack on the Hmong positions. Pa Dong had no radio contact with its outposts, and enemy artillery had knocked out the telephone line to its southern strongpoint. Shirley got the acting Pa Dong commander to dispatch a regular Laotian army company in response to the warning, but once out of sight it crept off, away from the action.⁶⁰

Taking the defenders by surprise, automatic weapons fire tore through the southern Hmong position, killing about 10 of Vang Pao's men and wounding perhaps 15 more. The survivors fled toward the base camp, and in Vang Pao's absence—he was visiting another site when enemy fire closed the helicopter pad—they could not be persuaded to turn and make a stand. Enemy fire now

⁵⁷ Averell Harriman, Paper Prepared by the Head of the Delegation to the Laos Conference, nd, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 224-25.

⁵⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, "Vienna Meeting Between the President and Chairman Khrushchev," 3 June 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 225-30.

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Path to a Hmong village in the rainy season

began falling on the camp itself, and Vang Pao's site commander readily accepted Jack Shirley's recommendation to withdraw.⁶¹

Shirley and Bill Chance's White Star team accompanied the main body of Hmong irregulars, whose first concern was to get their families out of harm's way. The weaker families had trouble keeping up the pace, and, at one point, Shirley found himself carrying a Hmong baby along with his rifle. could not resist the temptation to take on the enemy in person and was wounded while covering the withdrawal with the Hmong rear guard With the rear guard discouraging pursuit, a motley column of irregulars, territorials, and their families began a 15-hour trek through the mountains that ended the next day at Pha Khao, some 10 miles to the southwest.⁶²

Pa Dong represented a major defeat. The garrison failed to spike the four howitzers and two heavy mortars left behind, and the irregulars had suffered substantial casualties. More ominously, the attack represented a more general

⁶¹ Bill Lair

⁶² Ibid.; Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 57-58.

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enemy drive, not only in Vang Pao's Military Region 2 but throughout the country.

The loss of Pa Dong shook morale at Ban Na, the destination of some of the refugees from the main command post, but elsewhere it seemed not to diminish the Hmong will to fight. Vang Pao's authority as military and tribal leader thus survived the setback. At first depressed and discouraged, he was busy two days later reorganizing scattered units and making plans for guerrilla operations designed to force the enemy back onto the Plain of Jars. ⁶⁴

Ambassador Brown thought Vang Pao's resilience a most hopeful sign. He even found a positive aspect to the loss of Pa Dong, which he thought had acquired artificial importance as the symbol of the RLG's presence in MR 2 and the embodiment of Vang Pao's claim to be the protector of the Hmong people. Vang Pao, with the somewhat reluctant assent of his advisers, had wanted to hold Pa Dong in order to anchor a Hmong territorial base and defend the large refugee camp at Pha Khao. These considerations had drawn the Hmong into a kind of positional warfare for which neither tribal culture nor training had prepared them. ⁶⁵

Now that both the RLG presence and Vang Pao's authority had survived, the irregulars south of the Plain of Jars could return to the hit-and-run guerrilla operations for which they had more affinity. The refugee camp at Pha Khao remained a danger point, and the ambassador reported on 8 June that its relocation was "now being urgently studied." But the enemy, his supply lines back to the Plain of Jars being harassed by the guerrillas, did not try to exploit the capture of Pa Dong to push farther south, and the sense of crisis gradually dissipated. ⁶⁶

In any case, there was no way to eliminate territorial control as an integral aspect of the Hmong program. Unlike the Viet Cong, whose families usually remained in their villages, Hmong volunteers invariably brought their families when they came in to be armed and trained. Every major command post—some smaller ones, too—became a kind of garrison community, and the expectation of security for their dependents always constituted the guerrillas' essential motivation. ⁶⁷

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PHO REFUGEES AT LONG TIENG DISPLAYING VARIOUS HOUSEKEEPING UTENSILS BROUGHT THROUGH USAID.

Photo from undated briefing book with original caption

Bill Lair, for one, did not see this as an insuperable problem. He had already noticed how cheerfully the Hmong people seemed to accept relocation in exchange for some protection against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Vang Pao might worry about the effect on his authority of repeated forced migration, but the fact remained that his people were migratory farmers. Their slash-and-burn cultivation on mountain slopes quickly exhausted the soil that did not disappear in erosion, and every few years they moved on to establish a new village. With relocation farther from the Plain of Jars, they could reasonably hope for fairly long-term security and would not suffer extraordinary hardship if further movement were required.⁶⁸

Accordingly, Lair set out to help Vang Pao find alternative sites, both for his own headquarters and for the housing of civilians. Intensive aerial reconnaissance by Vang Pao and his advisers established that the village of Long Tieng, about 12 miles west of Pa Dong, occupied a site more inaccessible to ground attack than either Pa Dong or Pha Khao. The terrain lent itself to a longer, wider airstrip and guarded the access to Sam Thong, which lay to the northwest in a valley with room enough to support a substantial population. Before

⁶⁸ Ibid.

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the end of the summer of 1961, Long Tieng and Sam Thong became the military and civilian centers, respectively, of the Hmong resistance.⁶⁹

Conflicting Equities and the Provocation Dilemma

As long as the United States sought a negotiated settlement in Laos—a goal it never abandoned—short-term military gain sometimes had to be forgone in order to pursue diplomatic leverage. One such conflict of equities arose in the wake of the Pa Dong incident. and MAAG both saw the retreat to Pha Khao as having taken place in fairly good order, and it looked as if the Hmong could manage, in similar future circumstances, to “all back or evade attack . . . without further disintegration.” But this assumed “continued materiel support and Meo freedom to harass [the] enemy at other points than where [the] enemy chooses to attack.”⁷⁰

This view, conveyed to the US delegation at Geneva, provoked anxiety that the US negotiating position “would be compromised by Meo offensive activity.” American diplomatic tactics relied on an image of RLG forces as the “good guys,” and Hmong attacks would blur this image. In one of the early ironies of the Hmong program, the delegation also feared that reversion to guerrilla tactics, the only long-term possibility for the Hmong, would “undo [a] considerable amount of work” persuading delegates and journalists in Geneva that the Hmong militias were bona fide units of the Laotian armed forces and not merely “armed local tribesmen.”⁷¹

In a fluid military situation, with the enemy pushing hard, such distinctions could become almost academic. On 16 June, for example, two North Vietnamese battalions attacked the guerrilla base at Phou San, only 6 miles from a branch of Route 7 that bypassed the Plain of Jars on the north. The 500 irregulars there repelled the initial assault and later claimed to have inflicted 100 casualties. But they did not wait for a second thrust, breaking up instead into small guerrilla parties that, over the course of the next two days, harassed the Vietnamese without presenting a concentrated target.⁷²

The military imperative prevailed over the diplomatic, in this instance, and guerrilla units continued to seize opportunities to keep the enemy off balance. Indeed, Washington soon renounced, in practice, the essentially unilateral abstention from arming new forces it had ordered after the informal and partial cease-fire of 3 May. But these developments, inevitable on the tactical

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

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level, did not solve and may have aggravated the strategic dilemma facing the Laotian anticommunist forces and their American patrons. []

A recurring theme throughout the 12-year war, the conundrum resulted from two irreducible obstacles to the preservation of a noncommunist Laos. First, whatever the strategic importance of the Laotian domino or "cork in the bottle," the United States would accept neither the cost of an American invasion nor run the perceived risk of sparking general war with a Sino-Soviet bloc still regarded as monolithic. Whatever was to be done on the ground in Laos would have to be done by local [] surrogates. []

Second, []—an idea whose time had not yet come—the numerical and qualitative superiority of the NVA would always outweigh the military capacity of these surrogates. US objectives never included military victory, but sought only to preserve a Laotian bargaining position in Geneva. This meant that no expansion of the irregulars could ever be decisive, unless the communists chose simply not to exercise their predominant power. On the contrary, it always raised the question whether expansion would instead provoke Hanoi and its sponsors into a full-scale invasion of the Mekong Valley. []

The dilemma arose in considerations both of high policy and of immediate tactical decisions. President Kennedy and French President Charles de Gaulle discussed it in Paris, before the Kennedy-Khrushchev encounter. De Gaulle noted that, while the Soviets seemed to have no spontaneous designs on Indochina, "they will . . . tend to follow every time the West moves in." Kennedy seemed to agree, musing that the extent of US commitments in Southeast Asia "may have been unwise," but there they were, and the problem was "how to disengage in the best possible way."⁷³ []

The same problem emerged at the tactical level. In mid-June, the US Mission in Vientiane wanted to arm an additional 1,000 irregulars south of the royal capital at Luang Prabang, and one of Secretary Rusk's staff pointed out the problem: they could not defeat a concerted North Vietnamese drive on the city. On the contrary, their addition to the friendly order of battle would "undoubtedly be used by the communists as a pretext for more aggressive activity." And this would probably succeed, for the enemy could "bring more forces to bear than we."⁷⁴ []

⁷³ Memorandum of Conversation [Kennedy-DeGaulle], 31 May 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 214-20.

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But the arming of new irregulars might, on the other hand, allow the RLG to claim more territory in the north after a permanent cease-fire.
 expected more help from them for the defense of Luang Prabang than did State; they could at least inhibit flanking attacks against FAR positions facing the enemy on Route 13. The Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed, but Secretary Rusk still hesitated, and the matter wound up on the agenda of the 30 June meeting of the National Security Council. There, President Kennedy sided with the proponents, and the authorized strength of guerrillas armed by CIA grew to 10,500 men.⁷⁵

The issue may have been decided by the Pentagon's pessimism about the state of the regular Laotian military. The Joint Chiefs estimated that, at the time of the 3 May informal cease-fire, "the enemy could advance on any front without encountering effective Lao Army resistance." Now, two months later, after massive efforts by the MAAG to improve things, the army was "not yet an effective force."⁷⁶

Meanwhile, every incremental decision to expand the irregulars rekindled the continual debate between CIA and Defense over project costs and operational jurisdiction. The Agency lobbied for the military to assume the cost of the Hmong resistance, something Defense resisted so long as CIA ran it. But the military disclaimed any desire to take over until the Geneva negotiations produced a definitive outcome. Even then, if the talks failed and the United States moved to covert support, it wanted CIA to continue bearing the cost. In mid-summer 1961, both issues remained unresolved; CIA continued both to run the operation and to pay the bill.⁷⁷

The enemy pressure that drove the Hmong out of San Tiau and Pa Dong receded in June, and in July, Hmong irregulars retook San Tiau. Elsewhere, only minor skirmishes broke the quiet that prevailed not only in the mountains but among the regular forces facing each other on the Vicntiane Plain, around Luang Prabang, and in the lowlands of the Panhandle. In Switzerland, the Geneva talks were equally inconclusive, as the action shifted in mid-July from Geneva to Zurich. There, the three Laotian princes—the neutralist Souvanna Phouma, his Pathet Lao half-brother Souphanouvong, and General Phoumi's

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⁷⁶ Memorandum from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Lemnitzer) to President Kennedy, "Capabilities of the Lao Army," 7 July 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 290-91.

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anticommunist ally, Boun Oum—spurred not just over the composition of a coalition government but even over the location of subsequent talks.⁷⁸ [redacted]

A lower level of combat in Laos did not signal comparably reduced tension between the United States and its principal adversary. The month of June 1961 brought Khrushchev's threat to NATO access to the divided city of Berlin, and Walt Rostow, the president's special assistant for national security affairs, thought that Khrushchev might be orchestrating a "double crisis" in a decisive test of American will. Even if that was not the case, the question of Chinese sensitivities had always to be kept in mind. The perceived monolithic nature of international communism did not necessarily rule out, in Rostow's mind, Khrushchev's accepting a level of Western intervention in Laos that the Chinese would regard as an intolerable provocation.⁷⁹ [redacted]

In Laos, meanwhile, [redacted] the US Mission were less concerned with the larger policy issues than with refining the organizational and logistic instruments of the new style of irregular warfare that they had improvised over the previous six months. These became the principal order of business as agreement at Geneva grew nearer [redacted]

78 [redacted]
[redacted]

⁷⁹ Memorandum from Robert H. Johnson of the NSC Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow), "Reflections on Southeast Asia," 26 July 1961 and passim, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 317-20. [redacted]

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CHAPTER FIVE

Management by Extemporization

Unanticipated by any of the program's managers, air support almost immediately became the single most important ingredient in administration of the Hmong irregulars. The absence of preparation dictated the same improvisational approach to this issue applied to tactical matters. From the beginning in January 1961, the survival of the Hmong resistance depended on air support for delivery of supplies and equipment and timely movement of command and specialist personnel. Panhandle operations, launched at the end of the year, came to rely on it, too.

To get things and people to the right place at the right time, a mix of civilian and military crews flew a variety of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, owned or leased by two different contractors, to guerrilla bases and operational staging areas. All these craft flew unarmed, and all but the versatile and reliable Helio-Courier had been designed to operate under far different conditions.¹

Proprietary Aircraft and Sheep-dipped Pilots

The reliance on air transport posed the toughest early administrative challenge for the paramilitary program. The first major headache came in the form of the Sikorsky H-34 helicopter. The same roaring, shivering contraption in which Bill Lair had almost died at Ban Khang Kho, it operated at the very limits of its capacity when it struggled to take off with a full load from a pad often more than 4,000 feet above sea level.²

The hazards would have been less with more experienced and better motivated crews. The best pilots were superb, and some stayed for years, risking—sometimes giving—their lives to deliver ammunition and supplies to remote outposts and to evacuate Hmong wounded. But to many of them, in early 1961, the H-34 was not much more familiar than the intimidating mountains of northern Laos. They had to learn the terrain, and the enemy it sometimes

¹ Bill Lair; author's recollection.

² Author's recollection.

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Helio-Courier at Pha Khao. The letter B on the tail denotes registration in the Republic of China (Taiwan).

harbored, while they mastered the idiosyncrasies of the aircraft itself. [redacted]

The haste that attended the H-34 deployment created confusion that further tested crew morale. The first H-34s to arrive had been abruptly ordered to Laos in connection with Operation MILLPOND, the contingency plan for a US invasion of the Plain of Jars. The crews came from three services—army, marines, and navy—and there was bickering over flying technique and the marines' performance of the maintenance function. [redacted]

In early June, the JCS concluded that "the helicopter portion of MILLPOND operations is falling apart at the seams." By that time, attrition was confirming that H-34 pilots had good reason for anxiety about flying in Hmong country. The Abadie-Lair crash had been followed on 15 May by

³ Bill Lair; author's recollection. [redacted]

⁴ [redacted]

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H-34 at a landing pad in Hmong country

another, when an H-34 carrying NBC reporter Grant Wolfkill and others went down during a flight from Pa Dong; Wolfkill and the crew were captured by the communists. A few days after that, a third helicopter went down, killing its crew. By June, two helicopter pilots were dead, two had been relieved, and eight had "resigned."⁵

Although much better adapted than the H-34 to service in Laos, the clumsy-looking Helio-Courier was also disdained by many of its early pilots, who looked at it as something only a mother could love. All of them came from backgrounds in multiengine planes, and some found it demeaning to be assigned to a single-engine craft. Others found the Helio disconcertingly demanding, for the exploitation of its singular performance capabilities required a new set of handling skills. Perhaps even worse, the Helio pilots saw insult added to the perpetual threat of injury, for their short missions between guerrilla command posts gave them limited time in the air and, therefore, less money.⁶

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Bill Lair; interview.

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STOL aircraft after crash in vertical limestone formation known as a karst (date and location unknown)



Dornier-28.

Inadequate aircraft, some inexperienced and marginally qualified pilots, administrative tumult, and steeply rising demand for service had combined by mid-1961 to challenge the improvisational approach to air-support management. The only constants were treacherous weather, difficult terrain, the near absence of navigational beacons, and enemy ground fire. Air America and its smaller competitor, Bird & Sons, gradually made the necessary adjustments, covering the country with a motley fleet that, in addition to seven Helio-Couriers, included a converted US Navy bomber of World War II vintage, a twin-engine, German-built STOL plane (the Dornier-28) and, a little later, a Swiss-made STOL aircraft (the Pilatus Porter).⁷

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Hmong village with combined landing strip and drop zone at lower right

The background of the pilots who flew these machines was scarcely less diverse. Some, especially the C-46 and C-47 pilots, were veterans of Civil Air Transport (CAT), Air America's parent company. One of these, the legendary "Doc" Johnson, had defied the Viet Minh's antiaircraft artillery to fly resupply missions to the doomed French garrison at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Robert "Dutch" Brongersma, renowned for natty street dress [redacted] [redacted] was another virtuoso, in his case with the PV-2, the navy bomber. Another CAT veteran was Fred Walker, an extraordinarily capable Helio pilot whose bulk—he weighed well over 200 pounds—made his little aircraft look even smaller and more frail when he squeezed himself behind the controls. Robert Hamblin, flying for Bird & Sons, was a thrill-seeking former freelance flight instructor who stayed to become one of the program's most dependable and resourceful pilots.⁸ [redacted]

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[redacted] author's recollection. [redacted]

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No amount of skill could entirely compensate for the deficiencies of certain aircraft, especially the C-46 and the PV-2. In September 1961, one of each of these crashed. Lt. Col. Henry "Heinie" Aderholt, the pioneering air operations officer detailed to CIA from the US Air Force, blamed the incidents, in part, on the small amount of cargo that could be dropped on one pass. Pushing it out the door to the side required numerous passes over small drop zones, "setting up patterns which provide [the] opposition ample time to line up ground fire." With the rainy season coming to an end, supply requirements would skyrocket, and Aderholt feared he could not meet them. The solution was an aircraft that dumped an entire load down a ramp to the rear, and at Aderholt's insistence, planning now began to replace the antiquated C-46s and PV-2s with the twin-engine C-123 and the four-engine C-130.⁹ [redacted]

These refinements did not take place without some early tension between Aderholt [redacted] fully in charge of the Laotian air operation from its inception, saw no reason to abdicate control to newcomer Aderholt. Heinie, rightly confident of his unique expertise, wanted to bring more order to what he saw as a jury-rigged air operation. Writing from his office at [redacted] for the air support program, he complained to Headquarters about interference [redacted] But he and [redacted] each gradually discovered that the other was concerned not with bureaucratic turf but with running a successful and economical operation, and contention dissolved into collegial harmony.¹⁰ [redacted]

It was another year or two before the last of the C-46s and the even older C-47s disappeared from the skies over Laos. But Heinie Aderholt's advocacy ensured that, when the North Vietnamese escalated their counter guerrilla

⁸ Author's recollection. Yet another pilot, his name not recalled, had retired from Pan American Airways and had joined Bird & Sons apparently on a lark. As an older man, he was naturally more cautious than many of his colleagues and took some raillery from younger customers who had as yet no inkling of their own mortality. One day in late 1961, flying a twin-engine converted Piper known as the Camair, he left Vientiane for Paksane, where the Mekong turns south into the Panhandle. Flying east in an overcast, he may have passed Paksane and proceeded on into enemy-infested mountains until he crashed. But this was only a guess, for no trace of him, his passenger, or the aircraft was ever found. [redacted]

⁹ [redacted]
The first attempt at using the C-130 failed for lack of some of the required ground support facilities. The next try, in about 1968, established this aircraft as the workhorse cargo and troop carrier. A US Air Force standards team that inspected the program commented [redacted] on the mountain airstrips the Air America pilots had to contend with: Not one such site in South Vietnam was as bad as the best of those in Laos. But the team awarded the Air America pilots—and the overall operation—very high marks for both efficiency and safety. (James Glerum, in a series of interviews and notes in the winter and spring of 1999, furnished voluminous information from his experience with the paramilitary programs from 1961 to 1972 [hereafter cited as Jim Glerum].) [redacted]

¹⁰ [redacted] Bill Lair. [redacted]

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activity into massive ground operations, with infantry divisions supported by artillery and eventually by armor, the air logistics system would meet the challenge.

Preparing for the Long Haul

In late summer 1961, the gradual consolidation and expansion of the Hmong guerrilla organization still accompanied an effort to obtain by diplomatic means what no American policymaker expected to win by force of arms. Washington recognized the odds against finding such a formula, and there emerged a split-the-difference trend toward abandoning the search for a coalition government and settling, instead, for simple partition. The communists would be awarded the north and the Phoumi-Boun Oum government in Vientiane would go south into the Panhandle. But such an arrangement of last resort would immediately be threatened by the superiority of communist forces over those of the king. And it would constitute a de jure extension of enemy-controlled territory toward the Laotian border with South Vietnam.¹¹

Furthermore, partition might not endure even without an all-out communist assault. General Phoumi's shortcomings as politician and statesman matched those of his military leadership, and he might need a US-SEATO presence to prop him up even in his southern stronghold. In these unpromising circumstances, Washington sought to strengthen the American bargaining position by strengthening the military barrier to further communist inroads.¹²

In Vientiane, was concerned more with the narrower issue of what to do to ensure Hmong survival as both an irregular force and a people, either with or without a coalition government. Seeing no immediate prospects for a settlement, assumed that, if the FAR standoff with the communists continued as the dry season began in October, the enemy would be free to concentrate on suppressing the Hmong. He proposed to avoid provoking this by restricting Hmong operations to harassment of lines of communication that supported enemy attacks on the guerrillas. Meanwhile, he wanted to solidify the guerrilla organization, find and train new leaders, and form new units while improving communications, intelligence, and logistics.¹³

Some of this was already under way. The American presence was always subject to being negotiated away, and it was imperative to develop local

¹¹ Memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security (Rostow) to the President's Military Representative ([Gen. Maxwell D.] Taylor), "A Split vs. A Unified Laos," 8 August 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 354-58.

¹² Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, "Plan for Southeast Asia," 29 August 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 387-88.

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leadership to supplement Vang Pao's charismatic one-man show. Four of the nine guerrilla zones that surrounded the Plain of Jars were commanded by their traditional Hmong leaders. Fully loyal to Vang Pao, these local chieftains also accepted tactical guidance [redacted]¹⁴ [redacted]

The other five zones had no generally accepted leader, and Vang Pao had named a Hmong officer from FAR to command the irregulars in each. In these zones, the station was trying to identify the more influential local leaders who might supplement or replace the outsiders. In a wishful-sounding forecast, [redacted] Lair predicted that, by 1 October 1961, the program would have sufficient alternative leadership to survive the loss of Vang Pao. CIA's control of the communications system would allow them, they thought, to continue directing the nine zone leaders, who, in Vang Pao's absence, would become autonomous.¹⁵ [redacted]

But Vang Pao seemed to have more lives than the proverbial cat; despite his constant exposure to enemy fire, both in the air and on the ground, he enjoyed the luck of the untouchable survivor. But his seeming immunity did not solve the acute shortage of trained staff officers and subordinate commanders. [redacted]—and Vang Pao, too—recognized that he could not indefinitely constitute a one-man fire brigade, leading every operation and directing every defense.¹⁶ [redacted]

In the early months, [redacted] filled the staffing gaps at the Pa Dong and Pha Khao command posts. [redacted] competence and discretion made him indispensable to Vang Pao, who came to use him as his de facto chief of staff. Meanwhile, [redacted] continued to supervise logistics, communications, and intelligence at most of the other sites.¹⁷ [redacted]

As for combat leadership, Vang Pao was not quite alone. He had two experienced unit commanders, the more accomplished of whom was Capt. Youa Va Ly, a comrade-in-arms from their days in the French colonial army. Vang Pao sometimes sent Ly to take command of a guerrilla base under attack or to a command post that served as the staging area for a Hmong operation. No more than semiliterate, this former noncommissioned officer was tireless, smart, and entirely without fear. Bill Lair [redacted] watched with admiration as he traveled the mountains, instilling in new guerrilla units an indispensable modicum of military organization and discipline under fire.¹⁸ [redacted]

14 [redacted]

15 [redacted]

16 Bill Lair, [redacted]

17 Ibid. [redacted]

18 Ibid. [redacted]

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With doing the staff work, might have been content with the field management structure. But Bill Lair had always seen indigenous leadership as the key to a successful partisan organization.

The instruments of this strategy were the Special Operations Teams (SOTs), each composed of a dozen literate young Hmong—52 in the first group— for training in July. Instruction in weapons, tactics, communications, mapreading, intelligence, and other military skills was supplemented with the parachute training that symbolized their elite status.¹⁹

An SOT, composed of fulltime combatants, could be assigned to any guerilla site, from which it could conduct small-scale raids and long-range intelligence missions. But the program had the larger intent of buttressing local military leadership. The SOT would do this by example, in a way that respected the traditional tribal hierarchy, but the most successful team leaders would presumably acquire de facto authority as they proved their competence.²⁰

Larger missions would require more firepower and more concentrated small-unit combat training. This, too, would require fulltime combatants, with dependent families cared for at major sites like Pha Khao and Ban Na. To meet this need, Vang Pao began recruiting for the Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) that became the core of the Hmong ability to take the war to the enemy. Platoon-sized at first, with about 30 men, the SGUs were by 1965 operating in battalion strength, with as many as 350 men, and the designation became something of a misnomer.²¹

Meanwhile, Vang Pao's personal touch continued to bind the Hmong resistance into a cohesive and responsive whole. might reasonably hope for someone else to emerge, if disaster struck, but his dynamism and charisma meant that, so long as he remained on the scene, just one man would be in charge.

Exploiting Vang Pao's status as both military commander and political leader of a clan alliance required some departures from conventional funding and accounting procedures. By September 1961, the original practice of routing the entire Hmong payroll through Vang Pao had become too unwieldy to continue, and Bill Lair proposed that his case officers deliver the cash directly to the nine zone commanders. Vang Pao had one unanticipated reservation:

¹⁹ Bill Lair,

²⁰ Bill Lair,

²¹ Ibid.

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under the new scheme, the slush fund indispensable to his tribal leadership would disappear.²² [redacted]

By then, 60 Hmong irregulars had been killed in action, and surviving relatives had depended on Vang Pao to defray the cost of burial. The disruption of Hmong economic life resulting from relocation to safehavens like Pha Khao had created other demands, not all of which were being met by the USOM refugee relief program. Vang Pao acknowledged that he'd skimmed the payroll, up to that point, to meet the most urgent of these requirements, and now asked for [redacted] a month to make up the shortfall. In characteristically pragmatic spirit, [redacted] did not reproach Vang Pao for this irregularity. Instead, [redacted] Lair apologized for not anticipating this "urgent and legitimate requirement" when they asked Headquarters to make up the difference.²³ [redacted]

Manpower potential for Vang Pao's Military Region 2 included the remnants of FAR units, many of them ethnic Lao, which had disintegrated in January when FAR abandoned the Plain of Jars. In August 1961, members of various militia and territorial units, some of them Lao, were continuing to straggle into Vang Pao's outposts, and [redacted] wanted to give the resistance army the benefit of their military experience. In any case, whether or not they could do anything useful for Vang Pao, they had to be denied to the enemy. If they were rejected in favor of exclusively civilian Hmong volunteers, they might just go over to the other side. Meanwhile, new Hmong volunteers continued to press for arms, including several hundred from southeast of the Plain of Jars, who came in with tales of recent North Vietnamese atrocities.²⁴ [redacted]

Many of the most recent volunteers, both FAR and civilian Hmong, had come from Sam Neua Province, to the north. [redacted] now saw an opportunity to build a guerrilla organization there that only a massive communist operation could eradicate. Between 6,000 and 10,000 volunteers, in these two provinces alone, were ready to go. In addition, there might be additional potential in Military Region 1, especially among the ethnically distinct Yao tribesmen of Luang Prabang, Nam Tha, and Sayaboury Provinces.²⁵ [redacted]

Vientiane's proposals became part of a package that Secretary of State Rusk submitted to President Kennedy on 29 August. It began with conventional military options—like a possible SEATO invasion of the Mekong Valley—to be launched if the communists resumed their advance when the rains stopped.

22 [redacted]

23 [redacted]

24 [redacted]

25 [redacted]

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*Vang Pao presiding over
payday for the troops, c.
1967*

(Courtesy of Bill Lair)

Other measures included a unilateral resumption of air reconnaissance, the dispatch of more military training teams, and the recruitment of more Hmong irregulars.²⁶

President Kennedy approved just one of Rusk's proposals, the 2,000-man addition to the Hmong guerrillas that would bring the total to 11,000. As always, he sought to improve the RLG's position at the lowest possible level of provocation to Hanoi and to the major communist powers. Accordingly, he put on hold the suggestion for expansion into Sam Neua. The new weapons would go only to strengthen the Xieng Khouang resistance and to consolidate forces there and in Luang Prabang Province. But policy could change with circumstances, and Washington wanted intelligence on resistance potential in Sam Neua and adjacent tribal areas in North Vietnam. At the same time, concerned about reported Soviet air support to communist infiltrators passing through Tchepone, the administration called for reconnaissance of Routes 8 and 12, leading out of North Vietnam into the northern Panhandle.²⁷

²⁶ Rusk Memorandum, "Plan for Southeast Asia."

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Five***Guerrillas for the Panhandle**

The communist challenge in the Panhandle had arisen in the spring of 1961, when intensified communist military pressure there accompanied the attacks in Hmong country. FAR units in the south were as ineffectual as those in the north, and, at the end of April, the enemy drove them out of the garrison towns of Muong Phine and Tchepone. With these attacks, the communists secured the Laotian border area with North and South Vietnam, gaining a hold they did not relinquish, except for a few days in 1971, until the end of the war.²⁸

As new intelligence alleged increasing North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam, Washington faced the usual dilemma. Although no combination of indigenous forces could entirely suppress Hanoi's violation of Laotian territory, the use of American forces was already ruled out. Yet inaction posed its own dangers. Saigon's hold on the South Vietnamese countryside had begun to decline over a year earlier, and unhindered communist use of Laotian territory would give Hanoi a major, perhaps decisive, advantage. Washington's fear of massive Soviet or Chinese response to an expanded paramilitary program faded as the United States sought to limit Hanoi's use of a porous border to feed the burgeoning insurgency in South Vietnam.²⁹

No Laotian initiative to counter this infiltration was to be expected. The RLG, preoccupied with the Mekong Valley, cared relatively little about the mountainous and lightly populated eastern Panhandle.

If only the United States was to respond, questions remained as to what form that response would take, and who would run it. A US government intent on a negotiated settlement had entrusted CIA with irregular operations in Laos. In Vietnam, US Army Special Forces teams were engaged in tribal programs similar to the one with Vang Pao. But all these teams worked under CIA's operational control. Since any deployment of Vietnam-based units to or across the Laotian border would be surreptitious, Washington's discussion of sponsorship was brief; CIA would be in charge. It remained for the Agency to decide and which indigenous elements would participate.

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 cut the Gordian knot regarding the persisting confusion about numbers of volunteers armed; an "arbitrary Headquarters assumption for future reference purposes [is] that approx[imately] 9,000 [have been] armed to date."

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claimed a role in combating communist investment of the eastern Panhandle. Saigon, interested solely in finding and disrupting North Vietnamese infiltration and supply routes into the South, was authorized in June 1961 to send intelligence and combat patrols on short-term missions across the border. These would monitor and harass the movement of men and supplies south from Route 12. With admirable courage and persistence but to little effect, US Special Forces personnel and local irregulars struggled through dense jungle into areas unknown even to the tribesmen recruited as guides.³⁰

had three options. The first called for the creation of a Hmong guerrilla zone where Route 8, linking the northern Panhandle with the city of Vinh in North Vietnam, crossed the border. The second involved a new program, using the Hmong as a model but recruiting ethnic Lao from their villages along the foothills of the Annamite Chain. This would introduce a new element into the paramilitary effort, which, to this point, had involved only tribal minorities. The potential of an ethnic Lao program to impede infiltration of communist supplies and manpower into the Panhandle toward South Vietnam would depend on its ability to compete with the Pathet Lao for civilian loyalty. There was also a third possibility, the use of long-range reconnaissance patrols from bases on friendly territory.³¹

The three options were not mutually exclusive, and, in fact, the Agency adopted all of them. On 29 June 1961, while the Saigon station was preparing tribal reconnaissance patrols into the area just below the demilitarized zone, President Kennedy authorized a new force of ethnic Lao irregulars.³²

As the headquarters of FAR Military Region 3, Savannakhet would have been the obvious choice as a training site and command post for activity in the upper Panhandle. wanted the same kind of autonomy there that it enjoyed in the north, where it kept the RLG generally informed but exerted operational control through its case officers and PARU. In the new activity, CIA would be working with ethnic Lao rather than mountain tribes, and the question of control, always sensitive, became even more delicate.³³

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the author served in the ill-starred Border Surveillance Program, which, almost entirely without success, tried to monitor North Vietnamese infiltration from Laos.

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³³ Methven interview.

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There was also the question of the Lao will to fight. Given the almost universally poor combat record of ethnic Laotian units, [] entertained some doubt about the feasibility of working with lowland volunteers. The immediate imperative was to test the idea in the most favorable circumstances possible.³⁴ []

As it happened, a Colonel Sounthone, now commanding the FAR regimental combat team at Thakhek, was one of the "young Turks" of the CDNI whom station officer Stu Methven had tried to help with their effort at political modernization. Sounthone was both a native of the Thakhek area and a veteran of the Lao Issara, an anticolonial but also anticommunist movement that flourished briefly after World War II. Methven thought him a good candidate for the experiment, and flew to Thakhek to explore the possibilities.³⁵ []

Sounthone was entirely receptive and offered to recruit civilian volunteers he had known since their days together in the Lao Issara. Methven introduced the case officer [] while Sounthone introduced the proposed unit leaders and the members of the provincial coordination committee set up to oversee, at least nominally, the new activity. With an agreement on pay and death benefits—it was based on the modest emoluments paid to militiamen—a deal was struck. The leaders of the proposed three units began slipping back into contested areas like Napé and the Na Kay Plateau, northeast of Thakhek, to recruit local residents to fill the ranks.³⁶ []

The idea was to create platoon-sized units of 27 men each, trained outside Thakhek and infiltrated into areas controlled by the communists but not occupied in force. Sounthone was confident that the inhabitants of Na Kay and other locales east and southeast of Thakhek shared the anti-Pathet Lao sentiments of the unit leadership, and local recruitment would fill needs for both intelligence informants and combatants.³⁷ []

The new project would eventually deploy regimental-sized forces of infantry irregulars, often supported by tactical airpower provided by Air America or by one or more of the US, [] or Royal Lao Air Forces. At its inception, however, there were just the case officer, [] interpreter to help him deal with indigenous contacts ignorant of French, the FAR subdivision commander, and the local US Special Forces detachment consisting of one-half an "A" team, or about six men.³⁸ []

³⁴ Ibid. []

³⁵ Ibid. []

³⁶ Ibid.; author's recollection. The author served as [] case officer for the Thakhek project from the summer of 1961 until December 1962. He has no recollection that the provincial committee ever convened as a body. []

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³⁸ Author's recollection []

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The mission of Special Forces Capt. Sidney "Sid" Hinds and his men was to advise and train Colonel Sounthone's *Groupement Mobile 14* (GM 14). Unfortunately, for all his good will, Sounthone was not visibly more aggressive than the ordinary run of FAR officers, and the unit's performance—mainly in static security—gave the Special Forces men little sense of labor rewarded. A case officer's suggestion that they train the new irregulars drew an enthusiastic response, and their commander—the same Lieutenant Colonel Little who had demanded Special Forces control of Hmong operations in Sam Neua—approved.³⁹

With the military advisers dividing their time between GM 14 and the irregulars, training got under way, and expected to dispatch the three units in mid-September. Captain Hinds was content with a consulting role in their deployment, and the FAR subdivision commander required no more than an occasional briefing. From the beginning, enjoyed essentially unilateral control.⁴⁰

As it happened, the only military man—an *aspirant*, or warrant officer—among the leaders recruited by Colonel Sounthone was a native of the Napé area. He had already brought out volunteers for training, and his group was the obvious candidate to respond to the need for more intelligence on North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos. But secure communications would be a prerequisite not just to a successful operation but even to survival in a border area infested with both North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. When in the early fall Washington increased the pressure for more intelligence, the student radio operators being trained at Thakhek had not yet mastered their new trade, and the unit was not ready to go.⁴¹

Indeed, the potential of the entire activity there remained problematical. The three unit leaders had brought recruits out of their respective areas, and these had performed well in training. But the few who were not ethnic Lao came from the unproved (and at Xieng Dat, only a few months earlier, treacherous) Lao Theung minority, and hesitated to put all its operational eggs in this untested basket.⁴²

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[] hand was forced on 8 October, when the three Laotian factions accepted Souvanna Phouma as the consensus candidate for prime minister in a coalition government. Although many issues remained in dispute, early agreement might soon become a fact. This would presumably prohibit further expansion of the irregulars, and with the potential of the Thakhek initiative still a question mark, [] turned to the Hmong option.⁴³ []

Vang Pao assured Bill Lair that some 12,000 Hmong inhabited the hills in the border area at Route 8. He suggested that the clan leader from the ill-fated operation at Muong Ngat be sent south to find two relatives, both local leaders, who could organize their compatriots. Assuming a successful reconnaissance by Vang Pao's emissary, [] proposed to begin by securing the Route 8 area with 1,000 new Hmong volunteers.⁴⁴ []

Headquarters seemed to balk: why could [] not rely on the new Thakhek-based operation and perhaps on Lao patrols manned by General Phoumi's Directorate of National Coordination? Reversing field, the same cable reasoned that arming Hmong in the Panhandle could be justified on the identical basis as that in Xieng Khouang: it would establish both an RLG presence and the potential for large-scale harassment of enemy communications. []

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[] was at pains to define the limitations of even the most favorable outcome in the Panhandle. During an October visit by CINCPAC Adm. Harry Felt and an admiral from the JCS, [] got the impression that they arrived "looking desperately for some solution short of commitment of US forces." But the impediments were overwhelming, and Admiral Welling of the JCS explicitly acknowledged that interdiction of North Vietnamese infiltration would require the commitment of conventional

⁴³ Memorandum from State Department Executive Secretary (Battle) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), "Weekly Summary, Geneva Conference, October 2-8, 1961," 11 October 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 463 []

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The Special Group, chaired by the national security adviser and including State, Defense, CIA, and sometimes the FBI, provided policy guidance for covert operations. []

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MANAGEMENT BY EXTEMPORIZATION []

US as well as [] South Vietnamese ground and air forces. [] summarized this exchange for Headquarters in a cable clearly intended to preclude unrealistic expectations in Washington of Agency operations in the Panhandle.⁴⁶ []

While [] awaited word from Vang Pao's emissaries to the Napé area, one of the Thakhek-based teams finally trekked overland, approaching in somewhat gingerly fashion its Napé-Lak Sao target area. It began to report useful information about enemy activity and seemed to have the sympathy of the villagers on whom it relied for information and food. A second team infiltrated onto the Na Kay Plateau, northeast of Thakhek, and [] expressed both satisfaction and his modest expectations of the activity when he reported that the Thakhek teams had "done better than [] hoped or expected." Ambassador Brown, told that two of the three teams were now installed behind enemy lines, had displayed "pleased surprise."⁴⁷ []

But Phoumi's Directorate of National Coordination teams never reached their target, if indeed they were ever dispatched. And Vang Pao's mission to the Hmong around Napé was stalled not far from Muong Ngat; on 29 November he and [] and a column of 100 men had reached a point only 13 miles to the southeast. A week later, having proceeded another 10 miles, word arrived that two North Vietnamese battalions had crossed the border, headed for Muong Ngat. Painful memories of the slaughter there in May revived fears for families still in the area, and when the Hmong heard heavy firing from their rear on 7 December, the mission to Napé was aborted.⁴⁸ []

With these developments, the burden of working behind enemy lines in the upper Panhandle fell by default on the Thakhek-based irregulars. This provoked a reprise of the earlier discussion of 1,000 new Hmong volunteers for the Napé sector. Headquarters, under pressure from assistant secretary Averell Harriman to avoid provocative action, wanted more intelligence but without any commitment to large-scale recruiting in the target area. Not only that, Harriman anticipated that a political settlement would restrict the activity of irregulars already under arms. The Soviets had promised him, he said, to "keep communist forces in line in Laos" and to end the infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam. In return, the United States would have to comply, "spirit and letter," with the agreement.⁴⁹ []

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47 Author's recollection; []

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Entrance to the Kong Lo tunnel, which provided dry-season access via the Nam Hin Boun River to the Na Kay Plateau (U)

[redacted] enjoying an unexpectedly large response to the proselytizing of the first Thakhek units in their native villages, thought it self-defeating now to renege: the Americans would lose all credibility with the people they had been encouraging to take up arms on behalf of the RLG. Harriman had already recognized the importance of the irregulars in monitoring an agreement; indeed, if their intelligence should prove communist bad faith, this "would be another story." Faced with the alternative of leaving the eastern Panhandle to the communists, he authorized [redacted] to recruit up to 500 more volunteers for that area.⁵⁰ [redacted]

This authority did not, however, extend to the use of General Phoumi's DNC personnel with the Thakhek guerrillas. Ensuring the survival of CIA's irregulars had to be accompanied by pressure on the Laotian principals to form a coalition, and Washington feared that using Phoumi's irregulars would encourage him to think that the Americans were not entirely serious about an agreement, after all. Accordingly, he would not be invited to participate.⁵¹ [redacted]

50 [redacted]
[redacted]

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Other adjustments had to be made in anticipation of a conclusion to the Geneva talks. For one thing, there was always the possibility that negotiations would fail and that a return to overt hostilities would follow. Washington wanted to deal with this contingency by establishing a wartime pecking order, especially with respect to CIA and the Defense Department. An anxious flurry of correspondence about who would be in charge finally came to an end with a common sense suggestion from and the other interested parties in the Vientiane Mission. They proposed simply to have continue managing the irregulars while putting the effort under the overall direction of the military.⁵²

But a political settlement remained more probable, and laid out its plans to support the irregulars under a coalition government. tried to strike a balance that would help the irregulars survive without giving the communists a pretext to move against them in force. A "skeleton command structure" would remain in Hmong country, Vang Pao would prepare instructions to the guerrillas on "hiding weapons, attempting slowly [to] drift back to home villages, abstaining from all provocative action, [reporting] all enemy activity . . . and [returning to the] hills on call from Vang Pao." Decisions would be required also on such things as demobilization—or, for some, full integration into the FAR—plus financial and material support, including food and medicines.⁵³

The planning for these contingencies assumed communist and neutralist compliance. But no one in either Washington or the US Mission in Vientiane took this compliance for granted, especially after a Hmong commander near the Plain of Jars inadvertently handed the enemy a propaganda coup. In late October 1961, when the Hmong took up blocking positions on a road serving Xieng Khouang town, they seem to have provoked mortar fire from inside the town, which the Hmong commander promptly returned. Some of his shells hit a French mission school, killing or wounding several children, and damaged the house of the Polish ICC delegate.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Siho's participation in Panhandle operations appears to have come to an end in December, when rejected his demand to exercise tactical control and manage the radio communications.

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⁵⁴ Memorandum from State Department Executive Secretary (Battle) to Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), "Memoranda on Laos Requested by the President," 2 November 1961, Enclosure 1, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 490-91.

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Five***Incremental Concessions**

Bitter communist invective branding the Hmong as murderous outlaws exerted perhaps its most significant effect on Averell Harriman at Geneva. Responding to his complaint about Hmong depredations, Winthrop Brown felt constrained to remind him that, however unfortunate the casualties in Xieng Khouang town, operations around the Plain of Jars had, as their sole purpose, the defense of the Hmong against a campaign led by the Souvanna-Kong Le neutralists. The neutralists, in turn, relied increasingly on support from the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. They were executing a repressive program that included not only military force but the disruption of village life by forcible conscription of porters and intimidation of village elders. Ambassador Brown thought it "inevitable" that the Hmong would fight off these intrusions into their mountain domain and implicitly endorsed their refusal to submit.⁵⁵

The debate continued, with Harriman continuing to question the utility of the irregular forces and Brown defending their discreet and

gradual expansion [as] useful even in the present situation. I would hate to lose the momentum which has been generated and turn away people who are willing to fight to protect their village from the [Pathet Lao] until we have something concrete to substitute for this effort. To stop now would weaken or destroy what we have already built, and it would do nothing to establish control over territory and people who otherwise will have to accept [Pathet Lao] control.

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As for the neutralists, Brown wanted Harriman to understand that "the forces loyal to Souvanna are present in very little of Laos, and control even less."⁵⁷

Harriman's icy realpolitik might display little concern for the Hmong and indeed for the survival of a Laos led by the vain, vacillating Souvanna Phouma. But, in fact, there could be no negotiated settlement without compromise, and with US military action effectively ruled out, the arguments within the Kennedy administration and between it and the Soviets now concerned the form these compromises would take. The basic constraint, succinctly articulated by President Kennedy in late August, remained the same. The United States would not "take on a war in Laos in a situation where we lack French and British support and where public interest in the United States had greatly declined."⁵⁸

This left open the question of just what compromises were going to be made, and on this Harriman and much of official Washington often disagreed. In his single-minded pursuit of a deal with the Russians, Harriman tended both to distrust General Phoumi's commitment to a settlement and to accept Moscow's ability and willingness to impose compliance on its Laotian surrogates. State and Defense thought Phoumi essentially malleable, however reluctant, and deplored some of Harriman's proposed concessions on the functioning of the ICC. In the face of American irresolution, Georgi Pushkin, the tough, skillful Soviet negotiator, pressed for incremental modifications whose cumulative effect emasculated the crucially important inspection regime.⁵⁹

An NSC staffer, Robert Johnson, recognized the weakness of the US position and forecast the outcome. He drew the prescient inference that the effort to preserve a noncommunist position in Laos would "revolve primarily around what can be done to put some strength in a probably very weak Souvanna-led government." Meanwhile, as a State Department observer put it, the new ICC would be just a "1954-type ICC plus helicopters."⁶⁰

Meanwhile, as the diplomats sparred in Geneva, worked with Vang Pao—just promoted to full colonel—to create an organization capable

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⁵⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting . . . to Discuss Southeast Asia," 29 August 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 390-98.

⁵⁹ Telegrams from delegation to the Conference on Laos to State: Confe 786, Harriman to Rusk and President Kennedy, 26 October 1961; Confe 809, Harriman to President Kennedy (Eyes Only), 2 November 1961; *FRUS 1961-1963*, 482-83, 495-97 and passim.

⁶⁰ Memorandum from Robert H. Johnson of the NSC Staff to Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow), "The Geneva Negotiations," 2 November 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 498-99.

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of surviving the strictures of a negotiated peace. On 1 October 1961, the Hmong leader set up a Vientiane headquarters. This was followed six weeks later by a joint headquarters, near the Wat Tay Airport, that included the Americans—CIA and two US Special Forces staff officers—[redacted] and two of Vang Pao's staff officers. A [redacted] air operations team completed this command post, which served as a base of operations for Bill Lair and Pat Landry.⁶¹ [redacted]

On 1 November, [redacted]-trained Hmong radio operators began serving all but one of the nine zones of Vang Pao's Military Region 2, and graduates of the next class were assigned to the ninth. Along with the Thakhek-based guerrillas, dispatched during this same period, the Hmong worked the only secure, indigenous military communications networks in Laos. After completing two weeks training in first aid and basic hygiene, 60 other Hmong were distributed throughout the nine combat zones. Vang Pao directed all this from his new command post at Long Tieng, 7 miles northwest of Pha Khao, which he chose for its greater security and for terrain allowing a longer airstrip. From this headquarters, Vang Pao ran MR 2 combat operations—both regular FAR and irregular Hmong—until the cease-fire of 1973 brought a formal end to hostilities.⁶² [redacted]

The consolidation and refinement of the Hmong resistance organization had its counterpart in efforts by the communists to solidify their control of the area north of the Plain of Jars, particularly along Route 6, the road from Ban Ban to Sam Neua town. This in turn led the Vientiane Mission—Ambassador Brown and MAAG [redacted]—to make a late November proposal to send a [redacted] team to rearm and retrain two FAR territorial battalions. These were "orphans," cut off since the fall of the Plain of Jars and now located 20 miles north of Ban Tha Northeast, where [redacted] had helped set up a Hmong base the previous summer. In addition, Vientiane wanted to protect the northern sector by recruiting another 600 Hmong irregulars from the area west of these territorial battalions and directly north of the Plain of Jars.⁶³ [redacted]

Arming FAR territorial units would put CIA in the position of supplanting part of MAAG's Military Assistance Program, and Headquarters expressed some reluctance. But its reservations had less to do with this jurisdictional aspect than with the perennial tension between bolstering the RLG's military position and facilitating Harriman's work at Geneva. Asked to wait for "clari-

61 [redacted]

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Territorial battalions were light infantry whose place in the Laotian defense organization somewhat resembled that of the National Guard in the US military. [redacted]

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fication" of the political situation, [] responded that time was not on Vientiane's side. He invoked [] earlier endorsement of the idea when he urged Washington at least to supply some crew-served weapons for the territorials.⁶⁴ []

Enemy action, once again near Xieng Khouang town, soon reinforced [] sense of urgency. Hmong defenders on the slope of Phou Kabo, southeast of the town, beat off an attack on 23 December; the enemy left 10 dead, two radios, and a recoilless rifle. For the next two days, artillery shells pounded the defenders; a defector from the attacking Kong Le forces later said the guns were manned by North Vietnamese. The same defector talked of two Vietnamese battalions deployed toward the Vientiane Plain to prevent the withdrawal of Hmong irregulars under attack by Kong Le. At the same time, according to a captured North Vietnamese soldier, a battalion of Hanoi's 316th Division was participating in fighting in the far northwest, around Muong Sai. The level of combat in Hmong country alone was reflected in the 99 enemy soldiers reported killed in the month of January 1962.⁶⁵ []

A More Combative Stance []

Having yielded to Harriman on the functioning of the ICC, the administration overruled his opposition to strengthening the anticommunist position in north and central Laos. Probably influenced by aggressive enemy moves around Xieng Khouang town and in the northwest, the administration displayed a sudden new willingness to take risks with the outcome at Geneva. An interagency message of early February 1962 abandoned the earlier emphasis on accommodation and compromise. Instead, it pointed out the "pronounced advantage for the United States and any new RLG" of reducing the communist potential for control of population and territory.⁶⁶ []

The new guidance took note of the strongly anticommunist conviction of the tribal peoples in the north, and proclaimed the necessity to continue expanding their ability to defend themselves. As to the secrecy of such an effort, CIA Headquarters noted that Phoumi Nosavan—more knowledgeable than any other RLG official—had "only the most general" familiarity with the program, and its gradual expansion could be concealed even from him.⁶⁷ []

[] authorized to expand the programs in both northern and central Laos, beginning with 2,500 Springfield bolt-action rifles to be

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issued to isolated groups of ethnic Yao in Nam Tha and to Hmong in northern Luang Prabang Provinces. Another 2,500 of these weapons were to be held in reserve. If not needed earlier, they could eventually be issued to irregulars who would surrender them—not their semiautomatic weapons—in the event of demobilization.⁶⁸

More generally, the US Mission was authorized to move “as rapidly as consonant with reasonable security and avoidance of undue provocation to either side.” With this permissive formula to guide it, CIA began an energetic expansion of the Laotian resistance that soon carried it not only into the northwest but also onto the strategically important Bolovens Plateau in the far south.⁶⁹

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CHAPTER SIX

Squeezing an Ally

The decision, made in February 1962, to expand the Laotian irregulars even at the risk of adverse diplomatic consequences brought some changes in the program. Fewer inhibitions meant, among other things, bigger weapons, and the station won prompt approval of its request for 75mm recoilless rifles to be fired from Hmong positions on high ground against troop concentrations and vehicle convoys below. Recruiting continued apace, and by March almost 11,000 Hmong had been armed and trained. At Thakhek, two new units were formed from volunteers in the area to the southeast, toward the Demilitarized Zone in Vietnam.¹

This surreptitious assertiveness did not mean that the administration was any less determined to achieve a political settlement, only that it would run more risks to avoid a deal representing nothing better than a disguised surrender. Accordingly, expansion of CIA-controlled irregular forces was accompanied by fierce pressure on the rightist RLG—especially defense minister Phoumi Nosavan—to compromise over the distribution of cabinet posts in a coalition government.²

This had begun immediately after Souvanna's selection in October to be prime minister in a new government. There was a moment in late December, after a cordial meeting between Phoumi and Souvanna, when it looked to Phoumi as if they might be approaching a mutually satisfactory formula. Ambassador Brown talked to him about that session, and the general sounded optimistic about getting at least the Interior Ministry. Brown thought this expectation entirely unrealistic, but he quickly discovered that Phoumi's main concern lay elsewhere.³

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² State Telegram 789 to Vientiane, 4 December 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 531-33.

³ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 912, 30 December 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 549-51.

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The next day, Phoumi summoned [redacted] and unloaded his accumulated grievances. He was "too deeply shocked" by the "defeatist policy" of the United States, he said, to be able to continue. The United States was treating the RLG "like a small child," admonishing it to give a little here, then a little more there, "downhill into communism." Phoumi despaired of being able to get the right-leaning cabinet to cede both Defense and Interior to Souvanna, [redacted]

[redacted] pointed out that RLG intransigence risked the end of US support. Phoumi shrugged this off; he "really didn't see much use in US support if all it meant was giving in to the enemy."⁴ [redacted]

Ambassador Brown recognized that any resort to sanctions against the RLG would involve Washington in a game of "chicken," in which both parties stood to lose. The RLG might "simply dig in," and sanctions would harm both the civilian and the military sectors. Meanwhile, the communists would be encouraged to increase their military pressure in an incremental way that clouded their responsibility for renewed hostilities. But Brown saw that inaction would put the United States at Phoumi's mercy, and he "regretfully" renewed a recommendation to suspend military aid until the RLG agreed to "sacrifice the Defense and Interior Ministries."⁵ [redacted]

Washington found it difficult to administer such strong medicine, and, at a meeting on 6 January, President Kennedy confronted the familiar dilemma: The terms of the best possible negotiated settlement might fatally weaken the noncommunist elements in a coalition. DCI John McCone offered two reservations about imposing Souvanna's cabinet choices on the RLG. First, he advanced the Intelligence Community's view that the Defense and Interior Ministries in the hands of Souvanna's appointees meant "an open roadstead [through Laos] from North Vietnam to South Vietnam." McCone then rather tentatively suggested that such a government "would not be very strong."⁶ [redacted]

Governor Harriman leaped on this, pointing out that the "Souvanna solution" had been US policy since the previous August. The only issue was "quite simply whether Phoumi or the President of the United States was to run US foreign policy." Harriman also dismissed the infiltration issue: "The Russians had specifically agreed that this border should be closed." He believed that "the Russians did not want fighting, and [did] want a reasonable agreement." The alternative, in his view, was what Gen. [Omar] Bradley had once called "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." The president

⁴ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 916, 31 December 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 551-52. [redacted]

⁵ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 932, 3 January 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 553-54. [redacted]

⁶ McGeorge Bundy, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting in the Cabinet Room on January 6, 1962, on the subject of Laos," 6 January 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 571-73. [redacted]

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apparently found Harriman's last point the most compelling, making it "clear that he did not want a resumption of fighting." Interpreting this laconic formulation, national security assistant McGeorge Bundy inferred that it endorsed Harriman's support for the "Souvanna solution."⁷

Nevertheless, it was one thing to object to RLG intransigence, another actually to begin depriving it of vital economic and military aid. A Special National Intelligence Estimate of 11 January (SNIE 58-62) made the choice more difficult by concluding that the RLG's combat effectiveness, in the last nine months, had improved more than that of its adversaries. It did not credit the RLG with the capacity to win any key territory held by the enemy—if it did, the NVA would intervene to protect its own clients—but it did see the government as enjoying an advantage at the prevailing low level of combat.⁸

In the view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, US diplomatic and military programs were already working at "cross purposes in some respects." Although the United States might not be "advocating unlimited concessions, it appears that our policy in Laos, as at the Geneva Conference, is to obtain the 'best possible' negotiated settlement, making whatever concessions are necessary to this end." The JCS thought this a mistake, for it perceived a "shifting power balance" greater than the one described in SNIE 58-62. By failing to exploit the RLG's improved position, the United States was "neglecting an effective alternative means of executing our existing policy of achieving a neutral and independent Laos."⁹

The Joint Chiefs went on to point out that there was pressure from all sides on the RLG, but "no evidence [of] comparable pressure . . . being applied to Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong." Predicting that a neutralist defense minister would purge Western-oriented officers and divert US military supplies to Kong Le and the Pathet Lao, the JCS implicitly urged Secretary McNamara to oppose administration pressure on the RLG for more concessions.¹⁰

But the administration had little leverage on either Souvanna or Souphanouvong, and it saw no alternative to Souvanna as prime minister or to concessions on the composition of the government. On 18 January 1962,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brief Prepared by the Defense Intelligence Agency, "SNIE 58-62: RELATIVE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF OPPOSING FORCES IN LAOS," 12 January 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 578-79.

⁹ L.L. Lemnitzer, Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, "Reassessment of US Policy in Laos," 5 January 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 579-83. Assistant secretary of defense Paul Nitze amplified this theme in a memorandum to McGeorge Bundy and noted the real danger was that the United States would wind up fighting to preserve the southern third of Laos after refusing to save the half then under RLG control. (*FRUS 1961-1963*, 586-88.)

¹⁰ Ibid.

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Ambassador Brown had a painful session in Geneva with General Phoumi and the fervently anticommunist Prince Boun Oum. Phoumi reproached him for the merciless pressure: "One should never threaten an Asian," he said. If the Americans wanted to abandon Laos, they should just do it. Brown insisted that he only wanted to ensure that everyone understood the consequences of failure at Geneva. But Phoumi and Boun Oum did not budge, and the stalemate persisted.¹¹

One reason for increased American pressure on the anticommunist Lao was new evidence controverting the thesis, advanced by the Pentagon and the Intelligence Community, that the military balance was shifting in the RLG's favor. On 27 January, State instructed Ambassador Brown to reinforce that day's personal message from President Kennedy to Phoumi with an argument based on Vientiane's military inferiority. "Recent military activities in Laos have given incontrovertible proof of FAR's fundamental military weakness as compared with the [Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese]." Phoumi's survival, and that of the other anticommunists, therefore rested on participation in a coalition, even if Defense and Interior went to Souvanna.¹²

The "military activities" that Brown was to mention as proof of the enemy's ascendancy included attacks on the northwestern provincial capital of Nam Tha and FAR positions near Mahaxay, in the upper Panhandle. These attacks, on a scale unprecedented since the preceding May, shrank the FAR perimeter at Nam Tha and took Mahaxay from the RLG. They also threatened the conclusion of a negotiated settlement, and Washington reacted with new determination to force agreement on a coalition.

¹¹ Telegram from Delegation at Geneva to the Department of State, 18 January 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 588-90.

¹² State Telegram 669 to Vientiane, 27 January 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 597-98. Four days later, in SNIE 58/1-62, the Intelligence Community retreated. It raised the estimate of North Vietnamese troops in Laos from 5,000 to 9,000 and acknowledged that, in all recent engagements, FAR units had withdrawn. (*FRUS 1961-1963*, 540-41.) The substance of this revised estimate was presumably known to the Department of State four days earlier.

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The Department of State wanted the embassy to discourage Phoumi from reinforcing Nam Tha, a move which could "do little good and possibly much harm." In Washington's view, Phoumi's "unilateral decision" to defend Nam Tha, against MAAG and embassy advice, made him guilty of "action which may broaden [the] conflict irreparably." (State Telegram 699 to Vientiane, 4 February 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 612-13.)

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Once again, on the point of decisive action, Washington pulled back; the signal to withdraw Air America was not sent. Almost three weeks later, Headquarters informed that "the President is personally concerned to make sure that all US representatives use [their] full persuasive power with Gen. Phoumi" to get him to help set up an "effective Souvanna government." was to impress on Phoumi that the United States "really will not allow itself to be driven into a war in Laos by [his] intransigence." The message ended with an injunction to "leave him in no doubt whatever that all branches of the US Government are at one in execution of policy set by [the] President."¹⁴

Assurance of CIA fidelity to administration policy was to be followed by a visit from Admiral Felt, carrying the same message. Ambassador Brown apparently assumed this ploy to have been sparked by Harriman's recollection of the pro-Phoumi bias displayed by CIA and military representatives at Savannakhet in late 1960. But Brown was confident that Phoumi was "no longer counting on divided US opinion," and he urged against a visit that could only be interpreted to US disadvantage. Souvanna, the communists, the Thai, and almost certainly Phoumi himself would remember the attention from Admiral Felt and forget or ignore the message.¹⁵

Governor Harriman persisted, sending Brown a "Dear Win" letter defining the ambassador's task as one of working out "how—and not whether—a coalition government under Souvanna's leadership with a reasonable chance of success is [to be] formed." Brown should understand that

our job is not to confront the President with a situation requiring a decision on whether to permit Laos to be overrun by the Commies, or introduce American combat forces. A President cannot be asked to make such a decision in advance. We have got to start skating, even though we don't know how firm the ice may be in the center of the pond.¹⁶

The skating began on 6 March when, seeing Phoumi within minutes of each other, and Admiral Felt told him that the US government held him

¹⁴ Telegram From the White House to Vientiane, undated, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 633-34.

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¹⁶ Letter from Assistant Secretary of State (Harriman) to Ambassador (Brown), 1 March 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 641-42. The letter expresses Harriman's frustration at the well-informed objections from Vientiane to various of his tactical proposals and implies that Brown is insufficiently aggressive in bending the RLG to American will.

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largely responsible for the stalemate at Geneva. If the talks collapsed or the enemy attacked RLG forces on the ground, the United States would not come to his rescue, and events would simply take their course. If, on the other hand, Phoumi accepted the Ministries of Information and Youth and Sports, with Education going to a close ally, the United States would surreptitiously fund anticommunist political programs. Phoumi was noncommittal, and the next day [] made a separate but nearly identical approach to Prince Boun Oum. The prince declared his willingness to try to bring Phoumi around, and to lobby the other defiant cabinet members as well.¹⁷ []

Thailand's Prime Minister Sarit joined the United States in pressing his kinsman, Phoumi, to accept Souvanna Phouma's proposed cabinet, but to no avail. Desperation in Washington led Headquarters to suggest a deception ploy, with a spurious document detailing imminent US sanctions allowed to find its way into Phoumi's hands. But State had second thoughts: To specify a date certain for imposing sanctions would require action, if Phoumi did not bend, that the whole exercise was designed to avoid. In fact, if the United States was ready to apply additional sanctions, it might better just do so.¹⁸ []

[] always skeptical about the ploy, had more basic concerns about Washington's approach to Phoumi. Writing to [] he argued that State—he probably had Harriman principally in mind—saw Phoumi as no more than “a military dictator, motivated almost entirely by lust for personal power, ruling primarily by fear, and without any political talent or program that attracts support.” [] disagreed. The general was indeed not a “particularly warm or open personality,” even “dishonest, cruel, and . . . a man of limited experience and sensitivity.” But he was “a ‘gambler,’ who believes he is now playing for very high stakes which include not only his own fate but also that of King, country, and . . . his political and military followers.”¹⁹ []

The energy of [] language betrayed his sympathy for the general's skepticism about the capacity of Souvanna Phouma to restrain the communists. But he acknowledged the odds against success in a renewed US effort to preserve the noncommunist element in a putatively neutral Laos. Obstacles included hostility to Phoumi among Geneva negotiators and the questionable willingness—even ability—of the Russians to impose restraints on the North

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¹⁸ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1325, 25 March 1962, and passim, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 667-68;

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Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. A formula agreed to by Moscow but rejected by Beijing or Hanoi would put the United States back where it started, having to choose "between backing down or becoming involved in war in Laos as well as Vietnam."²⁰

Determined to force Phoumi to back down, Harriman joined Thailand's Marshal Sarit at a meeting with the Lao in Nong Khai, across the Mekong from Vientiane. Marshal Sarit echoed Harriman's call for a coalition and offered a formula for tripartite command of the military and police. But Phoumi did not budge. The venue then changed to Vientiane, and Harriman—enjoined by President Kennedy not to proclaim a suspension of military aid—resorted to a bitterly confrontational approach to the Lao. Phoumi was "white with rage" at Harriman's finger-pointing accusations of bad faith. As had predicted, the general made no concessions.²¹

Meanwhile, disagreement also strained the neutralist-communist alliance at Khang Khay, their headquarters on the Plain of Jars. Visiting American diplomats found the half-brother princes, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, at odds over alleged FAR encroachments across the cease-fire line of 3 May 1961. When Souphanouvong threatened to retake these points by force, Souvanna tried to assure the Americans that his brother meant to do so only if Phoumi used them to stage offensive action. When Souphanouvong contradicted him, suggesting that he would move no matter what, Souvanna stalked out.²²

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²¹ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1325 (from Harriman), 25 March 1962; State Telegram 1451 to Bangkok Embassy (Eyes Only for Harriman), 23 March 1962; Bangkok Embassy Telegram 1478 (from Harriman), 26 March 1962; all in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 665-69. Harriman's account of the tone of the meeting in Vientiane differs markedly from that of several Lao participants: "As patiently and carefully as possible, I answered all questions raised and touched on all points made by [the] RLG." One of the Lao participants, RLG representative to the United Nations Sisouk na Champassak, later claimed that Harriman had shouted to Phoumi and several others that "you, you, and you will all be killed!" By this account, Harriman said the administration did not "give a damn" what any American had said or done before 20 January 1961; as the official responsible for Laos, he was "in total and absolute charge."

Available documents do not explain Thai support for a Laotian coalition on Souvanna's terms, but Sarit may well have thought that a Souvanna government was a lesser evil than the prospect of the United States simply throwing up its hands and leaving the region to the Chinese and the North Vietnamese. And indeed, a couple of days later, the Thai foreign minister Thanat Khoman told the US ambassador in Bangkok that the draft agreement at Geneva had so many flaws that Thailand would probably not sign it. (*FRUS 1961-1963*, 713.)

²² Vientiane Embassy Telegram 845, 31 March 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 672-73.

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But neither the Americans—nor, apparently, Prime Minister Sarit—saw neutralist-communist tensions at Khang Khay as presenting an opportunity for tougher bargaining there. Everyone shared Harriman's concern about Souvanna, who, if pushed too far, might simply decamp for Paris, a move that would certainly bring the two sides back into open warfare. General Phoumi therefore remained the target of American and Thai pressure. On 1 May, the US embassy in Bangkok reported that Sarit had finally persuaded Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum to accept a coalition with rightists, neutralists, and the Pathet Lao sharing control of the Defense and Interior Ministries on a "troika" basis.²³

On 6 May, communist forces seized Nam Tha. The 4,500 FAR defenders—whom General Phoumi had just reinforced, against American advice, with a parachute battalion—outnumbered their attackers but offered little resistance. Instead, they fled toward Ban Houei Sai, a Mekong River port on the border with Thailand. A Special National Intelligence Estimate concluded that the "events of the past year have almost certainly convinced the communist side that the risk of US intervention has lessened significantly." The Soviets had probably acquiesced in the seizure of Nam Tha, but CIA's Office of National Estimates believed, nevertheless, that Moscow still preferred a political settlement.²⁴

This did not necessarily mean that Moscow could or would prevent the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese from exploiting their success at Nam Tha. The administration hoped that a show of force would persuade the communists of the risks of further cease-fire violations, and on 12 May the JCS ordered Admiral Felt to move US Marine infantry and helicopter units and a US Air Force tactical squadron to Thailand.²⁵

For the next month, military contingency planning occupied the center of the Washington stage. The Nam Tha disaster, combined with a continued stalemate in Geneva, increased the likelihood that the United States could achieve its objectives for Indochina only by applying American military force. But an invasion of Laos itself involved long supply lines and terrain just as hostile as the enemy itself. The preeminent importance of Vietnam prompted Washington to consider an alternative. An amphibious invasion of North Vietnam just north of the DMZ could quarantine the DMZ, and a push on into Laos could cut the infiltration routes into South Vietnam.²⁶

²³ Bangkok Embassy Telegram 1691, 1 May 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 708-11

²⁴ SNIE 58-3-62, Implications of the Fall of Nam Tha, 9 May 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 726-29

²⁵ Telegram from the JCS to CINCPAC (Felt), 12 May 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 754-55

²⁶ Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the NSC Staff to President Kennedy, "Contingency Planning for Laos," 5 June 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 816-23 and passim.

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Although logistically less challenging, this option was politically unattractive, and the administration again pulled back from the edge. The outcome, essentially by default, was further coercion of the RLG for more concessions on the makeup of a coalition regime. The ambassador kept leaning on General Phoumi, whose resistance seemed at last to be fading. Brown reported on 5 June that a coalition seemed within reach if all other issues were deferred and if the United States was prepared to swallow the "bitter pill" of the loss of Nam Tha Province. On the 11th, Brown advised that the three princes—Souvanna, Souphanouvong, and Boun Oum—had agreed on the composition of a coalition cabinet. Once the king and the National Assembly approved, the country would have a new government, and the Geneva conferees could conclude the terms of the neutralization guarantees.²⁷

Anticipating a Cease-Fire

The slightly schizoid quality of US policymaking in the spring of 1962 was exemplified by frantic efforts to avoid the collapse of negotiations while at the same time encouraging aggressive guerrilla operations in both northern Laos and the Panhandle. As late as the beginning of June, when Ambassador Brown was seeing some movement in Phoumi's bargaining position, Hmong irregulars were cratering Route 7. They had cut it in three places east of Ban Ban and were about to mine another segment, 500 feet long, in the same area. The interagency Special Group applauded this initiative, and Gen. Maxwell Taylor, President Kennedy's military representative, commented that it "was exactly what [Hmong] assets should be doing."²⁸

Ammunition stockpiling and recruitment continued wherever they could be accomplished without serious risk of being exposed. In Hmong country, this applied even to Sam Neua Province, where Vang Pao had only recently begun organizing guerrilla units. New bases there were attracting volunteers from outlying villages. the US Mission, thought it essential not to turn them away. suggested a narrow, deep valley near Phou Pha Thi where airdrops could be made unseen. In Xieng Khouang Province, where the Hmong occupied more territory than did the enemy, air activity had been routine for a year and a half, and occasional ordnance drops could not be distinguished, at any distance, from civilian supplies. The Panhandle program was of more recent origin, but thought that the principle applied there as well.²⁹

²⁷ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1663, 5 June 1962824, and Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the NSC Staff to Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, "Laos Planning" 11 June 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 824, 837-39

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The princes' agreement on a coalition rendered moot the tortured question of introducing US combat forces, and Washington's attention turned to Geneva and the mechanics of completing a formal cease-fire. It also produced a sea change in [] exploitation of its irregulars. Offensive action would cease, and the emphasis would shift to preserving the guerrilla organizations so painstakingly constructed in the past year and a half. With the resistance intact, the anticommunist element of the coalition would hold population and territorial bases in the highlands of both northern Laos and the Panhandle. From those bases, [] would deal with the essential intelligence question of a post-cease-fire Laos: Hanoi's withdrawal of—or failure to withdraw—some 9,000 North Vietnamese troops.³⁰ []

Word of progress toward a coalition worked its way through the ranks of the irregulars, to many of whom it looked like the prelude to abandonment by the RLG and the Americans. In mid-June, Col. Vang Pao brought 15 of his zone commanders and several clan leaders to Ban Na to set post-Geneva policy for the Hmong resistance. Vang Pao acknowledged that the Hmong would find it hard to see the merits of a military standdown, saying that he, too, expected a Souvanna government to be quickly displaced by the communists. Indeed, if worst came to worst, the Hmong could be forced to migrate to northwestern Laos, or beyond that into Thailand, or perhaps into South Vietnam.³¹ []

But Vang Pao hoped for a less apocalyptic outcome, and he urged his worried audience to accept the advice of the two men—Bill Lair [] []—whom he credited with saving the Hmong tribe at a time when it had been surrounded by enemies. Unit integrity would be preserved and weapons retained; additional—obsolete—arms would be provided later, if necessary, for surrender to the ICC. And USOM would continue to supply rice and other necessities until the Hmong could return to their fields and harvest a crop.³² []

In the egalitarian atmosphere that always prevailed in Vang Pao's meetings with Hmong chiefs, the senior clan leader questioned the wisdom of accepting people who had been enemies for 10 years. Joining the communists in a coalition "was like going to bed with a tiger . . . Everyone would have to stay awake all night." But the Hmong were accustomed to life at the mercy of external forces, and the leaders at Ban Na recognized the paucity of choices. They voted to stick with Vang Pao and to substitute intelligence collection for aggressive military activity.³³ []

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The occasion was solemnized by a *baci*, a ceremony at which cotton strings tied around the wrists of the participants symbolized an indissoluble bond of reciprocal loyalty. A tribal ancient chanted a prayer begging the ancestors of those present to safeguard them as they fought for Hmong survival. At the end, Vang Pao and his foreign advisers were required to down a shot of whiskey with each of the two dozen Hmong attending; as Lair later recalled it, they were given about an hour to accomplish this feat of conspicuous consumption. For the confidence inspired in Vang Pao and the other Hmong chiefs by Lair was a "most eloquent tribute to [the] leadership and character [of] these two outstanding officers."³⁴

In central Laos, where the irregulars were mostly Lao, ethnic tensions were not a factor, but doubts about a coalition threatened unit cohesion. Of the six units—about 1,000 men in all—the two largest were the most seriously affected. Hoping to fend off an epidemic of defeatism, the Thakhek case officer induced Chao Khoueng (Governor) Sisouphan and a young National Assembly deputy to get into a Helio for a visit to the joint command post in the foothills east of the Na Kay Plateau. The impact was hard to judge, but the very rarity of this display of engagement by RLG officials probably gave it some effect. In the event, unit integrity survived the installation of the coalition, and the program entered a new phase of recruiting villagers from points along the roads leading into North Vietnam.³⁵

New Tribal Allies

Earlier in 1962, when Washington authorized new recruitment at Long Tieng and Thakhek, it also approved two new programs aimed at securing territory and people in the far north and in the southern Panhandle. Each of these used a local resident whose relationships of trust with tribal leaders furnished access to people even less integrated into Laotian culture than the Hmong.

The first initiative responded to Pathet Lao efforts over the course of 1961 to expand communist influence in the northwest. began to look for anticommunist tribal leaders there, and a contact in the National Assembly—he was one of the rare Lao with a sympathetic interest in the highlanders—suggested a leader of the Yao. These mountain people, like the Hmong, had migrated from southern China. Found mostly in the mountains of northwest Laos, they generally shared the Hmong antipathy for communists and Vietnamese. They lacked a centralized political structure but—again, like

³⁴ ³⁵ author's recollection. ~~SECRET//MR~~

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the Hmong—had produced one leader, Chao Mai, with a substantially greater following than any other.³⁶ [redacted]

Sisouphan recommended Chao Mai to Bill Lair, who sent a young contract agent named [redacted] to explore the prospects of an irregular militia similar to the program with the Hmong. [redacted] qualifications included a childhood as the son of missionary parents who had worked among several of the tribes scattered from northern Burma to North Vietnam. Handsome and well-spoken, he looked the all-American boy and, with service in the 82nd Airborne Division, had the requisite military background. Most importantly, he spoke several local languages and could dispense with intermediaries as he explored the tribes' paramilitary potential. These credentials outweighed, at least for the moment, his free-spirited indifference to bureaucratic discipline, and as Bill Lair's agent, he debriefed Chao Mai in Nam Tha in December 1961.³⁷ [redacted]

Chao Mai turned out to be a veteran of combat against the Japanese in World War II, when he earned the tribal title "warrior chief," and RLG officials dealt with him as de facto leader of the Yao in Nam Tha Province. Like Vang Pao, Chao Mai declared loyalty to the king and abiding hatred for the Pathet Lao and communism. Claiming direct control over 5,000 Yao, he asserted that, as the channel for material aid from the United States, he could easily triple that number. In addition, as the son of a Yao who had become an official of the French colonial regime, he claimed substantial influence with other tribes, including the scattered Hmong villages in Nam Tha.³⁸ [redacted]

[redacted] found these claims credible and brought Chao Mai to Vientiane, where Bill Lair agreed to supply three 100-man weapons packs. But the FAR commander for the northernmost sector, General Bounleut, harbored the conventional Lao antipathy for the tribal minorities; he also looked unenthusiastic about a military operation that he did not control. His initial opposition—the need for help, whatever the source, eventually overrode it—had combined with communist pressure on Nam Tha town to delay delivery until shortly before the town fell in May 1962.³⁹ [redacted]

There was time for some training—whether [redacted] or US Special Forces is not clear—before Chao Mai's volunteers returned to defend their villages. Instruction was less intensive than in MR 2, or even in the Panhandle, but the

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program in the northwest also had less ambitious goals. The North Vietnamese had not penetrated that area on the same scale as they had Vang Pao's domain, and in order to defend their families against Pathet Lao patrols, the Yao could manage with old Springfield rifles and other leftovers from World War II.⁴⁰

[] borrowed a Hmong radio operator from Vang Pao, and Lair provided the usual RS-1 agent radio and one-time cipher pads. The uncertain security of Yao territory precluded assigning [] to Chao Mai's floating headquarters in Nam Tha Province, but the radio sufficed until the provincial capital fell to the communists. About that time, the radio failed, and by the time communications were restored, the Geneva Agreements had been signed. As with the other units, the immediate objective then became that of preserving the resistance organization and using it for intelligence.⁴¹ []

The Kha []

In the second of the programs created in 1962, MAAG and [] moved to extend to the far south a formula similar to that employed in MR 2 and the northwest. On 5 March, an interagency Special Group message authorized [] and MAAG to arm 12 companies of 100 Kha tribesmen inhabiting the commanding terrain feature known as the Bolovens Plateau. MAAG would exercise operational control of the activity, using the US Special Forces teams known in Laos as "White Star," until and unless a peace agreement required military advisers to depart. At that point, []

Meanwhile, [] supervised logistics and served as the ambassador's channel for discussion of policy questions. []

[] the Vientiane Mission proposed in May to double the original force. With 24 companies, it intended to secure the entire Bolovens and then send Kha units east and north with the ambitious objective of interdicting Viet Cong lines of communication and eventually securing all of southern Laos.⁴³ []

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The record does not explain the sudden eruption of collegiality between [] and MAAG. Regarding the southern tribesmen: The people called Kha (slave) in the south were of the same stock as the tribes farther north called Lao Theung and Khmu. The term "Kha" was so universal that American advisers used it, without derogatory intent, and tribal leaders seem never to have objected in even the most oblique fashion. Ethnic animosities were not limited to those between lowland Lao and the hill peoples. There was also a pecking order among the latter, with the Hmong contemptuous of all the tribes included under the label Lao Theung. []

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Given the historical performance of regular Laotian forces, [] was eager to keep FAR out of this effort, but the new program could not be strictly unilateral. For all the desirability of keeping a tactical free hand, Operation [] as it was called, would have to have at least nominal RLG sponsorship if it was to survive a possible future of ICC inspections. And CIA wanted no private armies; unilateral intelligence teams were different, but military formations had to have a genuine connection with local authority.⁴⁴ []

This requirement was particularly urgent with the Kha. Far less cohesive than the Hmong or even the Yao, they had no interclan leadership of the kind provided by Vang Pao, Touby Lyfoung, and Chao Mai. To compensate for this, Vientiane needed someone with enough stature to have his authority recognized by disparate leaders who accepted no hierarchy of tribal leadership. [] candidate was Prince Boun Oum, the RLG's prime minister and satrap of southern Laos. His standing as a local power would presumably survive departure from the national government, and—apart from FAR's poorly regarded Military Region 4 commander, Gen. Kot Venevengsos—there was really no one else. In any case, [] anticipated that the prince's role in Operation []—encouraging unit leaders to see themselves as supported and encouraged by the RLG—would remain pro forma in all matters of training, support, and tactical guidance.⁴⁵ []

A fragmented tribal structure, the limited role proposed for Boun Oum and the FAR command, and USSF unfamiliarity with such ambiguous command arrangements created a high potential for mutual misunderstanding in this triangular set of relationships in southern Laos. [] recognized that it would have to manage these connections, but, while awaiting a new infusion of case officers, [] had no one to send to Pakse to handle this essential liaison. []

For a solution, [] turned to two men already on the scene. One was a French-Vietnamese *métisse* planter and big game hunter, [] whose many years on the Bolovens Plateau had made him familiar with the tribal structure and with many of the elders. [] whose only son had been murdered in a Pathet Lao incursion, shared none of the official French enthusiasm for left-leaning neutralism and eagerly accepted a proposal that he put his knowledge and skills at CIA disposition.⁴⁶ []

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[] Recognizing that his knowledge of the area and easy relationships with Lao officials in Pakse (MR 4 headquarters) equipped him to manage both the paramilitary and the civic action aspects of the program, []

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[] He and [] set up at Houei Kong, centrally located on the Bolovens Plateau, and began building a dispensary, a rice mill, and a school, and organizing an agricultural cooperative.⁴⁷ []

The earlier talk of doubling the Kha force to 24 companies was replaced, as a cease-fire and coalition loomed in late June 1962, by concern about CIA's continued ability to use its Kha units even for intelligence. Having hoped to "keep FAR out of it," [] now complained that MR 4 had "worked its way into the program" to a point which rendered covert exploitation impracticable. [] therefore, proposed a unilateral adjunct to the guerrilla force, extracting from it potential staybehind intelligence cadres who might also later recruit others to contest with the Pathet Lao for political influence in communist-controlled territory.⁴⁸ []

The same uncertainty prevailed in northern and central Laos. That CIA would support its irregulars if they came under attack was not, in principle, at issue. But the timeliness and efficacy of such support would be determined by the terms of the agreement and by the frequency and scale of any North Vietnamese violations. Political and diplomatic factors would also play a part. These included the state of overall Soviet-US relations and the viability of the Laotian coalition, and especially the performance of likely prime minister Souvanna Phouma.⁴⁹ []

For [] this last factor represented the stickiest of several sticking points. Headquarters considered soliciting Souvanna's endorsement of a Hmong irregular force that Vang Pao would dedicate to unconditional support of the presumptive new prime minister. But [] doubted that Vang Pao would make any such unconditional pledge—and what if Souvanna then ordered the Hmong disarmed?⁵⁰ []

⁴⁷ [] recollections of the author, who later served with both [] [] displayed none of the Hemingway-style big-game-hunter macho; his avuncular manner made it easy for him to win the confidence of tribesmen always wary of the intentions of outsiders. []

⁴⁸ [] proposed not only to draw personnel from existing units but also to train them at the Kha base on the Bolovens. All this was to be insulated from the elements not included; just how does not emerge from surviving documents. The complaint about FAR intrusion probably reflects General Kot's personal involvement in enrolling new tribesmen, something that probably accounts for later criticism at Headquarters of allegedly indiscriminate recruiting.

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Even more to the point was [] skepticism about Souvanna's discretion. Souvanna would surely reveal to the French, as well as to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, any understanding he might reach with Vang Pao and the CIA, and he would probably buckle under the resulting pressure to repudiate it. In these circumstances, [] thought it better to have the Hmong "lie 'doggo'" and leave Souvanna in the dark. For the moment at least, the program would remain an essentially bilateral enterprise with Vang Pao.⁵¹ []

⁵¹ [] .

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CHAPTER SEVEN

New Rules of Engagement

On 23 July 1962, Secretary of State Rusk and the other conferees—including the Soviets, the British, and the French—signed the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. All foreign military personnel (except the French training mission, a relic of the 1954 Geneva Accords) were to withdraw by 7 October, and the respective sides turned to the problems of implementation. In Washington, this included confronting the more basic question of good faith.¹

That question had come into high relief in a 21 July conversation between Averell Harriman and the North Vietnamese foreign minister Ung Van Kiem. Harriman asserted the US intention to withdraw all its military advisers and asked if Hanoi would do likewise. Kiem replied that the North Vietnamese would “abide carefully” by the terms of the agreement and “would do nothing which was contrary” to it. Did this mean, Harriman asked, that Hanoi’s military personnel would leave? Kiem repeated that the North Vietnamese would “comply with all the provisions” of the agreement.²

Harriman tried again: was the foreign minister admitting that there were North Vietnamese forces in Laos? Kiem acknowledged the presence of trainers and “specialists.” Harriman noted that even this formulation conceded more than Soviet negotiator Pushkin had done at Geneva and went on to press the issue: would the foreign minister now “admit that there were North Vietnamese military units in Laos?” Kiem “evaded a direct answer to this question and repeated his reference to military training personnel who were performing such tasks as ‘running the military academy.’” The two then voiced their expectations of each other. Kiem asserted that successful implementation depended primarily on the United States, a statement Harriman found to be “a remarkable coincidence,” in that the US government thought success “depended primarily on the actions of the North Vietnamese.”³

¹ Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal to President Kennedy, “11:30 a.m. Meeting on Contingency Planning for Laos,” 13 June 1962, and Editorial Note, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 845-46, 871.

² Memorandum of Conversation, 22 July 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 867-870.

³ *Ibid.*

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In fact, the lack of an effective enforcement mechanism meant that the deal at Geneva masked a tacit partition of Laos. Hanoi would take the northern mountains and the Ho Chi Minh Trail while the RLG held the Mekong Valley and contiguous highlands. The surviving record does not establish how clearly—if at all—the American architects of the deal recognized the cession of an overland route, bypassing the DMZ, from Hanoi to South Vietnam. Harriman's overweening confidence in his ability to manipulate Moscow into restraining its Asian partners on Washington's behalf may have obscured the consequences of the terms accepted at Geneva. But Hanoi would now control the Ho Chi Minh Trail, with only partial and temporary interruptions, until the end of the war.⁴ [redacted]

The Geneva negotiations had concentrated on the composition of a so-called government of national union; if and how it would work remained to be seen. Now that the long-sought coalition had become a fact, one of the many uncertainties was the new prime minister's attitude toward the United States. No one thought Souvanna Phouma a communist—though many, including [redacted] thought him to be communism's helpless pawn—but he had doubtless not forgotten the record of US hostility toward him. Only if Souvanna distrusted the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao more than he did the Americans would there be a possibility of working with him to contain communist influence. [redacted]

The administration was eager to get off on the right foot, if possible, and invited Souvanna to Washington in late July. He met with President Kennedy for an hour, then attended a series of meetings with senior officials, such as Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defense McNamara [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] 5 [redacted]

⁴ See Norman Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War*, for one interpretation of the strategic effects of the Geneva Agreements [redacted]

⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting with Prince Souvanna Phouma," 27 July 1962; Editorial Note; Memorandum for the Record, "Highlights of Meeting held 28 July 1962 Between Prince Souvanna Phouma, Mr. John A. McCone, Governor Harriman," 28 July 1962; all *FRUS 1961-1963*, 874-81. [redacted]

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Ignoring [] recommendation to avoid mentioning the Hmong, the DCI acknowledged the Agency's feeling of responsibility toward them. He exhorted Souvanna to recognize, in turn, Hmong potential to bolster a truly neutralist government. Personalizing the matter in his usual fashion, Souvanna dismissed the implication that he might doubt Hmong loyalty: Touby Lyfoung, their chief, "was loyal to him, indeed had been brought up by him." The delivery of relief supplies, therefore, would be no problem. []



Vang Pao and Touby Lyfoung (r) at Hmong ceremony, mid-1960s (Courtesy of Bill Lair)

On the matter of expelling the North Vietnamese presence, Souvanna was as vague as expected, but McCone thought the session succeeded in diminishing his "distrust of the CIA and contributed to his confidence in the intentions of the US Government." And Vang Pao, at CIA's urging, accepted Souvanna's invitation to a mid-August meeting in Vientiane; [] thought Vang Pao now accepted that it lay in the Hmong's interest for him to support the new prime minister. []

Changing the Guard []

The Geneva Agreements dissolved an ineffective but resolutely anticommunist and antineutralist regime. Replacing it was a coalition of mutually antagonistic elements, for the Kong Le neutralists, allied with Souvanna Phouma, were already disaffected with their Pathet Lao partners. Control of key ministries—Defense and Interior—was to be shared among the three parties, which promised immobility at best, open conflict at worst. []

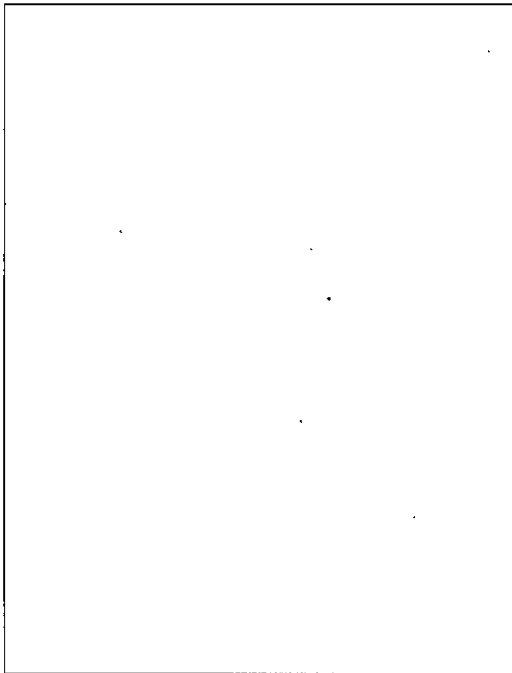
⁶ Memorandum for the Record, "Highlights," FRUS, 28 July 1962; []

[] As for being "brought up" by Souvanna, Touby was only nine years younger. []

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The 75 days after 23 July constituted something of an interregnum. While everyone awaited the 7 October creation of the new government, the two key figures in the US Mission completed their tours of duty. Ambassador Winthrop Brown had been cautious and judicious, always trying to anticipate the long-term consequences of tactical decisions. He was also consistently resolute in the face of communist challenges to noncommunist interests in Laos and had been an active partner in creating, expanding, and supporting the Hmong resistance. [redacted]

[redacted] was a man of more activist disposition, but not in any self-aggrandizing way, and he, too, favored prudence over any

kind of unreflective combativeness. If he had differences with the ambassador, he submerged them in unfailingly loyal support.⁸ [redacted]

[redacted] and Brown had been ideally suited by temperament to handle the ambiguous policy climate of 1961 and early 1962. The implementation phase of the Geneva Agreements was left to [redacted] and the new ambassador Leonard Unger. [redacted] as he was universally known, was a China specialist and an equable, pragmatic CIA manager. Unger shared his predecessor's caution without—in the eyes of most Agency observers—displaying Brown's firmness and resolution.⁹ [redacted]

[redacted] arrived along with a new contingent of paramilitary case officers. A few of the veterans had adapted poorly, as we have seen, to the cultural idiosyncrasies of their Hmong and Lao clients. And nearly all of those still in Laos were ending their tours of duty. Defining the credentials they wanted in new officers, [redacted] and Bill Lair had put a high priority on adaptability,

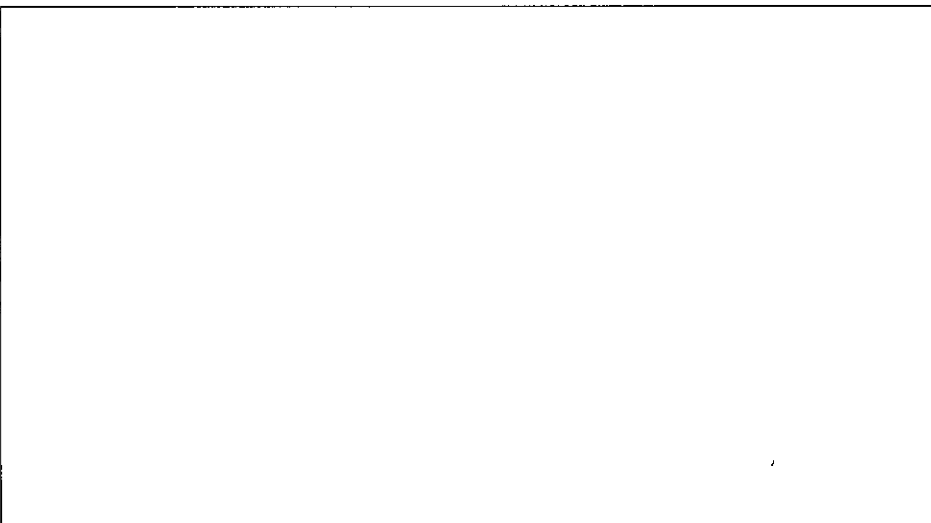
⁸ Bill Lair; author's recollection. [redacted]

⁹ Author's recollection. Douglas Blaufarb, Vientiane COS from 1964 to 1966, had been Unger's classmate at Harvard. Unger seemed to him to have adopted bureaucratic caution, in the service of ambition, as his first priority. (Blaufarb interview.) James Glerum, then a frequent visitor to Vientiane on Air America business, saw [redacted]—as devoting most of his time to the ambassador and senior Lao, "floating lightly" over the details of the PM program. (Jim Glerum). [redacted]

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for which they were willing to sacrifice paramilitary expertise. Accordingly, they had persuaded Headquarters to solicit volunteers among Junior Officer Trainees still in training. This approach yielded a group of imaginative and adaptable young officers who began arriving in mid-1962.¹⁰



Only could stay on the Laotian side of the Mekong, but abandoned its intention to put him into the Kha redoubt on the Bolovens Plateau. He would remain in Pakse, using his FAR liaison officer, a Lieutenant Thong, to communicate with the guerrillas.¹³

In the first days after agreement at Geneva, Ambassador Unger adopted an equally conservative approach to the handling of military emergencies. He allowed rice and civilian supply drops, but wanted no more arms or ammunition "until we [got] a feel for how [the] other side behaved after signing." thought Unger understood "the difficulties this standdown creates. But [I] also believe he thinks the situation is so delicate that he has no alternative."¹⁴

The ambassador did not have long to wait to discover communist intentions. As the Geneva Agreement was being signed, the North Vietnamese attacked the joint command post of three of Thakhek's units, situated northeast across the Panhandle in the piedmont of the Annamite Chain. Seven guerrillas were

¹⁰ Bill Lair.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Author's recollection.

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killed, [redacted]
[redacted] Other irregulars were wounded and at least one unit broke and scattered. The damage was compounded by the loss of the weapons for 100 new volunteers who had not yet arrived at the bivouac.¹⁵ [redacted]

The enemy attacked also in the north. In the four weeks after the Geneva signing, Hanoi prepared a new gambit to exploit both the shaky fire discipline of the Hmong and the American suspension of ammunition deliveries. The new tactic appeared on 18 August, when North Vietnamese troops occupied high ground near the Hmong base at Phou Koup, in Sam Neua Province. The irregulars at this forward position had received relatively little training, and only from a Hmong Special Operations Team, [redacted] Exploiting their inexperience, the communists dug "spider holes" under cover of darkness, out of range of small arms fire. Emerging after the morning fog burned off, they deliberately exposed themselves to heavy weapons fire, ducking for cover when the Hmong opened up. The irregulars exhausted their mortar and rocket ammunition, to little effect, after which the North Vietnamese launched a frontal attack.¹⁶ [redacted]

Despite the paucity of training, the Hmong held off the enemy with small-arms fire long enough to evacuate their families. But their new refuge was equally vulnerable to attack, and the station asked for permission to drop ammunition. This came within hours, so quickly that Harriman seemed to fear that his State Department subordinates would think him indifferent to good-faith implementation of the cease-fire. He cabled Ambassador Unger [redacted] to assure him that he "had no feeling of guilt in approving this resupply and that our conscience is clear because these Meo troops are clearly being attacked illegally by enemy forces in violation of the Geneva accords."¹⁷ [redacted]

It might be self-defense, but Headquarters still wanted to conceal the proposed ammunition delivery from the ICC. [redacted]

[redacted]

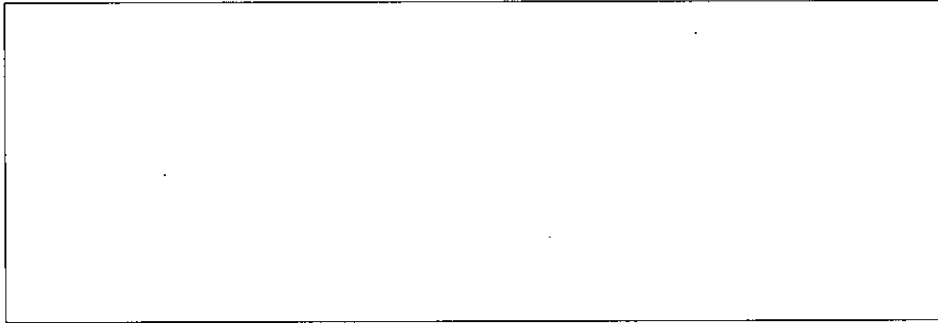
After the 18 August incident at Phou Koup, Harriman liberalized the rules to the extent of authorizing Ambassador Unger to send one-time resupply flights to units under attack and in danger of being overrun. But the most deli-

¹⁵ [redacted]

¹⁶ [redacted]
¹⁷ [redacted]
¹⁸ [redacted]

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cate problem, that of an advisory element with the Hmong, remained. With only a month remaining before the 6 October deadline, Harriman told CIA he expected all case officers to be withdrawn. could stay, though only at secure base camps, and only long enough to ensure a transition as smooth as possible.¹⁹



would be very much on its own, and its success would depend on getting the right people in the right positions. Pat Landry, Lair's deputy, and the dedicated and fearless paramilitary expert, quickly volunteered. So did a recent Princeton graduate with an ROTC commission in the artillery and an even more recent product of the standard Clandestine Service operations course. During a short apprenticeship in had impressed Bill Lair with his maturity and easy way of dealing with people, and Lair chose him during the summer to join at Long Tieng.²¹

About to leave Laos Lair had to decide whom to appoint as Vang Pao's adviser. Headquarters vetoed Landry—he was too knowledgeable of operations elsewhere to let him risk capture in upcountry Laos, and anyway, would need his gift for administration. senior to in age and grade—not to mention military skills—would be the obvious second choice, but his edgy relationship with Vang Pao made Lair

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²¹ Bill Lair.

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uneasy. [] by contrast, had quickly bonded with the Hmong chieftain, and Lair defied protocol, naming []—only in his mid-20s—as Vang Pao's liaison at Long Tieng. [] doubtless recognizing the liability posed by his lack of empathy with the Hmong leadership, stoically accepted his entirely pro forma status as senior man. In practice, he ran the air operation and served as chief instructor for the training schedules worked out by Vang Pao,

In a Staybehind Mode []

The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 made nuclear Armageddon look like more than a theoretical possibility. In this febrile climate, the Agency prepared to run the Laotian irregulars as staybehind units supporting US forces fighting a general war. But deniability continued to be imperative, at least until verifiable North Vietnamese violations of the cease-fire rendered the question moot. Accordingly, Heinie Aderholt [] and the Lair team [] developed an elaborate system to conceal the flights that delivered ordnance to guerrilla camps under attack.²³ []

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[] also served as air operations officer at Long Tieng, where his willingness to go on any flight reassured many a pilot being asked to fly in foul weather to deliver ammunition or recover wounded from some beleaguered mountaintop. (Jim Glerum.) In October 1963, [] was guiding a helicopter pilot on such a mission to a mountaintop site just retaken from the enemy. He disembarked just as a Hmong probing for enemy mines detonated a "bouncing Betty." It sprang into the air and exploded, killing four Hmong and wounding six more, plus [] and the pilot. [] threw himself on the ground at the explosion, and when he looked up saw leaking fuel tanks that would soon disable the chopper. He ordered the injured pilot into the air and back to Long Tieng. A second helicopter was waiting to land, and it picked up [] and the other wounded and flew them out for treatment. []

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The station found itself caught up also in the innumerable complications created by the demobilization provisions accepted at Geneva. Nonessential or ineffective units—mostly FAR territorials—were to be disbanded while CIA tried to replace them on FAR rolls with some of the irregulars not yet officially recognized. General Phoumi, concerned as always with preserving his own constituency, tried to manipulate his US patron by proposing some of his functioning units for demobilization. The US Mission saw through this ploy, aimed at getting the United States to support these directly, outside the Military Assistance Program, while the expendable units remained on the rolls. Just before the end of October, however, added pressure on Phoumi produced a list of territorial battalions to be dissolved.²⁵

Soon added to the list were 800 of the CIA-supported irregulars on the Bolovens Plateau. Exposure was part of the problem, as British and French reports began alluding to US activity in the Bolovens that exceeded legitimate support to Souvanna's government. In addition, the new commander of FAR Military Region 4, Gen. Phasouk Somly, wanted more participation in the project—and more information about the Americans involved—than CIA was prepared to give him. Finally, the departure of their US Special Forces teams had left many of the Kha irregulars without adequate direction or communications.²⁶

The tripartite coalition mandated at Geneva quickly displayed its fragility when the neutralist-communist alliance began to unravel. Only a week after the deadline for withdrawal of foreign military personnel, a dissident FAR officer, leading a force independent of Kong Le's, approached a station officer. Souvanna had charged him, he said, to approach CIA for surreptitious material help for the neutralist forces. The Mission thought it in the US interest to preserve Souvanna's personal base of military support, and the station scrambled to find radios and uniforms for this Phong Saly contingent.²⁷

By November, open conflict had erupted between Kong Le and Pathet Lao elements on the Plain of Jars. The Soviets halted their airlift of supplies to the neutralists, and with some misgivings the Vientiane Mission acceded to Souvanna's pleas for nonmilitary supplies for the neutralists on the Plain of Jars. On 27 November, an Air America C-123 cleared to land at the neutralist headquarters at Phongsavan was shot down on its final approach, killing the two pilots aboard.²⁸

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Gen. Phasouk Somly, 1964

The perpetrators could have been either Pathet Lao, also garrisoned in the town, or procommunist elements among the putative neutralists. Kong Le immediately cut his ties to the Pathet Lao, but this did not guarantee security for Air America, and Ambassador Unger suspended the supply flights. Meanwhile, the station urged caution on Vang Pao: he should do no more than "encourage friendly contact" between his men and Kong Le's troops, promoting the line that all were working for a neutral, independent Laos. Presumably with Kong Le's military weakness in mind, Whitehurst wanted Vang Pao to avoid any suggestion of support for the neutralists in open conflict with the communists.²⁹ []

Souvanna Phouma visited the Plain of Jars in a futile attempt to get a leftist officer among the neu-

tralists to return equipment he had expropriated from FAR. The prime minister had already demonstrated how little he controlled even the neutralist elements in his government, let alone the communists, and this prompted yet another anguished reassessment in Washington. Might there not be a stronger alterna-

²⁸ Memorandum from the President's Military Representative's Naval Aide to JCS Chairman, "Shooting Down of Air America Plane in Laos," 28 November 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 921-23.

²⁹ []

See also Roger Hilsman and Michael Forrestal, "Report on Laos," c. January 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 928. Two days after the crash, President Kennedy complained to Anastas Mikoyan, first deputy chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers, about this incident and about North Vietnamese failure to leave Laos and to abstain from infiltrating South Vietnam through Laotian territory. To Kennedy's charge that the Soviet Union was not fulfilling its obligations, Mikoyan retorted simply that it was. (Memorandum of Conversation, November 29, 1962, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 923-24.) []

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tive to Souvanna, someone who could restrain leftist obstructionism? The station, acknowledging how desirable that would be, said no.

Weak as he is and unlikely as his chances of success seem to be, Souvanna is a paragon of strength compared to any of his so-called Neutralist followers [who are] small boys by comparison.³⁰

Restive Clients, Aggrieved Patron

Conspicuous American support for Souvanna was accompanied by restrictions on material support for the Hmong that resulted in chronic ammunition and even food shortages. At the Hmong New Year's celebration at Long Tieng in early December, Vang Pao and his zone commanders bombarded with complaints about American passivity in the face of neutralist and communist violations. They railed against what they saw as a flaccid US response to the shooting down of the C-123 at Phongsavan and claimed that, while Hmong irregulars were running out of ammunition, the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese were arming and training new recruits. Any such violations by the Hmong, they charged, would have led to swift and severe American sanctions.³¹

pointed out that they had just finished watching a spasm of profligate small-arms fire into the air, a waste that had no better reason than greeting the New Year. Frustrated at the Hmong's airy indifference to fire discipline, they protested with a symbolic refusal to eat at Vang Pao's holiday dinner. This gesture, in front of dozens of guests, created a frosty atmosphere lasting several days. The tension eased with an unannounced ammunition drop at Long Tieng for redistribution to threatened outposts, and the advisers hoped that the Hmong had gotten the point: fire discipline had to improve, but units under fire would not be denied support.³²

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In a somewhat defensive response, rejected Vang Pao's accusation of a failure to foresee such an incident. On the contrary, wrote, the flights had represented a "coldly calculated risk" taken to ensure that if the coalition broke up, as it was showing signs of doing, the Pathet Lao would get the blame. "While we hoped it would not happen, we really anticipated possible loss of life in this effort."

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Incremental advances followed, but the problem could not be definitively solved. In late May 1963, the station reported Vang Pao's promise to do everything possible to improve fire discipline, but predicted that this would have "negligible effect . . . for [the] Lao style of fighting a war is to fire from as far away as possible in hopes of frightening [the] enemy away."

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For Vang Pao, ammunition consumption, however important, was not the critical issue. His objection to a perceived American emphasis on support to Souvanna at the expense of the Hmong rested on two political calculations, the first having to do with the tribe's place in Laotian society. Vang Pao insisted that all the Hmong wanted was equality with their Lao compatriots in a free, independent Laos. The unification under his leadership of so many clans in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces offered an unparalleled opportunity to achieve this. But success depended on continued, direct American assistance; in effect, an American guarantee of Hmong social advancement. [] summarized the Hmong position: "Their only hope of an honorable existence [sic] in Laos is to remain a strong enough group so that any Laotian government will be forced to treat Meos with respect."³³ []

The other political calculation concerned the effect of reduced support on Vang Pao's own standing with his people. He explicitly acknowledged that direct US aid had to continue if he was to "demonstrate to all Meos that their only salvation" was to follow him. Without him—and there was no one who could replace him—they would "break up into uncontrollable bands" and their military potential would dissolve. [] thought it essential to get more ammunition and spare parts, both to bolster Vang Pao's standing with his troops and to meet genuine tactical needs. [] emphasized the strategic aspect in explaining Vang Pao's low spirits: Vientiane might fear the extermination of the neutralists in a shootout with the communists, but Vang Pao had a different concern. If Kong Le tacitly ceded the Plain of Jars to the communists, they would consolidate their control, and the Hmong under Vang Pao would never recover this sacred ground.³⁴ []

[] acknowledged that Vang Pao's complaints had some merit. He noted, on the other hand, that by virtue of direct American aid, the Hmong were stronger and more united than ever before. Vang Pao had been warned that a political settlement would mean changes, including a return to greater agricultural self-sufficiency. But the US Mission was "still running [a] large airlift of food to [the] Meos who, as far as [I am] concerned, have not really adjusted to [the] fact that we cannot keep shoving tons of rice out of airplanes indefinitely."³⁵ []

Feeding the Hmong []

The "we" shoving rice out of aircraft referred primarily to USOM, which had always participated in the relief aspects of the Hmong program but in

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October 1962 had become, at least nominally, the sole agent of civilian supply efforts. Although may have assumed that it was equal to the job, his men disagreed. In their view, USOM's operating style, involving dependence on conventional procurement procedures like competitive bidding, had produced a 30-percent shortfall in the rice needed in December. Moreover, with numerous villages abandoned for the safety of refugee centers, many of the tribesmen now lacked the tools with which to clear land for the new crop of upland rice.³⁶

at first accepted the contrary view of Edgar "Pop" Buell, USOM's refugee relief officer, who argued that apparent rice shortages resulted from distribution problems. Total deliveries should actually be reduced, even as delivery schedules were refined. Buell also persuaded the COS that the Hmong were resisting a return to self-sufficiency, preferring to get their rice in the bags that fell from the sky. As for tools, USOM had promised timely purchase in neighboring Thailand, but the station noted Pop Buell's skepticism that it would make good on this commitment.³⁷

Two weeks later, Buell's doubts were confirmed. The dry season was now only six weeks away, and the Hmong needed to prepare for it by clearing land for their slash-and-burn style of mountain agriculture. The promised axes and machetes had not arrived, and Headquarters acceded to appeal for a modest \$8,000 to buy 5,000 hand tools. Seed rice was also late, and CIA bought 100 tons in Thailand to ensure timely delivery.³⁸

These measures did not prevent a sometimes heated debate about hunger among the Hmong. Officers living in the field were less impressed by Buell's global figures on requirements and deliveries than by anecdotal evidence of deprivation, and on 13 February relayed impassioned plea for more help.³⁹

had just talked to a man from an outpost at Long Pot, near Route 13, the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. The militia and villagers there, often hit by enemy raiding parties, had been without corn and rice for two months; even the seed for next year's crops had been consumed. The garrison at the nearest secure drop zone was also without food, and at both sites morale was down, with neglected weapons now unreliable and some units about to disband in order to forage for food. Pathet Lao were now penetrating Long Pot, and many civilians had left for the larger site at Tham Sorn Yai.⁴⁰

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Even if [redacted] doubted—total deliveries exceeded the total requirement, this did not help the outlying militia units, charged with collecting intelligence and protecting the refugee centers that were disintegrating for lack of food. [redacted] suggested that Pop Buell, however free to travel, had as little direct experience as he himself did of outposts actually engaged with the enemy. He thought that USOM failed to see the intimate connection between the safety of refugee centers and support to troops on the line.⁴¹ [redacted]

[redacted] Regarding the reported shortfall, the COS credited Pop Buell with unequalled knowledge of conditions upcountry, where he spent 29 days of the month. Seeing Pop as unrivaled also in emotional commitment to Hmong welfare, [redacted] thought he had struck the right balance when he “directed [Buell] to cut [deliveries] to [the] point his conscience permitted.”⁴² [redacted]

(b)(3)

None of this established that no Hmong were going hungry—indeed, [redacted] seemed implicitly to acknowledge that some might be doing just that—but he thought that Vang Pao (and by implication [redacted] failed to understand that “the war is over, at least for the time being” and that help for the Hmong was complicated by coalition politics. “There is nobody in [the] Lao government who is willing to stand up and publicly say that these supply flights are being flown [on its] behalf.” After every crash—a regrettably frequent occurrence—“the Commie world press organ goes into operation again . . . and there is not a single Lao, including [General] Phoumi, who will stand up and defend us.” Furthermore, airport officials at Wat Tay were now harassing the air-supply program, demanding written manifests and requiring personal inspections of aircraft by the base commander. In these circumstances, [redacted] said, rice could no longer be delivered on demand; Vang Pao and the Hmong would simply have to adapt.⁴³ [redacted]

[redacted] attributed the bureaucratic harassment to the hostility between General Phoumi and the prime minister. Whenever a plane went down, Souvanna would duck the media questions that followed, saying that he “never asked for these flights.” Phoumi’s private assurances to Americans of his support for the Hmong were “phoney.” [redacted] noted that any real help from the general would be contingent on covert US support for his own political ambitions, and the United States had no intention of accommodating him. The

40 [redacted]

41 [redacted]

42 [redacted]

⁴³ Ibid. Delivery of the seed rice and tools did not make the Hmong self-sufficient. A defaulting USOM contractor created another severe shortage in May 1963; it took 10 weeks to get deliveries under a new contract. This time, there was no argument about the fact of a shortage. [redacted]

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Hmong therefore learned to adapt to a more austere supply regime, while the station learned that CIA's logistical flexibility continued to be indispensable if American commitments to a client people were to be fulfilled.⁴⁴

The Vang Pao-Kong Le Alliance

At the beginning of 1963, continued American support of the Hmong resistance—and to a lesser extent of the smaller units in the Panhandle—reflected as much a sense of obligation to loyal clients as it did a conviction of their military or political value. When two Washington visitors—Michael Forrestal from the White House and Roger Hilsman from State—visited in January, they expressed doubts about Hmong combat potential, especially that of exposed units in the Sam Neua salient. They asked if it might be better simply to relocate Hmong combatants and dependents away from combat zones, not only for their protection but to reduce the risk to aircraft dropping supplies.⁴⁵

granted the possibility of migration, but noted that, as a hill people, the Hmong would never occupy in strength the lowlands through which supply by road would have to travel; a hermetically sealed enclave was not in the cards. In any case, the most dangerous area, for both the Hmong and the pilots supplying them, was not in Sam Neua but in eastern Xieng Khouang, up to the North Vietnamese border. And this sector could not lightly be ceded to Hanoi, for it was key to any effort to harass communist supply lines if the NVA turned on Kong Le's men on the Plain of Jars. Moreover, large-scale evacuation would probably invite communist attack even if the Hmong could be persuaded to undertake it. In fact, some movement was taking place in Xieng Khouang Province, but getting the Hmong to embark on a mass migration might well be simply impossible.⁴⁶

doubted, moreover, that such a move, most likely into Sayaboury Province west of the Mekong, would serve US interests. Valuable not only for intelligence on enemy activity in much of northern Laos, the Hmong were a material factor in Kong Le's ability to deter a major enemy attack against him on the Plain of Jars. Thus, they constituted a "real balance of power" in the overall effort to preserve the government of Souvanna Phouma.⁴⁷

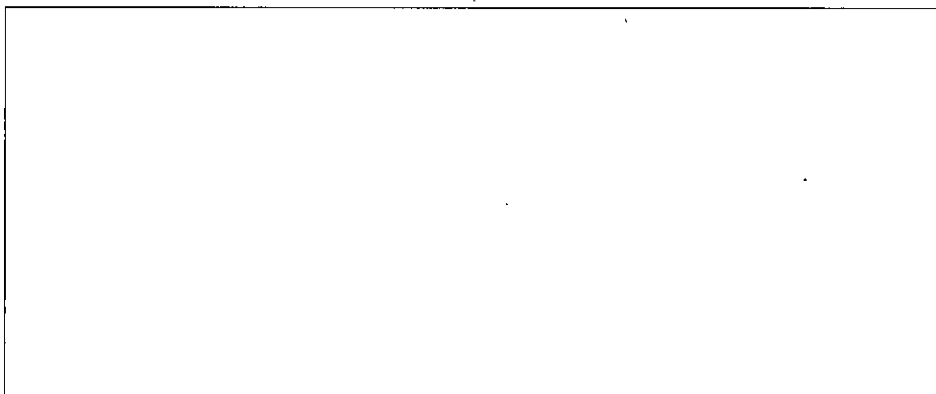
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[redacted] Admiral Felt was expressing similar concerns; even after making allowances for policy restrictions on aggressive action, he thought combat effectiveness was declining and that the Hmong were "not living up to expectations." [redacted] suggested that CIA reporting, too focused on Hmong morale problems and "too reticent" about their accomplishments, might be responsible for this. But in the nature of the case, any official who insisted on "decisive" action, as Harriman did, was bound to be disappointed. The Hmong were not prepared by social organization, motivation, or training to contest with regular formations for control of territory. Holding the high ground while they harassed enemy installations and lines of communications below was the most that could be expected of them.⁴⁹ [redacted]

For the other anticommunist Laotian forces, whose nonfeasance Harriman and Felt seemed to overlook, even this limited potential overcame cultural condescension and political mistrust enough to make the Hmong a valued partner. General Phoumi implicitly acknowledged this when, in mid-January, he encouraged Vang Pao not merely to cooperate with Kong Le but to integrate their forces wherever he saw fit. But mistrust was not a monopoly of the Lao, and Vang Pao temporized. Not fully persuaded of Kong Le's good faith and suspicious of French maneuvering in the Kong Le camp to prevent an alliance, Vang Pao thought it prudent to start with ad hoc cooperation. Integration could come later.⁵⁰ [redacted]

Headquarters agreed about integration, not only because of Kong Le's notorious volatility but because an overt merger, even if practicable, might provoke a major communist reaction. Nevertheless, it saw an "approaching

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showdown," even without a formal alliance. Accordingly, it suggested, in mid-February, that the station bolster the neutralists by providing relief supplies to Kong Le through Vang Pao, and that it prepare for possible "black bag" funding of the anticommunist neutralists.⁵¹

In the balancing act that attended every decision to raise the ante, Washington sought to win a tactical advantage without provoking unmanageable communist escalation. Perhaps no longer persuaded that the war was over, even for the time being, now agreed with that tensions on the Plain of Jars might soon explode. If they did, Hmong ammunition reserves would not suffice, and wanted to promise Vang Pao that he could give ammunition to Kong Le if things blew up between the neutralists and the communists. Headquarters turned him down, contending that contingent promises limited the Agency's "flexibility"; would have to be content with an offer of nonlethal supplies. Washington would go no further, for the moment, than to check American stocks of ammunition for the neutralists' Soviet-made weaponry.⁵²

relied to communicate the American position on all this to the zone commanders about to assemble at Long Tieng. Bill Lair, whose fluency in Thai allowed him to understand the related Laotian language, had attended previous such sessions, but Geneva restrictions would now keep him away. The proceedings would take place in Laotian and Hmong, not French, and would be unable to follow them. and Lair gave him an intensive briefing designed to help him correct any distortions in the picture presented by Vang Pao. In so doing, Lair exploited his relationship with and high standing with Vang Pao, to use as an informal conduit to convey US policy guidance.⁵³

A New Crisis

King Savang Vatthana and Prime Minister Souvanna visited Washington in late February 1963. At Foggy Bottom, the king asserted that a solution in Vietnam remained a prerequisite to peace in Laos, for Hanoi would not willingly relinquish the Laotian corridor to South Vietnam as long as it was directing the insurgency in the South. Even at that, the Vietnamese were only part of the problem: the Chinese, in the king's judgment, fully "intended to reestablish

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Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal to President Kennedy, "Laos," 20 February 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 935.

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their rule over entire Southeast Asia . . . The use of communist ideology was only one instrument applied by the Chinese to penetrate Southeast Asia."⁵⁴ []

Savang saw the Pathet Lao as responsive more to the Chinese than to the Soviets. Not only did the Chinese oppose a Western presence in Laos, they would not tolerate Russian influence there, either. The Russians, in turn, wanted to prevent Chinese hegemony in Southeast Asia; the king said that Chairman Khrushchev had told him this. At the same time, Savang believed that the Russian-controlled Polish contingent on the ICC was blocking all serious investigation of cease-fire violations.⁵⁵ []

With his geopolitical view on the record, the king turned to Souvanna, whom he described to Kennedy as the only genuine neutralist, to suggest ways out of the present quandary. The prime minister responded with his customary vague optimism. Phoumi and the neutralists had narrowed the gap between them, and even the Pathet Lao wanted peace. "If everyone [put] his cards on the table in good faith," things would work out, though some pressure from the great powers might be required, from the United States on Phoumi and from the Soviets on the Pathet Lao.⁵⁶ []

The foreign minister in the coalition government, a neutralist with Pathet Lao sympathies, accompanied the king and Souvanna to Washington. Back in Vientiane, he was assassinated on 1 April by one of his own guards, perhaps in retaliation for the Pathet Lao murder of a Kong Le loyalist. Whoever its sponsor, the killing came at a time of high tension on the Plain of Jars—Vang Pao's intelligence had already reported a North Vietnamese buildup there—and communist attacks on Kong Le positions came the next day.⁵⁷ []

[] reported that Ambassador Unger wanted to exhaust all possible diplomatic devices to restore the status quo ante on the Plain of Jars; [] had "no quarrel whatsoever with this for it is correct and legal and . . . in accordance with Geneva Accords." But he wondered if there was "time to make all these diplomatic moves and still have anything left to defend or to

⁵⁴ Memoranda of Conversation, 25 and 27 February 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 936-44. []

⁵⁵ *Ibid*. []

⁵⁶ *Ibid*. Perhaps for reasons of protocol, no one on the American side explored the implied disagreement between the king and Souvanna regarding the relative degrees of influence over the Pathet Lao exercised by Moscow and Beijing. []

⁵⁷ Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 153; Memorandum from the Director of INR to the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs (Hilsman), 3 April 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 953-54; []

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According to Hilsman, Quinim had been trying to subvert Kong Le's followers, who blamed him for the assassination of one of their number, an officer named Ketsana, who had resisted this pressure. []

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assist." Souvanna Phouma so far had dismissed Kong Le's pleas for help as the overreaction of "an emotional young man." Furthermore, Souvanna clearly wanted to believe Hanoi's recent assurances that "there were no Viet Minh in Laos."⁵⁸

On 6 April, Kong Le lost two key positions along Route 4, which ran southeast from the Plain of Jars through Xieng Khouang town. described the dilemma this created for Vang Pao, as General Phoumi urged him to strike the Pathet Lao and the Americans pressed him not to risk incurring the blame for a reversion to open warfare. Vang Pao tried to accommodate both, moving units toward the plain while abstaining from actually engaging the enemy. reminded Headquarters that CIA control over the Hmong fell short of the absolute; under pressure from Phoumi and fearful of the Hmong falling victim to the communists if Kong Le were eliminated, Vang Pao might feel compelled to act.⁵⁹

The prospect of the neutralists being wiped out had already induced Washington to approve three covert munitions drops to Hmong outposts for distribution to Kong Le units on the Plain of Jars. Risking that Vang Pao might just take the ball and run, Washington encouraged him to deploy troops around the plain and southeast along Route 4. Again invoking the principle of decisive action, Harriman prohibited committing them to combat, even to harass the Route 7 supply corridor, unless this became essential to Kong Le's survival, and Vientiane believed they could tip the balance.⁶⁰

On 9 April, Souvanna Phouma suddenly decided that enough was enough. He appealed for action by the Soviet and British cochairmen of the Geneva conference and abandoned his usual airy detachment when he declared the Pathet Lao the aggressor and accused the North Vietnamese of having left troops on Laotian soil. Even then, he shrank from conclusive action, and his aide told the embassy that Kong Le's plans to retake Xieng Khouang town were being kept from Souvanna for fear he would order them canceled.⁶¹

Trying to calibrate the US response to the new crisis, Secretary of State Rusk echoed King Savang Vatthana's views on the influence of the Soviet

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⁶¹ Memorandum Prepared in the Department of State, "Memorandum for Consideration by the National Security Council on April 10, 1963," n.d., *FRUS 1961-1963*, 959-60;

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Union on the Laotian communists, and on the centrality of Vietnam. There might be "some limitations on Soviet ability to guarantee a particular result with Hanoi or [Beijing]," but "we should press upon Khrushchev the fact that his own good faith is at stake and that we expect compliance with his solemn pledges on this subject." Meanwhile, the United States should supply the Kong Le loyalists as well as the anticommunist (i.e., Vang Pao's) forces around the Plain of Jars.⁶² []

In the larger framework Savang described, Secretary Rusk thought it might be time to take the war to the North Vietnamese. The United States should not shackle itself by considering action only "under conditions of greatest disadvantage . . . restricting our forces to [the] landlocked area of Laos." Rather than committing "doughboys to a frustrating and unrewarding effort" on the ground, the United States would do better to "shoot at the Viet-Minh from the air and sea at less cost to us and maximum cost to them." If the Geneva Agreements fail, "we must take the handcuffs off ourselves in deciding what we think about the security of Southeast Asia."⁶³ []

For the moment, Washington's action was a good deal more restrained than its rhetoric, as it continued relying on its team [] to try to restore the balance on the Plain of Jars. The first imperative was a working relationship between Vang Pao and Kong Le, and after an exchange of cordial letters between them, [] flew Vang Pao to the neutralist headquarters on 11 April. Next day, Kong Le came to the Sam Thong refugee center, where he persuaded Vang Pao to send troops to the Plain of Jars. Hmong irregulars dressed in neutralist uniforms moved onto the western part of the plain, where they secured Kong Le's headquarters, freeing neutralist troops to face the Pathet Lao farther east.⁶⁴ []

With the North Vietnamese abstaining from direct participation in the fighting, the Hmong reinforcements did, it seems, tip the balance, for within two days another cease-fire went into effect. With Kong Le no longer on the verge of defeat, American attention returned to the perennial conundrum: how to prevent further communist encroachments without provoking Hanoi to com-

⁶² Telegram From Secretary of State Rusk to the Department of State, 9 April 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 956-59. Rusk's thinking on this seems to have been influenced by the Yugoslav ambassador, Veljko Micunovic, at a meeting on 19 April. Micunovic "suggested the Soviet Union wanted to stabilize the situation in Laos, but China and North Vietnam did not." (See Summary Record of the 513th [NSC] Meeting, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 994.) []

⁶³ *Ibid.* The Viet Minh, the anticolonial front organized by Ho Chi Minh in 1941, had been defunct since the communists took over in Hanoi and created the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. But many US officials used the misnomer until the mid-1960s. []

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mit its own ground forces. The State Department foresaw communist pressure to expel Kong Le from the Plain of Jars and wanted the neutralists to occupy the moral high ground. must, therefore, persuade Vang Pao—and through him, Kong Le—to maintain a defensive posture in order to put the onus for any further cease-fire violations on the other side.⁶⁵

This produced a tense session with Vang Pao, who claimed to share the American “hope [that] the Vietnamese would fear embarrassment in the eyes of world opinion” if they did not retreat from the aggressive moves of the last weeks. But he pressed on the practical implications. Should he withdraw his irregulars from the only two spots on the plain where they were now deployed? Should he pull his men back from advance positions in the surrounding hills? The answer to both questions was no; we could not afford the likely effect on neutralist morale. Kong Le must be supported, allowed, but this had to be done by keeping our “powder dry” while we avoided any action that would cloud the communist responsibility for a decision to destroy the Geneva Agreements.⁶⁶

Back to Open Hostilities

The latest cease-fire, like its predecessors, signified not a suspension of hostilities but a return to skirmishing over peripheral bits of territory. The Hmong retook Pa Dong, Vang Pao's first command post, which had been lost in June 1961. Meanwhile, Kong Le prepared to try to retake some ground on the Plain of Jars. But the communists matched these operations with their own attacks and by mid-April 1963 the latest cease-fire had essentially collapsed. Washington again confronted the ugly choice between defeat, if diplomacy did not restrain the communists, and overt US intervention.⁶⁷

On 19 April, Secretary of Defense McNamara told President Kennedy that consideration was being given to moving a carrier task force into the Gulf of Tonkin off Hanoi as a direct threat. The president suggested linking Cuba with Laos: with the last 23 American prisoners now being repatriated from the Isle

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See also Summary Record of the 512th National Security Council Meeting, 20 April 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 976-80. At this point, the April fighting on and near the Plain of Jars had produced 71 communist troops killed and 155 wounded, while Kong Le's forces suffered 85 killed and 43 wounded. Hmong and FAR losses had been negligible. (Memorandum from William Colby to McGeorge Bundy, 22 April 1963, cited in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 994.)

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of Pines, it might be practicable to signal US unhappiness with Khrushchev's nonfeasance in Laos by striking Castro.⁶⁸ []

While Washington studied the geopolitical chessboard for opportunities to send minatory signals to Moscow and Hanoi, [] undertook the more prosaic task of preserving Kong Le's position on the Plain of Jars. This was threatened, it noted, by the propensity of neutralist and FAR units to flee whenever they anticipated encountering the North Vietnamese opposition. It also cited Kong Le's mood swings—he made the mercurial Vang Pao look positively phlegmatic—and Souvanna Phouma's continued equivocation as two obstacles to a concerted resistance to communist advances. If Kong Le were not to be thrown off the Plain of Jars, Hmong irregulars would have to cooperate with the neutralists in hitting communist supply lines.⁶⁹ []

Washington responded by delegating to Ambassador Unger and the country team greater authority to support integrated operations designed at least to preserve the status quo on and around the plain. By 24 April, the 4,500 Hmong irregulars supporting Kong Le had cratered Route 7, leading to North Vietnam; a Helio pilot confirmed three cuts, each between 200 and 300 feet long. The guerrillas also interdicted Route 4 between the Plain of Jars and Xieng Khouang town. Small ambushes were harassing local traffic, and the Hmong had cut off a number of Pathet Lao units and provided cover for scattered Kong Le units being withdrawn toward the western sector of the plain.⁷⁰ []

On 20 April, the embassy interpreted the events of the previous three weeks as the inauguration of a new phase. Prince Souphanouvong and another Pathet Lao minister had left Vientiane, and it looked as if the communists had abandoned even pro forma respect for Souvanna's coalition government. In these circumstances, Ambassador Unger authorized [] to deploy

⁶⁸ Summary Record of the 512nd NSC Meeting; Memorandum from William Colby to DCI McCone, n.d. "Presidential Meeting on Laos, 19 April 1963," *FRUS 1961-1963*, 974-75. DCI John McCone feared that US military intervention in Laos unaccompanied by action against Cuba would leave Khrushchev's position unimpaired, while the reaction of the US public would hurt Kennedy: "Let's not save Khrushchev at the expense of Kennedy." Conversely, however, strong action in Cuba before moving in Laos might bring down Khrushchev. (See Memorandum from Colby to McCone, n.d., "[NSC] Meeting on Laos," 20 April 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 987-98.) []

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[] The Department's delegation of authority to the embassy coexisted with a continuing urge at Foggy Bottom to "case officer" the Hmong operation, something for which Headquarters apologized to []

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recoilless rifles to Hmong positions within range of Pathet Lao positions and to step up munitions deliveries to the Hmong and their neutralist allies. The Hmong already held one position jointly with Kong Le's men, and [] believed that, absent a North Vietnamese attack in force, the proposed level of activity would save Kong Le. All this was done without consulting Souvanna Phouma, whose resentment of communist perfidy had not yet turned him into a reliable partner of the anticommunist forces in Laos.⁷¹ []

To bring the prime minister into consistently active opposition to the communists had been an American goal ever since the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements. The US Mission now sought to engage him in supporting the anticommunist forces in the northeast by offering the government a gift of several C-46 cargo planes. Souvanna accepted these, for they gave him the capability directly to support Kong Le's units, the only forces personally loyal to him. He then began allowing airport authorities to clear other C-46s, merely leased to the Lao but also carrying Laotian markings, to pick up ordnance at the border town of Paksane for delivery to Long Tieng. One of these even picked up ammunition [] and flew it direct to Kong Le's headquarters on the Plain of Jars. The ploy thus paid for itself: giving Souvanna control of some of the air transport supplying Kong Le and the Hmong not only secured his personal involvement but legalized some of the direct flights between [] and upcountry sites.⁷² []

On 26 April, Governor Harriman saw Chairman Khrushchev and Foreign Minister Gromyko in Moscow. He got little satisfaction: Gromyko denied the presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos, and Khrushchev responded to pleas for a more active ICC by appealing to the inviolable socialist principle of noninterference in other nations' affairs. But things quieted down on the Plain of Jars in the week that followed. To some in the White House, it seemed that Hmong support had supplemented direct material aid to the neutralists in damping down the Pathet Lao campaign to expel Kong Le from the Plain of Jars.⁷³ []

In the relative quiet that prevailed during most of May, Kong Le, Vang Pao, and a Phoumi representative prepared to retake key positions the communists had seized from the neutralists on the eastern Plain of Jars and at Xieng Khouang town. Reporting this to Headquarters, Ambassador Unger pointed out the risks: to make a move in force might invite a decisive riposte from

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⁷³ Memorandum of Conversation, 26 April 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1000-05; Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal to President Kennedy, "Help to Kong Le and Meos," 1 May 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1007-08; Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 152. []

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Hanoi, while accepting the status quo might prove fatal to the morale of Kong Le's tattered forces.⁷⁴ [redacted]

[redacted] adopted a middle position, endorsing a more limited campaign than the one its clients were planning. Washington professed to agree but imposed limitations that restricted Kong Le to strengthening his defensive positions: any aggressive move would "destroy [the] generally favorable world political position we and [the neutralists] now enjoy." It fell to [redacted] to get the plan canceled, and on 14 May, [redacted] spent an uncomfortable four hours with Vang Pao, finally persuading him to urge Kong Le to desist.⁷⁵ [redacted]

[redacted] wrote an exhaustive account of the session, recounting Vang Pao's objections at a level of detail that suggested his sympathy for them. And Vang Pao, for his own part, did not categorically reject [redacted] estimate of the risk created by reported enemy foreknowledge of the planned attack. But he feared that failure to move would only invite a move by the enemy, and he dismissed [redacted] repeated, if perhaps half-hearted, assertions of the need to tar Hanoi with the burden of any further violations. If North Vietnamese-encadred Pathet Lao drove Kong Le off the Plain of Jars in a lightning strike, he said, no one would be able to prove Hanoi's participation. And the damage would have been done.⁷⁶ [redacted]

The operation was duly canceled, although not without some rancor after a FAR general insinuated that Vang Pao had leaked it. One of Kong Le's officers was then determined to be the culprit, and the storm passed. But [redacted] made it explicit, a few days later, that Washington's constant vacillation made it most difficult to run a war. He assured Headquarters that he would follow orders, whatever they might be. But he went on to question State's instruction to [redacted] to limit itself to "appropriate actions" designed only to ensure Kong Le's "continuing ability [to] maintain [the] integrity [of] his military forces." If the only "appropriate action" involved waiting for the Pathet Lao to "chip away at his position [through the] rainy season," Kong Le was unlikely to survive. [redacted]

[redacted]

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⁷⁵ [redacted]

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But Unger, too, despite his deep-seated caution, saw Washington as wanting things both ways. He pointed out the growing tension between Souvanna Phouma and his half-brother Prince Souphanouvong, Polish obstructionism on the ICC, and the Soviets' failure to support the Laotian neutralists. Together, he told the Department, these suggested a trend away from coalition government and toward de facto partition. The question for Unger remained that of the purpose of US support to the Laotian anticommunists: Did we want them to hold their own against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese? Or should they merely serve as a tripwire, resisting a communist offensive long enough to let the West decide how to react?⁷⁸

The Department's hesitant reply—not coordinated with CIA—said that Washington wanted the Lao to be able to “hold long enough against attack to focus international attention on [the] situation and crystallize the elements out of which we must [decide] what actions to take.” This came close to saying that the United States would not know what it wanted until imminent disaster compelled it to act, and CIA's FE Division promptly lobbied Roger Hilsman for a more forceful statement of US intentions at least with respect to the irregulars.⁷⁹

Still highly qualified, the resulting addendum anticipated a possible need to “increase [Hmong] numbers or improve the quality of their arms to accomplish specific and limited objectives within the framework of the general objectives” laid out earlier. and Doug Blaufarb added, a paragraph on the conceptual climate in Washington:

It is clear to us that the changes which are taking place on the scene in Laos are going to require a far deeper reexamination of policy . . . but that owing to the normal lag between events . . . and the full digestion of their impact, thinking here is still grooved along somewhat outdated lines.⁸⁰

While awaited this “deeper reexamination,” Vang Pao and Kong Le, together with some FAR elements, proceeded to block the road east and west of Xieng Khouang town. They also launched attacks by fire on key points on the eastern Plain of Jars, destroying vehicles and tying up road traffic at Lat Houang and Phongsavan. Ambassador Unger deplored these moves

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Also see Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1719, 18 May 1963, summarized in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1014.

⁷⁹ State Telegram 1136 to Vientiane, 24 May 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1014-15.

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on the ground that they would only provoke a stronger enemy reaction. In fact, the Pathet Lao were also on the move, whether or not in response to anticommunist attacks, launching diversionary maneuvers toward Hmong positions south of the plain. In any case, it was Souvanna Phouma, not Ambassador Unger, who now applied the brakes. He called for a return to a more strictly defensive stance, and Vang Pao agreed to limit his operations to harassing enemy lines of communication.⁸¹ [redacted]

This returned the rules of engagement essentially to the restrictive formula imposed in October 1962. While Washington began its review of Laos policy, [redacted] underwent an attack of anxiety over the deniability of direct CIA support to the Hmong. Its concern applied almost as much to the FAR command as to the ICC, for General Phoumi had never been briefed on the scale of the Hmong program, or on the presence of [redacted]. And Vang Pao said it embarrassed him not to let FAR officers—not even his immediate superior—visit Long Tieng, especially as they already knew the “full story.”⁸² [redacted]

[redacted] Phoumi and Souvanna might well have heard about activity at Long Tieng, but [redacted] was not about to let the FAR command see for itself the unilateral munitions drops there and the redistribution to Hmong outposts. Nor were the Lao to have direct knowledge of the Americans [redacted] with Vang Pao.⁸³ [redacted]

[redacted] clearly thought this unsustainable, and in early June it adopted something of a we-told-you-so tone in a cable recounting an unannounced visit to Sam Thong, the refugee center near Long Tieng. Kong Le and a Canadian brigadier with the ICC landed there, professing to have been forced down by bad weather. [redacted] acerbic comment on this noted that it could as well have been Long Tieng and a Polish member of the ICC.⁸⁴ [redacted]

The policy stance resumed by Washington and Souvanna in May 1963 left the initiative with the communists. However intense President Kennedy's desire, and that of his military leaders, to avoid deeper US involvement, it seemed only a matter of time before the communists wore down the dispirited Kong Le forces. This would eliminate the anticommunist presence not only on the Plain of Jars but also in the upper Panhandle. There, scattered units of

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[redacted] Unger did, however, endorse a Vang Pao request to be allowed to furnish arms to Kong Le. Whether Washington approved is not known. [redacted]

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Kong Le's 4th and 5th Battalions offered some resistance to Pathet Lao control and impeded, to some small degree, North Vietnamese use of the Corridor into South Vietnam. If the anticommunist neutralists—neutralist, now, in the sense of supporting Souvanna while holding Phoumi at arm's length—were not to disappear, a new formula would have to be found. To this end, a full-scale policy review got under way in June.⁸⁵

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CHAPTER EIGHT

A Limited Offensive

The June 1963 review of US policy toward Laos took place against a background of renewed hostilities on the Plain of Jars that posed both a danger and an opportunity for the anticommunist side. A neutralist collapse there would confront the United States with the same dilemma it had faced before the Geneva Agreements, namely, whether or not US interests justified, perhaps required, sending American ground forces to save Laos. On the other hand, the overt if incremental communist campaign against Kong Le diluted the force of complaints from the Soviets or NATO allies of cease-fire violations by the anticommunist side.

The communist drive conferred on Washington some of the freedom of action that it had for the previous eight months denied itself. With Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le both shorn of their fantasies about the communists' intentions, the Vientiane government and its patrons might now be in a position to reverse or at least halt the enemy's recent gains. From that might follow, in the words of a White House staffer, at least a "stabilized de facto partition."¹

The fruit of the policy review appeared in National Security Action Memorandum 249 (NSAM 249) of 25 June 1963. President Kennedy approved the first of its three proposed action phases, directing a substantially greater investment by both the Pentagon and CIA. Defense was to provide howitzers and heavy mortars, several combat aircraft, and increased funding, while CIA was to beef up the Hmong and Panhandle programs and take up new responsibility for security in the Mekong Valley.²

In this first phase, CIA was to build the paramilitary program to a total of 23,000 men and deploy the guerrillas more aggressively. Along with FAR,

¹ Memorandum from Michael Forrestal to President Kennedy, "Laos Planning," 18 June 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1023.

² *Ibid.*, 1025-34: Memorandum for the Record, "Laos Planning, 19 June 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1031 n.

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they should try to link their zones of influence, consolidating previously isolated operating areas. The station was also to help complete the so-called Mekong buffer zone, handling the security aspect of a USAID adaptation of the Strategic Hamlet Program—a system of villages organized for self-defense—then rapidly growing in South Vietnam. The Laotian version of this program would try to secure the Mekong Valley all the way from Sayaboury Province in the northwest to the Cambodian border at the lower end of the Panhandle, a distance of some 500 miles. Finally, [] would deploy additional tribal intelligence teams, better trained and better equipped, wherever significant targets emerged. These—and only these—CIA-supported elements were exempt from the prohibition on incursions into territory long under solid communist control.³ []

The second and third phases of NSAM 249, not proposed for immediate execution, called for more aggressive measures. A second phase would begin with US aerial reconnaissance of Laos, more aggressive air and ground activity by FAR and the irregulars, and the introduction of US Air Force units into Thailand and a US Navy task force into the South China Sea. If these measures did not prevent further communist advances, the third phase would start with bombing of North Vietnam, followed by a US and allied invasion of North Vietnam and Laos.⁴ []

NSAM 249 and, more emphatically, NSAM 256 establish that, as of mid-1963 and contrary to a view later widely held that he was seeking to disengage, President Kennedy was contemplating massive US military intervention in Indochina. As things worked out, Laos and North Vietnam would not be

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Washington proposed applying the strategic hamlet concept in Laos just as some US advisers in South Vietnam were beginning to question the efficacy of the program there. Its claimed successes rested on unreliable South Vietnamese statistics, but official Washington did not accept its essential failure until after President Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown on 1 November 1963. (For the decay of Diem's hold on the countryside, see Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An*, and the author's *The CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*.) As DCI McCone understood Governor Harriman on the question of cease-fire violations, protests from the communists would be rejected on the basis that any measure requested by competent Laotian authority, i.e., Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, was allowable under the Geneva Agreements. Souvanna's readiness to make such requests was apparently assumed. (Memorandum Prepared in [CIA] for [DCI] McCone, "Operational Planning on Laos—Presidential Meeting 19 June 1963," n.d., *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1032.) []

⁴ Forrestal memorandum to Kennedy, 18 June 1963. NSAM 256 of 31 July gave approval in principle for some of the actions under phase two but did not authorize their implementation. (See Colby Memorandum to DCI McCone, 25 February 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXVIII, Laos* (hereafter *FRUS 1964-1968*), 11-12.) []

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bombed for another year, and US ground forces would not reach Indochina until 1965. Once there, drawn in by political implosion in Saigon and a military collapse in the countryside, they would deploy into South Vietnam instead of invading Laos or the North. In Laos, the United States continued its reliance on Laotian surrogates, and the eventual US commitment of massive combat air support substituted for the introduction of American troops. With these substantial exceptions, US military intervention in Indochina followed roughly the pattern of escalation in both Laos and Vietnam that the Kennedy administration laid out in NSAM 249.

CIA had participated in drafting that document and was prepared, when the president approved it, to launch an immediate flurry of activity that built on programs already under way. Seven Hmong Special Operations Teams fanned out to proselytize among uncommitted Hmong in the provinces surrounding Xieng Khouang. In the next five months, they brought in 2,000 recruits. By mid-July, Hmong guerrillas had retaken all the outposts lost to communist encroachment during the previous 14 months.⁵

At an Agency briefing in late April, assistant secretary of state Roger Hilsman had inquired about the "empty" area (that is, one with no friendly presence) in the hills between the Vientiane Plain and Vang Pao's line of guerrilla bases south of the Plain of Jars. A veteran of partisan operations in Burma during World War II and a self-professed expert on fighting communist-led rural insurgency, Hilsman wanted a fully secure zone between Vientiane and the Plain of Jars. Hmong irregulars, he thought, could be asked to control the mountainous portion of that zone, serving as a "guerrilla screen" for US forces that might be deployed into the Mekong Valley. The branch chief for Laos, Douglas Blaufarb, relayed Hilsman's idea to Vientiane.⁶

Left to his own devices, Vang Pao would have emphasized expansion to the northeast, toward North Vietnam and his kinsmen in the Nong Het area. But the first phase of NSAM 249 did not provide for this, and he acceded urging to do something about what had come to be called the "Hilsman triangle." Two of his relatives living in the triangle had recently trekked to

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As of May 1963, US intelligence estimated the forces engaged on and around the Plain of Jars, and eastward to Nong Het, at 4,500 Hmong irregulars; 1,200 FAR; 2,200 Kong Le neutralists (in possession of some 50 PT-76 light tanks); 2,800 Pathet Lao; and 1,350 North Vietnamese. No figures for the procommunist neutralists of another dissident, Colonel Deuane, have been found.

6 Blaufarb interview. ~~SECRET//MR~~

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Long Tieng to apologize for their tardiness in joining the resistance, and Vang Pao thought their village might serve as the base for a new guerrilla zone.⁷ [redacted]

But he would have to proceed with care. Fay Dang, the Hmong Pathet Lao whose men had shot down [redacted] helicopter in August 1961, still dominated the area, and the sincerity of volunteers there could not be taken for granted. It would be imprudent to begin by issuing arms, and Vang Pao proposed instead a civic action effort—especially medical and relief supplies for this desperately poor area—that demonstrated his good will and his capacity to confer material benefits.⁸ [redacted]

The Yao and the China Target [redacted]

The authors of NSAM 249 hoped to consolidate Vientiane's hold on areas not yet under communist influence. They also wanted to shrink areas of Pathet Lao control in the northwest, in the upper Panhandle, and on the Bolovens Plateau in the far south. Of the various ethnic groups offering candidates for recruitment, the Yao of northwestern Laos still looked to be the most promising. Since the first contact with them by [redacted] CIA case officers had found them more disciplined than the Hmong, and unlike the Hmong none were known to have joined the Pathet Lao.⁹ [redacted]

The enemy, moreover, was doing nothing to ingratiate himself with the Yao: Intelligence on harsh communist rule in Pathet Lao-controlled portions of Nam Tha and Phong Saly Provinces reported extortion, press gangs, and occasional summary execution of intransigent local leaders. In the eight months since the Geneva Agreements had gone into nominal effect, over 2,000 civilians and 40 Pathet Lao soldiers had "voted for freedom with their feet," as the [redacted] put it, by seeking shelter where an anticommunist militia could protect them.¹⁰ [redacted]

[redacted] described how enemy dispositions were concentrated in four nearly parallel lines following the main river systems southwest from China's Yunnan Province toward the Mekong River. The communists occupied the valleys, with only a scattered presence in the mountains between. A combination of coercion and propaganda charges that both Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi were agents of the United States and the French colonialists had won

⁷ [redacted]
⁸ [redacted] Blaufarb interview. [redacted]

Hmong loyalty in the area remained questionable, but Fay Dang posed no real threat, and when Hilsman resigned in early 1964, the effort to pacify the "Hilsman triangle" faded. (Blaufarb interview.) [redacted]

⁹ [redacted]
¹⁰ [redacted]

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the Pathet Lao some 2,300 new recruits from a variety of tribes. These, operating in support of regular Pathet Lao units, threatened the security of Yao and other noncommunist tribesmen.¹¹ [redacted]

CIA Headquarters proposed to counter this by adding 700 to the 1,000 Yao already under arms, using a base camp at Ban Na Woua, 16 miles from the Thai border in Nam Tha Province. But the [redacted] even while putting this into effect, seems to have had a different focus. Surviving correspondence suggests that, in mid-1963, it was devoting more attention to intelligence operations in Yunnan Province than to extending Vientiane's writ in Nam Tha and northern Luang Prabang Provinces.¹² [redacted]

In August, an exasperated cable from branch chief Douglas Blaufarb reminded [redacted] that the first phase of NSAM 249 called for "consolidation of friendly control of areas not presently being contested with the communists." Headquarters thought there were "still important gaps within these areas," which included parts of Sayaboury and Vientiane Provinces, the Thakhek area, and the Bolovens Plateau. Accordingly, it objected to [redacted] seen as "diffused into snuggling up to China and Burma borders and penetrating into Phong Saly, which latter province we consider [firmly under enemy control and therefore] not worth contesting."¹³ [redacted]

Blaufarb urged [redacted] to devote more attention to linking the Yao and Hmong irregulars of the northwest with those of Vang Pao. [redacted] response to this direction is unknown, but it might have noted that the expanded Yao program approved by Headquarters would be hard pressed to do much about Sayaboury or about linking up with Vang Pao's Hmong at Muong Sai. With its center more than 110 miles northwest of Luang Prabang, the Yao resistance would remain an isolated enclave. And, in fact, CIA persisted in this rather incoherent approach to irregular military operations in the northwest, even after Blaufarb himself replaced [redacted] [redacted] in 1964.¹⁴ [redacted]

No such ambiguity afflicted the two programs in the Panhandle. The Thakhek teams still had almost 1,000 men, but the neutralists in the area were buckling under communist pressure, and central Laos east of the Mekong lowlands was becoming what [redacted] now called a "denied area." The Thakhek irregulars, even if slightly increased in numbers—no major expansion looked feasible—lacked the power to reverse this trend and therefore would

11 [redacted]
12 [redacted]
13 [redacted]
14 [redacted]

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be used mainly to collect information on Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese activity in the eastern Panhandle. With this mission, they would be directed farther south than before, toward the North Vietnamese border with Savannakhet Province.¹⁵ [redacted]

The situation with the Kha was just the reverse. Consolidating friendly control of the Bolovens looked more feasible than in the plains and foothills east of Thakhek, but the number of Kha effectives was sadly reduced. Of the original 1,200 men, only some 300 remained under arms. Some units, as noted earlier, had been dissolved at the time of the Geneva Agreements. These included Loven from the western Bolovens, untrustworthy at best and pro-Pathet Lao at worst; General Phasouk had been lucky to disarm those who did not disappear with their new weapons into the jungle.¹⁶ [redacted]

Even among those loyal to Prince Boun Oum, the remote advisory presence—[redacted]—compounded the problem of a fragmented Kha tribal structure. No single leader commanded the fealty of a clan or interclan grouping, and the effectiveness of individual unit leaders decayed in the absence of personal contact with [redacted] Headquarters estimated that it would take months before an expanded program could “have a measurable effect in arresting communist encroachments in South Laos.”¹⁷ [redacted]

As the Kha example most dramatically illustrated, energized programs would require direct guidance by field case officers. [redacted]

[redacted]

Baroque Rules of Engagement [redacted]

The conversion of Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le to an actively anticommunist stance did not mean that either unreservedly endorsed the Laotian right

¹⁵ [redacted]
¹⁶ [redacted]
¹⁷ [redacted]
¹⁸ [redacted]

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wing or every American initiative in Indochina. Souvanna remained deeply suspicious of General Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum and hostile to Air America, which he clearly viewed as an instrument of possible unilateral American purposes in Laos. Aside from the problem of dealing with Souvanna, Washington still faced the need to avoid blatant, provocative violations of the 1962 Geneva Agreements it had negotiated and signed. The urgency of this requirement varied over time, depending partly on the scale of communist violations and partly on the state of diplomatic play, especially with the Soviets. But it was always a material consideration, and in mid-1963, despite the activist cast of NSAM 249, it still constituted an important factor.¹⁹

With respect to the noncommunist factions, the United States could do little to improve matters beyond urging them to demonstrate their good will by working together. The question of air support was equally intractable. Whatever was done to comply with the cease-fire inevitably detracted from the morale and combat effectiveness of both Vang Pao's Hmong and the ethnic Lao units in the Panhandle. For two months in mid-1963, the US Mission wrestled with the problem of supplying the station-supported irregulars—and the FAR units scattered among them—as hardly any of them could be reached by either road or river.

Souvanna's well-known sensitivities were not the only issue. The Polish delegate to the ICC had already accused Air America of transporting troops and ordnance in violation of the Geneva Agreements; he chose to ignore the communist attacks on Vang Pao and the Plain of Jars neutralists that provoked them. wanted to lease Air America aircraft to Souvanna—if he would accept them—but the State Department held that Laotian markings on the aircraft would not make it legal for Air America pilots to fly them.²⁰

In one of innumerable such arguments—they persisted for over a year, until the rising scale of combat rendered the issue more or less academic— complained about what it termed the Department's "legalistic" objections. It noted that State had raised no such objection to Bird & Sons pilots in the cockpits of the six aircraft already given or leased to Souvanna, and demanded to know why a different standard now applied.²¹

The possibilities included a new and presumably untainted American firm, or one from a third country, or Lao pilots in leased American planes. The per-

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The correspondence does not explain why the contract with Souvanna could not have been revised to permit the use of other carriers.

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mutations were nearly endless, but practical considerations of one kind or another killed them all. Lao pilots were simply not to be had, a third-country firm would dilute US control, Souvanna had objected or would object, and so on. With no immediate alternative, discussion focused increasingly on the number of flights needed to meet essential military requirements.²² [redacted]

The debate turned sharp in early August 1963, as [redacted] and Vang Pao completed preparations for a third cratering operation against Route 7. Charges embedded in the road where it hugged a steep slope would do the most damage, and Vang Pao picked a spot east of Ban Ban.²³ [redacted]

Like nearly all Hmong operations involving heavy ordnance, this one would require air support, and the station ordered up Air America helicopters, [redacted] to ferry troops and munitions from Long Tieng to the target site. Having approved the operation, the State Department now faced the political sensitivities of Secretary Rusk's impending trip to Moscow to sign the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Rusk intended to protest communist violations of the Laotian cease-fire, and State would not risk the embarrassment of an incident in which an American plane carrying war materiel went down in communist-held territory. Assistant Secretary Hilsman cabled the chargé d'affaires Philip Chadbourn [redacted] telling him to suspend all such flights—both Bird & Sons to the neutralists and black Air America missions to Long Tieng—between 2 and 10 August.²⁴ [redacted]

Chadbourn did not contest the desirability of avoiding trouble for Rusk, but predicted demoralization on the neutralist side if supplies were suspended, and a concomitant weakening of the prime minister. Furthermore, the long-planned Route 7 operation would come to a "dead halt in midstream," with predictable effects on Hmong morale. Finally, interruption of ammunition supplies to the Hmong around the Plain of Jars would make the irregulars withdraw farther into the hills, positively inviting a communist move to wipe out their neutralist allies on the Plain of Jars. If State really wanted to strengthen Souvanna's position, as it had instructed [redacted] to try to do, it should reconsider.²⁵ [redacted]

Hilsman backed off, allowing Chadbourn to continue Bird & Sons flights to the neutralists and the minimum practicable number of black missions to the Hmong. But for State, this remained a temporary expedient. For the long

22 [redacted]

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preparing cratering charges for airdrop, August 1963

term, some alternative to the transport of military cargos by US aircraft and crews would have to be found, and he instructed the chargé to find a way to do that. Chadbourn retorted [redacted] that no one knew of a source of Lao or third-country pilots to fly helicopters and Caribou transports and that, unless Washington could find them, there would be "little point to forming [a] Lao company."²⁶ [redacted]

To [redacted] Hilsman's original instructions had come "as a real shock." Until modified in response to Chadbourn's protest, they meant the end of the Route 7 operation, and the station thought that such a display of irresolution, after all the elaborate preparations, would devastate Hmong morale. But even as modified, State's restrictions doomed the cooperation with the neutralists, for the only alternative to an air operation run by a third country was the FAR logistical system. Delivering supplies to the neutralists using a FAR C-47 would surely persuade them that the United States now intended to subordinate them to General Phoumi. More generally, [redacted] saw the new constraints as rendering moot any further "discussion of expanding [the] anticommunist guerrillas."²⁷ [redacted]

These practical exigencies forced Foggy Bottom to accept a more gradualist approach toward replacing Air America and Bird & Sons, but even so, [redacted] was forced into a drastic reduction in the level of support to the irregulars,

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Results of cratering operation, August 1963

at least until Rusk's return from Moscow. [redacted] was pleasantly surprised when the ever-unpredictable Vang Pao accepted this news with perfect equanimity and continued his planning for the operation against Route 7.²⁸ [redacted]

The debate over air transport continued as the station urged the use of more Chinese—either first officers from Air America retrained as captains [redacted]

[redacted] At the same time, it insisted that [redacted] continue looking for a formula “based upon a contract between [the] RLG and a Lao air company.” Hilsman and Michael Forrestal were insisting on this “on the basis of legal advice that such arrangement will better insulate [the] US [Government] from implication in violation of Geneva Accords.”²⁹ [redacted]

FE division chief William Colby apologized to [redacted] for what he called “this exercise in legal pettifoggery.” But State insisted on a corporate fiction to protect Washington against the “ultimate horror of [a] signed piece of paper” that contradicted US denials of direct participation in transporting war materials. Colby implored [redacted] to indulge the demands of “this purification exercise” and to resist them only if they actually threatened to keep required missions from being flown.³⁰ [redacted]

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Irregulars cratering Route 4, 6 miles south of Xieng Khuang town, 7 May 1964

The "purification exercise" continued during a call on Souvanna by the chargé d'affaires. The prime minister opposed setting up a new Laotian entity and rather naively—or perhaps maliciously—suggested that the Americans use the French firm hired to transport ICC inspection teams. State in Washington instructed the embassy to persist, and the dance continued, with Washington and the embassy alternating in finding disabling shortcomings in each other's proposals.³¹ [redacted]

Meanwhile, [redacted] could not resist one last shot. He was not "annoyed," as Headquarters had suggested he was, but "horrified" at State's draconian new restrictions just when circumstances favored relaxing the ground rules. The Department had, after all, acquiesced in using American pilots in the critical months after October 1962, and [redacted] asserted that his protest reflected the view of the entire country team. [redacted] worried also that the new stance might presage new restrictions in other areas, [redacted]

³⁰ [redacted] At best, the arrangements demanded by Hilsman and Forrestal would "obfuscate US involvement" but not "relieve us of a violation of the Geneva Accords," which prohibited not only overt participation but anything done to "facilitate or connive at the introduction" of prohibited materiel. [redacted]

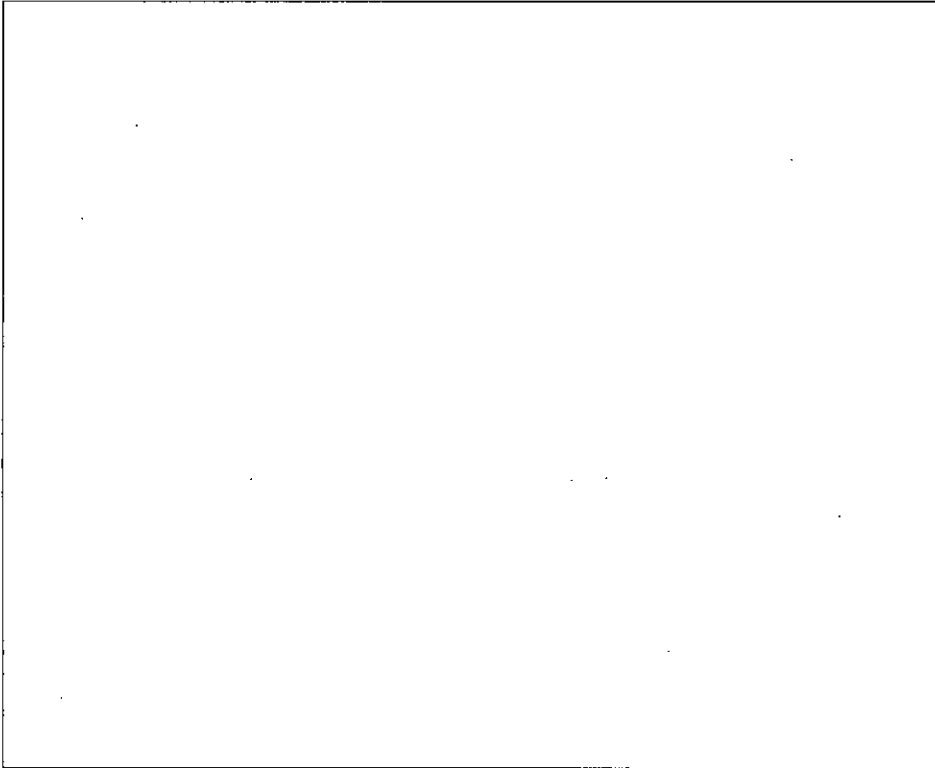
[redacted] The record does not explain the intensity, at the time, of Washington's attachment to pro forma compliance. [redacted]

³¹ [redacted]

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Headquarters responded with a curt instruction to advise [redacted] that they were not to [redacted] without explicit prior approval from [redacted]. This did not end the discussion, and six weeks later, in early September 1963, [redacted] reported ambassadorial approval for [redacted] to visit the various zone headquarters, [redacted] was to work on intelligence collections programs, while [redacted] reviewed the supply, storage, and distribution of ordnance and other materiel, impressing on the respective zone commanders that they "cannot get what they want on ten minutes notice."³⁴ [redacted]

A Dickey Operation [redacted]

The various zone headquarters were still out of bounds for CIA officers when the Route 7 operation was being planned, and Bill Lair was restricted to Long Tieng when he flew [redacted] to work on it with Vang Pao, [redacted]. Even without the uncertainties surrounding air

32 [redacted]
33 [redacted]
34 [redacted]

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support, they all had their work cut out for them. Much more ambitious than its two predecessors, the plan called for attacks on two vulnerable stretches of the road. On one of these, between Ban Ban and the Plain of Jars, Hmong irregulars would try to blast down onto the road a section of the cliff that loomed over it. The second and larger operation would emplace 240 cratering charges (20 for each of 12 SGU platoons) in the rocky roadbed east of Ban Ban. Vang Pao thought he would have to hold that segment for 12 hours, defending it against attack from either east or west, and the site lay only some three hours by truck from the North Vietnamese border. Even assuming complete surprise, the enemy might have time to react.³⁵

Adding to the risks was the Pathet Lao force that defended this eastern segment. Vang Pao was confident that the Hmong could deal with the company-sized unit known to be stationed there, but if more enemy were concealed in the area, and especially if there were North Vietnamese among them, hard resistance might result in the mission's being aborted. In the best of circumstances, success would depend on excellent communications between demolitions elements and the two battalions of local irregulars, one each on the east and the west, protecting their flanks. Should they hear firing, the SGU platoons laying the charges would need to know how soon their location might come under attack. Even though bolstered by they might otherwise exaggerate the imminence of a North Vietnamese attack and prematurely take to the hills.³⁶

The unprecedented communications and coordination requirements on Vang Pao and his irregulars sufficed to make the effort a chancy one, at best. Then, nine days of torrential rain in late July forced Vang Pao to choose a different forward support base, farther from Route 7, and the helicopters would now have a longer flight to the target. This complication lengthened the odds, and began to have second thoughts. "Vang Pao will be lucky to hold the road 12 hours . . . Frankly, we have reservations as to whether or not this operation will fully succeed."³⁷

This kind of candor elicited a predictably cautionary word from Bill Colby: "While [we are] in no sense seeking [a] sure bet . . . there is considerable breath-holding here" regarding a strong communist reaction to this "provocation." But he left the decision to who responded by assuring him that would rig the charges, and would serve the heavy weapons.³⁸

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On 6 August, 1,000 Hmong guerrillas occupied the stretch of road east of Ban Ban. A smaller force launched a diversionary operation against the secondary target, between Ban Ban and the Plain of Jars. [] gunners accompanying the Hmong in the latter action used recoilless rifles to silence the mortars of an enemy company guarding a bridge just north of the target. With the site secured, the demolitions team laid its charges. The blasts blew away the cliff face, covering the road with mounds of rock, while other charges nearby cut deep trenches, each 100 feet long, in the roadbed. By the time the enemy was able to direct more fire on the site, several hours later, the attackers had safely withdrawn.³⁹ []

To the east, things went even better. The Pathet Lao garrison apparently fled, but other enemy forces responded almost immediately, approaching from both directions on Route 7. Like their counterparts to the west, these were halted with heavy weapons fire, especially that directed by [] [] who justified his reputation as someone who could "drop a 4.2-inch mortar shell down a chimney." Concern about an overwhelming enemy reaction dissipated, and the demolitions teams had five days in which to blow away the roadbed with cratering charges. These dug a trench 1,000 feet long and 10 feet deep. Meanwhile, [] gunners shelled a Pathet Lao camp, and a demolitions team destroyed a bridge. Friendly casualties in both operations totaled one killed and three missing, and the road remained out of commission until after the end of the rainy season.⁴⁰ []

[] attributed this startling success primarily to expert planning by Lair and Vang Pao and to the technical competence and combat leadership of [] assigned to the operation. But the Hmong who constituted the bulk of the manpower had, in the space of two-and-a-half years, undergone a transformation without which the operation could not have been contemplated. The foresight of [] Bill Lair had resulted in the creation of Special Guerrilla Units and Special Operations Teams, [] [] Tribal irregulars previously uncomprehending of any technique or tactic beyond ambush at the approaches to one's own village could now be deployed, in relatively large units, far from home. [] they were more combat effective than either FAR or the Pathet Lao, and the Route 7 operation demonstrated that with some expert help they could mount a sophisticated, coordinated offensive operation.⁴¹ []

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Irregular trooper with captured 12.7mm machinegun at Phou Moun, east of Xieng Khouang town

Success, in the Laotian context, always raised the specter of an overwhelming enemy response. With Ambassador Unger still in the United States, Chargé Chadbourn was “jumpy,” as [redacted] put it, not only about the North Vietnamese reaction but also about General Phoumi, who might overreact with an impetuous proposal to insert airborne troops to interdict Route 7 permanently. [redacted] agreed, especially about Phoumi, who might well intend using the Hmong as a “cat’s paw for breaking [the] situation wide open and then claiming he has to become involved because American-sponsored Meo started it.”⁴² [redacted]

41 [redacted]

42 [redacted]

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The communist reaction finally came and, during the first two weeks of September, Hmong guerrillas fought 36 reported engagements along Route 7. The enemy lost 80 reported killed, but the Hmong too suffered a relatively heavy toll, losing 36 of their own and were gradually forced farther from the road than they had been before the Route 7 raid. Headquarters worried about Hmong losses in protracted "attritional warfare," while the neutralists—the main beneficiaries of the operation—"sit [on the Plain of Jars] concentrating on keeping their feet dry." Vang Pao agreed to pull his forces out of contact in this sector, as soon as he could get Phoumi's concurrence.⁴³

FAR on the Offensive

General Phoumi not only agreed to a Hmong pullback but, in a startling if short-lived departure from normal practice, now sent FAR on the offensive. This display of aggressive spirit probably reflected the new alliance with Kong Le and perhaps also a touch of envy at Vang Pao's multibattalion raid on Route 7. And there was a genuine opportunity because heavy seasonal rains, just then coming to an end, had put the enemy on short rations in Xieng Khouang town and forced the communists to give up the stretch of Route 8 south of Lak Sao in the upper Panhandle. Meanwhile, air transport had kept government forces reasonably well supplied.

Further inquiry revealed an innocent misunderstanding with Vang Pao, who readily abdicated any action role. Instead, he agreed to let Kong Le undertake the reoccupation of both Xieng Khouang town and the strategically more important center of Khang Khay, on the Plain of Jars itself.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, CIA irregulars in the Panhandle were already preparing the way for a FAR push northward toward Lak Sao from the Na Kay Plateau.
 later thought this initiative suicidally provocative but seems to have acceded to FAR pressure for help with it. And, in fact, the operation got off to

43 44 45 ~~SECRET//MR~~

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a good start. irregulars blew bridges northeast of the village, impeding to some extent reinforcements from North Vietnam. As neutralist forces approached from the south on 6 December 1963, the guerrillas also captured two 105mm howitzers from the communists. But a joint effort with FAR failed to dislodge the North Vietnamese battalion dug in a mile away at the airstrip.⁴⁶

thought that the Lao were already overreaching and urged to call off the irregulars before the North Vietnamese reacted in force. But it was too late. A week later, the communists struck back. Bolstered by two North Vietnamese battalions, the Pathet Lao rolled down Route 8 to the Na Kay Plateau. In early December, however, the advance came to a halt, and combined FAR-Kong Le irregular units still blocked Hanoi's use of Route 8 as a supply line into south Laos and South Vietnam.⁴⁷

The key contribution of the irregulars proved to be a mixed blessing, even to the extent that the Lak Sao operation succeeded. Their higher profile prompted Military Region 3 commander Gen. Lam Ngeun Prasavath to begin trying to insert his own noncommissioned officers and radio communications into irregular units. Hardly an unreasonable demand, in protocol terms, it threatened not just CIA control but the irregulars' unique effectiveness. For the rest of Lam Ngeun's tenure, had to fend him off, agreeing to deploy some of the irregulars in joint tactical activity while maintaining separate command and communications.⁴⁸

Earlier, while anticommunist fortunes were still waxing, Souvanna Phouma apparently had felt secure enough to indulge one of his recurring bouts of suspicion about the intentions of his anticommunist allies. In late November, he again raised the perennial issue of Air America's continued presence. The fleet had been culled to 21 from a pre-Geneva high of more than 50, but Unger and saw no salvation in this reduction; it appeared that, this time, Souvanna meant business with his demand for the company's departure.⁴⁹

This new display of sensitivity came just weeks after the 1 November 1963 military coup against Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon and was accompanied by an attack of the customary Lao paranoia about the country's ethnic minorities. Forgetting the reassurances he had given DCI McCone about Hmong loyalty,

46 47 Route 12, farther south, remained open to North Vietnamese infiltration 48 ~~SECRET//MR~~

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the prime minister now "strongly cautioned" Unger and the visiting Michael Forrestal against giving arms to the Hmong. They "had only their own interests in mind and once armed could well turn on the Lao Government . . . and begin systematic pillage and destruction of all who opposed them." At the same time—his paranoia perhaps of the schizoid variety—Souvanna presumably knew and approved of General Phoumi's proposed late December visit to Sam Thong to award Vang Pao the stars of a brigadier general.⁵⁰ [redacted]

King Savang Vatthana was more disposed than Souvanna to give credit where credit was due. With government forces under pressure at the end of the year, he followed Phoumi's flight to Sam Thong with an unprecedented visit of his own in early January 1964. Naming Vang Pao a Commander of the Order of the Million Elephants, he praised the Hmong for having continued to fight "at a time when all seemed lost." The visit and the award could not by themselves dissolve the entire legacy of mutual hostility and distrust between the Lao and the Hmong. But Agency observers had never seen a trace of ambition for Hmong autonomy in Vang Pao or in any other influential Hmong. Now, the king's embrace and Vang Pao's promotion added Laotian endorsement and sponsorship to what had begun as an essentially unilateral American creation.⁵¹ [redacted]

The Leader and the Led at Long Tieng [redacted]

In Bill Lair's view, Vang Pao later came to regard himself more as commander of an army and to pay correspondingly less attention to his function as tribal leader. But this syndrome had not appeared when he first rose to general officer rank, and [redacted] had ample opportunity to observe his populist style and the nature and limitations of his influence over the Hmong.⁵² [redacted]

Both the style and the substance of Vang Pao's leadership were on display at mealtime. [redacted] regularly ate lunch and dinner with him at a table whose length varied with the number of guests, never fewer than

49 [redacted]

The issue receded again until spring 1964, when Souvanna, supported by Unger, again pressed for a replacement for Air America. CIA did not object in principle, but the practical difficulties were overwhelming—Unger would not settle for any mere cosmetic change—and intensified hostilities then took the subject off the ambassador's agenda. No substitute for Air America was ever found. [redacted]

50 [redacted]

51 [redacted]

52 Bill Lair [redacted]

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10. Along with staff and family, every visitor—Hmong or Lao, eminent or humble—was invited, and Vang Pao engaged each one in his animated style, listening to reports, complaints, and requests. In so doing, he kept a continuous finger on the collective pulse, asserting and building his authority at the same time.⁵³

An outsider like the paranoid prime minister might think of Vang Pao as commanding a dumbly obedient ethnic bloc. In fact, his authority rested on constant negotiation and mediation on things like clan politics, personal disputes, official misconduct, and petty trade. Like any governor dependent on the consent of the governed, Vang Pao made the necessary compromises, in his case with important families to which he lacked close ties. This meant, on occasion, allowing "obvious wrongs to continue."

Vang Pao held court every morning, playing Solomon with supplicants; some of whom wanted redress for offenses committed by neighbors or militiamen while others, the unfortunate, were simply looking for help. And Vang Pao was a genuinely soft touch, especially for women. noted that "the finesse and ease with which [he] handles men vanishes when confronted with sobbing women. Every woman on speaking with him bursts spontaneously into tears as if the word on how to handle him had gotten around." Bill Lair had earlier seen that an ability to provide financial relief to the needy was essential to maintaining and extending Vang Pao's authority and had proposed the subsidy on which the general now drew to meet these demands.⁵⁵

To a foreigner, at least, Vang Pao's tribal compatriots were "infinitely unpredictable." observed that other ethnic groups, such as the Lao Theung, lived a "more orderly life and being less spooky can be depended on for regular if uninspired work. Unfortunately, they often do not object [to] doing the same for the PL." The Hmong, once committed to Vang Pao, could

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 Bill Lair,
 began his tour subsisting on Laotian food, which gave him two tapeworms and numerous other parasites, but in almost four years of Hmong fare—mainly poultry, beef, and pork with sauces and rice varied with an occasional offering of bear's paw or blood pudding—suffered no further infestations.

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be counted on for basic loyalty, but their mysterious blend of adaptability and attachment to the old ways made them a perplexing client.⁵⁶ [redacted]

Personal hygiene provided one example. Bathing, it was traditionally believed, risked washing off one of the body's 32 souls; the loss of a soul was also the cause of all illness, and it required the services of the village sorcerer to recapture it. For a fee of a pig or two, he would "with yells, grunts and rattles . . . bounce upon an imaginary horse for hours in hot pursuit of the lost soul." Yet it was not long before many of the Hmong, [redacted] adopted the [redacted] practice of frequent bathing. And they quickly recognized the superiority of Western medicine when it came to treating the wounded. Vang Pao's stock would rise or fall on the availability of aircraft to evacuate casualties after a skirmish or ambush, or after the frequent incidents in which a Hmong detonated one of his own booby traps.⁵⁷ [redacted]

Other beliefs were more impervious to outside influence. One of them involved what Bill Lair called the "feet of the terrible chicken." Most communal meals featured a chicken, boiled whole, whose feet would be studied by the elders present if some momentous event, like a raiding operation, was imminent. Feet curled one way forecast success, but in another they signaled disaster, and the operation would have to be postponed until the omens improved. Lair recalled that the incidence of such unfavorable portents rather suddenly declined after several disruptions of operational planning, and his Hmong friends believed that Vang Pao had begun adding a secret ingredient to make the chicken's feet curl into a more propitious shape.⁵⁸ [redacted]

[redacted] observations gave the lie to Souvanna's professed fear of Hmong rapacity. When competently led in defense of home and family, the tribesmen fought very well. But in the absence of "driving leadership," they were as individuals very far from the "fierce tigers of legend." What outsiders saw as "primitive ferocity" reflected nothing more, in [redacted] experienced opinion, than "being so accustomed to pain and death that they administer and [accept] both in workaday fashion."⁵⁹ [redacted]

An abiding concern of the advisers was to meliorate the conditions that made pain and death so ubiquitous and to prepare the Hmong for the day when rice would no longer fall out of the sky and guerrilla pay would cease. From the beginning, the station had seen support to Hmong civil society as essential to the tribe's survival. Bill Lair, in particular, recognized the American commitment as temporary at best. More than that: what he saw as a record of

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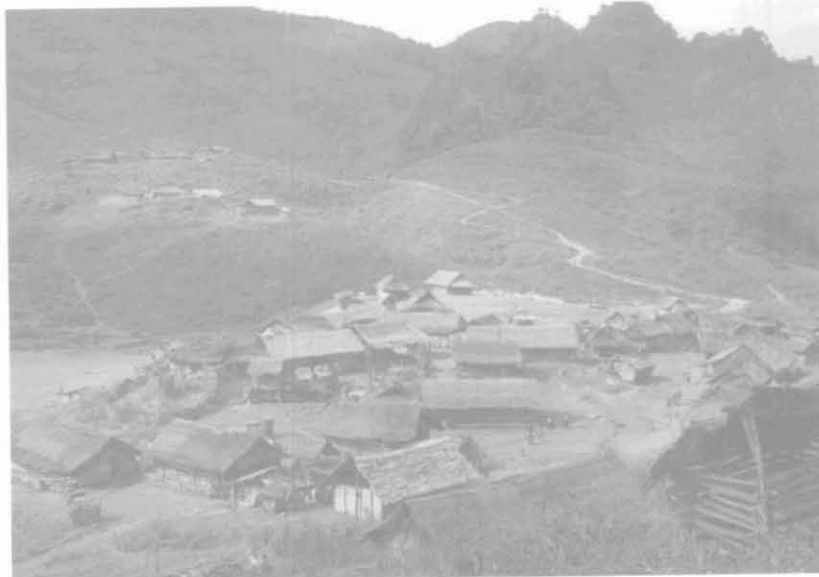
58 Bill Lair, [redacted]

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A LIMITED OFFENSIVE



Hmong village, c. 1964 (Courtesy of Bill Lair)

American inconstancy toward weaker allies led him to fear that support to the Hmong might come to an end earlier than anyone anticipated. As we have seen, his apprehensions were shared by Bill Colby, who in 1964 was still serving as chief of the Far East Division. Colby's presence assured a receptive atmosphere at Headquarters for proposals aimed at securing the Hmong's postwar future.⁶⁰ [redacted]

As Vang Pao's principal [redacted] adviser, [redacted] was closer to the problem than Colby or even Lair, and routinely coped with problems only indirectly connected with the war effort. Like his superiors, he came to see these as part of the same project: to preserve the Hmong way of life and to improve material conditions while encouraging political and economic integration into the Laotian polity.⁶¹ [redacted]

Vang Pao did not hesitate to deal with Americans other than his CIA contacts, and in the economic realm USOM's Edgar "Pop" Buell, deeply commit-

⁶⁰ Bill Lair; [redacted] interview by the author, 2 May 2000 (hereafter cited as [redacted] interview). [redacted] was with Vang Pao from the fall of 1962 until early 1966. Citing the American abandonment of the Burmese minorities after using them against the Japanese in World War II, Colby once bemoaned to [redacted] the readiness of great powers to exploit and then discard their surrogates among oppressed minorities. [redacted]

⁶¹ [redacted] interview. [redacted]

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ted to Hmong welfare, administered the bulk of US resources. But [] remained the general's overall adviser and confidant, and anticipating and meeting civilian needs remained an important aspect of his work. By early 1964, [] and Vang Pao had identified four such areas for development; they included roadbuilding (as a substitute for expensive air transportation) education, livestock production, and handicrafts (especially weaving the traditional black cloth).⁶² []

These prescriptions expanded and put in some order of priority what CIA had been doing ever since the beginning of the program. [] for example, had once ordered a cargo aircraft loaded with discarded tires. Refugees from Nong Het, on the North Vietnamese border, knew how to make durable sandals from old rubber, and Vang Pao proposed to have them train amputees in the same skill. The disabled would thus earn a small income while making a useful product, and Hmong dependence on foreign aid would be at least modestly reduced. It was so small as to be little more than symbolic, but this effort and others like it would remind the Hmong that a return to self-sufficiency remained their long-term goal.⁶³ []

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CHAPTER NINE

Focus on the Panhandle

Social and economic progress in Hmong country, and in the rest of noncommunist Laos, depended on physical security. In early 1964 the prospects for that were becoming increasingly fragile. At the beginning of the year, Laotian government forces, both FAR and CIA-led irregulars, found themselves back on the defensive. Communist gains in Laos, which included recapture of the entire Na Kay Plateau in the upper Panhandle, were accompanied by further deterioration of the Saigon government's position in South Vietnam.¹

These developments reinforced the sense of urgency that had led to NSAM 249 and its supplement, NSAM 256, in mid-1963. But President Lyndon Johnson, less than two months in office since the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, was no more anxious than his predecessor to send US troops. The imperative to preserve at least a shell of the Geneva Agreements therefore continued to restrict the range of measures that might restore the anticommunist position in Laos and limit North Vietnamese use of the Panhandle routes to South Vietnam.²

The need to justify US departures from the Geneva Agreements' restrictions on military aid produced in Under Secretary of State Harriman what Douglas Blaufarb later called a "fixation" on proving violations by Hanoi. The imperative to demonstrate that US action was driven by prior communist infractions led to intense pressure on CIA to come up with at least one North Vietnamese prisoner who could testify to the scale of Hanoi's intervention in Laos. The effort continued for months, until Blaufarb, who replaced in May, concluded that the Lao and the Hmong were only humoring the Americans with their professed intention to help. To the indigenous defenders, North Vietnamese involvement was so obvious as to require no documentation.³

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² Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State Hilsman to Secretary Rusk, "Laos," 15 February 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 7-8.

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Vang Pao's men finally came up with a prisoner, and the general turned him over to FAR for presentation at a Vientiane press conference. But Harriman was disappointed in his expectation of an international outcry. The event got two or three paragraphs in the *New York Times*, and that was the end of it. It appeared that *Times* readers, like the Lao, took communist duplicity pretty much for granted.⁴ [redacted]

In any case, no propaganda advantage would have spared the administration from confronting the recurring question of what arbitrarily restricted means might be expected to accomplish. CIA officials differed in degree on what the Agency could do, but they held a generally conservative view of the potential of [redacted] covert irregulars. A [redacted] review of prospects in the Panhandle, completed at the time of the assassination in Dallas, had arrived at the relatively hopeful conclusion that, while "no guerrilla operation . . . could ever hope to stop a determined North Vietnamese invasion," an expanded force of irregulars could force Hanoi to protect its routes with forces too large to be disavowed at Geneva. In that situation, the irregulars could "reduce to a considerable extent the effective use of this lifeline."⁵ [redacted]

More optimistic than [redacted] Ambassador Unger waxed uncharacteristically combative, calling the Panhandle irregulars "the best instrument I am aware of for reducing or conceivably eliminating Viet Minh use of [the] Ho Chi Minh Trail." But Headquarters took a more conservative tack even than [redacted] emphasizing only their intelligence potential as it recommended to State and Defense that Panhandle units be expanded. Assistant Secretary Hilsman picked up the same theme when he approved that expansion on 4 December 1963.⁶ [redacted]

This did not relieve the pressure on CIA to participate in military activity against the Corridor from South Vietnam. MACV was at this point just completing Oplan 34A-64, which called for a series of operations against North Vietnam aimed at reducing Viet Cong pressure in the South. The plan would also send irregulars across the South Vietnamese border into Laos against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, something that Secretary McNamara thought would incur more political risks than it promised military gains. Aware of the Agency's program on the Bolovens Plateau, he suggested instead deploying 500 Kha toward the east, monitoring and harassing enemy supply routes from within Laos.⁷ [redacted]

³ Blaufarb interview. [redacted]

⁴ Ibid. [redacted]

⁵ [redacted]

⁶ [redacted]

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In early January 1964, DCI McCone agreed to seek "high-level"—presumably presidential—authority for the Kha deployment. But the Agency continued to fear that MACV's enthusiasm for CIA participation in joint cross-border operations from South Vietnam reflected a desire to "circumvent [McNamara's] decision not to conduct them." It foresaw any such activity as certain to provoke opposition from Unger and to weaken CIA's control of its covert resources in Laos.⁸

One way to resist the pressure would be to disclaim any significant capability, and the station was enjoined to avoid asserting a capacity to "effectively harass or interdict" the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Headquarters acknowledged that the Thakhek-based teams, and the Kha units on the Bolovens could indeed collect useful intelligence. It seems genuinely to have doubted, however, that "Lao or tribal elements can have much effect on Viet Cong movement through Laos."⁹

Meanwhile, the arbitrary and consequently shifting restraints the United States imposed on itself colored the debate about both objectives and the means of pursuing them. With Oplan 34A still on hold, the debate grew testy. At an interagency meeting on 24 February, a participant from Defense attacked a State Department draft of revisions to NSAM 256 as confusing and demanded that Roger Hilsman explain "what he really wanted to do in Laos." Hilsman put his case in terms of getting the communists "to pause in their aggressive actions" and "worry them more about North Vietnam." Means to this end included introducing US forces into Thailand, not for deployment into the Mekong Valley but only as "a deterrent and to increase American capability in Southeast Asia at a time when the United States was thinking about more strenuous action in North Vietnam."¹⁰

Peter Solbert, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, derided this as "only words," charging that "there was no credibility left in the idea of deploying military forces to Thailand." The NSC's Michael Forrestal, by contrast, was prepared to accept that such deployment might in fact stabilize things enough to allow a program of political consolidation—whatever that might mean—in

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Also see Telegram from the [CIA] to the Station in Saigon, 12 February 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 6-7.

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¹⁰ William Colby, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting on Proposed Action Paper for Laos," 24 February 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 8-10.

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Laos. Even so, he wanted a more precise statement of the military's proposed role. In response, "Secretary Hilsman mumbled something about we would at least buy some time," and Defense's Brig. Gen. Lucius Clay, Jr., understood this as clarifying one thing: we sought "only to bide [sic] time and not to do anything serious."¹¹

Hilsman pointed out the need to be ready to act against North Vietnam, but only after "some victories in the [Mekong] Delta" in order to avoid both congressional opposition to operations against the North and a possible surge in support for neutralization for South Vietnam. This proposal left the military unpersuaded, and the meeting "went nowhere."¹²

Interagency disagreements were by no means the only problem. Asked to comment on the various steps toward escalation, Ambassador Unger pointed out in a telegram that some of them depended on the approval of the prime minister, whose perspective was very different from the American.

Souvanna believes [the] Lao proverb that when buffaloes fight it is grass which gets hurt and however [clearly] he now understands [the] nature of communist threat and tactics, he remains persuaded Laos will only suffer more from being made [the] scene of escalated conflict.

Unger said he would therefore expect adamant resistance to proposals like the one to launch guerrilla raids from Laos into North Vietnam.¹³

An Obstreperous Client and a Tactical Quandary

Aimed only at staving off defeat and therefore always at the mercy of events, US military strategy in Laos fell into near chaos as reverses in Hmong country were followed by political strife in Vientiane and conflict between CIA and the US military over cross-border operations from South Vietnam into Laos.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid. Colby, presumably writing to the DCI, permitted himself a rare display of venom, going on to say that, "Mr. Hilsman explained, apropos of nothing, that he was much more in favor of doing more about North Vietnam [than] some people may think." (He was obviously referring to the Stewart Alsop column in the *Saturday Evening Post*, which said Hilsman did not favor attacks on North Vietnam, to prove that he was really a red-blooded fellow.) Colby's allusions to the military's intransigence at this session are only a little less uncomplimentary. Clay's apparent pun on "buy" may represent only a transcription error by Colby's secretary.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 927, 1 March 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 24-27.

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This occurred at a time when intelligence—some from CIA roadwatch teams in the Corridor and some from military sources—indicated a massively greater use of Laotian territory for North Vietnamese infiltration into the South. The assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem just three weeks before the death of John F. Kennedy had been followed early in 1964 by a disastrous slump in Saigon's military fortunes, and in April it appeared to Washington that Hanoi might be moving in for the kill. The dispatch of integral combat units—not just advisers and specialists—down the Ho Chi Minh Trail would drastically change the balance in South Vietnam and threaten the end of Laotian neutrality. In this climate, General Phoumi had flown in mid-March to Dalat, South Vietnam, to see the junta that had replaced President Diem. Saigon's generals seemed amenable to military intervention in the Panhandle, and Phoumi—always disposed to let others do the fighting—agreed to South Vietnamese air raids and regimental-size ground operations in the Corridor.¹⁵

Distrustful of Phoumi, Ambassador Unger used Agency reporting from Saigon to keep Souvanna fully informed. The prudence of this emerged when the prime minister reported that Phoumi had informed him of the Dalat session in only the "briefest and most general terms." Souvanna promptly vetoed the regimental operations and air raids on Tchepone, but Unger won his assent to small-scale cross-border operations into southern Laos and a covert South Vietnamese military liaison with FAR at Savannakhet.¹⁶

It seems that no one had thought to keep the American hand out of this quarrel by getting Phoumi to give Souvanna a full account of the Dalat session; perhaps the general's low credibility with the embassy did not suffice to make the effort look worthwhile. Whether or not Phoumi knew of Unger's briefing of Souvanna, the continual tension between the prime minister and the rightists reached critical mass on 19 April. Phoumi allies in Vientiane arrested Souvanna and the other neutralists in the government and set up a military junta. State issued a prompt disavowal of US encouragement or endorsement, a statement that President Johnson, apparently not sure he still wanted to preserve the nominal coalition, privately deplored as premature.¹⁷

No such doubt afflicted the embassy in Vientiane, which saw nothing but disaster if the coup were not quickly squelched. For one thing, Kong Le might in a "fit of rage" simply give up on Souvanna and resume his alliance with the

¹⁵ Memorandum from DIA Deputy Director (Fitch) to Secretary McNamara, "Cross Border Patrols in Southern Laos," 9 April 1964; Telegram from CIA to State, 16 March 1964; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1023, 19 March 1964; all *FRUS 1964-1968*, 42, 32, 34-37.

¹⁶ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1023.

¹⁷ Situation Report No. 1, "LAOS," 19 April 1964, and State Telegram 69 to Secretary Rusk at Saigon, 19 April 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 43, 46-47.

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Pathet Lao. There would then exist no military force explicitly loyal to Prime Minister Souvanna, whose own position would certainly dissolve. [redacted] ordered Bill Lair to proceed posthaste to Long Tieng and instruct Vang Pao to keep Kong Le from defecting.¹⁸ [redacted]

There was the problem of Vang Pao himself, who as a hardline anticommunist had always deplored Souvanna's inclination to accommodate rather than fight. [redacted] feared that he might be tempted to defy the United States and cast his lot with the rebels. As the maneuvering grew more desperately Byzantine, Colonel Siho, Phoumi's intelligence chief, chose as emissary to Vang Pao [redacted] who had been serving as Siho's adviser since late 1960. [redacted]

Meanwhile, with the mutineers still in charge in Vientiane, McNamara and acting secretary of state George Ball cabled Rusk, then visiting Saigon. They suggested that the "current confused situation in Laos" perhaps merited the deterrent of an "unadvertised movement of US forces, such as naval units toward North Vietnam." Amid uncertainty as to whether the Thai or the South Vietnamese—or both—might have colluded in the rightist coup in Vientiane, the State Department scrambled to find a solution that avoided "having to decide to accept a Communist Laos or to assume the fighting in Laos."²⁰ [redacted]

Among the options were two suggested by [redacted] one of them a countercoup by Vang Pao and several Phoumi opponents in the officer corps, the other a dramatic withdrawal of the US Mission. These were, as [redacted] acknowledged, counsels of desperation, for "one of the most discouraging aspects of [the] present situation is [the] almost complete lack of leverage [available to the US] Government." Nothing good was to be expected from either Souvanna or Phoumi, for the prime minister's abhorrence of the "provocative" would prevent him from leading a vigorously anticommunist program. And General Phoumi no longer enjoyed any sympathy from the US Mission. He would simply have to go "if we are ever to [solve] the basic problem of inertia, corruption and inefficiency thru political action here."²¹ [redacted]

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At their first meeting after [redacted] arrival in May, Vang Pao declared that he had suffered a crisis of loyalty, wanting Phoumi to prevail but still feeling bound by his commitment to work in concert with his American friends. The American connection had prevailed, and Blaufarb inferred that Vang Pao had chosen this way to assure the new man that it would continue to prevail. (Blaufarb interview.) [redacted]

²⁰ Telegrams from the Department of State to Secretary of State Rusk at Saigon, 19 April 1964, and from the Department of State to Vientiane, 25 April 1964; *FRUS 1964-1968*, 47, 68n, 69n. [redacted]

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Near anarchy in Vientiane was accompanied by other bad news. New aerial photography indicated major road construction from North Vietnam into the Corridor east of Thakhek and improvement of the trail network to the south. This development, accompanied by new Viet Cong gains in South Vietnam, confirmed that Hanoi was indeed preparing for massive infiltration of the South. A renewed atmosphere of crisis in Washington led to the National Security Council meeting of 29 April 1964.²²

At that session, Defense sought President Johnson's authority to conduct the low-level aerial reconnaissance needed to help determine what use Hanoi was making of the road network. With a decision deferred pending a reaction from Ambassador Unger—he shortly agreed—JCS chairman Maxwell Taylor turned the discussion to collection on the ground. He scoffed at earlier efforts to use small cross-border reconnaissance teams to monitor Hanoi's use of the Corridor. So far, they hadn't worked, he asserted, and there was in any case no point in watching the North Vietnamese unless we intended to hit them, and to do this in at least battalion-size strikes. McCone did not disagree, at least about the intelligence product, for he had just received an analysis of Agency cross-border operations from 1961 to 1963, which concluded that only large-scale collection operations offered the prospect of a useful product.²³

No one argued that photography could replace ground observation, and the question remained who should run the roadwatch program. Michael Forrestal of the White House sent a trenchant analysis to his boss, McGeorge Bundy:

Our real problem is that we have given [MACV] missions in South Vietnam, which they are unwilling and unable effectively to perform. We *do* want hard intelligence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, both for military and political reasons; but in the getting of it, we do *not* want an overt invasion of Laos . . . Our regular military command

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²² Memorandum for the Record, "National Security Council Meeting—29 April 1964," 29 April 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 78-80.

²³ *Ibid.*; Memorandum for the Record, "White House Meeting on Southeast Asia—24 May 1964," 24 May 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 109-11. The navy and air force chiefs of staff still preferred to regard the conflict in Indochina as a conventional war, one that the United States should deal with by applying air and sea power. (Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal to McGeorge Bundy, "Laos Cross Border," 29 April 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 80-81). In the NSC discussion of cross-border operations, no one seems to have alluded to the CIA's indigenous Laotian assets, though McNamara had been briefed on them, at his own request, in mid-April, and State could have used them to support its opposition to large cross-border operations.

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structure has neither the desire nor the capability of tackling such a messy problem.

However disappointing the results of its earlier cross-border operations, CIA seemed, to Forrestal, to be the logical choice to take on this issue, but most of its tribal resources in South Vietnam had been transferred to MACV in mid-1963. Forrestal understated the problem when he said that "it will be extremely difficult partially to reverse this transfer; but if I were the President, I would tell my people to try to get it done." The Agency promptly vindicated his pessimism in a cable to the field asserting that cross-border activity ought to stay with MACV "despite [the] desires of some" in Washington to return it to CIA.²⁴ [redacted]

The End of Accommodation [redacted]

In May, the rightwing rebels in Vientiane finally backed down; they had apparently thought that Washington would bow to a brief show of intransigence. But the communists had taken advantage of the chaos in Vientiane to evict Kong Le from his toehold on the western Plain of Jars. More ominously, they had at the same time inflicted on Vang Pao his most catastrophic defeat in the three years of hostilities.²⁵ [redacted]

Despite the enemy pressure that followed the cratering of Route 7 in August 1963, the Hmong had continued to occupy most of the territory east of Xieng Khouang town and south of the road. But on the day of the rightist coup in Vientiane, intelligence was reporting enemy preparations for a major attack south from Ban Ban into the Hmong refuge at Phou Nong and Pha Khao. The assault came a week later, and after two days of seesaw combat, the enemy seized the western ridge of Phou Nong and began pouring heavy mortar fire down onto the airstrip and command post.²⁶ [redacted]

The political disarray had distracted the FAR command, and the commander of the FAR regiment at Phou Nong was unable to return in time from a meeting with Vang Pao and the MR 2 commander at Paksane. Left to their own devices, the three battalion commanders and the Hmong militia leader decided to withdraw farther south. The move began in orderly fashion, with one battalion holding as a rear guard while the others preceded it, this to be

24 [redacted]

[redacted] Emphasis in original. The transfer to MACV of CIA counterinsurgency programs in South Vietnam is described in Chapter 5 of the author's *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*. [redacted]

25 [redacted]

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continued in leapfrog fashion until the enemy gave up the pursuit. But the defenders were impeded by 4,000 panicky refugees and sometimes could not even return the harassing fire that came from ahead as well as behind them. The rocky terrain closed in on the retreating column, and flank security became impossible. The leader saw terrified, screaming refugees surge forward and back on the trail, knocking soldiers off the narrow trail in their panic while enemy fire picked off military and civilian alike. Before it was over, some 300 refugees died.²⁷

Two days later, the exhausted survivors had managed 11 miles, and delivered an airdrop of cooked food. At sundown, with the food just distributed, the enemy again struck in force, this time from the south. In the sudden chaos, along with the acting regimental commander, and the team leader later estimated that he had seen another 100 people killed. On 5 May, only 1,000 of the 4,000 refugees had arrived at Nam Keng, almost 30 miles of precipitous mountain trails from Phou Nong. All told, 900 FAR soldiers and 400 Hmong irregulars joined and the senior FAR commander among the missing. And the agony continued: an enemy probe two days later forced a withdrawal even farther south.²⁸

The enemy encroachments that began in early 1964 and accelerated during the political chaos of April and May, did achieve one decisive political effect. Souvanna Phouma, no longer hoping for restraint from the Pathet Lao and Hanoi, essentially abandoned the idea that neutrality could be achieved or preserved by accommodation. He did not, of course, formally repudiate the coalition, something that would have invited Hanoi into the Mekong Valley. But his newly combative stance prompted Ambassador Unger to make the unprecedented suggestion in mid-May that T-28 fighter-bombers flown by American pilots be deployed against the advancing enemy. Souvanna did not hesitate, and a week later, Air America pilots were bombing and strafing enemy positions both east and west of the Plain of Jars. From this point on, Air America helicopters resumed flying troops and ordnance as they had done before October 1962.²⁹

On 20 May, Souvanna told Unger that "the only way Laos could be saved from the communists was by military intervention by the Western Powers." Washington responded in terms of the now-conventional formula: convene the

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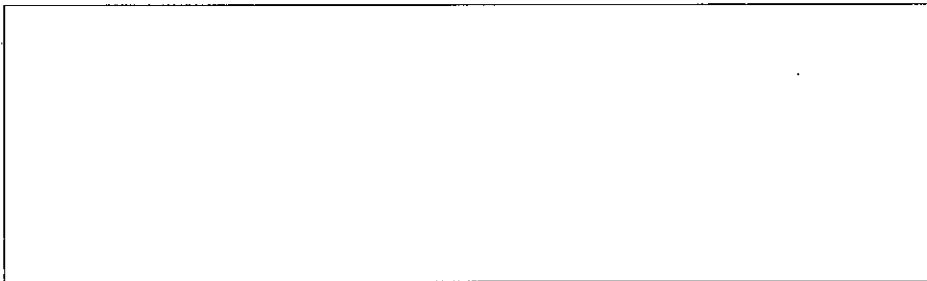
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²⁹ Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 1329 (17 May 1964) and 1411 (24 May 1964), *FRUS 1964-1968*, 86-87, passim and 105. Unger rescinded this a few days later; the T-28s were taking too many hits. But and USAF pilots shortly replaced them.

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Geneva signatories in hopes of gaining at least a propaganda advantage while further loosening the restrictions on friendly military and air reconnaissance activity in Laos. Another review of Indochina military options also got under way, but the interagency conferees limited the agenda to actions of an essentially demonstrative nature.³⁰ [redacted]



The neutralists and Vang Pao's forces still had to contend with enemy units holding Route 7 west of Muong Soui and a section of Route 13 south of the intersection. Tactical air compensated for the limited offensive potential of the friendly forces, and Operation TRIANGLE, launched in late July 1964 by three regiments of FAR and Hmong troops, succeeded where similar earlier efforts had failed. The conduct of that operation established two precedents that marked the rest of the war. Combat aircraft flown in close support of ground forces [redacted]

[redacted]—were thereafter to counterbalance the superior discipline and skill of the North Vietnamese infantry.³² [redacted]

The Special Guerrilla Unit in the Panhandle [redacted]

We have already seen that, after the April 1964 coup against Souvanna and the reverses suffered by both Kong Le forces and the Hmong, little remained to prevent the communists from breaking out into the Mekong Valley. Whether they did so depended not on their capacity—no one questioned it—but on the scope of their immediate ambition. This applied also in the Panhandle, where they were simultaneously exploiting the capture of the Na Kay Plateau with sharp thrusts at the demoralized FAR units and the almost equally unnerved

³⁰ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1368, 20 May 1964, and Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal (NSC Staff) to Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), "Intermediate Actions in Laos: 3 June 1964," *FRUS 1964-1968*, 91n and 128-29. Forrestal expected that the consultations then taking place among five of the Geneva conferees would "not amount to a hill of beans." Also see William E. Colby, Memorandum for the Record, "White House Meeting on Southeast Asia," 4 June 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 129-31. [redacted]

³¹ [redacted]

³² [redacted]

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CIA teams on its periphery. Friendly casualties in this sector had been light, but survival in enemy-dominated territory remained a challenge. Formerly friendly villagers were keeping the irregulars at arm's length, out of fear of communist reprisals. Food was therefore in short supply, especially as post-Geneva restrictions required case officer [] to lean on a very weak reed, the Royal Lao Air Force, for airdrops to beleaguered roadwatch teams.³³ []

The ground rules also restricted [] personal contact with the teams, whose isolation contributed to low morale. [] discovered that two teams were holed up well away from the roads they were supposed to be watching, and were either making up their reporting or trying to pass off second- or third-hand fragments as the product of direct observation. The result was that Headquarters chose to call for accelerated expansion—a “quantum jump, not gradual growth”—[] at a moment when team performance was suffering and the supply of willing manpower had severely shrunk.³⁴ []

The military reverses of the previous months and the recent political disarray only aggravated what [] saw as the more fundamental problem: the people of central Laos, seeing themselves as a mere buffer between more powerful neighbors and ruled by a government unable either to plan or to act, had succumbed to “doubt and fear,” and this could not fail to be reflected in the performance of the [] teams. At least two of these were clearly not making a serious effort to make their way back to their native villages and the nearby intelligence targets. One team leader, clearly influenced by Pathet Lao propaganda, had radioed for money owed to villagers for rice, saying he wanted it before the Americans left Laos.³⁵ []

Despite these obstacles, [] responded on 8 June 1964 with a proposal to form 16 units of 27 men for deployment against communist road traffic from North Vietnam moving south along the foothills of the Annamite Chain. [] acknowledged that Headquarters had been urging an intelligence, not a paramilitary, buildup, but thought further proliferation of roadwatch teams would have them “tripping over each other” without contributing much to the intelligence picture.³⁶ []

Washington's consideration of a new ground combat capability in the Panhandle coincided with the first loss of a military aircraft in Laos. On 6 June

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1964, a US Navy jet was shot down on an aerial photography mission over Ban Ban. Air America promptly launched a rescue effort, but Ambassador Unger, concerned to the point of obsession with Geneva restrictions, canceled it immediately upon learning of it. Air attaché Colonel Tyrell spent some four hours trying to reach Unger to persuade him to authorize its resumption, but the enemy had already found the pilot when search aircraft arrived; three of the rescue planes were hit and a crewman wounded as they tried unsuccessfully to retrieve him.³⁷ []

Defense Secretary McNamara recommended sending eight fighter-bombers, authorized to return fire, with the next reconnaissance mission. DCI McCone voiced some doubt about the deterrent value of air reconnaissance; he thought the communists' rather spasmodic mode of operation, with aggressive moves followed by pause and withdrawal, a function more of their difficult logistics. But he saw no positive reason not to endorse the McNamara recommendation. President Johnson approved it, contingent only on agreement by Souvanna Phouma, who immediately acquiesced, and armed escorts now began flying with the reconnaissance aircraft.³⁸ []

The next day, 7 June 1964, communist antiaircraft artillery downed another US jet, generating calls for retaliation. But unlike the idea of fighter escort for reconnaissance flights, a proposal for a demonstrative strike on the Plain of Jars produced sharp disagreement. At a meeting with President Johnson on 8 June, McNamara said he thought it impossible to "continue talking tough and acting weak." The only alternative to an attack would be "an entirely different course" involving readiness "to give up Southeast Asia." Gen. Marshall Carter, representing the DCI as McCone's deputy, said he spoke for his boss as well as himself in opposing the strike, on the ground that it would merely satisfy the urge for retaliation without improving the US position in Laos.³⁹ []

McNamara sharply contradicted this, insisting that McCone had endorsed the idea at a meeting the day before, just after the second plane went down. Carter stood his ground, saying that both he and the DCI objected to an action "out of sequence" that served no "longer range plan." But he admitted that he

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[] A Headquarters cover note remarks that Unger had also canceled the search for the Air America cargo plane that went down near Tchepone in September 1963. []

³⁸ Summary Record of the 533rd Meeting of the National Security Council, 6 June 1964, and John McCone, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting of the Executive Committee With the President," 6 June 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 141-44. McCone noted President Johnson's questioning of "whether we had thought through where we were going; specifically he said: 'and what comes next?' This question—the most important question raised in the meeting—remained unanswered." []

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had nothing else to offer to let "Hanoi know that we were serious about our position in Southeast Asia." The president acknowledged his own doubts about the mission but authorized McNamara to go ahead, and navy jets struck Xieng Khouang on 9 June.⁴⁰

The impulse in Washington to punish the North Vietnamese and inhibit further communist advance led to quick approval of modest new program in central Laos. Indeed, in its eagerness to help improve the sagging anticommunist position there, Headquarters entertained hopes for the new effort that, in a less heated atmosphere, it might have thought illusory. As a result, the authorizing cable set two new goals. The first entailed conversion of the roadwatch intelligence effort from its documentation of communist cease-fire violations to real-time reporting—for tactical exploitation by air and ground elements—of observed enemy locations and movement. The second, even more ambitious, envisioned creating a "mobile reserve, to improve security for the civilian population living in areas of operations and thus to restore a base of support for both intelligence and paramilitary work in the Corridor."⁴¹

had already disavowed any such grandiose aims, stipulating that its suggested SGU formations might be "nothing but a pin-prick" to the Vietnamese. units, furthermore, were operating "behind enemy lines in small groups and unobtrusively"; what would a mobile reserve support? As for the Kha, "we have already armed all we think we can trust."⁴²

Blaufarb thought it better to beef up the SGUs with preserving the mobility of the small unit while increasing its striking power.

³⁹ Bromley Smith, Memorandum of Conference With President Johnson, "SOUTHEAST ASIA," 8 June 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 152-60. Air America rescued the pilot of the second downed jet after a Caribou pilot spotted his flare and summoned an H-34 helicopter, whose pilot jettisoned fuel and equipment and settled the belly of the craft onto the treetops trying to get the rescue cable to the man on the ground. Loss of power followed by engine overspeed nearly caused a crash, after which a second helicopter guided the downed pilot to a spot where a landing could be made.

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⁴⁰ Ibid. Senator Mike Mansfield (D-MT) amplified the Carter argument and the president's doubts in a letter to Johnson on the 9th. "If it is not in the national interest to become deeply involved in a military sense on the Laotian front, we will avoid those actions [e.g., reconnaissance flights and retaliatory strikes after losses] which can impel us, even against our inclination or expectation, to become more deeply involved." (Emphasis in original.) (*FRUS 1964-1968*, 165-66.)

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“Wapi”: Village Defense in the Lower Mekong Valley [REDACTED]

The “mobile reserve” concept would have its day in the Panhandle, but not for another two years. Meanwhile, the next move to secure southern Laos was borrowed from the CIA’s village defense programs in South Vietnam. Its impetus came from developments in June 1964 in Military Region 2, where, encouraged by a newly militant Souvanna Phouma, the FAR command won US agreement to a major ground operation. Designed to prevent the communists from exploiting their control of the Plain of Jars, the operation would secure both Kong Le’s new command post at Muong Soui and the roads leading from there to Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Forces on the scene were inadequate, and General Phoumi intended to commit the 1,800 men of *Groupement Mobile 16* from Attopeu, in the far south. This redeployment would leave Military Region 4 without its best regiment and weaken the security of an area that extended from the Cambodian border north across the Bolovens Plateau and west to the Mekong.⁴⁴ [REDACTED]

This prospect focused renewed American attention on security in the Mekong Valley. A year earlier, as we have seen, the US Mission had responded to NSAM 249 by joining the Vientiane government in a program of defended villages (“clusters”) similar to the so-called strategic hamlet in South Vietnam. The Laotian version was called Mu Ban Samaki, for which CIA was to support the “covert or semi-covert” aspects, including weapons, radios, and militia pay, while USOM designed and funded the economic and social programs. The country team wanted a massive effort to secure the entire valley, but Washington mandated a more cautious approach. A scaled-back version had been launched in the fall of 1963, with six pilot projects scattered from Sayaboury to Attopeu.⁴⁵ [REDACTED]

⁴³ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

⁴⁴ State Telegram 1270 to Vientiane, 29 June 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 219-20. The regiment was moved, but the operation proceeded in the desultory fashion characteristic of the FAR. “Severely limited” US air support—“the desire was to avoid political problems for the United States in the event of a serious failure of the operation”—was another impediment, but the roads were eventually cleared. [REDACTED]

⁴⁵ [REDACTED]

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Working with Laotian officials at the provincial level, the embassy tried to make Ban Keng Kok, in the Panhandle just east of Savannakhet, the show-piece. Like most of the others, however, it fell victim to fragmented American management. Ambassador Unger insisted on running it through a subcommittee of the country team in Vientiane, and the incoherent, ill-coordinated activity that followed impeded [] in his efforts to help assure Ban Keng Kok's security.⁴⁶ []

Of the six sites under development in December 1963 only one, at Houei Kong on the southeastern Bolovens, was prospering in mid-1964. Not by coincidence, it had unitary management, in the person of [] and a security-force-in-being. This unit was manned by the 400 Kha of the Nja Hune tribe who had been salvaged from the US Special Forces program begun in 1962, and their presence made Houei Kong the only nexus between the embassy's Mu Ban Samaki and the CIA's paramilitary effort in Laos.⁴⁷ []

[] had exploited his open, straightforward style and long residence in Pakse to ingratiate himself with the local potentate, Prince Boun Oum, heir to the throne of the defunct petty kingdom of Champassak. [] then used his influence to instigate Boun Oum's removal of the obstructionist Gen. Kot Venevengsos and his replacement as MR 4 commander by the energetic and cooperative Gen. Phasouk Somly.⁴⁸ []

[] also enjoyed the trust of Charles Mann, USOM chief in Laos, and the good will of the USOM representative in Pakse. The result was de facto CIA management of the Houei Kong cluster, and an opportunity to attract uncommitted villagers with the first set of fully integrated security, intelligence, economic, and social programs in the Laotian countryside.⁴⁹ []

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⁴⁹ [] interview, []

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When the security of southern Laos attracted policy-level US attention in mid-1964, much of the countryside there was still a political and military no-man's land, dominated by neither the Vientiane government nor the Pathet Lao. A similar vacuum prevailed elsewhere, but the station was no longer promoting the expansion of Mu Ban Samaki to cover the entire Mekong Valley. Implicitly acknowledging that some of these projects had failed, it concluded that continuing to arm isolated and vulnerable village militias would only "result in giving arms to [the] Pathet Lao."⁵⁰ [redacted]

[redacted] Blaufarb therefore proposed that the CIA response to administration pressure for more rural consolidation be confined largely to MR 4. The formula already succeeding with the Kha at Houei Kong on the plateau could also be applied under [redacted] direction in the Lao-populated lowlands. There, it would expand outward from a central and secure point.⁵¹ [redacted]

There was some jurisdictional resistance. Liberal about Houei Kong, Charles Mann was less eager to see the Agency run a second and larger rural development project. But Ambassador Unger, probably now persuaded of the weaknesses of management by committee, agreed to the experiment. Headquarters authorized an Agency contribution of \$600,000 for a program beginning at La Phone Kheng, 60 miles north of Pakse, in Wapikhamthong Province.⁵² [redacted]

[redacted] later described his initial agenda:

Under the umbrella of Lao Army elements able to provide conventional security, the Wapi Project combined a broad socio-economic program—schools, dispensaries, roads, wells—with a security program that included the training of self-defense forces and the establishment of an early-warning intelligence system with an immediate reporting capability.

The warning system, using HT-1 portable voice radios, reported into a base station on a mountain overlooking Pakse. [redacted] who replaced [redacted] there in 1965, took it as a tribute to the program's worth that, when the communists staged one of their rare attacks in the Pakse area, they chose to hit

⁵⁰ [redacted]
Blaufarb and [redacted] interviews. The [redacted] irregulars could also be seen as contributing to village security, and Headquarters harbored some hope at this point for a defended village program also in the northern Panhandle. [redacted]

⁵¹ [redacted]

⁵² [redacted]

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the base station. They killed the unprepared operators and temporarily put it off the air.⁵³

The essential difference between the "Wapi Project" and the original Mu Ban Samaki lay in Wapi's explicit link between government largesse and a demand for villager identification with the government. The delivery of social and economic benefits was accompanied by a call to bear arms in defense of the community, to provide intelligence on the communists, and to deny the enemy all material aid. In this respect, Wapi resembled—indeed, consciously imitated—the purposes and techniques of earlier CIA work among tribal minorities in South Vietnam. These had always aimed at winning the participation of previously uncommitted villagers in their own defense against the communists.⁵⁴

At first, the requirement to join a village militia looked like a disabling impediment, for the ethnic Lao were on the whole no more anxious than their tribal compatriots to join the army. Phasouk persuaded them that part-time service protecting their own homes made sense and promised that no more would be asked of them. As long as that promise was kept, recruiting posed no problem.⁵⁵

General Phasouk's involvement demonstrated an imperative that was then becoming clear also to CIA colleagues engaged in rural pacification in South Vietnam: however indispensable the American contribution, everything depended on the quality of local leadership. Headquarters judged that, in southern Laos, "Phasouk's dominant position . . . along with his active participation and complete acceptance of responsibility for the program, was the real key to its success."⁵⁶

Success depended also, of course, on the level of resistance to it mounted by the Pathet Lao. Although about half of the 60,000 people—both Lao and minority—in the target area were thought to favor the Pathet Lao, there were only about 300 armed insurgents in the entire province. And among the village leaders brought in for instruction in new programs like agricultural cooperatives, even those thought to be in sympathy with the communists responded with apparent enthusiasm. The outcome was an almost permissive reaction

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See also interview; Report by the Chief of the Far East Division Colby to the DCI Helms, 16 August 1966, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 484-85.

⁵⁴ For the programs in South Vietnam, see the author's *The CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*.

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from the Pathet Lao, and Phasouk's men quickly consolidated the government's control of the first three targeted districts.⁵⁷ []

In April 1965, the ambassador approved an expansion designed to bring another 120,000 people into active cooperation with the government and to eliminate the communists from the Se Done Valley. The Pathet Lao had long predominated in the region, which was home to Sithone Khommadam, a Kha of the Loven tribe and vice chairman of the Neo Lao Hak Sat, the Laotian communist party. But the insurgency had done little to mobilize popular support among either Kha or Lao villagers, relying more on coercion, and they responded much like the people around La Phone Kheng.⁵⁸ []

This commitment to the government reflected popular confidence in Phasouk's ability to ensure physical security. For he was doing what few of his peers elsewhere even attempted, getting his regular and territorial troops to attack the larger formations that effective village defenses forced the enemy to deploy. One factor in this was the organizational refinement that put village defense units and FAR reaction forces under the same local command, partly to improve coordination but more importantly to stimulate active and willing FAR involvement in the civic action aspects of the program.⁵⁹ []

In a typical action, FAR troops ambushed a Pathet Lao unit in the wilds south of the road to Saravane, killing eight of the enemy and capturing two weapons. Phasouk gave much of the credit to CIA logistical support to his troops; this had been supplied under the Headquarters mandate, mentioned above, to supplement where necessary the regular aid programs of other US agencies. [] in turn, cited the aggressive, confident propaganda being disseminated through FAR to Pathet Lao sympathizers; it seemed to energize the troops at least as much as it influenced the adversary.⁶⁰ []

As of June 1966, part-time militias were defending an area of 2,100 square miles and the population of 120,000 projected in earlier planning. The result was a level of tranquility in the Se Done sector such that [] thought nothing of loading his family in the car and driving from Pakse to Saravane, using the road restored under project auspices. But the enemy had still not responded, and the project's durability remained hard to gauge. Like

⁵⁷ [] interview. []

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Regarding communist nomenclature: The author follows the practice of US and Vientiane officials, all of whom referred to the Laotian communists as Pathet Lao, rather than by the official party designation. []

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Carlton, Headquarters relied on anecdotal indications, such as increasing Pathet Lao defectors and an influx of refugees from communist-dominated territory to the east.⁶¹

L'Armée Clandestine

American recognition of the superiority of the North Vietnamese Army over Vientiane's ground forces was accompanied by continual, if usually sublimated, anxiety about Chinese intervention through the Yunnan salient into northwestern Laos. The Pathet Lao had exercised de facto control over Phong Saly, one of the two provinces there, since the 1950s. But both there and in Nam Tha, they displayed little energy and exerted even less popular appeal, especially among the numerous hill tribes. For several years, the Agency had engaged in desultory efforts to enlist various of these tribes into intelligence and staybehind guerrilla units; as we have seen, the main instrument of these efforts after 1962 was Yao leader Chao Mai.⁶²

When the Geneva Agreements came into force in October 1962, a force of about 1,000 CIA-supported Yao tribesmen was scattered over the mountains of Nam Tha Province. Supplied by boat and mule train on the scene, Chao Mai's guerrillas played a minor role. Nevertheless, the collapse of the Geneva Agreements, beginning in 1963, stimulated some additional support aimed at preempting population and territory in the northwest. By mid-1964 the CIA-supported guerrillas in the northwest numbered some 4,400 men—half of them still armed only with the local muzzle-loading rifle—drawn from a variety of tribes.⁶³

In the wake of FAR and Hmong reverses in early 1964, the northwest began to get more attention. A battalion or more of communist Chinese troops and an equivalent force of North Vietnamese arrived at Muong Sing in Nam Tha in April. News of these reinforcements intensified the perennial worry about Chinese intentions and led Ambassador Unger to approve 300 weapons to arm new intelligence teams targeted at Yunnan Province in southern China. These were to be run by the station in the quasi-unilateral manner typical of the Hmong units, that is, with communications and tactical

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Also see interview. recalled that Phasouk, when he found out about the trip, thought it a little too adventurous, especially as the family had returned to Pakse from Saravane south across the Bolovens Plateau.

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direction in CIA hands and FAR authority purely nominal. Several additional teams, directly under Chao Mai and his brother Chao La, were to lack even this pro forma connection to the FAR command.⁶⁴ []

At best, the new activity would achieve only partial coverage of the People's Liberation Army in southern Yunnan, and the need for intelligence finally overcame longstanding inhibitions about any US identification with the Nationalist remnants on the southern border. Headquarters now overcame the traditional concerns about provoking the communist Chinese, dismissing them as "hoary problems involving Chinat irregulars." Instead, it now proposed to use Chinese "retreads"—presumably former Nationalist soldiers—to supplement the other efforts.⁶⁵ []

At this point, [] the missionaries' son, was still in charge of the indigenous guerrillas in Nam Tha. Not a permanent Agency employee, he lacked any relevant professional experience other than training with the 82nd Airborne Division. What he did offer was the language and area knowledge conferred by his boyhood in highland villages in Burma and Thailand. His independent streak precluded using him as a mere interpreter, and Bill Lair sent a series of young officers—[] was the first—to [] [] to exert some restraint, if only by exhortation and example.⁶⁶ []



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One puzzle that this intelligence effort hoped to solve was Beijing's construction of an all-weather road from Meng La, in southern Yunnan, into Nam Tha Province. Begun about 1962, it eventually reached Pak Beng, on the Mekong above Luang Prabang. But its purposes remained obscure. Throughout the conflict, it carried no troops or materiel into the combat zone. At a meeting in the mid-1970s, Zhou En-lai left Henry Kissinger with the impression that, from the beginning, it had been intended to deny Hanoi unchallenged influence in the Mekong Valley. []

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No records have been found describing any action on this proposal, whose significance lies in Washington's growing willingness to entertain operational proposals that only a little earlier would have been rejected as dangerously provocative. []

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Bill Lair, []

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The Chinese (both Nationalist and communist), the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao, the Thai, the CIA and its assorted irregulars, and the FAR command with its farrago of regular and irregular formations combined to make northwest Laos a political, ethnic, and military stew that defied management or even description. Chao Mai's Yao irregulars constituted only one element of the CIA-supported guerrilla and intelligence program; there were Hmong as well, and Chao Mai and Vang Pao clashed over command of Hmong units in Nam Tha. FAR Commander in Chief Gen. Ouane Rathikoun complicated matters further when, in September 1964, he approached Bill Lair asking for support for the 13 companies of his *Armée Clandestine*, the remnant of a tribal guerrilla force created by the French Expeditionary Force in the 1950s. Now, having been isolated in scattered pockets since the fall of Nam Tha and Nam Bac in 1962, these units were in parlous condition.⁶⁸

They had little military significance, but wanted to indulge Ouane, partly as a device to secure his approval of a project closer to American and Thai hearts. This involved a multiethnic program of defended villages along the Thai border west of Luang Prabang, and originated with USOM as an element of the village defense effort mandated by Washington in mid-1963.

[REDACTED]

With project headquarters at Xieng Lom, located south of the Mekong where the river bends east toward Luang Prabang, the village defense program became, at least nominally, a part of the *Armée Clandestine*.⁶⁹

Subject to the weaknesses of all such organizational hybrids, the activity prospered as long as it was run by Ouane's representative in the northwest. This was Prince Siboravong, a French-educated member of the Laotian nobility, a FAR colonel, and a leader of unusual dedication, ability, and courage. His wide acquaintanceship among local leaders, down even to the village level, let him identify potential communist defectors, and during one operation in Sayaboury he brought more than 300 armed Hmong Pathet Lao to the government side.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Bill Lair.

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Armée Clandestine as a term for these guerrillas was first used by General Phoumi in late 1961. Then, as later, it represented no functioning tactical organization.

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Headquarters of MR I
irregulars at Nam Yu, c.
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Siboravong died in the helicopter crash in August 1965 that also killed his CIA adviser, [redacted] and the RTA team leader, [redacted] to represent CIA in the northwest, at the joint [redacted] Laotian-CIA headquarters recently moved from Xieng Lom to Nam Yu. [redacted] professional skills could not compensate for the leadership vacuum created by Siboravong's death, which was followed by corruption and reduced military effectiveness. Fortunately for the political and military balance in the northwest, the communists did not fully exploit their advantage. A subsidiary sector for both sides, it continued for the rest of the war to see inconclusive skirmishing and sporadic efforts by the adversaries to enlist the support of the multi-ethnic civilian population.⁷¹ [redacted]

[redacted] had had more than one reason to accommodate General Ouane's request for help for the so-called *Armée Clandestine*. In addition to securing cooperation in the village defense program, it wanted to blunt the general's capacity for mischiefmaking with the prime minister. In early June 1964, just after Souvanna had denounced North Vietnamese aggression and asked for more tactical air support, his chronic mistrust of the United States and of the Hmong flared up in a confrontation with Ambassador Unger. Souvanna complained that the Hmong were defying direction by the FAR command, and [redacted] saw in this the ambitious hand of General Ouane, and perhaps also of the French—ever-jealous of their fading influence in Indochina—and Vang Pao's clan rival Touby Lyfoung.⁷² [redacted]

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Feeding Souvanna's anxieties was his ignorance of just what was going on. No one on the US side, and probably no one on the Laotian side either, had ever given him a detailed account of the CIA paramilitary programs employing the always-suspect tribal peoples in the mountains. Successive ambassadors and had told him as little as possible, fearing that his chronic urge to accommodate his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, would lead him to reveal their details to the Pathet Lao or to demand that the programs be turned over to FAR or abolished. As defense minister, Phoumi was much better informed, but, in view, he would also have kept the prime minister in the dark about the CIA's role in order to claim the credit when tribal elements mounted a successful operation.⁷³

Maneuvering by the embassy, and Vang Pao made the issue go away, for the moment, but Souvanna raised it again in November.

State acquiesced, and sent Bill Lair, armed with the promise of aid, to get Ouane to assure Souvanna that the FAR command had no problem with the Hmong irregulars or the mode of their support.⁷⁴

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The French, eager to reconvene the full 14-nation Geneva Conference on Laos, continued maneuvering to frustrate American efforts to consolidate Souvanna's position. In September, they were applying "massive pressure" on Souvanna to accept both the conference and a Pathet Lao proposal to count dissident, procommunist neutralists as part of Kong Le's forces. The desired outcome, presumably, was enhanced French influence over a Laotian government less committed to the vigorously anticommunist posture of the United States. (Department of State memorandum, "Laos Situation," 18 September 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 271-73.)

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Chapter Nine



Vang Pao in dress uniform, probably c. 1970

Ambassador Unger left in November, persuaded that Souvanna was entirely mollified. [] Douglas Blaufarb was not so sure. He anticipated that, within another year, CIA might be directing a force of some 40,000 mostly full-time soldiers and supporting a population of "several hundred thousands." Not only could this not be concealed, its scale would invite criticism of massive interference in internal Laotian affairs "without so much as advising [Souvanna] of what we are doing." Blaufarb didn't think the secretive approach would work much longer, but before opening up to the prime minister, he wanted the views of the ambassador-designate William Sullivan.⁷⁵ []

The program's rising profile would indeed become a problem, though in the United States and not with Souvanna. Meanwhile, the prime minister vindicated Unger's optimism when, after earlier declining a Vang Pao invitation, he visited the Hmong civilian center at Sam Thong on 7 January 1965. He stayed overnight and endorsed his host in a public address full of praise for the general's achievements and his wisdom. A month later, Brig. Gen. Vang Pao became commander of Military Region 2. This new comity did not bring an end to ethnic antagonisms in Laos, but it did permit the war effort to be pursued, on the Laotian side, with perceptibly greater unity of purpose.⁷⁶ []

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Greater unity was fostered also by the failure of yet another military coup in Vientiane. As much the product of rivalries inside FAR as of the military's opposition to Souvanna, it resulted in Phoumi's exile to Thailand in February 1965. With a tripartite government still in nominal existence, the anticommunist factions in it now enjoyed an unprecedented, if fragile, unity. The result was a more nearly harmonious atmosphere—among the Lao and between them and the Americans—in which to prosecute the war.⁷⁷

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Mutual distrust flared up again in August 1965, after Vang Pao had repeatedly refused to visit Vientiane for fear of arrest by one of Phoumi's longtime antagonists. After frantic US intervention with Souvanna, the tension dissolved in late September when he visited Long Tieng and Sam Thong.

⁷⁷ Memorandum from Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, "News of the Day," 31 January 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 325-28. The coup had the comic opera aspect so typical of political convulsions in Laos. Ambassador Sullivan became an active player, having in Bundy's words "blocked this coup by getting a tipsy Australian technician to cut some wires" serving the radio station intended by the rebels to broadcast their coup

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PART TWO
1965-70

The near-collapse of the Saigon government led, in March 1965, to the deployment of US Marines in South Vietnam. By midyear, the marines and the US Army were conducting offensive ground operations. The commitment of both ground and air combat forces in Vietnam changed Washington's perception of the role of the irregulars in Laos. No longer confined to resisting communist encroachments that violated the Geneva Agreements, they were now to reduce the pressure in South Vietnam with a challenge to Hanoi's control of northeastern Laos. []

The bombing halt in North Vietnam that followed the January 1968 Tet offensive and President Johnson's decision to negotiate with Hanoi resulted in further escalation in Laos. Not at issue in the Paris talks, government forces in Laos now received new levels of US tactical air support. With its help, in 1969, Vang Pao scored his biggest tactical victory, []

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The North Vietnamese accepted the challenge and moved to take Vang Pao's redoubt at Long Tieng. []

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[] Vang Pao's strategic aim was defensive: to protect the Hmong population concentrated west and south of the Plain of Jars. []

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CHAPTER TEN

In the Shadow of Vietnam

In mid-1964, the Laotian government's forces held the numerical advantage, with some 50,000 FAR regulars and 23,000 CIA-supported irregulars facing perhaps 11,000 NVA troops and about 20,000 Pathet Lao. Vientiane's military also enjoyed air support, both tactical and logistical, something denied to the communist forces. But the superior quality of the Vietnamese infantry, and Hanoi's capacity to commit reinforcements in overwhelming numbers whenever it wished, meant that nothing better than a stalemate was to be expected.¹

An Impulse To Take the War to the Enemy

Washington's desire to curb North Vietnamese use of Laotian territory had always conflicted with its aversion to any course of action that might draw American forces into ground combat there. But the strategically inferior position of the anticommunist side in Laos contributed to a chronic itch to find tactical ploys that might blunt Hanoi's advantage. One of these, the recruitment of tribesmen from the North Vietnamese side of the border to operate in the highlands there, preceded Souvanna Phouma's epiphany of May 1964.

Even before the prime minister finally acknowledged Hanoi as an implacable enemy, Ambassador Unger had approved giving small arms to 200 "able-bodied Meo refugees" from North Vietnam. Organized and dispatched to their native villages in three groups, they would set up roadwatch observation points while keeping the "spirit of resistance alive among [the] people" in villages near Route 7. But Unger acknowledged the inherent risk when he decreed that all this must be accomplished in surreptitious fashion: the irregulars should engage in "no overt action which might trigger retaliation."²

¹
 Memorandum from Chester L. Cooper of the NSC Staff to President Johnson, "Developments With Respect to Laos," 22 January 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 318-20.

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In June 1964, as Hanoi readied the Ho Chi Minh Trail for a massively expanded infiltration of the South, policymakers demanded new initiatives from both CIA and the US military. In this climate, Headquarters began to see some paramilitary potential in the Hmong refugees from North Vietnam. Their mountain villages now began to look like potential staging points from which to launch ethnic Vietnamese intelligence agents into the lowlands of the North.³ [redacted]

On 7 July, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy—brother of national security assistant McGeorge Bundy—approved a CIA program “in DRV tribal areas” that included setting up base camps and roadwatch positions, and establishing “safe areas for further activities if and when directed.” The CIA cable to [redacted] announcing Bundy’s authorization acknowledged continuing tension with the US military over control of cross-border operations. It also asserted the Agency’s continuing determination to remain in charge of activity with tribal elements along the border, arguing that “CIA can best create [a] tribal resistance program” capable of surviving if subsequent policy changes “should necessitate drastic curtailment of US Government support.”⁴

[redacted] pointed out that some of what Washington was now authorizing had been under way for two months. Hmong patrols were already observing Route 7 inside North Vietnam and scouting out base camps and sites for “carefully conceived harassment” of traffic on the road. Operations could begin as soon as demolitions material was delivered via the overland supply route then being established.⁵ [redacted]

[redacted] insisted that harassing Route 7 and instigating a tribal resistance movement on North Vietnamese soil were two different matters. Blaufarb thought that a resistance would meet a quick and bloody end, and he begged Headquarters to make “no reference to [this] resistance concept in discussion with other agencies.” Gordon Jorgensen, now Peer de Silva’s deputy in Saigon, weighed in with a cautionary word about bowing to MACV pressure for a tribal area of its own: separate lines of command to different tribes would inevitably set them against each other and prevent their uniting against the common enemy. To avoid this, all US support must be delivered through Vang Pao, and CIA must be the sole channel of that support.⁶ [redacted]

3 [redacted]

4 [redacted]

The DRV is the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, i.e., North Vietnam [redacted]

5 [redacted]

6 [redacted]

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Blaufarb added new objections in a late July cable that implied—not quite accurately—that only MACV had expressed an interest in a resistance program. But the logic of objection applied to any such proposal. It seemed to Blaufarb that proponents of a resistance were being “carried away by visions derived from [World War II] experience and [were] thinking of raising up the tribal populations to overthrow the communist regime . . . such an approach would inevitably end in disaster unless [the] United States were serious about seeking a complete victory over [North Vietnam].” But American aims were, in fact, more limited: to increase the cost to Hanoi of its effort to take over South Vietnam. Accordingly, “the use of tribal populations who have to live indefinitely under communist rule to accomplish such limited objectives involves a contradiction which we have to acknowledge from the beginning.”⁷

The contradiction could not be resolved, Blaufarb believed, but only managed. Villagers armed by CIA had to be “protected against the inevitable retaliation of the regime. In practical terms, this means . . . refuge in a safe area, of which there is only one available, i.e., the Meo area of Laos.” assumed that the United States would shrink from offering refuge to large numbers of people, and this implied an obligation to be “highly selective and restrained in the number of people we arm and the tasks we assign them.”⁸

pursued the cautious approach dictated by this analysis until early December 1964, when Headquarters suggested accelerated recruitment of tribal elements in North Vietnam. Vang Pao was pressuring his CIA contacts for the same thing, for he had long wanted to extend his protection to the Hmong around his home area of Nong Het, hard by the Vietnamese border. But Blaufarb was not persuaded. He pointed out to Headquarters the need first to consolidate the Laotian side of the border, an essential step if air resupply of cross-border elements was to be avoided.⁹

It seems unlikely that Hanoi would have seen a material difference between intelligence and harassment, on the one hand, and tribal resistance, on the other, on North Vietnamese soil. In any case, valid or not, Blaufarb’s concept risked being swept aside by the imperative to hamper and deter communist infiltration of South Vietnam, which now faced military and political collapse. In December 1964, US combat aircraft began bombing infiltration routes in the Laotian Panhandle, and early in 1965 President Johnson was pressing for a maximum effort to shut off infiltration into South Vietnam through Laos. By

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March, the administration had despaired of holding the line in South Vietnam without deploying American combat units, and US Marines landed near Da Nang to protect the US airbase there.¹⁰ []

“Pinpoint” vs. “Middle Course” []

In this atmosphere, no [] was likely to temper Washington’s new enthusiasm for cross-border operations, either by CIA into the DRV or by MACV into Laos. As it happened, however, Douglas Blaufarb acquired an able and forceful ally in the person of William Sullivan, a career Foreign Service officer who replaced Leonard Unger as ambassador to Laos at the end of 1964. In the opinion of [] officers like Doug Blaufarb and [] [] Sullivan quickly came to understand the limitations of tribal irregulars. This understanding drove his opposition both to the resistance concept and to the MACV drive for a larger role, using South Vietnamese tribesmen in cross-border operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.¹¹ []

Other factors influenced Sullivan’s assertion of Vientiane’s primacy, one being the evident pleasure that a former junior naval officer found in running his own war. But the new ambassador had other, more substantive, reasons for a conservative approach to any military initiatives—certainly including bombing missions by US aircraft—on Laotian soil. One of these was the imperative to retain Souvanna Phouma’s support for direct US military action against the communists in Laos. Sullivan argued that using Laos to foment rebellion in North Vietnam or turning the eastern Panhandle into a free-fire zone would jeopardize the prime minister’s continued support for unacknowledged US attacks on communist forces and installations. Unless the United States was prepared to jettison Souvanna for a fractious, incompetent military junta, this had to be avoided.¹² []

Another danger arose from the prospect of a reconvened Geneva Conference. Sullivan pointed out that the communists, fully aware of surreptitious and technically illegal US activities in Laos, would use a conference for a propaganda assault upon them. That they all responded to communist cease-fire violations would not prevent their nearly certain suspension under a barrage of publicity.¹³ []

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Also see State Telegram 809 to Vientiane, 20 March 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 352-53. (U)

¹¹ Blaufarb and [] interviews. []

¹² Bill Lair; Blaufarb interview; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1511, 22 March 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 354-56. []

¹³ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 982, 13 May 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 365-66. []

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MACV, less attuned to the politics of the matter, persisted in trying to find a role for its Special Operations Group (SOG), staffed by the US Special Forces and still supporting the tribal irregulars taken over from CIA in 1963. In April 1965, it proposed a foray into the southern Panhandle that struck Sullivan as an "old [Special Forces] ghost pulling my leg," an allusion to the US Special Forces' unsuccessful arming of tribesmen in that area in 1962. Sullivan considered it "far-fetched to think of storming the Ho Chi Minh Trail with a bare bottomed bunch of these boys." But the military persisted in trying to carve out a proprietary slice of the Laotian pie. In September, CINCPAC outraged Doug Blaufarb with a proposed operation into "the Laos Panhandle south of the area under [CIA] influence," that is, into the Kha area of operations.
 thought Honolulu needed to be disabused of the notion that the area below the sector was "some kind of a void," and he suggested a briefing for the commander and his staff.¹⁴

Sullivan's casually contemptuous description of MACV's tribal irregulars concealed a lively sense of responsibility for the survival of primitive peoples drawn into the war as American surrogates. And it was not only the US military that Sullivan thought too ready to lead such allies into danger. On 18 May, he wrote to Bill Bundy explaining his opposition to CIA's proposed recruiting of Hmong irregulars in the DRV. It was, in part, a matter of policy: To create "the seeds of an internal resistance" on North Vietnamese soil conflicted with Sullivan's understanding that Washington wanted to assure Hanoi that its own territorial integrity would be guaranteed under a peace agreement. But the fate of the Hmong had also to be considered, for "it would be immensely cruel and counterproductive to develop such a movement and then bargain it away as part of a political counter."¹⁵

Sullivan had that very day approved expanding the irregular forces "up to and across [the] DRV border," as the station understood him, north of Sam Neua and southwest of Dien Bien Phu. Headquarters interpreted this as leav-

¹⁴ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1726, 23 April 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 360-61. Sullivan also noted, as had periodically done, that interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail was not a task for tribal irregulars and that even modest harassment operations risked the "end [of] our intelligence coverage." Sullivan went on to state his modest expectations of such operations from South Vietnam into Laos: "A little intelligence scouting, with luck a little sabotage, and maybe even a little interception" of traffic on the trail. Three years later, he was still resisting MACV proposals for ground operations into the Corridor. (Vientiane Embassy Telegram 11150, 31 December 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 788.)

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ing open the prospect of a "middle course," one which avoided "premature creation of armed uprising" while developing a "sympathetic following" to be used for intelligence and propaganda purposes. Meanwhile, the tribal people in border areas of the DRV would be offered the "hope of an alternative to Vietnamese communist control."¹⁶ []

Doug Blaufarb pursued the issue and reported that Sullivan would have nothing to do with a "middle course" program that involved "the arming of populations . . . or any moral commitment to population groups." Headquarters refused to give up, and when the ambassador visited Washington in July, Bill Colby and Des FitzGerald pressed for a more liberal approach to recruiting in North Vietnam. Sullivan argued that "it would be immoral to encourage 'resistance' of any size in the DRV if we were not willing to follow it up and support it." Colby interpreted this as posing an obstacle to exploiting Hmong potential on the Route 7 axis east of the border; he worried that even intelligence operations would suffer "if we were not able to develop at least a popular base of opinion [sic] and some armament to protect the teams." Sullivan disagreed, and insisted that provocation be minimized by limiting operations in that area to intelligence collection by small teams operating surreptitiously.¹⁷ []

Conflicting Equities []

However compelling, the ambassador's argument did not end the discussion. The arrival of marine units at Da Nang had been immediately followed by the commitment of thousands of US Army troops into South Vietnam. At the same time, the program of US airstrikes on the Ho Chi Minh trail begun in 1964 under the code name BARREL ROLL was having only modest success in stemming the flow of North Vietnamese troops and materiel into the south.¹⁸ []

To US military commanders, it was simply intolerable to allow Hanoi a quasi-sanctuary through which to supply the forces now engaged in bloody combat with American as well as South Vietnamese units. MACV commander William Westmoreland and his nominal superior, Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp in

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William E. Colby, Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting with Ambassador . . . Sullivan, 23 July 1965," *FRUS 1964-1968*, 378-79. Sullivan's tentative approval of the Sam Neua effort, given 27 April, specified that he expected it to remain small, based on irregular units "in their current position."

¹⁸ Special National Intelligence Estimate, *Short-Term Prospects for Laos*, 5 August 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 380-84. []

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Honolulu, accepted that political considerations—especially Souvanna Phouma's sensitivity about Laotian neutrality—ruled out deploying US regiments or divisions. And they presumably shared the belief, expressed in the SNIE of August 1965, that any major Laotian action against the Ho Chi Minh Trail or DRV borders "would be repulsed with great damage and a severe setback to general military morale."¹⁹

The answers, for the military, were to be found in more harassment operations and in better use of tactical air. Guerrillas would contribute to both, identifying targets for air attack and themselves helping inhibit enemy use of the trail system. Sullivan bowed to the imperative of action against the Ho Chi Minh Trail when he agreed to a MACV concept codenamed SHINING BRASS. It would allow US Special Forces advisers to accompany patrols of irregulars from South Vietnam up to 12 miles into Laotian territory for both intelligence and harassment activity. Reinforcement, resupply, and evacuation by air were also permitted. He also bent a little on the contentious issue of a tribal resistance in the DRV when he authorized Vientiane station to distribute 1,600 weapons for recruits at two new guerrilla sites, both of which extended "up to and across" the border in the far north.²⁰

Tactical operations required intelligence, but this was still in short supply. The United States had been conducting aerial reconnaissance over Laos since mid-1964, but its results after a year persuaded American military intelligence that only ground observers could fill the need for accurate information. Enemy trucks traveled at night, and US Air Force pilots relied on their headlights to spot convoys. The North Vietnamese drivers knew this and used their lights only where needed on winding portions of the track, turning them off at the first sound of an aircraft.²¹

But the same security measures that foiled aerial reconnaissance would impede ground observation efforts. Bill Lair doubted that, assuming good discipline in the drivers, even well-located roadwatch teams could provide the detailed, real-time reporting necessary to make air-strikes successful.²²

Sullivan pointed out a contradiction similar to the one noted by Doug Blaufarb in the context of a resistance movement inside North Vietnam. In the Cor-

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 142, 9 August 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 387-90.

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proposed a hybrid alternative that would have USAF reconnaissance aircraft confirm during daylight hours that trucks seen at night had taken refuge for the day in suspected parking areas. Whether this procedure was adopted is not known.

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ridor, harassment activity—SGU operations did not yet aim at interdiction—almost invariably provoked a North Vietnamese riposte that cleared a given stretch of road not only of the attacking SGU but of the roadwatch teams whose information was so desperately needed to target airstrikes. Like the resistance conundrum, this one could not be solved, but only managed, in Blaufarb's term, with priorities assigned in the light of particular circumstances.²³

The inherent limitations of the surrogates available to the United States for intelligence and military operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail prompted yet another calculation of the potential costs and benefits of direct American military action. SNIE 10-10-65 of 10 September 1965 assumed a force of three US divisions moving into Laos to seal the Corridor along Route 9 in the central Panhandle. The political risks looked high, for Souvanna Phouma—egged on by the French, who still fancied themselves ultimately the preeminent Western power in a neutral Indochina—might simply quit. Or he might denounce such an invasion and then be overthrown by a junta that would never escape being tarred as an American puppet.²⁴

In addition, no matter who was in charge in Vientiane, the Thai and the Lao would demand US guarantees of protection against Chinese communist intervention. The estimate assumed that this intervention would come, at least in the north, as soon as US troops entered Laos. Moreover, interdiction of the trail complex might reduce, but would not end, infiltration into South Vietnam; Hanoi could turn to sea routes to the south, either directly or via Cambodia. These considerations prevailed, and American-led efforts in the Corridor, though substantially larger than those that preceded the brief moratorium in 1962 and 1963, continued to respect the now-traditional rules of engagement.²⁵

Overload

Self-imposed restraints on the application of US military power in Laos placed an immense burden on the surreptitious programs that were all that policy allowed. It was universally accepted that Lao and tribal irregulars could not by themselves even find, let alone destroy, a decisively large portion of the

²³ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 142.

²⁴ Special National Intelligence Estimate, *Reactions to a Certain US Course of Action in Southeast Asia, FRUS 1964-1968*, 392-96.

²⁵ Ibid.

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enemy traffic on the Trail. But the thirst for information only intensified as American troops continued pouring into South Vietnam.

CIA managers were already squeezing their teams, not just for more nearly continuous observation of road traffic but for more detailed information on cargos and their points of origin and destination. This required exploiting informants—occasionally recruited agents—among villagers cultivated by team members native to the area. Friendship or blood ties did not necessarily suffice to win cooperation, for Pathet Lao sanctions threatened villagers who collaborated with the enemy, and well-led teams went to considerable lengths to establish their claim to the locals' loyalty.

Since the beginning of the war, the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government—represented mainly by CIA-run irregulars—had contested for influence on the Na Kay Plateau, a key terrain feature between the Annamite Chain and the Mekong. Located northeast of the original command post at Thakhek, it offered the only access to important targets in Khammouane Province. Communist control since late 1963, however, had intimidated the villagers, who now held irregulars at arm's length.²⁶

Team Alpha, composed like all units of ethnic Lao, had been inserted into the Na Kay Plateau by air a year earlier. It had then dodged enemy patrols for three months before finding an area less firmly under Pathet Lao control. There, in the foothills north of the plateau, it began to compete with the communists in the fashion typical of CIA work with rural minorities. Distributing the medical supplies, tools, and propaganda kits air-dropped to its command post, it began a relatively aggressive regime of patrolling that took it as far as the main population center, Ban Na Kay, 12 miles to the south.²⁷

Gradually persuaded that the team intended to resist Pathet Lao efforts to evict it, the villagers became less vulnerable to communist threats of reprisals against collaborators. At this point, they began supplying information and soliciting arms with which to secure their villages and, in so doing, made Team Alpha the RLG's de facto representative on the central part of the plateau. In May, two enemy agents reportedly keeping the Pathet Lao informed of team activity were, in the station's laconic phrase, "eliminated from the area. After this, enemy search parties were reduced."²⁸

This combination of civic action work and a modest show of force encouraged an occasional Pathet Lao to offer his services. One such agent, probably

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recruited by a friend or relative, was a Pathet Lao "truck checker," who listed the cargos of all trucks passing his station on Route 23. Information of this kind arrived at [] far too late for tactical exploitation, but it served to document, if only on a sample basis, the amount and kind of supplies headed south. Meanwhile, the RS-48 radio—smaller than the obsolete RS-1—now supplied to well-situated roadwatch teams allowed for airstrikes within an hour or so of radio transmissions. But not even the RS-48 permitted real-time reporting, for the observer normally worked at some distance from the team command post, which had to be located to avoid both the enemy's patrols and American bombs.²⁹ []

And not all the [] teams enjoyed Team Alpha's possession of a reasonably secure base. The constant need to scramble for their lives overrode, in a few cases, the need for honest reporting of what they were—or were not—seeing on the trails, or even of their own location. Team leaders might go months without seeing their case officer and, on occasion, a few would take the easy way out. []

One team failed to put out signals for two successive supply drops, and [] suspected that it had stopped well short of its destination. To smoke out its location, he declared his intention to visit the team's CP. The reply told him that the area was too dangerous; he radioed back giving his intended time of arrival.³⁰ []

[] would never in such dubious circumstances approve a personal visit, but [] thought it imperative to get the facts, and he did not ask. A strip suitable for the Helio lay in more-or-less secure territory several hours walk west of the claimed bivouac site, and [] landed there, intending to walk the rest of the way. Each armed with a .45-caliber "grease gun," they followed a trail eastward, the Helio orbiting at a distance, but within range of the voice radio. After an hour or two on the trail, still far west of the team's reported location, the party came upon the team, occupying a bivouac where it had obviously spent considerable time. [] informed the leader that no pay or supplies would be delivered except at the designated campsite, and the embarrassed team leader moved his men out to the original destination. []

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³⁰ The episodes about visits to [] teams and the tetrahedron mission are drawn from the [] interview []

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made other occasional exceptions to ban on behind-the-lines travel; one of them, in the spring of 1965, took him to a karst formation southeast of Route 12 at the North Vietnamese border. He had just managed to get a small team installed there, on a tiny mesa that overlooked the road as it emerged from a gap in the Annamite chain called the Mu Gia Pass. Too small for a drop zone, its resupply depended on an Air America helicopter flying at night, and decided to go along when he discovered how little enthusiasm the H-34 pilots had for an unescorted night landing so near the North Vietnamese border. It was just one of those things: he was under orders both to avoid capture and to get the job done. Like many of his colleagues in similar circumstances, he let the issue be settled by his reluctance to send others on a risky mission while he stayed home manning the radio.

This observation post, impossible to maintain over the long term, endured long enough to provide some reporting. As recalled it, management never placed high value on feedback to its outposts, and he never did learn how important a contribution the Mu Gia team had made. Nor did he find out whether his extemporaneous foray over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, with Bird & Sons pilot Bob Hamblin, did the communists any damage. Flying in daylight, they found a major route, with trucks visible under foliage. They made just one pass, dropping tetrahedron nails intended to puncture truck tires, without drawing fire. ³¹

A Fabrication Flap

In October 1965, with policy-level interest in the Corridor still rising, case officer determined that three of his 25 teams were fabricating at least some of their reporting. As his predecessors had already discovered, guerrillas concerned with survival in hostile territory would sometimes be tempted to reduce the risks by keeping a safe distance from the roads they were supposed to observe. Embellishment of fragments elicited from villagers, or even outright fabrication, was therefore a constant danger and earlier case officers had had to dismiss the occasional errant road-watch team leader. ³²

³¹ Management's overriding concern was always the risk of capture. Jim Glerum recalled that, he later had to reprimand an eager paramilitary officer found to have accompanied a combat mission in southern Laos. The essence of the reproach: the Agency could tolerate somebody's letting himself get killed, but anyone letting himself be captured would not be forgiven.

³² The author, the first Project case officer, recalls having discovered occasional fabrication or embellishment on his own watch

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Unfortunately for [redacted] the new outbreak came at a time when the US military was demanding more and better information from CIA roadwatch teams or, alternatively, more freedom to do its own collection. Air America pilot Jim Rhyne, flying a dangerous treetop level flight south from Route 12, had, in October, provided the first photographs of motorable roads and the foliage-covered trellises used to conceal them. And it was clear that traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail had metastasized since mid-1964. Motor traffic could now reach the South Vietnamese border southwest of Da Nang, 100 miles farther south than before the latest surge of construction. Previously used to infiltrate specialists, advisers, and modest amounts of equipment, the Trail network had by this time transported three regiments of Hanoi's 325th Division, the 250th Independent Regiment, and possibly a fifth regiment as well. Some of these units had engaged US forces in a major action at Plei Me, in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, and this strengthened the imperative to find and destroy enemy reinforcements.³³ [redacted]

The result was an impulse at Headquarters to find someone to blame for the embarrassment. Bill Colby professed to be "baffled and frankly appalled" at the station's continued use of information from two of the suspect teams and suggested that the COS send Bill Lair's deputy, Pat Landry, to Savannahket long enough to "review and, if necessary, reorganize and revitalize [the] program." Blaufarb acknowledged a lapse in [redacted] handling of information from one team; its reservations about that unit should have been declared to customers, even though the doubts did not apply to the information chosen for dissemination. But he insisted that "we have been treating reports from the suspected sources with reserve and skepticism since our suspicions were first aroused."³⁴ [redacted]

³³ [redacted]

See also Memorandum from DDI (Kline) to Special Assistant for National Security (Bundy), "Communist Road Development in Laos," 9 December 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 422-24. It was presumably the Rhyne photos that Ambassador Sullivan used in briefing Prime Minister Souvanna on 14 November. (Action Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy to Acting Secretary of State George Ball, "U.S. Air Operations in Laos," 18 November 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 413.) Rhyne may also have discovered the major new route, No. 911, running east of and parallel to Route 23. He was later severely wounded during a leaflet drop when previously quiescent Chinese antiaircraft protecting Beijing's road construction project opened up, and a fragment from a 20mm shell shattered Rhyne's leg. He survived, despite loss of blood that had him "running on empty" when he landed [redacted] (Bill Lair.) Having lost a leg above the knee, Rhyne was back in Laos within a year, serving as chief special missions pilot. Later, he received the Distinguished Intelligence Cross for gallantry for his participation in Operation Desert One, the attempt in 1980 to rescue the American hostages in Iran. (Jim Glerum.) [redacted]

³⁴ [redacted]

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Colby was not mollified. Having to admit to the Intelligence Community that the "single most important activity CIA [is] now responsible for in Laos" had produced tainted reporting sorely embarrassed him. This soon became clear to Doug Blaufarb, who fended off what he anticipated would be a demand for [redacted] head. The COS defended his case officer's assiduous investigation of the first hints of trouble and laid the blame on personnel shortages, [redacted]

[redacted] and on the policy that prohibited [redacted] and other officers in similar circumstances from visiting roadwatch-team command posts in enemy-held territory. Whether or

not Colby fully accepted this logic, it produced a policy concession unthinkable only a few months earlier: Washington now authorized case officers to accompany supply flights to roadwatch command posts whenever the COS and the ambassador judged the risk to be acceptable.³⁵ [redacted]



Bamboo trestle for foliage camouflaging a segment of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The photo may be one Jim Rhyne took on his pioneering, low-level photographic mission in 1965.

³⁵ [redacted]

In VETN 1131, Blaufarb retreated from his earlier defense of the station's management of the central Lao roadwatch when he acknowledged "failure to expose and suppress [three teams'] fabrications." The problem could not be eliminated, but radio operators tended to bond with their [redacted] and American leaders, and this enabled [redacted] to foil one imaginative deception ploy. [redacted] was paying bonuses for captured AK-47s, and a team came in with several of these, all of them scarred by claymore mine shrapnel, together with photographs of dead Pathet Lao troops. The radio operator confided that it was all a scam: the team leader had bought the weapons from defecting Pathet Lao, and staged the claymore blast that damaged them; the stains on the "bodies" were from chicken blood. [redacted] interview, 18 January 2000). [redacted]

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Ten***Sullivan's Answer to Westmoreland**

The action against the North Vietnamese at Plei Me, in the Central Highlands, was not the first test of US ground forces in South Vietnam. As early as August 1965, the US 7th Marine Regiment had battled the Viet Cong 1st Regiment in the first major American combat action against the communists in South Vietnam. In November, elements of the 1st Cavalry Division engaged three NVA regiments in a bloody action in the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands. US firepower turned the balance in both these actions, but Hanoi continued to pour reinforcements down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³⁶

Ambassador Sullivan despaired of closing the trail complex with any foreseeable concentration of forces, even including the three-division task force earlier suggested for deployment along Route 9. Such a move, in his view, would "do nothing more than spread a thin picket of men along horrendous terrain, and expose them . . . to the bloodletting of concentrated enemy attacks at places and times of the enemy's choosing." Instead, Sullivan proposed a US amphibious invasion of the Vietnamese Panhandle, cutting North Vietnam in two at Vinh, well above the 17th parallel, and effectively shutting down the infiltration of men and supplies to the South.³⁷

Sullivan pointed out that, with 185,000 US troops already in South Vietnam, the idea was much less radical than when first advanced. At least one of his Washington colleagues agreed: two weeks earlier, Assistant Secretary of State Bundy had proposed exactly the same thing. But their superiors did not adopt it; it seems likely that they saw an unacceptable risk of Chinese intervention. US airstrikes in the Corridor were intensified, but the United States continued to avoid major escalation.³⁸

The continuation of the status quo generated new tension between the ambassador and the US military. Sullivan derided SHINING BRASS, the US Special Forces-run cross-border program, as "an Eagle Scout program," one whose scheme he had to shoot down because the military hierarchy abdicated its professional responsibility to disapprove fanciful proposals emanating from lower levels. And Westmoreland was unhappy with Sullivan. The ambassador declined to expand the bombing zone along the Trail complex in

³⁶ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam War Almanac*. Chronology of ground action in South Vietnam is taken from Summers, unless otherwise specified.

³⁷ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 651, 15 December 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 424-26. Concerned to avoid presenting himself as an amateur strategist, Sullivan attributed the idea to the then JCS chairman Lyman Lemnitzer, who, in a meeting in McNamara's office in 1962, had offered it as a possible response to a considerably lesser threat. Other US officials, and Sen. Stuart Symington (D-MO), still thought that bombing would bring Hanoi to its knees. (See Vientiane Embassy Telegram 713, 5 January 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 434-36.)

³⁸ Information Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State (Bundy) to Secretary of State Rusk, "Escalation of US Activities in Laos," 3 December 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 418-20.

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IN THE SHADOW OF VIETNAM []

Laos until the efficacy of current operations had been established, and Westmoreland accused him of "fiddling while Rome burns."³⁹ []

Sullivan had already staked out his own position on jurisdiction over southern Laos. Vientiane would be in charge, and its main tool would be the Kha irregulars. By mid-1965—six months into Sullivan's tenure—careful recruiting among several tribes had brought their strength to about 2,400 men. Half of these were devoted to what the station now called consolidation operations, building on [] success at Ban Houei Kong in 1963 to extend government control from the Se Done Valley to the entire Bolovens Plateau. The deployment of the other 1,200 Kha responded more directly to Westmoreland's demands for information on and action against North Vietnamese traffic along the Corridor, east of the Se (River) Kong, and on the river itself.⁴⁰ []

Consolidation on most of the plateau and in the Se Done Valley was encountering only feeble Pathet Lao opposition, usually in the form of a small home guard. This was replaced, as the irregulars approached the Se Kong, by vigorous communist resistance from substantial Pathet Lao units, often reinforced by North Vietnamese. The result was a sometimes deadly cat-and-mouse exercise in which the station tried to set up durable observation posts on the river and on the major roads and trails beyond it.⁴¹ []

The launch base east of Saravane was hit in early August 1965 when some 300 North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao overran the camp, killing 11 defenders and wounding 14. Among the wounded were two who were captured and questioned in poor Lao by "tall . . . light skinned" interrogators heard speaking Vietnamese among themselves. Each was then shot, once each in the right leg and left arm; the two lay helpless until a relief force rescued them three days later.⁴² []

The relief force was led by Lt. Col. Vuk Daraseng, one of the few Kha integrated into the Laotian establishment. His status as a fairly senior FAR officer tempted his Agency contacts to see him as the Vang Pao of the Kha, and he became the focus of propaganda efforts aimed at bringing more tribesmen to the government side. [] a promising young officer on his first tour and in charge of Corridor operations, saw expansion of the village defense program as a prerequisite to improving access to the trails east of the

³⁹ Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 651 (15 December 1965) and 703 (3 January 1966), both *FRUS 1964-1968*, 426n, 432-33; *Vietnam War Almanac*, 36. []

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Se Kong. Although the Kha lacked any clan structure and therefore any authority figures outside the village, [] hoped to exploit Vuk's eminence by establishing his image among the Kha as a benevolently powerful intermediary with the Lao.⁴³ []

MR 4 commander General Phasouk squelched the notion before a single leaflet on this theme could be dropped. He would tolerate neither "another Meo project [nor] a Vang Pao of the Kha." So [] contented himself with leaflets that emphasized what Kha refugees and defectors had been telling him: after years under the communists, they were "poorer, hungrier, sicker, and more ignorant than ever." The Royal Lao Government could and would act to improve their lot, but only if they renounced any links to the Pathet Lao.⁴⁴ []

It was a tough row to hoe. [] described the east bank of the Se Kong as having been "fought over and robbed by both FAR and the [communists] for about ten years." The Alak tribesmen there were "true and confirmed neutralists," and absent the ability to secure them against the communists, [] proposed to emphasize "civic action on our side of the river and psywar on the other," trying to "dazzle the left-bank Alak" with the amenities being showered on their compatriots across the river.⁴⁵ []

Even when converted to the government side, the Kha tribesmen marched to the beat of their own drummer, and [] reported with tongue in cheek that "Phou Khao [north of Saravane] is infested with malevolent spirits, and we will never get [our] troopers onto it; we hope that the spirits are impartial and the PL do not feel free to take it. We are now investigating possibilities of psywar reinforcement of this mountain's taboos with the view of further discouraging PL investiture."⁴⁶ []

On 12 October 1965, []
[] dropped off a payroll at a site east of the Se Kong. The team there reported by radio that the helicopter seemed in trouble after takeoff, and when it failed to arrive at Pakse, [] alerted [] Landry []
[] which jumped at dusk into the jungle in the area indicated by the Kha team's report. In the darkness, the H-34 could not be found, and it was [] who spotted it the next morning from the air.

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The Kha worldview emerged in a political indoctrination session for a group of Kha radio operators after their return from training [] One of them suggested ending the war by telling "the King of the Viet Cong we don't want his people in Laos, and he should make them come home." [] interview.) []

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He directed [] to the spot while his pilot found a clear spot on which to land.⁴⁷ []

All aboard— [] and the two-man Air America crew—were dead. Dependent families, evacuated in August 1960, had recently been allowed in Vientiane and other main towns, and back in [] it was [] excruciating duty to persuade an incredulous [] that her husband had been lost in action.⁴⁸ []

[] legacy included Kha footholds, secured by platoon-size SGUs with some FAR support, in a lightly populated area east of the Se Kong. The arc stretched from Kong My (south of Attopeu near the Cambodian border) to the vicinity of the communist logistical center at Chavane (east of the Bolovens) and on up the river valley to highland villages north and east of Saravane.⁴⁹ []

The legacy also included a growing number of refugees seeking General Phasouk's protection. Exactly a month before the fatal crash, four minor Pathet Lao officials had applied for asylum at the Kong My command post near the Cambodian border. When they brought in their 150 followers, the refugee population there would reach 900; USOM was also supporting three other villages protected by Pakse's Kha irregulars.⁵⁰ []

A welcome sign that the government side looked more attractive, the influx of refugees was, nevertheless, a mixed blessing. As [] had put it, refugees turned into a mob if the enemy attacked, getting in the way of the defenders. And always, they needed scarce troops to protect them and scarce rice to eat. But "while they are eating our rice, they are at least not growing any for the [enemy]," or serving as porters or Pathet Lao soldiers. And there were defectors of real consequence, including two officers who, at the end of 1965, were working with [] unit to induce others to come over to the government.⁵¹ []

What these outposts were not yet doing was providing much exploitable intelligence. The Kha program faced the same obstacle as the []

⁴⁷ [] interview. []

⁴⁸ Ibid. []

⁴⁹ []

⁵⁰ []

⁵¹ []

[] recalled the lengthy dickering between a senior Pathet Lao commander and General Phasouk. The Pathet Lao commander wanted guarantees of supplies to launch his men on a new life under government protection and sent a party, including his wife, to inspect the warehouse that Phasouk (with CIA help) had filled with clothing, farming implements, etc. But the contact lapsed, for reasons unknown. []

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effort farther north, namely, the dangerous increase in enemy security measures that accompanied the increased volume of traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Less experienced than the [] irregulars, the Kha were still looking for vantage points from which the Se Kong and Route 92, running parallel to it, could be continuously observed.⁵² []

A Liberalized Regime []

Almost a year before these developments, the very different security situation in the north had led to a more permissive set of rules for case officer deployment. Hmong irregulars and the MR 2 FAR units under Vang Pao's command enjoyed very substantial territorial holdings, something denied to the [] teams and to the Kha units operating east of the Se Kong. This more relaxed stance represented not just the better security in the north but also a growing disposition in Washington to substitute simple denial for any serious effort to conceal US support for the irregulars. The State Department continued to worry about Soviet or Chinese intervention, but the administration began to doubt that either of the communist great powers saw a vital interest in guaranteeing a North Vietnamese victory in Indochina. Accordingly, the United States need avoid only an overt challenge to Moscow or Beijing in order to prevent either one from joining the fray.⁵³ []

While American officials continued to debate the format and scale of action against North Vietnam, CIA proceeded to beef up its paramilitary staff in Laos. Two early additions to the field case officer cadre were young, first-tour officers named [] Both adventurous and adaptable young men, they encountered more adventure and more tests of their adaptability than they had anticipated. []

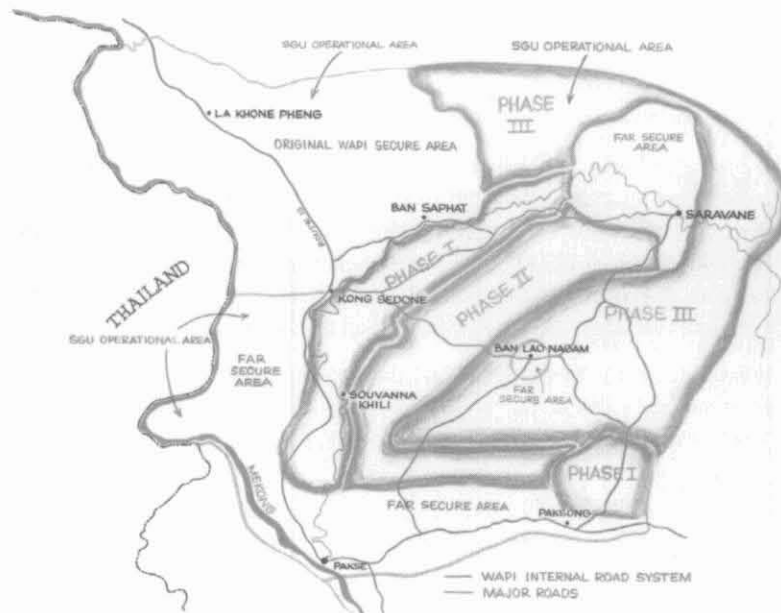
The station had agreed, as we have seen, to support the militia units of General Ouane's so-called *Armée Clandestine*. In the spring of 1965, [] was to become their first adviser, working out of a command post at Bouam Lao, 75 miles north of the royal capital at Luang Prabang. []

Less secure than the Hmong headquarters at Long Tieng, Bouam Lao lay in territory that still harbored enemy troop units, and [] depended on outposts and patrolling to keep tabs on their movements. These measures should have sufficed, and he was never to know what defeated them, whether negligence by his irregulars or extraordinarily skillful enemy planning. But fail they did, for, in the pre-dawn darkness of 21 May 1965, the crash of exploding ordnance

⁵² []⁵³ Blaufarb interview. []~~SECRET//MR~~

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Planned expansion of the village defense program, c. 1966

snapped him awake, clutching at the M-1 rifle lying next to his cot. [] leaped out of his hut and down the slope into the surrounding brush. After finding some of the defenders and making a futile effort to organize a counterattack, he and what he could find of the [] fled into the jungle.⁵⁴ []

With the survivors in hiding—they had no radio—an Air America Helio-Courier approached for a landing soon after daybreak. Almost too late, the pilot realized that there was no signal panel to be seen and, as he shoved the throttle open, the ground below erupted with small arms fire. Back at altitude, gratefully unscathed, he saw a Bird & Sons Pilatus Porter on the same approach pattern. He radioed a warning, but the Porter captain, Ernest Brace, apparently did not hear. Brace flared out for a landing and had reached the end of the strip when enemy soldiers appeared. He spun the aircraft around and began to run a gauntlet of small arms fire. The plane faltered and came to a stop, and Brace, along with three [] became prisoners of the North Vietnamese, not to be released until 1973.⁵⁵ []

⁵⁴ Ernest Brace, *A Code to Keep*, 16–17, 40–42. The book gives what is presumably [] account of his own experience. []

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Some hours later, having eluded the attackers, [] used a signal mirror serendipitously still in his pocket to attract the attention of an Air America pilot passing overhead. Accompanied at this point only by his [] interpreter, two wounded Lao, and a Pathet Lao defector working in his civic action program, he had only to wait for the helicopter pickup that soon followed.⁵⁶ []

Ambassador Sullivan, fearing the propaganda fallout from the capture of an American, had instructed Bill Lair to use any available means to find and rescue Brace. The means included one flight of T-28s, flown by Air America pilots, and another of USAF jet fighters. Sullivan neither instructed Lair how to use them nor imposed any limitations, but the first task seemed obvious enough: find out whether Brace was trapped or dead in the Porter.⁵⁷ []

The air search for Ernie Brace and the missing [] took advantage of the same liberalized rules of engagement that had brought [] and other new officers to the upcountry sites. Until late 1964, the T-28s had been the primary tool of air bombardment. Their slow speed and their [] Lao pilots' intimate knowledge of the terrain helped ensure that targets were properly identified. In early 1965, American combat jets— "fast movers"—took on a larger share of the bombing missions, not only in the Corridor but also in the north. These were among the combat aircraft now ordered to suppress ground fire aimed at the smaller craft conducting the low-altitude search.⁵⁸ []

Many pilots, only sketchily familiar with the terrain and flying three times as fast as the T-28, found target identification a problematical thing, and errant bombing runs by the fast movers had already produced a rash of friendly casualties. The worst of these incidents occurred during the search for Ernie Brace []⁵⁹ []

The search would require suppressive fire from the air while a helicopter landed next to the Porter on the Bouam Lao strip. In the co-pilot's seat of a Caribou transport, Lair instructed the jets, with their limited loiter time, to go first. Recognizing that their speed and their higher operating altitude affected their accuracy, he told them to orient themselves by the Porter, and lay their ordnance parallel to the strip at least 100 yards away. The T-28s would follow, their greater precision allowing them to tear up the ground closer to the strip, on both sides of it. The helicopter went in, and [] leaped out to search the Porter, which he found empty.⁶⁰ []

⁵⁶ Brace, *A Code to Keep*, 41. []

⁵⁷ Bill Lair. []

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Caribou transport plane, valued in Laos for its STOL capability (Courtesy of Bill Lair)

By this time, unknown to Lair, one of the jets had inexplicably dropped its ordnance several miles away. The bombs devastated a small village, killing 13 people and wounding scores more. Sullivan was furious. He had always been sensitive to the issue of friendly casualties, partly out of concern to keep the prime minister engaged against the communists and partly, it seems, out of a sense that the United States owed its feeble Laotian partner a certain consideration. He accused Lair of having approved the strike "quite without authority," only "in order to strike fear" into the heart of the enemy.⁶¹ [redacted]

The facts were more complicated, and it is clear that Sullivan was mistaken when he exonerated the USAF pilot of faulty navigation. The language of his reprimand to Lair suggests some recognition of this, for he followed the accusation that Lair had exceeded his authority with the assurance that he wanted [redacted] to stay: he was "thoroughly dedicated and conspicuously effective," handling "an extremely complicated task with great credit to himself and your agency."⁶² [redacted]

⁶⁰ Ibid. Leaving the strip, [redacted] spotted a lone farmer in a field not far away and induced the pilot to land to pick him up. The villager had seen Brace's landing and provided the first eyewitness information on his capture. [redacted]

⁶¹ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1511, 22 March 1965, FRUS 1964-1968, 354-56; [redacted]

⁶² [redacted]

Lair never did get an explanation for the off-target bombing and reached the unflattering but perhaps accurate conclusion that the pilot had been too concerned about ground fire even to approach the target. [redacted]

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The incident prodded the Mission and the US military into accelerating the installation of sophisticated electronic navigational aids in Laos. In late 1965, Souvanna Phouma approved two such devices, called TACAN, one each in the north and the south; they began operating in February 1966. The introduction of forward air controllers (FACs), [redacted] Americans flying the tiny O-1 spotter plane, also substantially improved the accuracy of airstrikes. USAF pilots resided at Long Tieng, on a rotational basis, where they learned the terrain and the linguistic peculiarities of Hmong [redacted] voice radio communications. They also became part of the team, and most of them developed an intense personal identification with the troops on the ground.⁶³ [redacted]

Like any initiative, improved reconnaissance supporting a growing program of tactical air support had its unintended consequences. One of these was the irregulars' growing dependence on that support, something that would increasingly define the tactics of the irregulars in both north and south.⁶⁴ [redacted]

⁶³ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 610, 4 December 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 421; Jim Glerum; [redacted]

⁶⁴ Jim Glerum. [redacted]

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

On the Frontline in Sam Neua

In early 1965, as Ambassador Sullivan and MACV began tussling over operational authority in the Corridor, the NVA took the offensive in Laotian Military Region 2. When the NVA deployed new units into Sam Neua Province, it confronted Vang Pao and his advisers with a new challenge. To the general, it was clear that Hanoi intended to secure new supply routes less vulnerable to air interdiction than Route 7. At the same time, these new routes would support a new effort to expel government forces and reestablish the province as the seat of a putative communist government.¹

Vang Pao's commander in Sam Neua was an ethnic Lao, a lieutenant colonel named Thong Vongrasamy, whose charisma, abetted by long, flowing hair and a bundle of Buddhist amulets, accompanied tactical genius, immense energy, and courage. Commanding both a territorial battalion and the local Hmong irregulars, and supported by he set out to try to prevent the North Vietnamese from driving him out of Sam Neua.²

Thong's command post at Hong Non, a dozen miles west of Sam Neua town, enjoyed the services also of whose artistry with the 4.2-in. mortar had made him a hero of the Route 7 cratering operation in 1963. helped drive off the first North Vietnamese assault, which came on 20 January 1965. took a bullet in the hip when, as he later recalled, he left his trench to inspect the bodies of enemy soldiers killed trying to cross the airstrip. The team leader died in the same fusillade, and several local unit commanders were already dead. Knowing that their position could not withstand another attack, and Thong managed to organize a fairly orderly withdrawal, leaving the heavy mortar crew to support the rear guard.³

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³ Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 142-45.

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[] alternately walked and was carried 5 miles to a point safe enough to call down the H-34 helicopter that had just arrived on the scene. [] prevented three uninjured [] from boarding, insisting that the chopper had to go back to Hong Non for the wounded. Pilot Bob Nunez protested that the elevation there was too high for a takeoff fully loaded, [] cut him short; he had promised to return. And they did. The North Vietnamese had not resumed the attack, and Nunez and a USAID doctor, who chanced to be aboard when [] distress call came in, hauled in a dozen wounded. The overloaded H-34 staggered into the air for the run southwest to the sector headquarters at Houa Muong, where the wounded were transferred to fixed-wing aircraft and flown out for treatment.⁴ []

Houa Muong then also fell, and Vang Pao, desperate to reverse the momentum, reacted by reinforcing the Sam Neua front with two battalions. At the station's urging, FAR commander General Ouane paid a rare visit to the front, and he followed up by committing three more battalions—one neutralist and two regular FAR. With this force, and the remnants of the units from Hong Non, Vang Pao began a drive to recover lost territory. The days of hit-and-run ambushes and raids were now behind him, and his troops moved forward under the cover of US jets, T-28 fighter-bombers [] and heavy mortars.⁵ []

The well-disciplined North Vietnamese took heavy casualties trying to hold their positions, and one SGU battalion commander reported finding some 50 bodies at a position that had taken repeated direct hits. Villagers reported the evacuation of numerous wounded, and a Vietnamese-language radio message in the clear reported "50 dead . . . 50 at least . . . and many wounded . . . the commander dead too."⁶ []

While SGUs and regulars advanced to the northeast, militia units isolated during the enemy's earlier advance were now to harass Hanoi's supply lines running down from Sam Neua town. The NVA hurled fierce counterattacks on Vang Pao's main force, which held its ground, on occasion in hand-to-hand combat. Now logistically overextended, the North Vietnamese began to shorten their defensive lines toward the northeast. For some, it was too late. Three SGU companies infiltrated an enemy position in a rare night attack and provoked a disorderly retreat. At dawn, the Hmong pressed the attack, turning

⁴ Ibid. By the time Warner interviewed him, [] had become an unreliable witness to the events of his own career. But close associates like Bill Lair and [] see his conduct as described here as entirely characteristic. Warner says nothing about the fate of the [] heavy mortar crew. []

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the NVA withdrawal into a rout. A "jubilant" Vang Pao ordered his men to pursue the advance, which at that point had cost just one friendly fatality.⁷

By May 1965, Vang Pao's guerrillas were active within 10 miles of Sam Neua town, and nearly all the positions lost to the earlier North Vietnamese drive had been recovered. was back from the hospital but soon to be transferred to the northwest, and Lair sent —himself just out of the hospital after a bout of hepatitis—to join Colonel Thong at the new Sam Neua sector headquarters at Na Khang.

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Like that of many another upcountry site, Na Khang's importance derived from its topography. The length of its airstrip, almost 2,300 feet, compensated for the thin air of its elevation (4,400 feet) and it accommodated the C-123's nine-ton payload. By international civilian standards, the strip was suicidally dangerous: no navigational aids helped a pilot through heavy weather, and it was, of course, unpaved. Further, the high ground at the northeast end of the strip eliminated any possibility of aborting a landing, once on final approach, to make a second pass. But its handling capacity—fuel for the Jolly Green Giants being a major item—made it the best available facility from which to support operations in Sam Neua.⁹

From Na Khang, Helio-Couriers and Porters ferried food and ammunition to the advancing forward units and to the militia outposts. As the 1965 rainy season wore on, Vang Pao's motley little army stayed on the offensive in Sam Neua Province. saw him often, and grew familiar with the general's hands-on style even while learning how to deal with a proud, charismatic leader who was also an American client. This meant accepting the same imperative that Bill Lair and had earlier recognized: to exert the requisite influence without wounding Vang Pao's pride or diminishing him in the eyes of his people. ¹⁰

had the impression that the general indulged an almost paternalistic interest in the younger case officers, seeing it as part of his job to ensure that they were properly trained. played on this, allowing Vang Pao to think of him as a senior subordinate. When the general gave him orders, he promptly complied, at least as long as the assignment was something he was authorized to carry out. In understanding, the Agency did not in any

7 8 interview; 9 Jim Glerum 10 interview. ~~SECRET//MR~~

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case want to be in charge any more than it had to. And should there be serious disagreement—he did not recall any that he couldn't handle with gentle persuasion—he held the trump cards of air support and money.¹¹ []

Supporting the USAF []

The liberalized policy stance that brought US airpower into Laos required a more active air force role in search-and-rescue operations on behalf of US airmen shot down over Laos or, on occasion, North Vietnam. Doubtless spurred by the Ernie Brace affair, Ambassador Sullivan had, by mid-July 1965, authorized C-53 heavy helicopters to take up daytime stations at secure upcountry sites like Long Tieng and Na Khang, from where they could shorten by an hour their response time to distress calls.¹² []

The C-53 "Jolly Green Giant" supplemented but never replaced Air America's special capability to find and rescue not only its own aircrews but those of the US military. The intimate knowledge Air America pilots had of the terrain and their ability to exploit tactical intelligence, coupled with help from the Hmong irregulars, lent this collaboration a special efficacy. The crews of combat jets began to reap the benefits almost immediately after their commitment to both the "Rolling Thunder" campaign over North Vietnam and close support operations in Laos.¹³ []

One pilot, shot down east of the Plain of Jars in January 1965, had hardly unbuckled his parachute harness when Hmong guerrillas appeared and guided him to the nearest village, where he was ceremoniously offered boiled eggs and tea. Later, he was given a horse on which he proceeded to a second village, where he spent the night before his guides resumed the march. News of his rescue had already passed through the Hmong tactical radio net [] and [] dispatched a helicopter that was waiting for the pilot when the party reached San Tiau. He was transferred to a Bird & Sons Dornier at a neighboring site and arrived [] the same day.¹⁴ []

In the first months of 1965, Air America was still conducting all search-and-rescue missions, flying unarmed and unescorted even into hostile country. In June, one of these flights came to grief when Colonel Thong, having volunteered to help, climbed into an Air America helicopter to guide it into North Vietnam in search of a downed pilot. The craft drew heavy ground fire, and

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¹² Memorandum for the Record, "Headquarters Meeting with Ambassador Sullivan," c. 27 July 1965, [] (No classification marking.)

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ON THE FRONTLINE IN SAM NEUA



Lt. Col. Thong Vongrasamy (left) and Col. Phan Siharath (right), ca. late 1965.

Col. Thong was mortally wounded when a 12.7mm round pierced the floor of the helicopter and tore into his abdomen.¹⁵

The loss of Colonel Thong could hardly have been more ill timed, for the ballooning role of airpower was transforming Na Khang from an obscure little guerrilla camp into a major command post. Thong's replacement, a Lao colonel named Phan Siharath, was soon dubbed "quaking leaf" for his propensity always to see some lurking disaster. In his hesitant way, he commanded six regular and SGU battalions and some 2,000 Hmong militia.

No longer reliant on the cumbersome RS-1 agent radio of the the command post enjoyed direct, relatively high-volume communications with Vientiane as well as with Long Tieng. To all these it relayed

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From left: Vang Pao, Ambassador Sullivan, Bill Lair and Colonel Pettigrew, US air attaché to Laos (Courtesy of Bill Lair)

the take from its tactical units and intelligence teams in the field.¹⁶ [redacted]

Na Khang came to exemplify, on a smaller scale, engineering programs being conducted also at Long Tieng. At the Na Khang command post, a bulldozer, parachuted from a cargo aircraft, graded and extended the airstrip, which then could accommodate larger planes and obviated the need to drop cargo by parachute. Meanwhile, a school and a hospital rose alongside refugee housing for a population that eventually reached some 20,000. It was all extemporized, almost primitive, for the construction relied mainly on local materials, supplemented by salvaged wooden ammunition

boxes. [redacted] supported Don Sjostrom on these projects, while handling intelligence and giving tactical advice to Phan and the outposts, and taking care of local security, sector logistics, and guerrilla training.¹⁷ [redacted]

Na Khang became something of a transportation hub, with helicopters and STOL aircraft ferrying to the tactical units and village militias the ammunition and other supplies required for military operations. Rice had to be delivered not only to the FAR battalions and the SGUs but also to the part-time guerrillas in the militias, for the recent disruptions of war had brought agricultural production nearly to zero. Locally based air activity required fuel, and along with rice and ammunition, aviation gasoline became one of Na Khang's three main imports.¹⁸ [redacted]

¹⁶ [redacted]

¹⁷ [redacted]

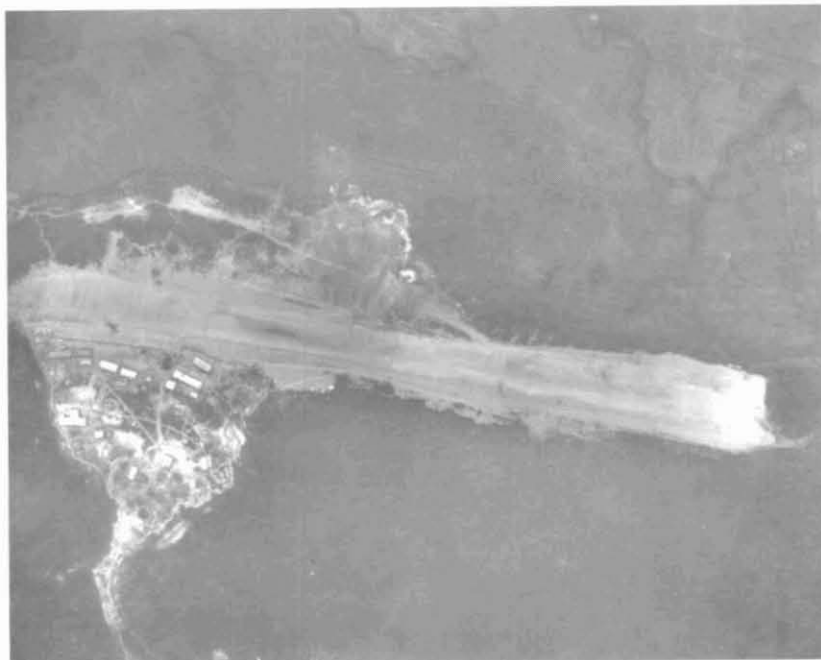
Encouraging civilians in enemy-held territory to abandon their villages and take refuge in government strongholds became a US policy goal in mid-1965; the rationale was the prospect of denying to the communists the forced labor on which they relied to support dry-season offensive operations. Unlike in Vietnam, where "generating refugees," as it was called, sometimes involved coercive methods, this effort was to rely on positive incentives. [redacted]

¹⁸ [redacted]

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ON THE FRONTLINE IN SAM NEUA

*Na Khang, early 1966*

Reaping the Whirlwind

With the end of the rainy season in October 1965 came the end of the offensive in Sam Neua; it left Vang Pao's forces dispersed over much of the province. In September, the enemy had struck Na Khang in an early morning raid, but everywhere else it was quiet, and calm returned to the command post, for the communists did not pursue the attack. The storm did not break until December, when typically thorough North Vietnamese preparations, conducted with admirable secrecy, were followed by attacks on almost every friendly position in the province. Taken by surprise, they were nearly all overwhelmed, and in one night Vang Pao lost 80 percent of what had been won during the summer.¹⁹

The Na Khang perimeter was now reduced to a radius of about 10 miles from the headquarters and airstrip. Colonel Phan needed no urging to maintain continuous, aggressive patrolling, but once again the North Vietnamese gave no sign of exploiting their advantage. Calm prevailed until the morning

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of 17 February 1966, when an outpost a couple of miles south of the airstrip came under attack. Using the single sideband radio—provided by USAID, not CIA—[] called for air support, and while fighter aircraft were being scrambled, the USAF forward air controller took off from the Na Khang strip in a Porter. Hardly off the ground, it took small arms fire from an enemy unit no one had detected. The arriving jets were directed to this target; along with Na Khang's howitzers, they destroyed or drove off the attackers.²⁰ []

With a frontal assault imminent—this time, Colonel Phan's apprehensions would be more than fulfilled—the defenders moved radios and equipment and even the 105mm howitzer all the way to Muong Hiem, 7 miles away. Vientiane ordered [] to abandon the Na Khang command post, and [] and his compatriots took the last flight to Muong Hiem. [] stayed and identified targets to the [] observers aboard the AC-47 "Puff the Magic Dragon" gunships.²¹ []

That night, the North Vietnamese stormed the hill above the airstrip and broke through the defensive perimeter. But the desperate garrison regrouped and killed 30 of the enemy at the command post, losing 12 of its own. The next morning, [] and USAID man Don Sjostrom returned to Na Khang with the air force forward air controller. The command post on the hill was secure, but the remnants of enemy units still lurked in the brush. One group was flushed out of hiding near the airstrip and, in a sharp skirmish, a dozen of them were killed. A wounded sergeant was captured, and [] prepared to send him out for treatment and interrogation.²² []

Vang Pao now arrived from Long Tieng in a helicopter. Standing on the landing gear to relay instructions from the general to the pilot, [] heard a burst of automatic weapons fire. The pilot abruptly applied power—his windshield now had two holes in it—and [] jumped off the landing gear. Thinking the pilot had been spooked by the sound of friendly fire, he screamed over his radio for the chopper to land. But the bullet holes in the H-34 vindicated the pilot, who escaped around the hill to the alternate landing pad behind it. As the chopper disappeared, [] saw Gen. Vang Pao holding his bleeding right upper arm, shattered by a bullet that had also nicked his throat. [] helped him up the hill, but he stayed on his feet until he reached the alternate pad and emergency evacuation []

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The captured North Vietnamese was sent out with Vang Pao. [] later heard that, as they were lying side by side on the floor of the helicopter, the general recognized the prisoner's uniform. Weak from loss of blood and disoriented by pain and sedatives, he had to be forcibly restrained from assaulting the wounded captive. Subsequent surgery at the USAF hospital at Korat did not fully repair Vang Pao's arm, and he was sent on to Honolulu for treatment there.²⁴ []

The clearing operation around Na Khang continued through the afternoon of 18 February, and, for the first time, Ambassador Sullivan authorized the use of napalm against communist forces in Laos. Fanned by the wind, the flames reached the command post and destroyed everything not already evacuated. Colonel Phan still controlled the site, but as [] put it, "there was actually nothing left to defend."²⁵ []

Sullivan ordered all Americans to be out of the Na Khang area by dark. [] and Sjoström marched out with the troops, were picked up by an H-34, and then ferried down to [] With no defensive positions ready, Phan and his men would be vulnerable to a renewed North Vietnamese assault. Anticipating this, Bill Lair met [] and Sjoström [] and hauled them off to brief the air force for the night's support missions.²⁶ []

The two civilians contrasted vividly with the impeccably uniformed air force officers in their spotless briefing room. Sjoström was lugging a double-barreled shotgun, and he and [] were both still wearing filthy, blood-spattered jeans. But they were politely if warily received, and the pilots welcomed their information on friendly dispositions and the likely routes of enemy attack. After Bill Lair left, the two consolidated their welcome by offering to guide the two AC-47 gunships about to take off.²⁷ []

Neither [] nor Sjoström asked for permission, knowing it would be denied, and, as it happened, [] plane soon developed engine trouble and returned [] The case officer had time at least to see how its "Gatling guns," each with a set of revolving barrels, were fired through the windows in the side of the fuselage. Fixed in place, they were aimed by the pilot, who circled the target and brought the guns to bear by maneuvering his plane until he could see the target through a circle drawn in grease pencil on the window to

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The use of napalm became almost routine. At the request of Souvanna Phouma, who feared the expulsion of Kong Le's neutralists from their positions west of the Plain of Jars, Sullivan arranged in March to send US jets to drop napalm on the communist units threatening them. (FRUS 1964-1968, 446.) []

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his left. Firing at 6,000 rounds a minute, the guns emitted streams of tracers that, seen at night, looked like sheets of fire as they obliterated everything in their path.²⁸ []

Don Sjostrom's mission fared better. The former Peace Corps volunteer, who spoke good Laotian, coolly interpreted for the defenders, pointing out targets to the AC-47 commander. The Gatling guns surrounded Phan's bivouac with a deadly hail of bullets, and the defenders survived the night. [] knew that Sjostrom would be fired if his USAID superiors found out about this extracurricular activity but was not surprised at his decision to go; Sjostrom had long since endeared himself to his CIA colleagues with his dedication to getting things done.²⁹ []

A Soul in a Black Box []

The units overwhelmed in December 1965 were, for the most part, scattered, not annihilated, and Vang Pao's first goal, endorsed by Bill Lair [] [] called for restoring material aid to them as soon as they found secure ground on which to regroup. Meanwhile, an American imperative called for improved search-and-rescue facilities in northern Laos. Vang Pao proposed to serve both these purposes by seizing Muong Son, an old French fort 30 miles northwest of Na Khang. It boasted a 2,000-foot airstrip and, once secured, would serve as the forward base in Sam Neua through the remainder of the dry season. The reinforced North Vietnamese now presented a more lucrative target, and tactical air directed from Muong Son would try to offset by attrition the communists' superior numbers and their professional skill and discipline.³⁰ []

With Na Khang abandoned and Muong Son not yet secured, operations were being run from Muong Hiem, where the neutralist battalion sent in earlier by General Ouane had set up its bivouac. [] was struck by the contrast between the neutralists' tidy new camouflage fatigues and web gear with the filthy, often bloody, rags of the Na Khang garrison. Like his other upcountry colleagues, he thought the disparity reflected both the neutralists' aversion to combat and the apparent inclination of the North Vietnamese to indulge it. The Na Khang irregulars deeply distrusted these putative allies, and the neutralists, for their part, seemed not to welcome the communist probing attacks that now disrupted the prevailing quiet.³¹ []

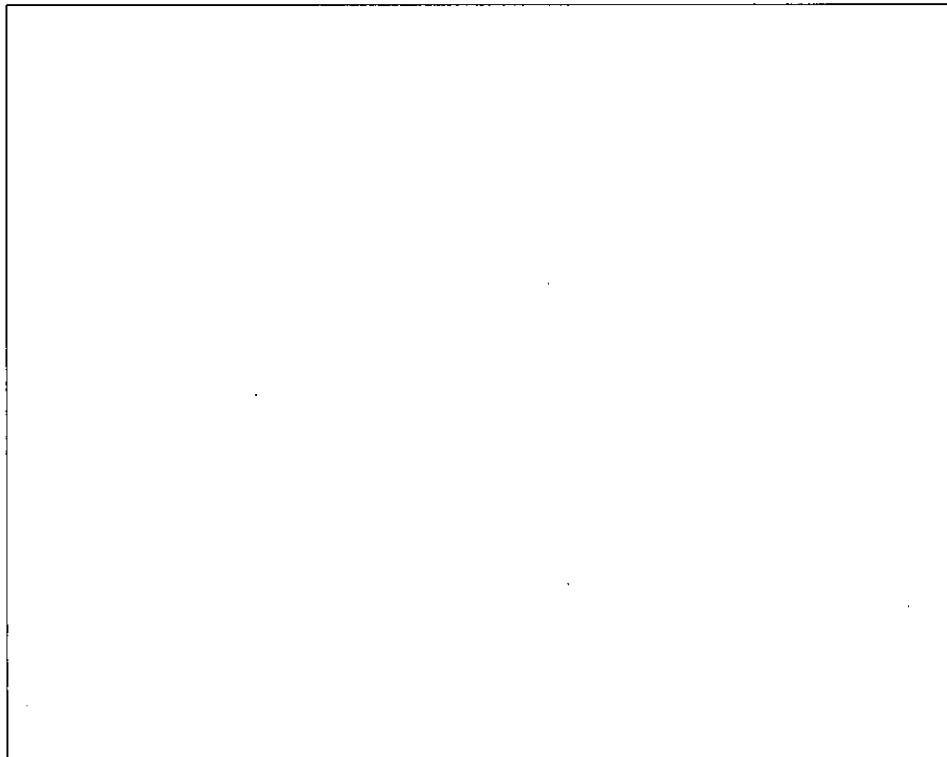
²⁸ Ibid. []

²⁹ Ibid. []

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Planning for the operation to capture Muong Son was to be undertaken in the absence of Vang Pao's leadership, for the general was still recovering from surgery. Communist propaganda was already crowing that he was dead, and Lair feared that even as capable a subordinate as Youa Va Ly might be unable to mobilize the various clans involved in the attack. The solution came in a series of tape-recorded mission orders, done in Vang Pao's hospital room and flown to the major sites in the mountains of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua.³²

In this delicate matter, the courier was almost as important as the message. He had to enjoy the full trust of the Hmong leaders, and Lair chose

 and the Hmong leadership. accompanied on his visits to the Sam Neua sites and recalled the tapes being played for awed Hmong irregulars, some of whom thought their leader's soul resided in the little box containing his voice.³³

³² Ibid. Vang Pao's absence sparked an abortive effort by the Ly clan, headed by Touby Lyfoung, to challenge the general's primacy as tribal leader.

³³ Ibid.

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Bill Lair's extraordinary empathy with the Hmong style of planning and decisionmaking included the recognition that one-way communication would not suffice. Vang Pao needed a response just as much as his subordinates needed the opportunity to reply, and Lair had told [] to give each of them the microphone. [] watched as each clutched it in a death grip, screaming into it as if trying to make his voice carry all the way to the hospital at Korat. With Vang Pao's wishes and their agreement thus established, their CIA [] had no difficulty controlling the initial preparations.³⁴ []

[] and [] a former Montana smokejumper and a new CIA face in MR 2, used a guerrilla camp 10 miles east of Muong Son as a staging area. In early March, Capt. Cy Roberts, the air force officer [] set up three days of airstrikes to soften up the defense. The enemy abandoned Muong Son without a fight, and it remained only to send in the Hmong to occupy it. On 6 March, Air America pilot Wayne Encimer lifted off the Muong Hiem airstrip with [] and several American passengers, bound for the staging area where [] awaited them to help dis-

patch the guerrilla force.³⁵ []

Perhaps overloaded, perhaps the victim of engine failure, maybe both, the craft crashed and exploded about 2 miles from Muong Hiem. [] witnessed the crash and radioed [] who got his H-34 into the air for the 40-minute return flight. Meanwhile, [] another new CIA man, flew up from Long Tieng. [] picked up [] leaving [] to send a patrol to the scene, and headed for the hills in which [] had seen Encimer go down.³⁶ []

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Case officers
both later died in accidents—
of James Glerum)

with Hmong irregulars in MR 2, c. 1971;
(Courtesy

The crash site came immediately into view—the burning craft had scorched the ground around it—but the rough terrain precluded a landing. The pilot hovered over the smoldering wreckage while the crew chief used the rescue winch to lower [] and [] 40 feet to the ground by cable and sling. The would-be rescuers found only the skeleton of the aircraft, with two charred bodies inside and one on the ground near what had been the door. [] was now reporting enemy patrols in the area, and [] and [] raced to get the bodies onto a cargo sling. The winch then lifted them into the H-34 for the short ride back to Muong Hiem.³⁷ []

The victims were burned beyond recognition, but the grim task of identifying them did not take long: pilot Encimer by his Rolex watch and [] by the toothbrush, now melted, that he habitually carried in his breast pocket. The third wore a gold ring bearing initials inside that [] took to be those of George Raynor, an AID air operations man who had been at Muong Hiem that morning trying to get a ride to the staging point. []

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preparing to lift the bodies of two victims of the Helio-Courier crash into a helicopter, 6 March 1966

[] reported the disaster to Long Tieng, which would relay the names of the dead to Vientiane and Headquarters. Then, later in the day, a Hmong irregular who worked at the airstrip approached [] to say that he'd seen four Westerners in the plane as it took off. But no one known to be at Muong Hiem was missing. At this point, someone remember the planned visit of [] [] scheduled to arrive [] that day to brief the defenders on recent aerial photography. A quick call to [] determined that, in fact, he had departed for Muong Hiem that morning, though no one at the site remembered seeing him. []

[] and [] had quickly checked the area around the crash site, but it hardly seemed possible that anyone had survived the crash in any condition that would let him walk away. In any case, they had had no reason to look for another victim. Now, with darkness falling, it was too late to mount an air search. And the irregulars had no stomach for a night march to a site at which the North Vietnamese might already be waiting for a recovery party. []

With a physical search not possible before morning, the CIA advisers started looking for someone who might infiltrate to the crash sight for a look around. They found a Hmong irregular who acknowledged familiarity with

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the area, and offered him all the kip in his pocket, maybe a hundred dollars' worth, to look for the body of the missing *farang* (foreigner).

Early the next morning, the Hmong returned with an exhausted but not severely injured George Raynor,³⁸ who had somehow escaped, perhaps through the severed tail section, then either passed out or was knocked unconscious by the concussion as a fuel tank exploded. He said he had not seen or heard the rescue helicopter clattering overhead; it was only later that he regained consciousness and started down the rough trail on which his Hmong rescuer later found him. The initials and had seen on the ring were CR, not GR, and they amended their report accordingly.

The discovery of body just outside the aircraft led his colleagues and friends— American, and Lao—to credit him with having tried to save the men trapped in the wreckage. No one could be sure, of course, that he hadn't been thrown clear and was lying helpless when the wreck turned into a fireball. But it was so characteristic of this extraordinarily brave and dedicated man to risk himself for others that this became part of his legend. With his death, Vang Pao and Bill Lair lost a friend and trusted colleague, and the advisory cadre one of its best officers.³⁹

Taking Muong Son and Na Khang

The route from the staging area to Muong Son had seen little military action, and the risk of encountering booby traps and antipersonnel mines was correspondingly small. Vientiane allowed and to walk there with their troops, and once in possession of the old fort, they set out to prepare the airstrip for the first Caribou landing.⁴⁰

Compared to Muong Hiem and Na Khang, Muong Son turned out to be as much vacation idyll as guerrilla command post: no land mines, no enemy ground attacks except a few tentative probing actions, and duties largely confined to refueling the Jolly Green Giants. It offered a river for bathing and swimming (neither Muong Hiem nor Na Khang boasted even a shower) and also for fishing (if only with hand grenades). And then there were the quiet nights: when the last aircraft left Muong Son at dusk—unlike at Na Khang, no aircraft was allowed to stay overnight—the advisers could relax until dawn.⁴¹

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Planning for the Muong Son operation was still under way when Vang Pao returned to Long Tieng "amid cheers and tears" on 15 March. "Everyone who is anyone in Meodom was there to greet him," the station reported, and he delivered a characteristic stem-winder about North Vietnamese aggression in Laos. Then it was back to work, implementing the Muong Son operation and planning to retake Na Khang.⁴² []

As usual, enemy intentions were obscure. Ambassador Sullivan noted that, during their dry-season offensive, Hanoi had introduced "far more supplies and trucking, if not troops, for military operations in northern Laos than are required merely to hold its own and [Pathet Lao] positions." Whether or not they intended now to press south—Sullivan thought not—they had demonstrated the will and the ability to counter "air and guerrilla harassment" with major tactical and logistical activity "in a theater that has no direct connection with their main military efforts in South Vietnam."⁴³ []

Tranquil in the weeks after its activation, the Muong Son base remained vulnerable to any concerted drive against it, and Vang Pao and his advisers never looked on it as a long-term replacement for Na Khang. In May, that pillaged site looked deserted, and Vang Pao expected to take it without difficulty, staging from a secure helicopter landing zone about 6 miles to the southwest.⁴⁴ []

With Na Khang back in friendly hands, [] and his [] and Laotian comrades expected a sharp communist response. They substituted heavily fortified bunkers and a deep, dry moat backed with sharp stakes and barbed wire for the shallow trenches that had guarded the original inner perimeter. The [] quarters, serving also as a communications shack and operations center, were now built into the slope near the crest, well inside the main fortifications, instead of standing at the more convenient former site near the airstrip. Constructed of sheet tin made from 55-gallon drums, it was fortified by walls of fuel drums filled with earth and stacked six feet high. But [] and company decided to forgo a reinforced roof; the ordinary corrugated metal roof reflected their belief that an attacking force would rely on small, flat-trajectory weapons.⁴⁵ []

By mid-1966, airstrikes were slowing the traffic on communist supply activity via Route 7, and the CIA detachment now back at Na Khang began hearing that the North Vietnamese were compensating for this with increased use of Route 6. Aerial photography provided no confirmation, and Vientiane

⁴² [] Also see Conboy, *Shadow War*, 155. []

⁴³ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1015, 23 March 1966; *FRUS 1964-1968*, 449-50. []

⁴⁴ [] Vientiane Embassy Telegram 58 to Manila [for Harriman], 20 February 1966, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 443-44. []

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* []

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expressed skepticism. and thought there must be fire behind all this smoke, so they joined a small team of Hmong and hid overnight on a mountainside a few miles from the road. From there, the headlights of trucks lumbering down the rutted mountain road toward Ban Ban were unmistakable.

If the volume of enemy traffic on Route 6 remained to be determined, the fact of it was no longer in doubt. But merely counting trucks—as conventional roadwatch teams did in both MR 2 and the Panhandle—would do nothing to stop them. and looked for a collection method that could be translated immediately into airstrikes.

This would require an English-speaking ground observer to communicate both with the Na Khang officers and with the pilots of the US strike aircraft overhead. Before a mission, Na Khang would talk to the USAF operations center at Nakorn Phanom, providing weather information and guidance to the target area. Once over the target area, however, the pilots would talk directly to the observer, situated within line of sight of enemy convoys. No special radio gear would be required; the Na Khang advisers would use single-sideband and VHF equipment already stocked by CIA, USAID, or the US Air Force.

Tallman and Red Hat

Everything depended on the availability of an English-speaker, and a very brave one, for the North Vietnamese would quickly infer the presence of a forward observer even if they failed to intercept his transmissions. As it happened, Long Tieng had a Hmong intelligence assistant named Moua Chong who had somewhere—no one knew how—acquired real competence in the English language, and Vang Pao sent him to Na Khang. There, given the call sign *Tallman*, he learned from the CIA advisers how to direct airstrikes and operate the single-sideband radio that he would take into the field.

When Tallman left, it was not as a singleton agent. For one thing, each of two voice radios (one a spare) weighed 20 pounds. Then there was the truck battery to power them, slung between two porters, plus a separate secure radio system, the old RS-1 with its hand-cranked generator. Adding porters to carry rations and taking into account the need for guides and security, the mission required 20 men. Tallman was not the team leader, though his English and his new technical skills made him its indispensable member. His status may also have provoked envy among his teammates and thus contributed to the internal conflicts that eventually led to disaster. ⁴⁶

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Tallman's first mission, scheduled to last a month, sent him into North Vietnamese-held territory east of Route 6, in the inverted "vee" formed by the road and the border. Arriving at the target area, he found friendly villagers who offered order-of-battle information. They were willing also to sell food, which reduced air supply requirements to an occasional drop by a Porter. With a secure bivouac established, Tallman was to use the hours of darkness to work himself and his equipment-bearers close to the road. From his observation point, he would give precise directions to the A-26 "Nimrod" pilots already orbiting above, waiting to be called. []

At the Na Khang command post, [] and [] relayed to [] an encrypted message from Tallman giving a date for his first foray toward the road. On the appointed night, they listened, first anxiously, then with delight when they heard the lead pilot respond to Tallman's first transmission. The pilot acknowledged Tallman's instruction to drop flares at a given point on the road, after which all hell broke loose when the light revealed a major convoy. The A-26s tore into them, and the glare of secondary explosions dimmed the flickering light of the flares.⁴⁷ []

It all made for an auspicious, indeed spectacular, beginning, and Tallman directed more such strikes during the months of his service. But he was killed in mysterious circumstances: squabbling had apparently turned to violence, and it looked as if his own men had murdered him. There was no immediate replacement, and [] scrambled to find someone with the courage, brains, and language skills needed to fill his shoes. Desperate for results, it placed an anodyne, "see the world" ad in Bangkok newspapers, and this attracted a bored taxi driver looking for excitement. Against all the odds, the new forward observer—Red Hat, after his trademark baseball cap—not only performed with distinction but went on to survive the war and return to Thailand. []

Success bred refinements of technique. On the morning of 9 October 1966, USAF jets bombed a segment of Route 7. That evening, after truckloads of enemy arrived to begin repairs, a Hmong team on the heights used a radio beacon to bring the A-26s in over their vantage point. With the aircraft overhead, the Hmong used flashlights to form an arrow pointing to the reconstruction site. The A-26s dropped flares to illuminate the target, and for the next 40 minutes made one pass after another, dropping fragmentation bombs. The next day, a Hmong informant able to circulate in the area counted 17 destroyed or dis-

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The most effective strike by a single aircraft came in May 1967 when an A-26 destroyed all 11 trucks in an NVA convoy. []

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abled trucks; there had presumably been heavy casualties among the repair crews.⁴⁸

The Sam Neua modus operandi, relying as it did on help from sympathetic villagers, worked only so long as enemy pressure on them did not either drive them away or intimidate them into withholding support. Along

the major routes in the Panhandle, matters had long since reached precisely this point. The closer a roadwatch team approached a key infiltration route, the more likely it was to find the local villagers either evicted by or reporting to the enemy. By January 1966, having sorted out the confusion generated by tainted reporting, the station was already trying a new approach to intelligence operations in the south.⁴⁹

Until then, roadwatch and guerrilla activity in the Panhandle had been part of an organic whole. The unit leaders sending patrols to monitor Routes 8 and 12, for example, did so from bases in their native areas on or near the Na Kay Plateau, where the villagers provided both sustenance and information. Even those working the more heavily enemy-infested area east and south of Savannakhet infiltrated overland, relying for their survival on the cooperation of friends and relatives still there.⁵⁰

Local support had begun to shrink as early as the end of 1964, when Hanoi started sending combat units down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but some access to the main routes continued for another year. By January 1966, this advantage had largely evaporated. Doug Blaufarb noted that the road system through the Corridor had "become vital to [the] enemy effort in SVN and [that the] enemy

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⁴⁹ There was no way to prevent venal or frightened teams from fabricating, and another Savannakhet team tried it again in 1966; it remained a chronic problem there and with the Kha teams in the far south. (and interviews.)

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is taking necessary steps to assure that roads are secure." These included "strict measures to control all people living along [the] roads," and the station's teams and "loyal villagers who supported them have had to move away from roads in order to survive."⁵¹ [redacted]

A New Approach in the Panhandle [redacted]

Blaufarb [redacted] therefore proposed to supplement overland infiltration with roadwatch teams introduced by air, using either helicopters or [redacted] techniques of parachuting into the jungle canopy. These teams would "live completely black," covering their targets for six to eight weeks before being exfiltrated by helicopter or by the so-called sky hook recovery technique. Continuous coverage would be accomplished by deploying a second, compartmented, team to a different observation point before the first was withdrawn. With the manpower on hand, the station expected to create up to 10 of these smaller new teams. The 7/13th Air Force agreed to supply helicopters, and State gave the needed policy approval.⁵² [redacted]

Certain teams would do no more than collect and report, but others would be connected by voice radio to a Lao observer flying with a USAF forward air controller. These teams would direct fire on enemy truck parks, chokepoints, and similar lucrative targets. The enemy would quickly suspect their presence, and the station did not plan to keep any one team in place for more than a week.⁵³ [redacted]

It looked like a very tall order, but Lair and Blaufarb were encouraged by the quality of the 41 Lao junior officers, all volunteers, in training in late 1965 [redacted] provided by FAR commander General Ouane, they were better than any other Lao that CIA had ever trained. And there were salvageable elements in the old teams, where retraining, more recognition, and some relief from almost continuous deployment should allow their use in the new format.⁵⁴ [redacted]

US military intelligence had long since acknowledged that the available techniques of aerial reconnaissance offered little prospect of adequately covering the trail network. Absent a new system of electronic coverage, human sources (trailwatchers) would have to provide more information on enemy

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[redacted] About 20 roadwatch teams were available in spring 1966 for overland infiltration throughout the Panhandle. [redacted]

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convoys and vehicle parks and do so on a more nearly real-time basis. But the new operational scheme would, at best, not produce instant results, and the Agency's fragmentary coverage did not begin to meet the insatiable demand from MACV and CINCPAC. This produced some testy exchanges, as when the 2nd Air Division in Saigon complained that it wasn't getting all of [] production. []

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But there was more cooperation than conflict, and better coordinated use of existing resources began to get results. On 22 January 1966, the day that State granted authority for helicopter insertion of roadwatch teams, [] reported the results of the first integrated use of roadwatch reporting, aerial reconnaissance, and airstrikes called in by a US Air Force spotter plane.⁵⁶ []

Team Echo, one of the early [] units, had reported via its agent radio a North Vietnamese concentration some 45 miles east of Thakhek. [] conducted a photoreconnaissance mission that confirmed the target, and [] flew [] to the US Air Force base at Nakorn Phanom to brief the American forward air controllers (FACs). One of these controllers spotted a truck park and bivouac and marked the target with smoke for the navy's A-6 and air force's F-105 aircraft that swarmed in for the attack. Two gun positions were destroyed, some 200 enemy troops were killed, and a pair of fuel storage facilities were left burning. Subsequent strikes on adjacent positions inflicted similar damage, and the air force credited the "superior" work of the []⁵⁷ []

The newly arrived FACs deserved similar praise, as they flew low and slow over reported targets in their tiny single-engine spotter planes to guide other such attacks. But in spite of the improved coordination, there remained a substantial gap—at least 18 hours and sometimes several days—between a sighting by a roadwatch team and tactical exploitation from the air. For one thing, the observation point still had to be set up at a substantial distance from the bivouac containing the agent radio. Information then had to be encrypted and broadcast on the schedule prescribed by the team's signal plan, and transmission was often delayed by the chronic failure of nighttime radio contact. Success, therefore, depended on a static target and good luck with communications.⁵⁸ []

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Also see Theodore Shackley, interview by the author, Sumner, MD, 12 July 1999 (hereafter cited as Shackley interview). []

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Accordingly, [] proceeded to improvise the ground-to-air tactical communications that Vientiane had included in its proposal of January 1966. The base gave its teams the civilian HT-1 walkie-talkie first introduced by USAID; with this, a roadwatch outpost could talk to the AC-47 communications platform orbiting overhead. The information was relayed to a FAC, who would then guide the strike aircraft to their targets. As soon as new HT-1 radios with compatible frequencies came into the inventory, the teams would report their observations directly to the FAC plane []

[]⁵⁹ []

Information from roadwatch teams permitted not only tactical strikes, at least on fixed targets, but a more focused effort by low-level aerial reconnaissance to map the continuously expanding roads and trails. In mid-February, for example, an O-1 "Cricket" FAC used ground team reporting to search the junction of Routes 23 and 911. The intelligence turned out to be precisely accurate, and the reconnaissance was greeted with intense small arms fire that damaged the observation plane and shot down one of the heavily armored A1-E escorts. Other, less time-sensitive roadwatch contributions included information on truck models—for evaluation of cargo capacities—descriptions of personnel and equipment, traffic volume, and NVA security techniques.⁶⁰ []

The station recognized that 10 teams would not suffice to achieve continuous, comprehensive coverage of the trail network in the central Panhandle. It was not merely a matter of numbers of teams—something the station soon addressed—but the scarcity of suitable landing pads. More teams would not help if they could not be infiltrated, and this obstacle threatened what Admiral Sharp had taken to describing as the "most fruitful intelligence collection resource" on the Panhandle. The admiral did what he could to help. He picked up on a hint from Bill Lair when he instructed the air force element at Udorn to work with [] to evaluate the "helicopter jungle penetrator systems" already being used in Vietnam to land personnel through the multiple layers of jungle canopy.⁶¹ []

To preserve the collection capacity it already had, [] refined the practices that allowed conventional teams to evade enemy attempts to eradicate them. Early-morning supply drops were abandoned, wherever communist patrols might discover a team bivouac site, in favor of night drops. Teams

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closest to protected targets were issued strobe lights for quick identification by aircraft overhead and a minimum number of passes over the drop zone.⁶²

CIA made clear to its military colleagues that the nearly impenetrable security screen that protected the most heavily traveled segments limited the potential of the roadwatch effort. Major targets, both static and mobile, were going undetected, and the dim prospects of bringing them all under direct observation fed a growing emphasis on various technical expedients both to find and to interrupt the traffic.⁶³

As early as May 1966, two teams were being prepared for helicopter infiltration, one north and one south of the communist transportation hub at Tchepone; they were to install electronic sensors signaling the passage of motor vehicles. Battery-powered, the devices were to furnish continuous coverage for as long as two months.⁶⁴

Heliborne infiltration continued until the end of the war—although, as we shall see, with a new tactical orientation—but it never replaced the practice in which natives of the target area infiltrated overland and recruited local villagers as informants. In mid-July, the station concluded that, despite the obstacles posed by enemy security measures, these teams remained the most productive. This was true even in the area around the key chokepoint called the Mu Gia Pass, where several hundred residents of the area had taken refuge at the closest roadwatch command post, about 10 miles away.⁶⁵

The flight of these villagers severely reduced the indirect access afforded by village informants, but they could not return to their villages, and Air America evacuated them to Thakhek. Nevertheless, those few villagers who remained near the pass found their cooperative spirit reinvigorated by the American bombing of North Vietnamese targets launched in late 1965. The same factor energized the teams themselves, who had become increasingly discouraged by American failure to act on their reporting, and their performance improved proportionately.⁶⁶

Better intelligence and the willingness to exploit it with airpower began to raise the cost to Hanoi of its massively expanded use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. But it was clear that, if the North Vietnamese were prepared to pay the price, the US countermeasures of early 1966 would not suffice to choke off the traffic. Even then, American policymakers still shrank from deploying

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American ground forces into Laos. In the point-counterpoint cycle of escalation that now evolved in the Laotian Panhandle, CIA-backed irregulars and the bombers of the US Air Force and the US Navy continued to provide the only forces directly opposing infiltration into the south.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ It does not appear that the US Special Forces operations conducted under the SHINING BRASS rubric had any measurable effect on Trail traffic.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Introduction to Interdiction

In mid-1966, Hanoi continued the escalation in the Panhandle when it deployed 37mm antiaircraft guns and shot down several of the indispensable AC-47 communications platforms. The US Air Force replied with the C-130 platform, flying at higher altitude, and the A-26 attack planes that had become the single most effective close-support aircraft in Laos. Especially in MR 2, the A-26s exploited real-time reporting from sources like Tallman, the Hmong observer in Sam Neua, to slow the rate of infiltration.¹

Unfortunately, successes in MR 2 could not easily be reproduced in the eastern Panhandle, which presented an environment even more hostile to roadwatch operations than did Hmong country. The Tallman practice of stationing observers within line of sight of road traffic could only rarely be reproduced along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Many of the targets being hit in late 1966 were discovered by USAF forward air controllers surveilling probable choke-points, but MACV and the air force wanted less dependence on the skill and luck of cockpit observers.²

Where roadwatch teams were situated to observe traffic, it still took at least 18 hours to get intelligence from the point of observation to the pilot of an A1-E or an F-105. the station, hoping to find a technological solution, called for an "idiot-proof" counter with the capacity not only to store information but also to transmit it. using some components already on the shelf, quickly came up with a prototype and the radio passed its field tests.³

The drawback was its unavoidably short range, a product of the need to use a UHF transmitter in order to minimize the size of the antenna. Air America chief pilot Jim Rhyne was charged with creating an airborne monitoring sys-

¹ Jim Glerum; Warren A. Trest, "CHECO Report: Lucky Tiger Combat Operations," 15 June 1967, US Air Force HRC

² Jim Glerum,

³ Shackley interview,

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tem, and he went to work designing auxiliary bladder fuel tanks for the Volpar, the jet-prop version of the twin-engine Beechcraft C-45. Rhyne also worked out the kind of high-altitude flight pattern that would keep the Volpar within the [redacted] range without betraying a team's location.⁴ [redacted]

The station first deployed the [redacted] on 17 December 1966 and began employing it against traffic through the Mu Gia Pass in 1967. The new system reduced to a matter of minutes the time between a sighting and the arrival of air force attack planes, and reporting, sometimes from multiple sources, often confirmed truck kills along Route 12. Ted Shackley, who had run the Vientiane station since the summer of 1966, was satisfied that the program met the requirement for reliable information that allowed prompt tactical exploitation.⁵ [redacted]

Some in the station disagreed. [redacted] [redacted] thought the program only modestly successful. For one thing, he thought, the North Vietnamese were increasingly skillful at camouflage and other passive defense measures. Although response time had fallen from 18 hours to a matter of minutes, targets reported by [redacted] radio might or might not be found by FACs or strike aircraft. Furthermore, as of April 1967, only 12 teams were equipped with the new gear. Meanwhile, in [redacted] [redacted] understanding, the FACs were still finding a disproportionate number of targets by simple visual observation.⁶ [redacted]

Nevertheless, when the [redacted] system worked as intended, it worked very well indeed. In mid-1967, a team stationed just across the border in North Vietnam saw 37 trucks headed north from the Mu Gia Pass. Within two minutes, an air force command and control aircraft was relaying the team's [redacted] report, and five minutes after that, six flights of F-4 jets were making their bombing runs. Secondary explosions continued throughout the night, and similar success followed another report from the same team only three days later.⁷ [redacted]

The 7th Air Force J-2 was generous in his thanks for the CIA roadwatch contribution to air interdiction operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But, in fact, the variety of air force reporting channels made it almost impossible to determine which of the targets being attacked had been identified by CIA. A precise evaluation of team reporting in general and [redacted] performance in particular thus remained elusive. Moreover, the air force wanted more comprehen-

⁴ Ibid. [redacted]
⁵ Ibid.; [redacted]
⁶ [redacted]
⁷ [redacted]

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sive intelligence coverage, and a spirit of competition with CIA may also have encouraged the development of its unmanned "sensor strings" for seeding along known or suspected lines of communication. In any case, it already appeared that the intelligence deficit was not the only obstacle to more effective interdiction. The station found the air force chronically short of strike aircraft and, therefore, often "not particularly eager" to respond to reporting.⁸

Intelligence limitations, aggravated by overtaxed means of exploitation, inevitably restricted the results of the air campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. CIA estimated that, during the course of 1966, between 55,000 and 85,000 North Vietnamese made it down the Trail into South Vietnam. "Permanent losses," including deserters and those incapacitated by illness, were calculated at between 5,000 and 15,000; only about 10 percent of these losses was thought to be direct result of airstrikes. The air war had indirect effects, of course: these included increased sickness and desertion rates, and longer and more taxing infiltration routes. Documentation was hard to come by because the database, limited to interrogations of prisoners and deserters, was sparse. But it was clear that, while it raised Hanoi's costs, air power still had not come close to closing the Corridor.⁹

NVA troops and supplies still flooded the Trail net, but the limits of airpower did not make the introduction of US ground forces look any more attractive to US policymakers. The scarcity of options led to increasingly abstruse proposals—mostly from the Department of Defense but also from CIA—for various kinds of technological fixes. aimed at seeding rain clouds to wash out major Trail segments, and the Pentagon suggested a series of barriers to North Vietnamese traffic. Someone thought of training monkeys to serve as explosives-laden saboteurs, and a similarly fanciful notion would have had pigeons, carrying even tinier charges, trained to seek out the axles of communist trucks and detonate them once safely perched.¹⁰

Ambassador Sullivan said of one such idea that he was reluctant to trade a roadwatch team for a "sono-buoy sensor" or a FAC for a mine disguised as a "sack of gravel." Technical and legal questions—an example of the latter was the perceived need to consult Souvanna before risking major flooding

⁸
 Jim Glerum. In November 1968, the station cited air support costs
 inadequate air force exploitation of reporting, and the air force's introduction of its own, larger electronic system as the basis for termination of the project.

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with [redacted] combined to keep these projects on the drawing board.¹¹ [redacted]

Meanwhile, MACV continued pushing for expanded SHINING BRASS operations into the Corridor. At a meeting in Udon on 14 September 1966, General Westmoreland made it explicit that he regarded Laotian territory adjoining both North and South Vietnam as an "extension [of] his tactical battlefield in Vietnam." As the station described the session, Ambassador Sullivan "expressed sympathy" with Westmoreland's concerns, but "simultaneously made it clear [that he] and not MACV would determine the nature and scope of operations in [the] Laos Panhandle." Sullivan was adamant: such operations would not include deep forays by Special Forces-led irregulars.¹² [redacted]

A subsequent meeting in Saigon left Vientiane station with the impression that MACV would not "challenge Ambassador Sullivan's supremacy in Laos" but would instead work to improve coordination and cooperation with Vientiane during the approaching dry season. Depending on results, Westmoreland could use this effort later to document a case that Sullivan and the Vientiane station could not or would not meet MACV's needs.¹³ [redacted]

New Regime, New Charter [redacted]

The standoff regarding MACV's authority in Laos left CIA as the only actor with any potential to compete with Hanoi for control of the ground in the eastern Panhandle. The handwriting on the wall had emerged earlier in the year, and [redacted] leaving Headquarters in the spring of 1966 for another

¹¹ [redacted]
¹² [redacted]
¹³ [redacted]

A year later, Defense Secretary McNamara pressed the construction of the "McNamara Line," running from the South China Sea west through the Laotian Corridor, to serve as a physical barrier to infiltration. Project DYE MARKER, covering the segment in Laos, would employ USSF-led teams of South Vietnamese tribal irregulars, hand-emplaced as well as airdropped sensors, and various support aircraft stationed at forward positions in Laos. Project MUSCLE SHOALS, with much the same formula, was to cover the Trail network in Laos south of the DMZ. Technical problems and the usual policy issues revolving around Laotian sovereignty, probably compounded by Sullivan's and Shackley's distrust of MACV's proposals—they never got what they thought was a satisfactory reply to reminders that the air force could not fully exploit even the intelligence it did get—limited the DYE MARKER and MUSCLE SHOALS projects essentially to targets for airdropped sensors. [redacted]

The controversy never ended. As late as mid-June 1969, Vientiane station saw what it called indiscriminate sowing of sensors of questionable reliability and a MACV push to expand B-52 free-bombardment zones as threatening the survival of roadwatch teams. [redacted]

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tour in Laos, remembered being told that the station had to devote a bigger share of its paramilitary resources to the Corridor. Then, in the summer, DCI Helms and DDP Des FitzGerald sent as the new chief of station a man whose reputation as an able and relentlessly tough executive outweighed whatever disadvantage might attach to his lack of experience in Asia.¹⁴ []

Pulled out of [] after only 10 months, Ted Shackley left Headquarters with the understanding that Washington wanted just two things from him. First, he was to achieve the longstanding goal of complete, timely intelligence on communist traffic in the Corridor. Second, he was to raise the level of resistance to that traffic. No one expected CIA irregulars to halt it entirely, but Washington wanted them to inflict significant damage and to force the NVA to divert major resources to protecting the Trail.¹⁵ []

By the time he arrived in Vientiane, Shackley had tentatively concluded that the intelligence gap required massively expanded programs of roadwatch teams and refugees and POW exploitation. This imperative applied not only in the Panhandle but, in the north, to NVA efforts against the Hmong. Shackley's mandate would also, as he saw it, require a new approach to harassment operations. It was clear that the Hmong were already taxed to the limit, with the tribe's manpower fully committed and suffering a debilitating level of casualties. A new campaign against the North Vietnamese in the Panhandle would, therefore, have to rely on lowland Lao and Kha tribal manpower.¹⁶ []

Shackley's Agency superiors and assistant secretary of state William Bundy had made it clear that only quick results would allow continuing their resistance to growing MACV pressure for control of military operations in the Panhandle. Shackley would have 60 days to propose something promising enough to neutralize the Pentagon's vigorous lobbying at the White House. This was the message that Shackley brought to his own people [] [] "If we don't do it, the Army will."¹⁷ []

[] upcountry officers greeted Shackley with some reserve. The very fact of his coming from outside FE Division suggested to the old hands that the assignment reflected a vote of no confidence in them. They were not reassured when the new COS immediately proposed dividing the paramilitary project into two, with Lair running the north [] and Landry the Panhandle from the Vientiane station. Landry thought that the new boss might have it in mind to eliminate [] entirely, and he and Lair raised so many practical objections to the move that Shackley finally let it die.¹⁸ []

¹⁴ [] interview, 18 January 2000. (U)

¹⁵ Shackley interview. []

¹⁶ Ibid. []

¹⁷ Ibid. []

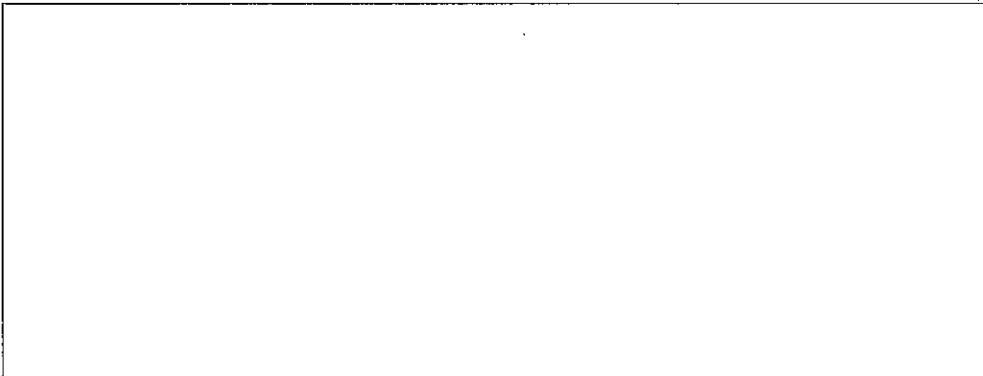
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Bill Lair deplored the higher CIA profile that the new expansion entailed, [redacted] He thought Shackley's single-minded determination to exploit the Laotian irregulars on behalf of US aims in South Vietnam risked the sacrifice of Laos, in general, and of the Hmong, in particular. But he recognized the pressures created by the commitment of US divisions to battle in Vietnam and, despite his reservations, did not resist Shackley's reorientation of the paramilitary program. Lair soon came to respect his new boss, and Landry, who served every COS [redacted] [redacted] thought Shackley one of the best: energetic, decisive, and deeply engaged in trying to make the thing work.¹⁹ [redacted]

The atmosphere had improved as soon as it became clear [redacted] that Shackley did not, in fact, disapprove of its management of the war. His approach was to do more of the same, especially in the Panhandle, and [redacted] [redacted] found that his essentially quantitative approach made him easy to work for. One had only to persuade him of the means needed to meet material goals; for example, the amount of communications and air support needed to create and support a given number of SGUs or roadwatch teams (RWTs). Shackley would find the resources, and field officers were free to work out their own schedules of training, support, communications, and deployment. If the desired number of units was deployed on schedule, all was well.²⁰ [redacted]



¹⁸ [redacted]
[redacted]

¹⁹ [redacted]



²⁰ Jim Glerum, [redacted]

²¹ Bill Lair; Jim Glerum, [redacted]

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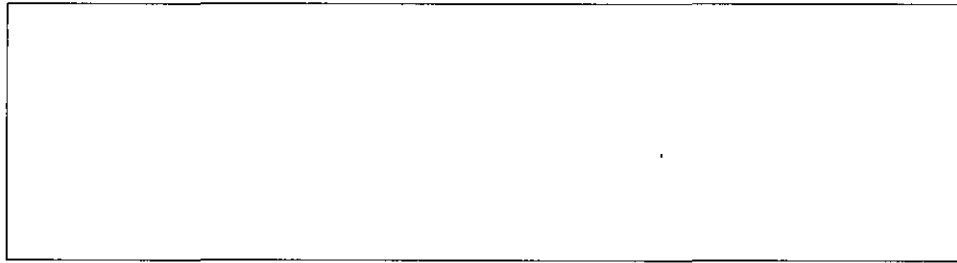
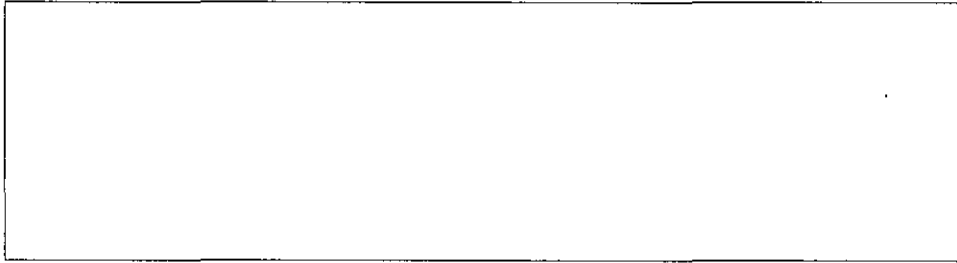
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New Charter, New Style

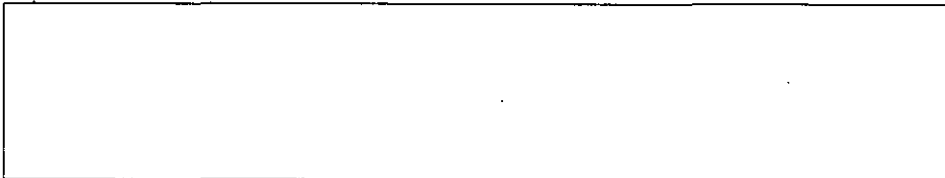
If the veteran case officers saw Shackley's expansion of American staff as extravagant, this reflected, at least in part, their attachment to the shoestring approach adopted by Bill Lair in the early days He and the handful of Agency colleagues with him had seen frugality as a virtue, and not just for its own sake. It had the practical advantage, they thought, of reducing the US profile even while it preserved the ability of to support the unit without foreign help. Now, with American troops shouldering an increasing share of combat in South Vietnam, economy was subordinated to the production of more and quicker results. ²⁶

Nevertheless, even as the programs grew under Shackley's stewardship, Agency staffing of the program remained, by conventional military standards, remarkably austere.

Three years later, when he was not only running road-watch teams and SGU platoons but also commanding battalion-size formations of air-mobile irregular light infantry, there were about ²⁷

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²⁶ Bill Lair; interview.

²⁷ interview.

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With expansion and standardization as his main imperatives, Shackley began by establishing a standard roadwatch team, giving it a chief and deputy, a radioman, a medic, and six riflemen. With this formula, he set up 70 teams, half in MR 3 (Khammouane and Savannakhet Provinces) and half in MR 4 (covering the remaining provinces to the south). This forced-draft expansion created its own problems, especially that of fabricated reporting by newly recruited team leaders or radio operators. Shackley dealt with them in characteristically vigorous fashion, bringing in a polygraph operator to try to authenticate the teams' activities and reporting.²⁸

Fabrication was not the only source of discrepancies between CIA and military reporting; the diversity of collection mechanisms meant some discrepancies in the activity attributed to the North Vietnamese. MACV tended to interpret these differences as revealing a flawed Agency product, and CIA expected the military to push for participation in collection efforts in the Panhandle. The controversy led to a conference attended not only by the MACV J-2 but also by a State Department official dispatched for the occasion from Washington. Jim Glerum watched the COS give a masterful 45-minute presentation. Neither acknowledging the recurring authentication problem nor making any claims for the accuracy of CIA reporting, Shackley somehow persuaded his uniformed audience that Agency intelligence did indeed represent the best available coverage, and the jurisdictional problem once again receded into the background.²⁹

At the same time, the COS began creating battalion-size units in the Panhandle, the first on the eastern Bolovens and the second on the Na Kay Plateau. The first two responded only indirectly to the mandate to attack the Corridor. They were intended mainly to supplement team harassment-and-

²⁸ Shackley interview; interview.

²⁹ Jim Glerum.

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collection operations and to tighten the irregulars' hold on their base areas in preparation for larger scale activity against the Trail network.³⁰ [redacted]

The growth of the Panhandle SGUs followed the quasi-unilateral pattern established during [redacted]

[redacted] encouraged by a "subsidy" for which no accounting was required, General Bounpone allowed [redacted] to recruit among civilian Lao in MR 3. He assigned an officer to represent MR 3 interests, but Colonel Onkeo was "rarely seen and less often consulted." The program was already known for its timely and relatively generous pay and for quick and competent medical care for its wounded, and these attractions overcame the prospect—much greater than in the

FAR—of seeing real combat.³¹ [redacted]

Expansion aggravated the traditional leadership problem, as [redacted] discovered when he went to General Bounpone to ask for junior officers for new roadwatch teams. The 15 warrant officers who showed up for training were so inert that [redacted] unable to avoid the risk of offense, told Bounpone that there was simply nothing he could do with them. Apologetic rather than offended, Bounpone waved a hand at the officers lolling about his headquarters. There was nothing else to do with them, he said; not one would ever be found sneaking up on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the dark. Would [redacted] give the 15 another chance? And after a pep talk from Bounpone, they set off on a

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[redacted] It appears that, in addition to the pecuniary incentive, Bounpone saw the program as making a material contribution to the security of government-held territory in MR 3. [redacted] interview.) [redacted]

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forced march, following not a road but a compass course through the jungle. Having established that he meant business, [] resumed training, and about half the group performed well enough eventually to be sent on road-watch missions.³² []

The qualitative limitations of the Laotian manpower pool might have encouraged Ted Shackley to consider a more collaborative approach with a perpetually eager MACV. The COS later said that he examined the idea in a review of the modus operandi of the Special Operations Group (SOG), MACV's Special Forces element, but found it incompatible with both Agency practice and Washington's policy restrictions on cross-border activity. He acknowledged that the SOG infiltration team resembled the helicopter-borne roadwatch unit initiated by Doug Blaufarb early in 1966. But CIA teams contained personnel native to their target areas; SOG teams did not. And MACV depended more heavily than CIA units on air for resupply and firepower. Finally, SOG teams all operated with US Special Forces cadre, which raised the level of political risk when they were deployed into Laos. These considerations—probably fortified by Ambassador Sullivan's disdain for MACV/SOG leadership—prompted Shackley to forgo any attempt at joint operations.³³ []

Goodbye to Village Defense []

Shackley also decided to end CIA support to the village defense program initiated through [] in 1964 and now championed by [] successor, []. With the benefit of CIA field management and massive USAID support, an important part of MR 4 had been secured. [] acknowledged that the effort was not yet self-sustaining, but thought it well on the way toward being able to survive on its own. Shackley asserted that the time to try that had come, and withdrew the Agency's contribution.³⁴ []

³² [] interview. []

³³ Shackley interview. []

³⁴ [] and Shackley interviews. Headquarters—or at least Bill Colby, []

[]—shared these reservations. In May 1967, the station responded to an expression of concern, giving assurances that it would not prematurely withdraw CIA support for village defense in the south. But it had already largely done so. In December 1967, Lao Ngam, anchoring the defense of the southeastern Se Done sector, was seized in a surprise attack; it was quickly retaken, but the absence of warning suggested a substantial deterioration in the villagers' identification with the government. In 1968, a Headquarters analysis cited the withdrawal of CIA support as having precipitated the program's rapid disintegration. []

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General Phasouk was disappointed and angry, but consented to the formation of SGUs manned by lowland militia personnel. [] judged the first such units to be of poor quality, an outcome he attributed to the abrupt change of mission. Like the first Hmong, these Lao had been recruited among villagers whose sole motivation was protection of their land and families. Now, there were some to whom moving into full-time military service was preferable to being removed from the rolls, but they joined without much enthusiasm. []

The scarcity of willing recruits in the south led to experimentation with various expedients. As early as December 1965, Headquarters had suggested recruiting "mercenaries" among the Nung, a tribal minority in northern Vietnam that fought with the French in the First Indochina War and then took refuge in South Vietnam after the Viet Minh victory. Ambassador Sullivan endorsed the idea, and the Saigon station helped recruit 100 Nungs for whom [] constructed a camp in a remote corner of the Bolovens Plateau. Doug Blaufarb wanted the American cadre "of oriental ethnic origin" offered by the US Special Forces, but the usual political considerations prevailed, and the project would stand or fall on the quality of the group's own leadership.³⁵ []

That leadership proved to be unimpressive, and the Nungs' performance was not enhanced by the short-term contract (only six months) under which they served. Initial results were poor, and although the US Special Forces then offered battle-hardened Nungs from irregular units in South Vietnam, later missions also failed. Within a few months, Vientiane abandoned the whole thing.³⁶ []

If [] was disappointed with General Phasouk's first SGUs, these were superior at least to the abortive effort with the Nungs. Indeed, one small but well-planned attack in August 1966 suggested the potential for joint operations in which FAR troops and airpower supplemented the better discipline and leadership of station-led irregulars. A cave situated just above the Cambodian border and near the main communist supply route to the south appeared to be serving as a munitions and supply dump. [] paramilitary staff set up air transport for 300 troops—half SGU and half FAR—to a staging point a few miles away. They also moved two 75mm pack howitzers by helicopter to a point within range of the cave.³⁷ []

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An early-morning artillery barrage was followed by four flights of General Phasouk's T-28s, bombing and strafing as the ground troops tried to descend the cliff face toward the cave entrance. The sheer slope foiled this effort, but a diversionary effort got better results. A helicopter dropped two dummies, each dressed in paratroop uniform. One floated past the cave on its way to the valley floor below, and some 70 enemy troops dashed out of the cave in pursuit. T-28s scored direct hits on the village into which they chased the presumed paratrooper, and even though Phasouk then withdrew the ground forces—he believed they were being flanked— was gratified by the smooth unfolding of a complicated undertaking.³⁸

Under pressure from Washington and having no workable alternative to a quasi-unilateral approach to Corridor operations, the station proceeded to create more and larger SGUs. Recruiting under the auspices of General Bounpone in Savannakhet went relatively well, and by January 1967, the program had 3,500 effectives.³⁹

The most successful ground operation in the Panhandle during this period had nothing directly to do with the Corridor. On 8 January, a team guided by a recent escapee raided a Pathet Lao prison camp, killing one guard and scattering the others. They freed 57 prisoners, including four members of a roadwatch team overrun six months earlier and a former shot down in 1966 while serving as an Air America kicker. Their rescuers led them northeast, away from Thakhek, to the safety of a roadwatch command post.⁴⁰

At this point, CIA's promise of combat units for the Corridor had done more to shut out MACV than to slow the traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Few of the new units had yet seen combat, and those that had were deployed on armed reconnaissance patrols in detachments of 15 to 30 men. With the NVA still streaming down the Trail, the Defense Department continued to lobby for a larger role in Laos. In February, it won a small victory when President Johnson approved company-strength SOG operations.⁴¹

These would enjoy air support to the full depth of an operating area now extended to more than 12 miles from the border. Ambassador Sullivan pointed

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³⁹ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 4405, 21 January 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 553-54. ⁴⁰

and Landry did not ask Vientiane's permission for the raid, and Ted Shackley recalled thinking that their ex post facto assertion of the need to act on perishable intelligence may have concealed some doubt that Vientiane would approve an advance request. Whatever the fact of the matter, Shackley joined in the applause. (Shackley interview.)

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Vientiane Embassy Telegram 5248, 25 February 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 560-62.

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Freed prisoners at Team Golf-1 command post,
8 January 1961

out some ambiguities, but had no alternative to accepting the new rules of engagement for SHINING BRASS operations. In any case, the new rules were only modestly more permissive than the old and looked more like a bureaucratic compromise between State and Defense than like a serious strategy to interdict the Trail.⁴² [redacted]

However slow the start, the trend away from guerrilla warfare would not be reversed while hostilities continued in South Vietnam. Conventional operations would deploy light

infantry trained in multibattalion parachute and heliborne operations, and these would require new professional skills in the case officers training and commanding them. Not many CIA officers had the requisite credentials, and the Agency turned to army and marine veterans of combat in Vietnam whom it hired under contract in the so-called [redacted] program. The Agency sent them all through the standard paramilitary training program at [redacted] an exercise that, in the recollection of one of them, was poorly adapted to operating conditions in Laos.⁴³ [redacted]

[redacted] one of the few contractors without Vietnam experience, entered the program with no military experience beyond a tour of duty in the Coast Guard. He left it feeling that he had been "trained for World War II." The curriculum lacked anything about the communication systems used in Laos, or about the capabilities and limitations of the various helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft whose use he would be supervising. The introductory briefing [redacted] presented at least an up-to-date tactical picture, but offered nothing about [redacted] prospective duties at Long Tieng. He asked Landry what he'd be doing there, and Pat grunted, "Figure it out yourself when you get there." Landry knew that [redacted] would get the guidance he needed from the exceptionally capable [redacted] and [redacted] eventually came to see considerable merit in the station's informal regime of on-the-job training.⁴⁴ [redacted]

⁴² [redacted]

⁴³ Jim Glerum; [redacted] interview by the author, McLean, VA, 17 March 1999 (hereafter cited as [redacted] interview). [redacted]

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The Agency's commitment to support large-scale ground operations in Laos abetted Ted Shackley's emphasis on quantity in the expansion not only of combat units but also of the intelligence elements needed to support them.

First and most obvious was prisoner interrogation. MR 3, was already doing the best job of exploiting prisoners whose knowledge transcended the low-level tactical. Accordingly, Shackley nationwide debriefing responsibility, a function that grew in importance as the Hmong began to respond to CIA urging to bring in their North Vietnamese prisoners rather than execute them.⁴⁵

Some of these prisoners contributed to the work of the intercept program, aimed primarily at North Vietnamese units in Laos and employing a group of South Vietnamese monitors and translators. These were headed by a captain named Anh, detailed from the South Vietnamese Army, whose services had been obtained in a mysterious deal consummated in Saigon.

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The bulk of the intercept program dealt with material recorded in the field by monitors who might or might not understand Vietnamese; they needed to know only how to capture the desired frequencies. The traffic they monitored sometimes contained tactical information of substantial value, and Captain Anh's translators would quickly render it into English for the benefit of CIA advisers working with tactical commanders.⁴⁷

It remained to exploit North Vietnamese prisoners, especially those knowledgeable of tactical codes. Captain Anh and the CIA contractor running the debriefing program, joined forces to put these prisoners in a cooperative frame of mind. The technique was simple, if labor-intensive: the two would display such solicitude for their charges' welfare that prisoners often wound up trying hard to please. The result was necessarily uneven but occasionally excellent coverage, and on these occasions tactical air inflicted serious attrition on communist forces, especially in MR 2.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ interview.

⁴⁵ Jim Glerum,

⁴⁶ Ibid. sympathy with the Agency's approach to the highland tribes in South Vietnam, one that emphasized expanding territorial control over offensive tactical operations, put at odds with his MACV superiors and ended his military career.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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Aerial photography provided a more regular and prolific source of intelligence. The US Air Force, with its emphasis on Vietnam and its practice of high-altitude photography, could not provide the required coverage of bomb damage, roads and trails, reported POW camps, and heavy weapons emplacements. A CIA-controlled capability was needed also for photoreconnaissance of the sites of planned operations, both tactical and intelligence.⁴⁹ []

From Ted Shackley's tenure until the end of major hostilities, [] photo interpretation shop kept an average of a dozen Agency analysts fully employed. Jim Glerum, supervising their work, admired their quick adaptation from interpreting high-altitude pictures of Soviet ballistic missile sites to the very different requirements posed by low-level images of jungle topography.⁵⁰ []

All of these sources, supplementing direct ground observation and informant reporting, [] fed [] order-of-battle shop. Run for several years by contract employee [] and after 1971 by [] it was staffed with two or three Agency employees, several locally hired wives of station officers, []⁵¹ []

Although it produced some formally disseminated intelligence, the OB shop was designed mainly to support local operations. It tracked enemy troop and weapons deployments for the benefit of tactical planning, both offensive and defensive, and followed the movement of North Vietnamese men and supplies into and through Laos. It reduced the risk to supply and liaison flights by

⁴⁸ Ibid. The intercept operation grew more sophisticated as field commanders provided feedback. This sometimes revealed that an NVA command post was often located at some distance from the point at which ARDF (airborne radio direction finding) placed its transmitter. Intelligence reports accordingly began to refer to the location of a "radio associated with" a given NVA headquarters, leaving open the whereabouts of the headquarters itself. []

⁴⁹ Jim Glerum. []

⁵⁰ Ibid. []

⁵¹ Ibid. []

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identifying enemy presence on the ground below the approaches to upcountry sites. And finally, it worked to help the US military locate US aircrews downed in Laos.⁵²

By late 1966, Ted Shackley had essentially finished refining and enlarging the intelligence structure. It still remained, at that point, to create the combat capability needed to meet Washington's demands for a ground-based interdiction campaign. At Savannakhet, the initial locus of this effort, continued dealing with the routine if thorny problems of recruitment, base construction, training, and leadership development. In MR 2, substantially greater difficulties with recruitment were compounded in September by a medical crisis that took Vang Pao away from his post.

⁵² Ibid.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The High Water Mark

The relatively small size of the Hmong population was only one of the impediments to recruitment for Special Guerrilla Unit battalions in Military Region 2. Previous combat losses and the substantial manpower demands of existing village guerrilla units and smaller SGUs had reduced the manpower base of the Hmong as well as that of allied tribes like the Lao Theung. Nevertheless, recruiting was under way when, in September 1966, Vang Pao's arm wound—never entirely healed—began to produce crippling pain. This time, CIA made arrangements to fly him to Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii, where he was lodged in the suite reserved for the CINCPAC, Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp.¹

and later attended him. Their best efforts did not entirely soothe a most impatient patient, for Vang Pao well understood the effect of his absence on the pace of activity at Long Tieng. The general's CIA escorts served as interpreters and represented to the military the Agency's proprietary interest in him. As his condition improved after surgery, they found themselves mediating between cultures in ways that, in the fastnesses of northern Laos, had never been required.²

The recuperation phase was marked by an invitation to visit Admiral Sharp's headquarters. For all his tactical brilliance, Vang Pao had only a shaky grasp of strategy, and wanted to avoid having him embarrass himself with any bizarre proposals. And so he edited, as best he could, Vang Pao's eager suggestion to Admiral Sharp that a Porter STOL aircraft, with himself aboard as guide, fly low among the mountain peaks into North Vietnam. After the pilot had parachuted to safety and Vang Pao had taken the controls, he would proceed to Hanoi on a one-man kamikaze mission.³

¹ interview. recalled that, well before Shackley arrived, the relocation of dependents of full-time combatants had already helped transform Long Tieng from a tiny village of perhaps 15 huts into a haven for some 30,000 people.

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³ Ibid.

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Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp inspecting Hmong machete presented by Gen. Vang Pao in Honolulu in 1966

The editing task was a delicate one. Vang Pao now understood considerable English and could follow the drift of Sharp's questions and [] translation of his replies. [] was relieved that Sharp did not try to communicate directly with the general; the admiral never noticed that Vang Pao and [] communicated in a bastard patois, as much English as French, with a few words of Laotian and Hmong. The conversation continued through [] who managed in translation to reduce the one-man raid idea to less provocatively specific terms.⁴ []

Admiral Sharp changed the subject with a question about air support. This provoked an impassioned plea from Vang Pao for more World War II-era attack aircraft—A-1Es and B-26s—whose relatively slow speed made them ideal for low-altitude support of ground troops. Sharp responded by asking about the effectiveness of the jet aircraft supporting the irregulars. The general whispered his reply to [] who translated: the jets were as deadly as a cobra. While the admiral and his staff smiled in satisfaction, Vang Pao told [] to add that he, the general, had never known anyone actually bitten by a

⁴ Ibid []

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cobra. That ended the discussion of close air support, with uncertain whether or not Vang Pao had conveyed his point.⁵

The Fog of War at Na Khang

The recent achievements of Vang Pao's guerrillas made it easy to understand the VIP treatment accorded him at CINCPAC. Over the course of the rainy season, his forces, both irregular and FAR, had gradually reoccupied nearly all the ground lost to the communist offensive of late 1965 and early 1966. The introduction of USAF forward air controllers into Laos had transformed the air war, making both jet and propeller-driven strike aircraft more responsive to the needs of ground forces. The combined efforts of guerrillas—their own mobility multiplied by CIA-leased transports—and the 7th Air Force were inflicting significant casualties, destroying supplies, and breaching enemy lines of communication.⁶

Even before the first SGU battalions began coming on line, this newfound synergy was tying down major North Vietnamese combat and logistical resources and precluding their deployment into South Vietnam. In the last months of 1966, the combination of air and ground operations also delayed the NVA's annual campaign to regain the MR 2 territory lost during the rainy season.⁷

The only major exception during this unusual dry-season lull was an NVA attempt to recapture Na Khang, the logistical and command center for all Hmong operations against Sam Neua Province. In January 1967, 11 months after the action in which Vang Pao had been wounded, the NVA took advantage of a protracted stretch of unseasonably bad weather to mount another assault.⁸

The second battle of Na Khang started without warning in the predawn darkness of 6 January. Sleeping in the operations shack,

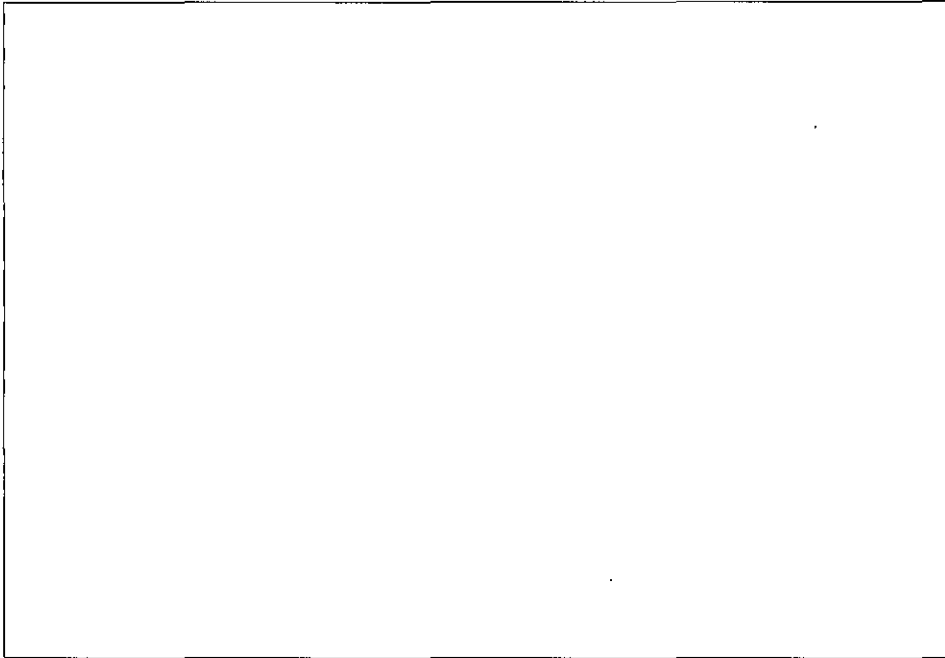
⁵ A Defense Department study released two months later asserted that "propeller aircraft are approximately nine times as effective as jet aircraft per sortie in destroying trucks and water craft in Laos." The JCS, arguing that only armed reconnaissance missions should be compared, assigned a favorable ratio of only 3.5 to propeller aircraft, and resisted McNamara's suggestion that two A-1E squadrons be substituted for two F-4 squadrons. (See Memorandum from Secretary McNamara to the Chairman of the JCS, "The Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in Laos," 18 December 1967, and reply from JCS Chairman Gen. Earle Wheeler, 2 January 1968 *FRUS 1964-1968*, 640-41 and 645-47.)

⁶ Memorandum From the Central Intelligence Agency to the 303 Committee, "Status Report on CIA Counterinsurgency Operations in Laos," 8 September 1966, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 487-89.

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[redacted] [redacted] were jolted awake by the roar of sustained automatic weapons fire. One of the outposts had come under fire earlier in the night, but that was routine, and there had been no warning of an assault on the command post itself. Attacking now from two directions, the enemy was already at the defensive perimeter, and it was clear that the North Vietnamese genius for bypassing Hmong sentinels at night had once again achieved tactical surprise.⁹ [redacted]

[redacted] grabbed a shotgun and hand grenades and ran out to the trench on the hilltop 50 yards from the operations shack. From there, he would cover the blind rear approach and see how the other defenders were faring. Meanwhile, [redacted] turned on his single-sideband radios, calling [redacted] Vientiane station, and the USAF Airborne Command and Control Center. To his surprise— [redacted] It alerted the station and, of more immediate importance, the air force, asking for combat air support. [redacted] was reporting a heavy overcast, but the air force promised to have help overhead within 40 minutes.¹⁰ [redacted]

⁹ [redacted] Headquarters Pacific Air Force, Tactical Evaluation Division, CHECO Report, "Second Defense of Lima Site 36," 28 April 1967. Courtesy of [redacted] (hereafter CHECO Report). [redacted]

¹⁰ [redacted]

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Ordnance exploding near CIA bunker during the battle for Na Khang, January 1967. Courtesy of

[] left the shack to tell [] and the senior FAR commander that help was on the way. Approaching the hilltop, he saw friendly troops firing into the fog-shrouded scrub brush and grass beyond the perimeter trench. [] was with them, and [] saw him drop to the ground as if taking cover after throwing a grenade. An explosion followed, but [] lay motionless, and when [] crawled to his side, he found him unconscious and bleeding profusely from a head wound. [] began trying to drag him back down the hill as small-arms fire kicked up dirt around them. In the dense haze—a combination of fog and smoke—and the din of automatic weapons and artillery fire, [] could see no enemy at whom to return fire. [] now displayed no vital signs—he was not breathing, and his wound no longer bled—and [] crawled alone back to the operations shack and its radios.¹¹ []

At 0730 hours, a flight of four RF-105 jets, diverted from an armed reconnaissance mission in the Panhandle, arrived overhead. The dense overcast, some 4,000 feet thick, extended to within 200 feet of the ground at Na Khang. Lt. Col. Eugene Conley calmly asked [] for a description of the Na Khang terrain and the direction and elevation of the nearby hills. He would try, he

¹¹ Ibid. Several enemy bodies were later found just a few yards from the spot where [] fell, and it appeared to [] that he had, in fact, prevented the defensive line from being breached at that point. []

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said, to get low enough over Na Khang to intimidate the enemy by cutting in the jet's afterburner to create low-altitude sonic booms.¹² []

[] protested that he couldn't guarantee the accuracy of the elevations or azimuths he was giving, to which Conley laconically replied, "I'll give it a try." He searched the overcast until he found a small hole some distance away, through which he snaked his way down among the surrounding mountain peaks. He somehow found Na Khang, and the shriek of the engine accompanied the sonic booms that shook the ground as his RF-105, invisible from below, tore through the clouds just overhead. With too little space to align himself for a strafing run, Conley made repeated passes over the communist attackers, and [] rejoiced to see that the continued sonic booms did help stall the enemy charge.¹³ []

Conley, running low on fuel, had to rejoin the rest of his flight for return to base. The air force, meanwhile, had redirected a flight of two prop-driven A1-E attack planes from the Panhandle, and these arrived only minutes after the RF-105s left the scene. The weather had not yet improved, and the flight leader, Maj. Robert Turner, asked [] to describe the fighting on the ground. []—"very excited," as one pilot later recalled—told him that most of the defensive perimeter had been overrun.¹⁴ []

[] himself remembered being nearly overwhelmed, trying to brief arriving pilots on their targets while pumping local defenders for the latest information on friendly and enemy locations. Running back and forth between the operations shack and the various trenches and bunkers, he had to try boosting the morale of the Hmong and Lao officers even as he debriefed them. Most of these, in the excitement and confusion of battle, forgot the English or French they used at more tranquil moments and tried frantically to communicate by shouting and waving their arms.¹⁵ []

Vang Pao—who had returned to Long Tieng—had to be brought up to date, and [] called the senior Hmong officer to the operations shack to use the single-sideband voice radio. The Hmong screamed into the microphone, and [] thought he must be trying to reach Long Tieng by sheer lungpower. But he was apparently understood, because he stopped to listen when Vang Pao began issuing orders. Then, he gave the radio a smart salute and ran out to rejoin his troops.¹⁶ []

¹² CHECO Report; []

¹³ Ibid. Two weeks later, Colonel Conley was killed when a ground-to-air missile struck his plane 30 miles north of Hanoi. []

¹⁴ CHECO Report. []

¹⁵ []

¹⁶ Ibid. []

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Meanwhile, also using the single-sideband radio, various bosses at Long Tieng, and Vientiane were demanding to know how the battle was going. Replying to these inquiries seemed less urgent than directing the A-1Es to their targets, and was fully occupied trying to help Major Turner find Na Khang. Accustomed as he was to the heroics of Udorn's 602nd Fighter Commando Squadron, he nevertheless doubted that Turner could repeat Colonel Conley's feat. But with the benefit of intermittent "lock-on" to the feeble beacon at Na Khang, Turner finally threaded his way through the clouds, emerging just over Na Khang where—as Conley had done—he found himself flying substantially lower than the surrounding peaks.¹⁷

Looking down, Turner saw enemy troops on both sides of the airstrip, on the hill where the operations shack stood, in the fuel storage area, and among the trees west of the strip. He asked where to strike, and invited him to hit anything outside the command post area. That meant more targets than the A-1E had ordnance to hit, for Turner and his wingman had begun the mission by hitting a bridge in the Panhandle. It would be some time before additional A-1Es could arrive from Udorn, and the task became, as Turner later put it, one of "buying time."¹⁸

Turner made several passes, conserving ordnance by launching his remaining rockets one at a time and firing only short bursts from his 20mm cannon. Concentrating on the hill around the command post, he gradually forced the enemy down the slope and across the airstrip. He was flying so low that shell casings and links from the 20mm guns fell on the operations shack. could see the oil stains on the engine cowling and hear the roar of the Skyraider's open exhaust stacks as it passed just overhead, strafing suspected North Vietnamese assembly points only yards from friendly lines.¹⁹

With such a small margin for error, there were close calls. A bomb landed close enough to rain dirt on the shack and to give a permanent hearing loss. But the fate of the outmanned Na Khang garrison depended entirely on this kind of surgically exact procedure, and there was no question of asking for a wider buffer zone.²⁰

asked if the A1-E could hit enemy troops occupying the fuel dump, preferably without igniting the drums of fuel. Turner hit the near side of the dump, as he approached, then interrupted his fire for a moment before resuming on the other side. later found five enemy dead at that spot, and the fuel drums intact except for two dented by ricocheting 20mm rounds.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid.; CHECO Report.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mike Lynch.

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With his ammunition exhausted, Turner climbed back up through the overcast to find his wingman, Capt. John Haney, and led the way back down to Na Khang, where he remained to distract enemy gunners while Haney began the first of nine strafing runs. Both planes were hit, but spent 65 minutes in what Haney later described as a "constant turn" over the depression, about a mile-and-a-half in diameter, that contained the guerrilla base.²² []

By the time more A-1Es arrived from Udom, Turner and Haney had hit the North Vietnamese with 1,600 rounds of 20mm cannon fire, 50 rockets, and several white phosphorus bombs. Striking within 50 yards of friendly positions, they had driven the enemy back from the command post and into the tree line several hundred yards away. The overcast finally began to break up, and the new A-1Es, reinforced by Laotian air force propeller-driven T-28s, pounded the nearby woods and fields from which the enemy continued to fire at the defenses. An hour or so later, with the weather clear enough for jet operations, F-104 fighter-bombers joined in the onslaught.²³ []

Even with the weather improved, the jets flew too high and too fast to provide close support. It took an air force FAC sent from Long Tieng in one of the station's Porters to guide them to suspected enemy staging areas and likely routes of advance and retreat. Against these targets, they could deliver not only conventional ordnance but also the napalm that was too dangerous for close support work.²⁴ []

After the A1-Es forced the enemy back down the hill, the defenders counted 33 enemy dead on the perimeter wire, most of them killed by Turner and Haney in the first hour of strafing runs. With that many casualties on the wire itself, it seemed certain that the communists had suffered more than 100 killed. But the garrison had also suffered serious losses, some 20 dead, in addition to [] and twice as many wounded.²⁵ []

Vang Pao flew in after enemy fire on the airstrip had been largely suppressed. He wanted to dispatch patrols to determine the strength of surviving communist elements, but continued fire from the neighboring tree lines made progress slow. The air force FAC directing the F-104s thought the enemy too

²¹ CHECO Report. []

²² Ibid. []

²³ Ibid. [] credited Agency air operations officers— [] Vientiane—with a major contribution to this success. They relayed Na Khang's requests for specific ordnance to match the targets to be struck and assured that A1-E arrivals at the target were properly spaced to allow maximum time over target. []

²⁴ [] The CHECO report, [] gives the Hmong casualties as eight killed and 24 wounded. []

²⁵ [] CHECO Report []

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scattered to be able to renew the attack that night, but this represented little more than an educated guess.²⁶

A search of the enemy dead yielded documents that illustrated an attack plan involving at least 600 men. It appeared that some lack of coordination, perhaps owing to the unfamiliar terrain, had disrupted the intended three-pronged operation. As the day wore on, the question became that of enemy intentions when darkness fell: if he still had the numbers and the will, he might defy the air bombardment and renew the attack.²⁷

Vang Pao and his advisers, with painful memories of the earlier loss of Na Khang, hoped to avoid a second retreat. This would require immediate reinforcement, and at Long Tieng coordinated the airlift, first getting the wounded out of Na Khang, then sending in Vang Pao's reinforcements by C-123 transport. Carrying ammunition and additional weapons as well as troops, the shuttle continued until dusk, and the garrison regrouped to mount another defense.²⁸

The decision to fight left unresolved the question of what to do with the American contingent, which by noon had grown to three.

had persuaded a CASI Porter pilot to bring him in while the strip was still under fire. They landed and made a momentary stop while dropped through the floor hatch. The pilot then jammed the throttle forward and took off on the stretch of airstrip still remaining to him. A little later, were joined by an assistant army attaché, a captain named Reed.²⁹

Ted Shackley, responsible for enforcing the general prohibition on CIA advisers in combat, had consented to leaving the three men there for the remainder of the day, but ordered them to leave before dark. appealed this with the vehement protest that their withdrawal would cripple Hmong and Lao morale and gravely reduce the prospects—otherwise very good—of a successful defense. Captain Reed supported him, and the COS, accepting the argument, took the matter to Ambassador Sullivan. Well aware of the consequences for himself if any of his staff were lost that night, the ambassador gave his approval. But, "if they're gone tomorrow morning," he told Shackley, "so are you."³⁰

Someone, it is not clear who, communicated this sense of urgency to 7th Air Force commander Lt. Gen. William Momyer, who that night diverted a C-130

26 27 Ibid. 28 Ibid. 29 Ibid. 30 Ibid. Shackley later told of the ambassador's response. ~~SECRET//MR~~

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"Lamplighter" flare ship from its mission in the Panhandle. The Lamplighter used its powerful flares to turn night into day for the A-26 bombers that spent the night bombing and strafing likely enemy assembly points. If the communists were planning another try, this show of force changed their minds, and the night passed in relative tranquility.³¹ []

Next morning, the grim attrition of enemy forces resumed, as Vang Pao put one of his men in a spotter plane to serve as forward air guide. He tracked a suspected enemy infiltration route and just over a half mile from Na Khang found a group of North Vietnamese trapped in a box canyon. The communists, carrying some 100 dead and wounded, had apparently lost their way, and now paid the price as a flight of A1-Es led by Capt. John Roberts battered them with rockets, cannon shells, and machinegun fire. Over the two days of engagement, the enemy suffered an estimated 250 killed in action, mostly by airstrikes. [] recalled thinking, when it was all over, that he had just witnessed a classic application of airpower in direct support of troops on the ground.³² []

High Tide []

With the successful defense of Na Khang, Vang Pao reached what the station later judged to be the "high water mark" of his territorial holdings. His forces occupied not only Na Khang, near the Xieng Khouang border with Sam Neua, but Phou Pha Thi, only 25 miles west of Sam Neua town. And each of these strong points had extended its reach to threaten key communist holdings. In the northern part of the province, guerrillas had established outposts from which they controlled territory north and southeast of the town. Farther south, elements fanning out eastward from Na Khang sat astride the alternative land route, east of Route 6, from Sam Neua to the key intersection at Ban Ban.³³ []

The station, long accustomed to the seasonal ebb and flow of the military balance, now thought it saw something new and expressed optimism about a "permanent change in the tactical balance of power" in Laos. No one argued that any combination of US air and indigenous ground forces could expel the North Vietnamese, but to Shackley and his lieutenants it did appear that "the Royal Lao Government has the opportunity to exercise several offensive options in the second military region during the 1967 rainy season." The other members of the country team agreed, attributing the government's improved position largely to better intelligence and to better exploitation of that intelligence by tactical air.³⁴ []

³¹ Ibid; CHECO Report, []

³² CHECO Report, []

³³ []

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One of longtime managers later recalled three other factors that he thought contributed to the new atmosphere of optimism. First was the six-year history of the Hmong operation. In that time, Hanoi's commitment in northern Laos had never reached a level that destroyed the Hmong capacity to mount successful offensive operations. Aside from the attempt on Na Khang, the enemy had done very little during the previous dry season, and in mid-1967 there was no indication of a more vigorous drive in the next.³⁵

Policy imperatives also influenced the station's thinking. The mandate to support the bitter struggle in Vietnam reinforced the human desire to succeed, and disposed people to see the situation in the most favorable possible light. This disposition was supported by the optimism of the Agency's Laotian allies. Vang Pao, especially, wanted to be seen as the man who would recover for the Hmong their ancestral lands.

Souvanna Phouma could look forward to the extension of his government's sway over the countryside. All indulged a tendency to project into the future a gratifying series of local successes against an adversary seen as primarily committed to victory in South Vietnam.³⁶

Finally, there was Ted Shackley's insatiable drive to get things done and to see them as getting done. Jim Glerum, did not view the COS as in any way "cooking the books" in his situation estimates, just disposed by temperament to expect success. His subordinates in Vientiane shared the prevailing outlook, and if any of them were less actively optimistic, they offered no dissenting views.³⁷

In September 1967, as the rains began to subside, the North Vietnamese still showed no sign of having ambitious plans for the dry season. Vang Pao now had some 22,000 CIA-supported irregulars, as well as the FAR units, supplied through the US Military Assistance Program, that he controlled as MR 2 commander. In early October, Ted Shackley evaluated the allied posture of the last 12 months, noting that it had emphasized consolidating Vientiane's holdings in the north while avoiding expansion into "territory which would be easy to seize [but] difficult or impossible to defend." By the same token, it had been

³⁴ Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 326 (18 July 1967) and 543 (29 July 1967), *FRUS 1964-1968*, 598-600 and 604-05. Bill Colby agreed with the Mission's emphasis on the effect of tactical air in his report of a visit to Laos. (Memorandum from CIA to President Johnson, 31 July 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 608-10.)

³⁵ Jim Glerum.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

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Mission policy to abstain from even the appearance of "seriously [threatening] those strategic or critical areas which were under enemy control." All of this, as the station saw it, constituted a kind of "'holding action,' pending some sort of settlement in South Vietnam."³⁸ [redacted]

Without explicitly dismissing the possibility of a negotiated peace, Shackley now found this stance "overtaken by events." Thanks to airpower, the "balance of power in the 'see-saw' war" was leaning toward the Lao. Souvanna's military commanders, who increasingly saw the North Vietnamese, rather than their compatriots in the Pathet Lao, as the enemy, had developed a more aggressive, "expansionist" frame of mind. In this context, the COS thought it time to explore "how far we can go without biting off more than we can chew."³⁹ [redacted]

What he wanted to bite off was the Plain of Jars. Not a traditional Pathet Lao stronghold and only relatively recently seized by the North Vietnamese, its recovery was essential to eventual Hmong economic self-sufficiency and to the preservation of their will to fight. In addition, as long as the enemy held the plain, he threatened the security of Luang Prabang and of the Mekong Valley all the way to Paksane. Vang Pao and his FAR colleagues were confident that, with the requisite air support, they could take and hold the Plain of Jars, and the station proposed to help them do it.⁴⁰ [redacted]

Ambassador Sullivan did not share the prevailing confidence that the Plain of Jars was ripe for picking. Unlike his subordinates, he feared that occupying it would only provoke an overwhelming counterattack, and he therefore consented only to a contingency plan for a "blitz" attack, a kind of land grab to be launched if and when Hanoi appeared to be "on the verge of negotiations" for peace in Indochina. Shackley acknowledged the unlikelihood of implementation on these terms, and Bill Colby, commenting from Headquarters, disputed both Sullivan's proposed timing and the idea that Vang Pao could hold the Plain of Jars, even if the timing were propitious.⁴¹ [redacted]

As Shackley anticipated, the proposal lay dormant, but friendly forces continued to press their advantage well into the dry season. In a bizarre incident in December 1967, some of [redacted] Dam tribal guerrillas infiltrated into the Nam Tha Province capital, by one account intending simply to pay a surreptitious visit to relatives. But the small Pathet Lao garrison fled

38 [redacted]

39 [redacted]

40 [redacted]

41 [redacted]

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upon getting word of their presence, and men occupied the town long enough for him to fly some 3,500 progovernment civilians out by Air America. Meanwhile, other refugees began an overland trek to government-held territory to the southwest.⁴²

The Plain of Jars might be out of reach, but the optimists in both Vientiane and FAR were determined to exploit what they saw as the tactical initiative. For the Lao, and to a considerable extent the US Mission in Vientiane, this would begin by extending the government's writ to areas traditionally under communist control. Washington and the US military establishment, seeing Laos as a sideshow to Vietnam, were more interested in increasing the Laotian contribution to the increasingly violent struggle in South Vietnam. In the heady atmosphere that prevailed after the successful defense of Na Khang, both looked possible.

Bill Lair recalled having been summoned to Shackley's office, probably around the first of December, to discuss a proposal to retake the town of Nam Bac, lying on the river route from Dien Bien Phu to the Mekong west of Luang Prabang. A multibattalion operation would be necessary, and Lair argued that, even if the Lao took the town, they could never hold it. FAR simply could not handle the logistics. Food and ammunition would languish at the airstrip while the North Vietnamese regrouped, and with front line positions lacking supplies, the Lao would fall back under the inevitable counterattack.⁴³

Shackley did not comment on this, just thanked his paramilitary chief for the advice. Whether or not he pressed Lair's view on the idea's proponents—army attaché Col. Clark Baldwin and FAR commander Gen. Ouane Rathikoun—they remained committed to it. As planning progressed, Baldwin asked the station to support the operation with irregular forces. Shackley admonished him not to expect much: Vang Pao was fully extended in the northwest, and the most that Baldwin could hope for was a little help from MR 1 irregulars.⁴⁴

The lure of an unprecedented linkup between government forces in Military Regions 1 and 2 proved too much to resist, and preparations continued. And the station did, in fact, become actively involved: CIA officers joined Gener-

⁴² Conboy, *Shadow War*, 165.

⁴³ Bill Lair.

⁴⁴ Ibid.; Shackley interview, 12 July 1999. Ambassador Sullivan later attributed to Shackley a greater degree of enthusiasm for the project, telling a congressional hearing that the COS was "pretty much single-minded" about reinforcing and holding Nam Bac, and more generally about wanting "to get the North Vietnamese off Lao territory as quickly as possible, and those who didn't get off, get them killed." (Quoted in Timothy N. Castle, *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam*, 83.) The finger-pointing and self-exculpation over Nam Bac, and later over the fall of Site 85, recall the adage about failure as a fatherless child.

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als Ouane and Vang Pao on 8 December to discuss Hmong diversionary operations. SGU elements were deployed around Muong Sai and elsewhere to discourage enemy attention to the dozen FAR battalions, some of them stripped from the Panhandle, that participated in the move on Nam Bac. Meeting little resistance, FAR invested the town a few days later and set up a defensive perimeter.⁴⁵

An Attractive Nuisance

Just a month earlier, the US Air Force had put into service the largest facility on Laotian soil aimed at direct support of the war in Vietnam. The impetus for it had arisen gradually. In February 1967, 26 American and South Vietnamese battalions had launched Operation Junction City, until then the biggest ground operation of the war in South Vietnam. But the grievous attrition of communist forces in this and subsequent combat produced no measurable decline in the enemy's will and capacity to pursue the war. With the enemy defying the intensified effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the air offensive against the North took on increasing importance.⁴⁶

Chronically bad weather over North Vietnam had always hampered the bombing campaign known as Rolling Thunder. The air force hoped to find the solution in a guidance system that permitted accurate bombardment of targets obscured by cloud cover. But this would require a ground installation closer than any potential site in South Vietnam. With Vang Pao occupying much of Sam Neua, the air force proposed to expand its use of Phou Pha Thi, the dominant terrain feature that already hosted a TACAN navigational aid.⁴⁷

As a guide to bombers attacking North Vietnam, the new system, called the TSQ-81, would represent a major escalation in American use of Laotian territory. Ambassador Sullivan, certain that Souvanna Phouma would reject it, resisted the idea for several months. He also worried about the risk to the installation itself, which he thought would surely invite communist ground attack. But in the optimistic atmosphere that prevailed in mid-1967, the air force found the risks acceptable.⁴⁸

Secretary Rusk, the object of intense military lobbying, ultimately sided with the Defense Department and in June instructed Sullivan to get Souvanna's agreement. It took another month, but Souvanna finally gave in

He offered also to

⁴⁵ Bill Lair; Shackley interview;

⁴⁶ Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 41-42.

⁴⁷ Memorandum from Ambassador Sullivan to Assistant Secretary Bundy, "Limitations on Military Actions in Laos," 1 May 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 569-72; Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 26.

⁴⁸ Sullivan memorandum to Bundy. The TSQ-81 was the air-mobile version of the MSQ-77.

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provide "electronic camouflage" to conceal the radar's purpose. "Scrambled" transmissions to aircraft flying over the Gulf of Tonkin would be processed and relayed as guidance to the bombers approaching their targets.⁴⁹

Hanoi might still infer the radar's purpose, but enciphered signals would at least allow pro forma denial. The pretense of Laotian neutrality would also be screened by American denials or refusal to comment, or by professions of ignorance from Souvanna, should the radar's presence be publicly revealed. These devices, Sullivan wrote, "should bring all of us angels together on the head of the same pin."⁵⁰

There were more concrete issues to be resolved, especially that of security. With Chinook and Jolly Green Giant helicopters already ferrying components to Phou Pha Thi from the strip at Na Khang,

He talked with Ambassador Sullivan and COS Shackley, both of whom dismissed any possibility that the Hmong irregulars at and around Phou Pha Thi could defend the facility against sustained assault. The Hmong would do their best to provide early warning and delay an attack, but, in the worst case, the gear would have to be destroyed and the staff evacuated. Sullivan emphasized that he would order the site closed upon the appearance of a serious enemy threat.⁵¹

Meanwhile, several hundred guerrillas directed by the Hmong command post at Phou Pha Thi would patrol an early-warning line on a 4-mile radius from the installation. The radar, situated at the crest of the mountain, would be protected on three sides by sheer cliffs, and on the fourth by defenders

On 1 November, Operation Commando Club, as the air force called it, began directing F-105 fighter-bombers in raids over North Vietnam. Beset by technical problems, it was also afflicted by the shaky morale of its staff, isolated on their mountaintop only 15 miles from North Vietnamese territory. Pilots also found it unsettling to have to follow its radioed commands on a fixed course, with no deviation permitted to avoid antiaircraft fire. Nevertheless, Commando Club directed 130 sorties during its first month.⁵³

⁴⁹ Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 7403 (3 June 1967) and 108 (6 July 1967), *FRUS 1964-1968*, 581-82 and 593-94.

⁵⁰ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 108.

⁵¹ Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 67-68.

⁵² Shackley interview; Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 57-58.

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The emphasis on North Vietnam did not last, as that priority almost immediately began to give way to raids on Laotian targets. In December, more than three-quarters of some 440 sorties—including 16 striking around Phou Pha Thi itself—hit enemy locations in northeastern Laos.⁵⁴ []

In mid-December, with the communists already probing the Phou Pha Thi perimeter, the momentum began to shift. Growing pressure on the Nam Bac defenses raised the specter of another humiliating rout for the FAR, and the US Mission began having second thoughts. It now urged on the Lao its view that Nam Bac “should not be defended at all costs.” Chargé d'affaires Robert Hurwitch expressed confidence that the Lao would adopt this view, but three weeks later, in early January 1968, they were still hanging on.⁵⁵ []

The station was preoccupied, at this point, with helping FAR move in reinforcements. Apparently now more optimistic about a successful defense than those who had sponsored the operation, it was trying to persuade the FAR command to “expand its defensive perimeter through aggressive ground operations.” These, it was hoped, would prevent further attrition and the eventual loss of Nam Bac. Vang Pao was already trying to help, having launched diversionary operations both east and west of the besieged garrison.⁵⁶ []

Yet More Trouble []

As the noose around Nam Bac grew tighter, communist forces in the south assaulted Lao Ngam, the linchpin of [] previously successful Se Done Valley security project, and inflicted almost 100 casualties. On Christmas Day of 1967, an attack on Muong Phalane, east of Savannakhet, disabled the US Air Force TACAN navigational radar there; the installation near Saravane had been forced to evacuate three weeks earlier. It suddenly appeared, as Bill Sullivan acknowledged in characteristically off-hand fashion, that Hanoi's toleration of continued government advances might be coming to an end. NVA intentions were not yet clear, he wrote, but the “indications so far are that we shall probably be in for a rather lively time.”⁵⁷ []

It turned out to be livelier than anyone, except perhaps Bill Lair, had expected. Neither last-minute reinforcements nor Vang Pao's diversions

⁵³ Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 61 and 98–101. Apparently sketchily briefed about living and working conditions, at least some of the 15-odd staff made prohibited visits to the village at the foot of Phou Pha Thi, which may have contributed to the communists' rapid identification of them. (Castle, 90–92, and 98–99.) []

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 98–99. []

⁵⁵ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 3326, 16 December 1967, *FRUS 1964–1968*, 639–40; []

⁵⁷ Vientiane Embassy Telegram 3326; Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 27. []

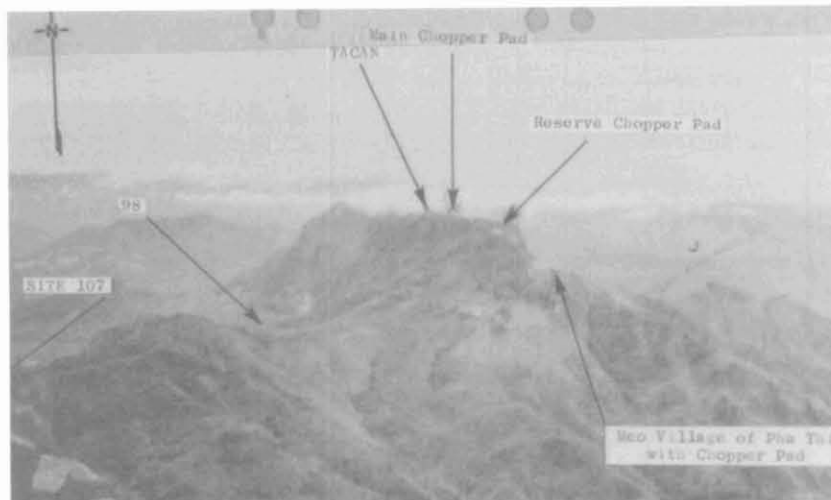
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enabled the FAR battalions at Nam Bac to mount an effective defense, and on 14 January 1968, a massive North Vietnamese assault shattered the garrison. The effort to link government forces in Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang Provinces ended with the loss of all of the government's reserves in the worst defeat of the war.⁵⁸

The enemy had already turned its attention to Phou Pha Thi (Site 85) and in mid-December, the station had committed one of its new SGU battalions to retake some ground and reinforce other SGU elements east of Route 6. One of several efforts designed to "throw the enemy off balance," this drew North Vietnamese counterattacks, including an assault in battalion strength. The inexperienced Hmong unit began to break, and the station withdrew it to Na Khang, hoping to replace it with two other, more battle-hardened, SGUs.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, the three sheer cliffs of Phou Pha Thi meant that an attack in



Phou Pha Thi (Site 85)

force would be a costly one, if the Hmong put up a vigorous defense of the one slope that offered access to the top. On 12 January, clearly hoping to find a more economical way to disable the radars at the top, the North Vietnamese launched a bizarre air raid. Two antiquated AN-2 "Colt" biplanes made sev-

⁵⁸ Bill Lair; CIA Information Cable, 30 January 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 649-50;

⁵⁹

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eral passes, dropping mortar shells as makeshift bombs on the radar installations and strafing [] bivouac below the peak.⁶⁰ []

Having inflicted minor damage, the attackers fled. Air America helicopter pilot Capt. Ted Moore applied the expertise he had acquired as an army gunship pilot in Vietnam. He pursued a lumbering Colt until he brought it within range of the M-2 automatic carbine wielded by his flight mechanic, Glenn Woods, who began firing through the open side door. Apparently hit, the Colt began losing altitude and soon crashed into a ridge near the Vietnamese border. The other, safely distant from Moore's helicopter, then also crashed, perhaps the victim of earlier ground fire from Site 85.⁶¹ []

TSQ-81 operation was not interrupted, and the North Vietnamese accepted that only some kind of ground operation could be relied on to take it out. Enemy pressure on the Site 85 perimeter cost the defenders several outposts, but bad weather hid the main enemy threat, the extension of the road leading west from Sam Neua town. By mid-February, when Vang Pao and CIA learned of it, the road was only 2,000 yards short of bringing North Vietnamese artillery within range of Phou Pha Thi. By early March, the North Vietnamese had the equivalent of seven battalions within striking distance of Phou Pha Thi, and there had been a skirmish within 3 miles of the mountain.⁶² []

As Shackley and Sullivan had already told [] Site 85 would not withstand a determined North Vietnamese assault, and the ambassador now wanted a "date certain" beyond which the radar crews could no longer stay. The station calculated the likely timing of an attack by the pace of road construction, and set 10 March as the deadline for evacuation. When he was apprised of this on 7 March, Gen. William Momyer, 7/13th Air Force commander, had already essentially abandoned Commando Club's *raison d'être*, guiding raids on North Vietnam. In its last 10 days on the air, the TSQ-81 at Site 85 operated almost exclusively in its own defense, directing just three strikes on North Vietnam while guiding 153 missions in Laos, mostly around Phou Pha Thi. Nevertheless, Momyer objected to what appar-

⁶⁰ Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 76-78; []

⁶¹ [] The station briefly thought that Na Khang, as the major support base for Sam Neua operations, would take the first blow, but this interpretation was quickly abandoned. []

⁶² [] The same document cites the "forward intelligence teams" dispatched into enemy territory north and west of Sam Neua town; these apparently did not encounter the road-building activity. []

"Appraisal of the security of the guerrilla base at Phou Pha Thi, Site 85, as of 9 March 1968," *FRUS 1964-1968*, 664-65. []

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ently struck him as an ill-considered decision to fold the tent, and issued no evacuation order.⁶³

On the contrary, even as the enemy pushed his road construction toward the mountain, the air force was arguing that a slightly larger team would permit 24-hour operations. The ambassador had acceded, and an augmented relief unit of 16 men went to Site 85 on 4 March.

The next evening, an NVA artillery, mortar, and rocket barrage sent the diving for cover. With the help of FAC Sgt. Roger Huffman——and a map taken from a dead North Vietnamese a month earlier, they began to guide A-26s and F-4 Phantom jets in airstrikes on suspected enemy locations. But the communist barrage resumed at about 2000 hours, and lasted for another hour and a half despite continued airstrikes.⁶⁵

That night, the 7/13th Air Force was still opposing an evacuation order when Ambassador Sullivan ordered nine of the Commando Club men to be pulled out the next morning. It was too late. Still looking for an alternative to an infantry assault up the defended slope, the North Vietnamese had already dispatched a platoon of sappers to scale the presumptively impregnable northwestern slope. At about four in the morning, they opened fire on the TSQ-81 and TACAN facilities.⁶⁶

unable to reach the site by field telephone, could only listen to the firing from the darkness below. At dawn, and Maj. Souya Vang led a few Hmong up the trail while stayed

⁶³

Shackley later said that last-minute orders to hold Site 85 had come directly from the White House; this may be related to Castle's assertion of administration pressure on the air force to improve the effectiveness of Rolling Thunder. Momyer's deputy, Gen. William Lindley, advised General Ryan at PACAF that "moving the [TSQ-81] is out of the question for 6 to 9 month period," while Lieutenant Colonel Clayton, without saying that he had, in fact, asked Sullivan for permission to evacuate, claimed he was helpless to order that action without ambassadorial approval. (Shackley interview; Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 62, 104-105, and 108-109.)

⁶⁴ Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 97-98, and 107.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Chapter 9;

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to man the radios. Arriving unharmed at the facilities above, [] saw no bodies and no damage except for a burning generator. But a Hmong who ventured beyond the living quarters drew fire and was wounded, and part of the team escorted him back down. An enemy soldier came into sight, then as suddenly disappeared after a blast from [] shotgun. [] was then himself wounded in the leg, but made his way back down the path []

Daylight gave the advantage back to the air force. [] thinking the site crew all dead, directed A-26 and A-1E strikes that—inaccurate enough to wound several [] Hmong defenders—nevertheless forced the North Vietnamese to seek cover. At this point, USAF Jolly Green Giant helicopters, their pilots unaware of the sapper attack and still under instructions to evacuate part of the Site 85 staff, were already on their way.⁶⁸ []

Ken Wood, flying an Air America UH-1 out of Long Tieng, also had no inkling of the Site 85 disaster until he heard the beeping signal of a survival radio on the air force guard frequency. Arriving at Phou Pha Thi, Wood found A-1Es trying to silence the site's 12.7mm machinegun, captured and being fired by the North Vietnamese.⁶⁹ []

Captain Wood saw light reflected from a survival kit mirror on the ledge below the crest and maneuvered in toward it, a mile above the valley floor. He hovered over the ledge while Chief M.Sgt. Richard Etchberger used the rescue cable to lower himself to the ledge. He hoisted a wounded technician, then another, up to the helicopter. Then, with a third survivor who dashed down from his hiding place at the last moment and simply grabbed the cable, Etchberger was lifted off the ledge. Throughout this exercise, made even more perilous by wind and fog, the Huey had taken no fire. But as it rose from the relative shelter of the cliff, automatic weapons fire tore through its belly, and Sergeant Etchberger suffered a fatal bullet wound. []

[]

⁶⁷ Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 125-27; []

⁶⁸ Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 125, 127. []

⁶⁹ These accounts of helicopter operations on 11 March are taken from *One Day Too Long*, Chapter 10. []

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Hmong units continued to skirmish with the communists around Phou Pha Thi, but Vang Pao's hold on the area was now broken. The air force assumed that the missing technicians were dead, and it directed bombing missions against the remains of its facilities on the mountaintop. Ambassador Sullivan told Washington that the fall of Phou Pha Thi opened "a new time of troubles for Vang Pao and the Meos of Military Region 2." He reminded the Department that the scale and intensity of the North Vietnamese attack reflected Hanoi's determination to eliminate the "attractive nuisance" represented by the TSQ-81. The "vast uprooting of [Meo] human resources and abandonment of useful territory" was therefore the "direct result" of American, not Laotian, operational interests.⁷⁰

Na Khang could be expected to become the next target, and Sullivan and the station doubted it could hold off the estimated seven battalions the North Vietnamese could bring to bear on it. Vang Pao asked for "maximum air-strikes" to save it and other newly vulnerable positions. Some of his proposed targets lay in or near civilian population centers previously declared off limits by the prime minister. But the general won the support of King Savang Vatthana, and Souvanna, in any case, had begun to fear that Vang Pao might be considering a major contraction of his lines of defense. Accordingly, the prime minister began working with the US Mission to meet the general's needs in hopes of minimizing territorial losses in Sam Neua and northern Xieng Khouang. On 17 March, the 7th Air Force committed 166 aircraft to a series of raids in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces.⁷¹

The station reported encouraging results from the first strikes, but the embassy worried that the new enthusiasm displayed by both the king and his prime minister reflected "the amateur's overconfidence in the effectiveness of airpower." While Souvanna had earlier "been cold-blooded about civilians in North Vietnam ('bomb the dikes')," Chargé Hurwitch had not until then "heard him reflect quite such a diet of raw meat regarding his own population." The US Mission would in any case "continue to avoid villages" and to "continue the meticulous care and cautious judgment exercised by [the] Ambassador in approving targets within Laos." It would do so despite the sudden promise of more combat air resources that resulted from parallel developments in neighboring South Vietnam.⁷²

⁷⁰ Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 5073 (13 March 1968) and 5136 (14 March 1968), *FRUS 1964-1968*, 667-69.

⁷¹ Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 5136 (14 March 1968) and 5187 (16 March 1968), *FRUS 1964-1968*, 668-71;

⁷² Vientian Embassy Telegram 6562, 16 May 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 722.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Holding Operation

When North Vietnamese roadbuilding east of Phou Pha Thi signaled the attack on Site 85, two of the most consequential events of the war in Vietnam had just taken place. On 21 January 1968, the communists besieged the US Marines at Khe Sanh, due east of Savannakhet and just inside the Vietnamese border with Laos. Nine days later, with the Marines engaged in bloody but inconclusive battle in the highlands, Hanoi launched the nationwide Tet offensive.¹

The marines held at Khe Sanh, at a heavy price in dead and wounded. And the Tet assault was quickly beaten back—indeed, the indigenous Viet Cong, which furnished most of the attackers, suffered catastrophic losses. But widespread initial successes—a raiding party even penetrated the grounds of the US embassy—shattered the confidence of the Saigon government. Abetted by the American casualties at Khe Sanh, it broke the will of President Lyndon Johnson as well. On 31 March, he announced that he would not be a candidate for reelection, called for accelerated peace talks, and ordered the suspension of airstrikes above the 20th parallel in North Vietnam.²

On 12 May, the United States launched bilateral peace talks with the North Vietnamese—Saigon was not included—in Paris. With these developments, President Johnson abandoned, in fact if not by declaration, the expulsion of the North Vietnamese Army from South Vietnam as an objective of its war effort. As a substitute for military victory, he would settle for an agreement that gave Saigon the best possible chance of surviving after the withdrawal of US combat forces.³

¹ Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 44–47. For an account of the Tet offensive and its effect on the course of the Vietnam war, see the author's *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*.

² Ibid.

³ Special National Intelligence Estimate, *COMMUNIST INTENTIONS IN LAOS*, 21 March 1968, *FRUS 1964–1968*, 674–78.

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With traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail continuing to increase, the prospects for achieving even this ambiguous goal would be doubtful. The beginning of negotiations, therefore, was accompanied by greater pressure on the US Mission in Laos to limit and perhaps even reduce the infiltration of men and materiel. The United States had never acknowledged its air operations over Laos, and these were not included in the presidential moratorium regarding North Vietnam. The suspension of Rolling Thunder—the US bombing campaign against North Vietnam—meant that more aircraft should now be available for operations in Laos.⁴ []

Although the air force promised to deploy more aircraft in Laos, the CIA station in Vientiane continued to complain that both helicopter lift and combat sorties were falling short of demand. In addition, the 7th Air Force was proposing a full-scale interdiction program for northeastern Laos even while it ignored station appeals for night sorties against trucks that were inviting attack by traversing the roads in that sector with their lights on.⁵ []

The Hmong Air Force []

As it happened, the controversy over the level of US Air Force support in Laos was accompanied early in 1968 by the commissioning of the first two Hmong T-28 pilots. [] Bill Lair, eager as always to build indigenous capabilities, had laid the groundwork in late 1964. The policy restrictions on US air support, at that time, encouraged the creation of an indigenous tactical air arm, and Lair set to work in his usual improvisational fashion. He obtained two salvaged Piper Cub trainers [] and used [] only qualified pilot to give basic training to 12 candidates supplied by Vang Pao.⁶ []

[] at the time the station's liaison with Vang Pao [] objected to the new program. The leadership-starved guerrilla organization needed the talent that the new activity drained from it, offering only a marginal addition to Hmong combat potential. In addition, he saw the creation of an air force, however tiny, as inflating Hmong notions of the kind of weaponry needed to fight the communists. It might also arouse the suspicion of the Lao, perennially nervous about Hmong separatism: a Hmong plane sent to bomb the North Vietnamese might fly south to bomb Vientiane.⁷ []

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⁶ Bill Lair; []

⁷ [] interview. []

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Lair saw the boost to Hmong self-sufficiency as the overriding equity, and began the arduous task of teaching eager and intelligent students who had never heard of an airfoil or operated a reciprocating engine. It took two years to compensate for the cultural and educational gap, and only a few of the trainees made the grade. When work was finally done, Heinie Aderholt's special operations squadron took over for instruction in the T-28. Lair was gratified to hear that the Hmong still in the program had excelled in the gunnery phase; Aderholt said they were far better than the South Vietnamese pilots also in training



Hmong student pilot (foreground) and Thai instructor

This first training cycle produced the best of the handful of Hmong pilots, whose endurance and heroism made an enormous contribution to the morale and probably the effectiveness of tribal forces on the ground. Whether they might have used their skill and courage to better effect as guerrilla commanders cannot be judged. Whatever the case, the best of them, Ly Lue, flew several thousand sorties before being shot down and killed over the Plain of Jars in July 1969. Based at Long Tieng, he had routinely flown in one week the 100 combat missions required of an American pilot over the course of a one-year tour of duty.⁹

⁸ Bill Lair,

⁹ Ibid.;

In the first six months of 1969 alone, Ly Lue had survived one crash landing and one bailout from a crippled airplane. In the end, none of the Hmong pilots survived, partly because of their flamboyant style. Case officer recalled that they would do aerobatics low over the Long Tieng airstrip. They also tended to land too fast, and one, unable to stop, smacked into a stack of fuel drums at the end of the strip. Another case officer, with a cigar—presumably unlit—in his jaw, dashed through the flood of gasoline and pulled the pilot to safety in what called "one of the bravest acts I witnessed [as an upcountry officer] in Laos."

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The growing importance of airpower reflected both the addition of air assets and the deterioration of the balance of forces on the ground. North Vietnamese victories at Nam Bac and Phou Pha Thi had been followed by increased communist pressure throughout the country. During the two years ending in mid-1968, enemy forces—Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese—had grown from 56,000 to 100,000, while friendly forces, both FAR and irregular, had increased by only 4,500, to a total of 110,000. The superiority of the 30,000 North Vietnamese infantry in the enemy order of battle far outweighed the slight numerical advantage enjoyed by the government forces, and FAR commanders had, for the most part, hunkered down into a timorous crouch.¹⁰

In this atmosphere, the US Mission had little choice but to bolster the regulars with CIA-sponsored SGUs, including the seven in MR 2 and the five in the Panhandle. The optimism of the previous autumn had now entirely evaporated, and a draft Headquarters memorandum concluded on the bleak note that "the guerrilla operation in the north has survived largely on the sufferance of the North Vietnamese. It will continue only as long as the enemy calculates that the harm done [to him] is not worth the effort to stop it."¹¹

A Changing of the Guard

In the midst of all the cyclical changes, there had been just one constant. The tactical balance might change twice a year, and ambassadors and chiefs of station every two years, but the field management of the war in Laos had remained in the same hands since 1961. Bill Lair, soon joined by Pat Landry, had served [redacted] and every subsequent COS, [redacted] [redacted] Unsympathetic to what he saw as Ted Shackley's preoccupation with a quantitative buildup that risked a major reaction from Hanoi, Lair became restive. He did not actively oppose the new approach—indeed, he loyally supported it and stayed [redacted] through Shackley's tenure. He could presumably have stayed when the COS departed, but chose, for reasons not clear, to leave at the same time. He left [redacted] in mid-1968 for a sabbatical at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.¹²

¹⁰¹¹¹² Bill Lair, [redacted]~~SECRET//MR~~

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Vang Pao and Bill Lair at farewell baci.
(Courtesy of Bill Lair)

1968; Pat Landry at right

No one is irreplaceable, and the program continued. But Lair seems to have enjoyed unique standing with Vang Pao [redacted] something that owed as much to his modest demeanor and personal rectitude as to his acknowledged competence. Jim Glerum recalled that [redacted] had a nickname for him that meant "the man who never lies." Watching the proceedings at numerous farewell ceremonies in 1968, Glerum concluded that Lair enjoyed more respect from foreign counterparts than any other American he'd ever known.¹³ [redacted]

Pat Landry replaced Lair, bringing to the job the same single-minded dedication but a very different personal style. He was even more impatient with bureaucracy than Lair had been, and Jim Glerum, as the new deputy chief, found himself running not only [redacted] administration but also liaison with Air America and the US Air Force. In addition, he dealt with the military aid mission to Laos, nominally a part of the Mission in Thailand and headed by Brig. Gen. John Vessey, later chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Vessey proved to be an exceptionally able and cooperative colleague, one who would loyally defend [redacted] logistical requirements against MACV skeptics at SEACORD meetings. But Pat wanted no part of the unending difficulties with leadtimes and delivery schedules and delegated the logistical problem to Glerum.¹⁴ [redacted]

¹³ Jim Glerum. Lair was not proportionately rewarded with promotions, leaving [redacted] as a GS-15. (Landry interview) [redacted]

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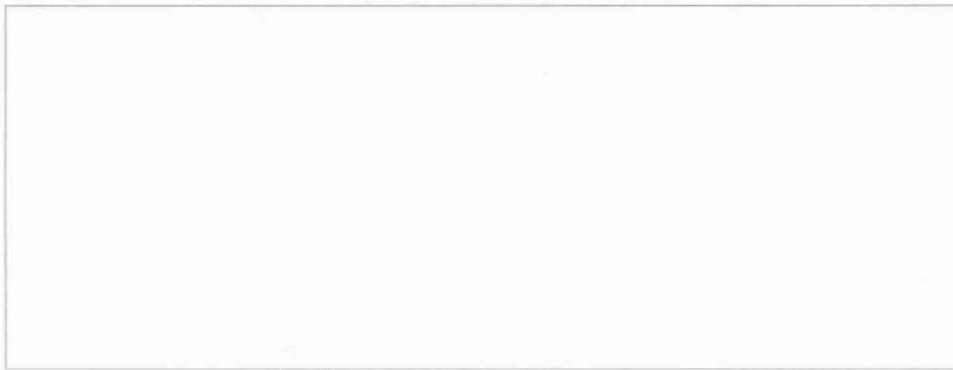
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Air America hangars (upper left), C-130 transport, and T-28 attack plane at Udorn.

[redacted] Landry's style made no concessions to military protocol. He often covered his beefy frame with a sarong-like garment, worn by the Thai as pajamas; shower shoes completed the uniform. He habitually carried a swagger stick, and Glerum recalled a pair of visiting air force colonels being startled almost out of their chairs when the sharp crack of the stick against the door to his office signaled that [redacted] was joining their meeting.¹⁵ [redacted]



In Pat Landry, field case officers still had a familiar and admired patron [redacted] and Lair's departure made less difference to them than it did to the Hmong [redacted]. Dealing with the pressures of a seven-day-a-week war, [redacted] at Long Tieng pursued the usual agenda, the first and most endur-

¹⁴ Jim Glerum; Landry interview. [redacted]

¹⁵ Jim Glerum. [redacted]

¹⁶ Ibid.; Landry interview. [redacted]

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ing imperative being the reconciliation of Vang Pao's endless demands with the perennial constraints on resources. At the same time, it had to keep the liaison functioning, and bore the burden of developing the intelligence on which Air America and air force pilots relied for their survival.

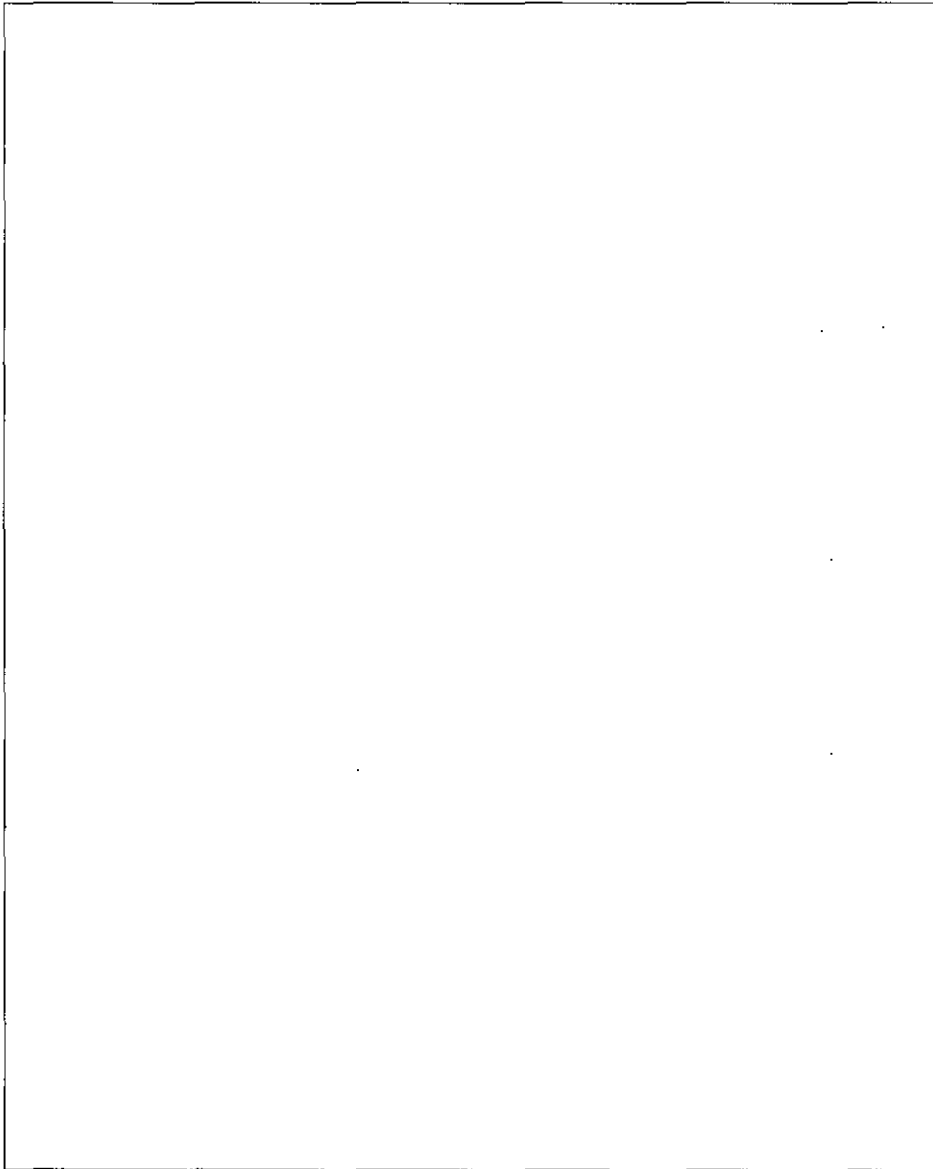
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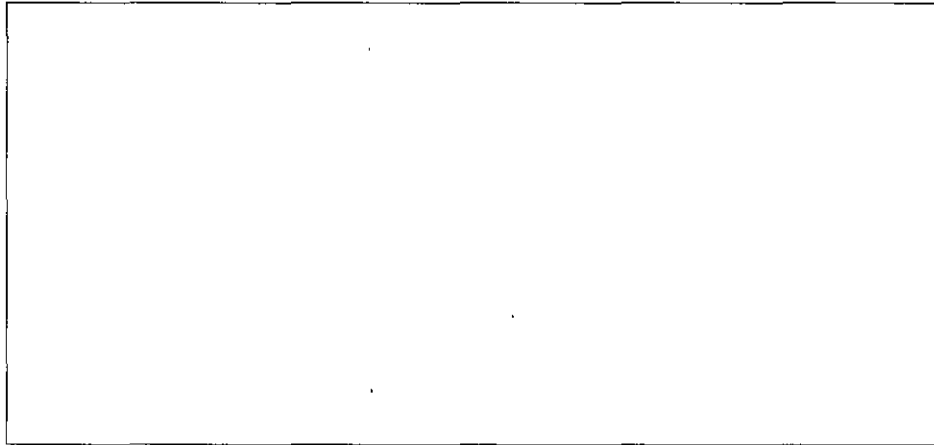
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The fraternal upcountry atmosphere resulted as much from the intermittent danger as from the austerity of life on an isolated mountain. One case officer, trying to disarm a bunch of sullen Kong Le neutralists being moved by helicopter, had to watch impassively as they filed past him, tossing at his feet the hand grenades they were forbidden to carry on board. Even the most routine mission could provide moments of genuine fright, as when a giant M-80 firecracker, intended to open a sack of leaflets being dropped from the air, blew back into the aircraft before it exploded.²⁵

There was also the constant threat of ground fire. once mistakenly assumed that a mountain pass north of the Plain of Jars was still secure, two or three days after his last flight through it, and he allowed his HU-1 "Huey" helicopter pilot to fly across it. The peril of taking things for granted was promptly demonstrated by the three rounds that cracked in through the floor, all within inches of and one wounding a Hmong trooper leaning against the back of seat.²⁶

Labor Relations

The COS who displayed the greatest need for acceptance by his men had considerable difficulty earning it. Replacing Ted Shackley in mid-1968, Lawrence Devlin was seen, even by those who disliked his histrionic bent, as a manager deeply concerned for the success of the program and the welfare of his people. But this concern, certainly genuine, did not prevent an outbreak, after an introductory *baci* hosted by Vang Pao, of the roughhouse behavior already familiar to the troops at Long Tieng.²⁷

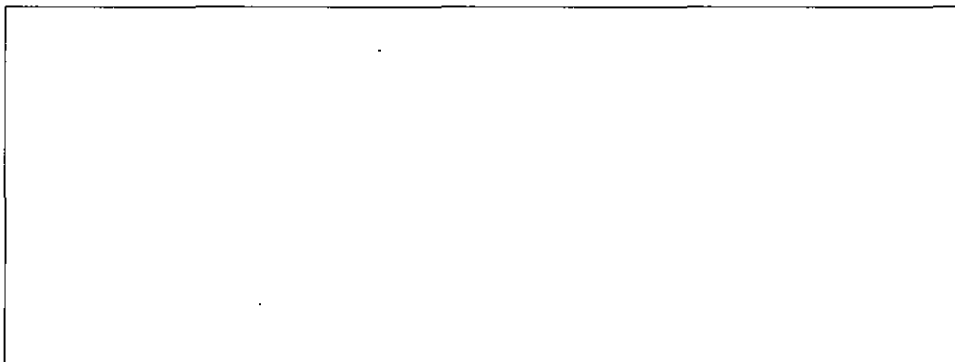
²⁴ Jim Glerum; Landry interview.

²⁵ memoir.

²⁶ Ibid.

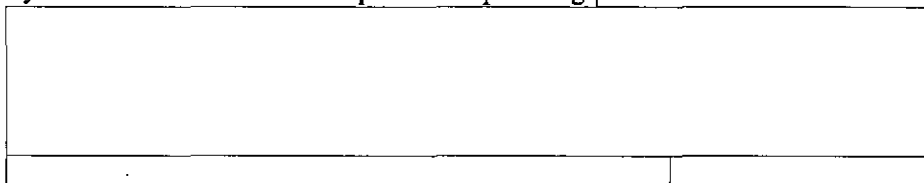
²⁷ Jim Glerum; interviews.

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Devlin became more involved than his predecessors in the tactical decisions [redacted] and he would query the base about such things as the emplacement of 105mm howitzers around Long Tieng or Ban Na. The subsequent arrival of Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley reinforced this proclivity, for he and Devlin had worked closely together in the then-Republic of the Congo in the early 1960s, and both liked the nuts and bolts of operations. As Pat Landry recalled it, they would propose multibattalion operations that Hmong military competence simply did not permit. To fend these off, [redacted] occasionally resorted to stratagems, such as a fictitious claim that certain unit commanders were refusing to participate.²⁹ [redacted]

Landry and Glerum might be nostalgic for the more permissive style of previous chiefs in Vientiane, but they accepted the new man's right to run things as he chose. Nevertheless, they saw no need to invite even more participation by the COS in the details of operational planning. [redacted]



Devlin sensed these proprietary feelings, and later regretted that he had not more aggressively exploited what he said was his mandate from Headquarters to "take a look" at the management of the paramilitary project. He did, however, act when he discovered that Landry had an unacknowledged Thai family. He arranged to have Pat transferred to Vietnam, but this went awry when Dick Helms visited in late 1970. The DCI announced that the White House had

²⁸ [redacted] interviews; Lawrence Devlin, interview by the author, Moratico, Virginia, 5 August 1999 (hereafter cited as Devlin interview). [redacted]

²⁹ Jim Glerum; Landry interview. [redacted]

³⁰ Ibid. [redacted]

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already intervened to keep Landry at his post; it seemed that

Vang Pao Goes to Washington

In the patronizing language that tended to obscure his genuine regard for Vang Pao, Ambassador Sullivan announced on 19 September 1968 that "our little guerrilla general" would be visiting Washington on the way back from his son's graduation from a *lycée* in France. Sullivan wanted "the best fighter . . . in Southeast Asia" to get the Legion of Merit, and he recommended a lunch for the general to be attended by senior Pentagon brass, including General Westmoreland and JCS chairman General Wheeler.³²

Vang Pao saw not only Wheeler but also White House adviser Walt Rostow, and during these visits he pressed his hawkish views on bombing North Vietnam and on the Hmong resistance activity there that he had consistently championed. He got a muted response to these ideas, both at the Pentagon and at State, but Senator Karl Mundt (R-SD) made no secret of his enthusiasm for resistance and his opposition to a bombing moratorium. Vang Pao's Agency escorts had already billed Mundt as a "powerful figure" on several committees responsible for Agency appropriations, and they now had the ticklish job of reasserting the executive branch position on these issues without antagonizing Mundt or disheartening Vang Pao.³³

Stuart Methven, Vang Pao's first CIA acquaintance and one of his Washington escorts, told the station he thought the visit had "in some measure reassured" the general about the US will to stay the course in Indochina. But Vang Pao's positions on Hmong resistance in North Vietnam and on bombing still clearly differed from those of his Washington hosts. Indeed, it is not clear that Methven succeeded in persuading him that objectives and forces would both have to be scaled down if a peace agreement came within reach, for the general continued to argue for a campaign to retake the Plain of Jars.³⁴

Only days after the general's return to Laos, President Johnson made his 31 October announcement of an unconditional suspension of bombing

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attacks on the North. At this point, CIA had suffered its first battle death in Laos when case officer [redacted] was killed during the June 1968 recapture of Muong Phalane by FAR and irregular units in the government's "first major victory in a year." Although a success in the Panhandle may have reinforced Vang Pao's impulse to take the offensive against the North Vietnamese, he knew that retaking the Plain of Jars depended on major commitments from FAR and the US Air Force that were not in the cards. Next best would be the recapture of Phou Pha Thi, whose loss had always rankled, and Vang Pao proposed a multibattalion operation to begin before the end of the year.³⁵ [redacted]

Operation PIGFAT [redacted]

It was [redacted] satirizing the air force penchant for grandiose operational codenames, who named Operation PIGFAT; the label alluded to an old joke about cauldrons of boiling pig fat waiting for enemy troops foolish enough to try scaling Phou Pha Thi. A less derisive name would probably not have won the idea a better reception, for neither Vientiane nor Washington was in a mood to embark on an unprecedented dry-season offensive. There was also the question of Hmong morale, eroded by the year's tactical reverses and combat losses.³⁶ [redacted]

Vang Pao was adamant. The mountain was sacred to the Hmong, and must be retaken; it seemed to the station that the general was concerned also for his own political standing, both among the tribesmen and in Vientiane.

[redacted] supported him with an impassioned cable—[redacted]—that went to Headquarters as well as to Vientiane. [redacted] The operation was essential to the morale of the Hmong irregulars, [redacted] argued, and it merited major tactical and transport air support. Should his superiors not accede, the "last centurion," as [redacted] described himself, would have to end his service with the program.³⁷ [redacted]

This *lèse majesté* outraged Devlin, who ordered [redacted] to relieve [redacted]. But Landry sympathized with Long Tieng and procrastinated until the storm passed. Meanwhile, after more emotionally charged correspondence among the four parties, Headquarters came around to supporting the plan, and attention turned in November to obtaining the necessary airlift.³⁸ [redacted]

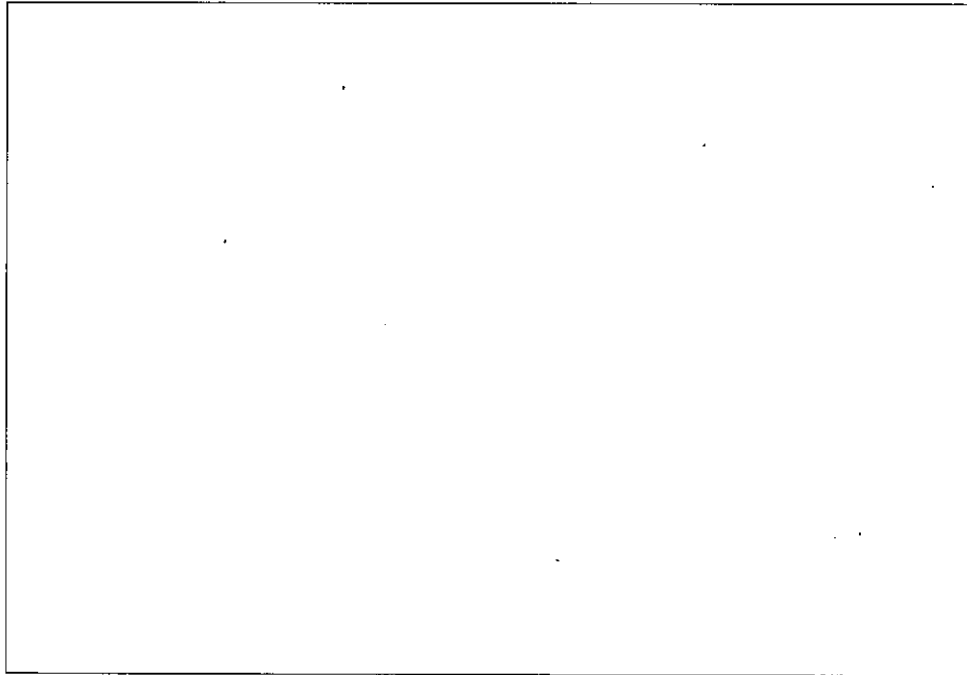
³⁵ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 199; [redacted] interview by the author, McLean, VA, 17 March 1999 (hereafter cited as [redacted] interview); [redacted]

³⁶ [redacted]

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The troops assembled at Long Tieng to be ferried to the staging point at Muong Son, the site west of Phou Pha Thi opened by and others after Na Khang was temporarily abandoned in early 1966. Early on the appointed day in late November, with some of the heavy helicopters already in place, Vang Pao announced that an ancestor had told him in a dream that Muong Son was infested with Vietnamese. Aerial and ground reconnaissance had revealed no such buildup, and threatened with grave personal embarrassment, begged him to proceed. Vang Pao insisted that the North Vietnamese were too strong, and had to tell the air force commander to head back to ³⁹ .

Ten days later, in early December, the omens were better, and approval for the operation had stayed in effect. But PIGFAT remained an ill-starred operation. The three battalions were ferried to Muong Son, but an Air America helicopter was lost when a bundle of hand grenades, wrapped in parachute cloth, fell open as a Hmong trooper disembarked. One grenade lost its pin, and the ensuing explosion detonated 3.5in rockets intended for use in the ground attack. The helicopter turned into a fireball, and all passengers and crew died. On the same day, 8 December, two A-1Es and an F-105 were also lost.⁴⁰

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Trying to help one unit gain the Phou Pha Thi summit in the initial attack, US Air Force attack planes saturated the communist positions. But whenever they broke off to let the Hmong advance, a North Vietnamese machinegun crew would emerge from a cave commanding the final slope to the crest. The Hmong tried again and again, but took heavy casualties without ever reaching the top.⁴¹ [redacted]

Through the rest of December, the Hmong SGU battalions struggled to reach the mesa that had prompted US pilots, seeing it rising above the clouds, to call Phou Pha Thi the "aircraft carrier." One SGU company swung west to try a maneuver similar to that of the North Vietnamese attack on the radar site. They scaled the northwest face of the mountain, but enemy counterattacks soon forced them off. SGU-4 later reported almost 25 percent casualties, including 28 killed, for the month of December.⁴² [redacted]

North Vietnamese forces at the base of the mountain now threatened to flank Vang Pao, who bowed to the inevitable and ordered his men to withdraw. But the North Vietnamese launched no immediate counterattack, and he was at least able to escort out of the area some 9,000 refugees who had been unable to join the exodus the previous March. In mid-January, these were ferried in a massive airlift, using both Air America and USAF helicopters, from Muong Son to the civilian center at Sam Thong near Long Tieng.⁴³ [redacted]

CIA officers debriefed a few of the refugees for information on enemy order of battle. The Hmong said that only a week before Vang Pao's occupation of Muong Son, the area had been crawling with North Vietnamese troops headed home from the Luang Prabang front. Skeptical questioning produced no indication that Vang Pao had planted them to furnish ex post facto justification for the dream-driven postponement. It thus appeared that his ancestor had, indeed, served him as a reliable source.⁴⁴ [redacted]

The station had wanted Operation PIGFAT to produce more than symbolic results. If it succeeded, it would seize the initiative in northeastern Laos and "disrupt the enemy's timetable for his annual dry-season offensive." And indeed it did succeed—mainly by airstrikes—in cutting up three North Vietnamese battalions and inflicting severe losses in materiel before communist reinforcements reversed the momentum. But the best that the station could say about relative combat losses was that enemy casualties exceeded the friendly. This assessment turned out to have substantially overstated the erosion of Hmong morale, but its implication of a deteriorating strategic balance could not be faulted.⁴⁵ [redacted]

⁴¹ [redacted] interview; [redacted]

⁴² [redacted]

⁴³ [redacted]

⁴⁴ [redacted]

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~~SECRET//MR~~A HOLDING OPERATION **Defending the Meo Heartland**

Operation PIGFAT had already ended when FE division chief Bill Nelson wrote to Devlin just after New Year's Day in 1969. Cast in the form of a tasking letter, the message betrayed Washington's apprehension about the vitality of Souvanna Phouma's government. To Nelson, the prime minister and some of his associates looked content to sit and "wait for the next round" while the communists were "busily building the political infrastructure needed to control the provinces and National Assembly" after a cease-fire. Admitting that "the magnitude and frustrations of such a task must be overwhelming," Nelson said that the station "must do all it can now to get at the basis of this apparent complacency and identify and develop the type of political leadership needed to save Laos from its own self-devouring fate."⁴⁶

CIA had first addressed the problem of political lassitude and factionalism more than a decade earlier, but history gave Nelson little to offer by way of concrete suggestions. The station should "nudge and even push Souvanna" into more energetic leadership, and it should "also get key Lao personalities to forget old grievances and form alliances which will bring cohesion and unity to noncommunist groups." With this accomplished, CIA would then give the Lao what they needed to build a "viable grassroots political base."⁴⁷

More exhortation than operative instruction, Nelson's plea apparently drew no reply. In any case, it was the failure to capture and hold Phou Pha Thi that now preoccupied CIA officials in both Washington and Vientiane. The inauguration of Richard Nixon was only two weeks away, and Headquarters seems to have been anticipating some skepticism in the new administration about the Hmong contribution to the war in Vietnam.⁴⁸

Replying to a Headquarters query on the subject, the station offered a lengthy and somewhat defensive account of the potential and the limitations of Vang Pao's irregulars. The objective of disrupting the timing of the enemy's expected dry-season offensive had been "partially, if not fully, achieved," but Hanoi now had several thousand more troops in Sam Neua than it had used in the offensive of the year before. More basically, Vientiane thought that "Dr. Kissinger or anyone else concerned by the current situation in Laos should

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keep in mind the cyclical nature of the war." As long as the Lao continued to fight, and their country survived, CIA was "achieving the basic objectives for which [the paramilitary program] was created."⁴⁹ [redacted]

This argument begged the question whether the new administration's goals would be served by so inconclusive an accomplishment, but the discussion seems to have been suspended when the communists began rolling south. After extensive probing, they took the Na Khang strongpoint on 1 March 1969, killing Col. Phan Siharath and capturing [redacted] only one member of which survived to be repatriated at the end of the war. With Sam Neua and part of northern Xieng Khouang in enemy hands, the Hmong were once again forced into a defensive posture.⁵⁰ [redacted]

The most ominous implication of the Na Khang debacle arose from the circumstances in which it fell. The Hmong were well dug in and had repelled the first communist attack with relative ease. Then, without waiting for the pressure to resume, they fled. Their compatriots at other sites in northern Xieng Khouang had done likewise in the aftermath of Operation PIGFAT, and CIA officers [redacted] heard that, in one case, the defenders left their post in the hands of recruits as young as 12. These had driven off two communist assaults before being overrun, and their heroism provoked CIA people [redacted] to say that, if you now wanted the Hmong to fight, you had to count on children to do it.⁵¹ [redacted]

The fall of Na Khang occasioned the appearance of the term "Meo heartland," which Larry Devlin used in a cable to Headquarters about the loss of Sam Neua. Vang Pao had just agreed to insert reconnaissance teams between Na Khang and the Plain of Jars, but he refused to reinforce the garrisons there that stood in the way of continued enemy progress. Instead, he would concentrate on "the defense of southern Xieng Khouang"—what Devlin labeled the heartland—"where the greatest number of Meo are located." And from that point to the end of the war, the lower portion of Xieng Khouang became the principal battleground for the Hmong irregulars.⁵² [redacted]

Dejected by the Na Khang debacle and the prospect of additional dry-season reverses, Vang Pao made one of his periodic references to a mass

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The station had already acknowledged "an ever increasing number [of] troop replacements in their early teens." [redacted]

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Hmong migration, this time to northern Vientiane Province. Devlin and Ambassador Sullivan discouraged this, citing the absence of resources to move and support them; in any case they counted on seeing the general's morale rebound, as it had always done in the past.⁵³

Reacting like a man with his back to the wall, Vang Pao proposed to prevent Hanoi from exploiting its new advantage by launching a massive diversionary attack on the Plain of Jars. Rejecting COS Devlin's cautionary advice, he persuaded Souvanna to endorse an invasion of the Plain of Jars, and the station found itself, along with Sullivan and the army attaché, scrambling to sabotage the project with their various RLG counterparts.⁵⁴

The American gambit was complicated by the felt need to disclaim responsibility for the final decision; at one point, Sullivan told Souvanna that he had to decide the matter himself; the United States would support "whatever operation the Lao [were] determined to mount." But airlift for a quarter of a million refugees into Vientiane was out of the question, and Souvanna finally called Vang Pao to Vientiane to tell him that the FAR battalions he had promised would not be available. Having had two weeks to recover from the trauma of Na Khang, the general submitted with no evident rancor, and set to work with the station on a more modest diversionary operation.⁵⁵

But the question of Hmong morale had not gone away. On 21 March, just three days after the departure of Ambassador Sullivan, Vang Pao begged Devlin for an SGU pay raise and building materials for the families of the three SGU battalions withdrawn from Sam Neua before the attack on Na Khang. USAID's refugee adviser, Pop Buell, was at that moment reporting a crisis of leadership, with clan leaders demanding of Vang Pao that he choose among the three possibilities: further combat, surrender to life under the communists, or migration. Devlin inferred that the plea for material help reflected the larger political problem, and when advised that the budget could absorb it, he authorized the payraise and help for dependents.⁵⁶

A Dismal Prospect

The immediate threat of a Hmong collapse receded, but the communist advance from the north continued, and in late March threatened Muong Soui, the key town on Route 7 west of the Plain of Jars. The station estimated that its defenders—Hmong irregulars and the Kong Le force that had occupied Muong

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Soui since late 1960—now faced not only the 316th Division but also two regimental-size units. Counsels of desperation flew between Headquarters and Vientiane, and Washington went so far as to revive the cloud-seeding idea. This time, it included a variation that would tint the clouds in hues representing a favorable omen to the Hmong and disaster for the North Vietnamese.⁵⁷ []

In the gloom that pervaded Vientiane, Souvanna Phouma asked Chargé Hurwitch to cancel the immunity from bombing that had protected several towns, all with substantial civilian populations, on the Plain of Jars. These had become “sanctuaries” for a communist supply buildup, and Hurwitch agreed, subject to participation by the Laotian air force in the requested raids. Looking at the government’s decaying position in southern Xieng Khouang, Hurwitch speculated that Souvanna might soon be asking for B-52 (“Arclight”) strategic bombers to halt the North Vietnamese advance.⁵⁸ []

Larry Devlin expressed similar pessimism: “It is not a question of whether we will be hurt but rather how much, and it is not a question of whether we will lose terrain, but how much.” The COS anticipated the need for more “studied but quick decisions,” such as the sudden boost in SGU emoluments, “in order to meet the crisis of the moment.” Emphasizing his personal role in keeping the Hmong in the fight, Devlin described for Headquarters how he was “bounding back and forth between Vientiane and Long Tieng like a shuttle cock in a fast badminton game.” On these visits to Vang Pao, he said he was offering tactical options to the leader designed to “maintain an offensive posture even on the defense, and, most of all, to insure that Vang Pao keeps his people in the line.”⁵⁹ []

As had long since become the rule, the US Mission relied on US and Laotian—now including Hmong—combat air to redress the balance. Raven FACs at Long Tieng led the bombers against communist forces threatening Muong Soui from the northeast. Then, after Souvanna expanded the list of targets on and near the Plain of Jars, they turned to lucrative targets at Khang Khay and Xieng Khouang town. The North Vietnamese still held the initiative on the ground, north of the Plain of Jars and also along Route 7 toward North Vietnam, but roving Hmong units were now keeping them engaged and even succeeded in retaking some positions around the plain.⁶⁰ []

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~~SECRET//MR~~A HOLDING OPERATION **The Worm Turns**

Two unexpected events now produced a dramatic—if temporary—reversal of fortune. In mid-April 1969, three Pathet Lao battalions were decimated in a futile assault on the Hmong redoubt at Bouam Long, commanded by perhaps the crustiest of Vang Pao's old warriors, Cher Pao Moua. Aided by close air support that included terrifying high-volume fire from the "Gatling guns" of the AC-47 "Spooky" gunship, Bouam Long then held out against a second assault, this time by the North Vietnamese. It looked as if the communists would eventually renew the attack, but, for the moment at least, word of Hmong tenacity at Bouam Long served to inject new spirit into Vang Pao's bedraggled troops everywhere around the Plain of Jars.⁶¹

Having triumphed in a defensive action, Vang Pao set out to inhibit the communists from moving their stores out of the Plain of Jars into more secure wet-season storage. To this end, he retook Phou Khe, overlooking Route 4 between the plain and Xieng Khouang town. Once installed on the heights, the irregulars discovered that nothing lay between them and the road. The dissident neutralists defending much of this area were putting up no fight, and Vang Pao abruptly found himself invited by their nonfeasance to take one of the enemy's key command and logistics centers. He accepted, and on 30 April he occupied Xieng Khouang town.⁶²

Although garrisoned by procommunist neutralists, the town had served as a warehouse for North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao ordnance and supplies, and as an ad hoc archive for Pathet Lao records. Vang Pao's men captured 25 trucks, several other vehicles, 13 artillery pieces, and 300 tons of medical supplies. CIA sent in C-123 aircraft to fly out what looked usable, and officers from Saigon supervised the demolition of what remained. One cache, in a cave a mile and a half long, was too large to destroy. The Pathet Lao were notorious for their superstitions, and the station thought to discourage their return by arranging with local Buddhist monks to spread word that the cave had become the lair of evil spirits ready to take their revenge on anyone who entered.⁶³

Another cave, which case officer recalled as situated under "a granite dome blasted bare by airstrikes," had served as an NVA headquarters.

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The bombing campaign, known as Operation RAINDANCE, lasted from 17 March to 7 April.

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Impervious to air attack, it was accessible only through a narrow fissure, at ground level, or a two-foot hole at the top from which the Vietnamese descended on a rope woven out of parachute cords. But the NVA had decamped for parts unknown, and the Hmong could explore the cave at leisure.⁶⁴ [redacted]

The durability of the sudden turn of events at Xieng Khouang town remained in doubt. The station combined jubilation and apprehension as it reported its plans to keep the irregulars on the move, having them consolidate new gains while they prevented the enemy from massing for a counterattack. At some point a tough response was to be expected, and the COS anticipated diversionary attacks against Long Tieng, Sam Thong, and the ring of defensive positions that protected them to the north and east.⁶⁵ [redacted]

Meanwhile, the station did not claim full control over Vang Pao's next moves. On 1 May, the COS reported that, in the face of embassy fears that the general might provoke a North Vietnamese move toward the Mekong, it was "not clear what Vang Pao's plans are" for Xieng Khouang town. But early withdrawal was not part of them; the general told both CIA and the army attaché that his authority to take the town had come not only from Souvanna but directly from the king.⁶⁶ [redacted]

Souvanna denied [redacted] [redacted] that he'd authorized any such thing, but now, after the fact, the prime minister would not order the town abandoned. The station shared Souvanna's ambivalence, agreeing that the town itself should not be defended, and telling Headquarters of its intention to "convince Vang Pao that his plan to clear the edges of the Plain of Jars and cut Route 7 west of Ban Ban is too grandiose for his capabilities."⁶⁷ [redacted]

At the same time, the station seemed to share Vang Pao's euphoria, reporting in the same message that the Hmong "are now on the offensive and the future looks very bright indeed." Given the historical vicissitudes of the Hmong program, the basis for this optimism remains obscure. Whatever its reasoning, the station seemed to accept Vang Pao's argument that, if his allies forced him to abandon Xieng Khouang town, home to many of the Hmong, "it would break their spirit."⁶⁸ [redacted]

In the event, Vang Pao installed only a token garrison—he had apparently invested less of his prestige in permanent occupation than he'd led the station

⁶⁴ [redacted] memoir. [redacted]

⁶⁵ [redacted]

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to believe. His forces were then summarily expelled, both from the town and from the surrounding heights, when four North Vietnamese battalions attacked in late May. By then, Vang Pao had changed his emphasis. His militia forces were operating near three points along Route 7, east toward the North Vietnamese border, trying to force the communists to withdraw forces from the Plain of Jars to defend the road.⁶⁹

The Fall of Muong Soui

The reversal of the usual seasonal cycle of combat in northeastern Laos—Operation PIGFAT had initiated it—continued in June when the North Vietnamese retook all the high ground on the edges of the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao then withdrew all his forces from the plain, and the next move was up to the communists. They announced their intentions with an assault, in the predawn dark of 24 June 1969, on government positions at Muong Soui, on the main road west of the Plain of Jars.⁷⁰

The importance of this bit of real estate had never been matched by the competence or élan of the Kong Le neutralists defending it. As early as 1964, as we have seen, the RLG and its allies had found it prudent to bolster them This joint garrison had never been tested, but the North Vietnamese now demonstrated that they no longer intended to treat Muong Soui as a de facto sanctuary. They sent Russian-built PT-76 tanks to support their infantry assault in the first appearance of communist armor in the war in Laos.⁷¹

The communists lost four tanks in the early hours of the battle, but lost half their artillery when two 155mm and two 105mm howitzers were put out of action. The morale of all the defenders, looked questionable, and Larry Devlin flew to Muong Soui The station had no irregulars directly engaged, and protocol would have had the defense attaché's office represent American interests in the matter, but the chargé, Devlin reported, "requires our participation in decision making" there.⁷²

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Concentrated air action inflicted grievous damage on the North Vietnamese, but the communists pressed the attack. Communist prisoners asserted that reinforcements were advancing from the south, but the defenders, again with massive air support, held their own until 27 June. At 0600 hours, the neutralist troops finally broke and scattered, [REDACTED] with 50 Hmong irregulars flown in to add perimeter support, was taking both mortar and small arms fire. The weather had closed in, preventing accurate bombing runs, and the army attaché advised [REDACTED] to prepare for helicopter evacuation. In the afternoon, nine Air America and seven USAF helicopters took advantage of suppressing fire from A-1Es and jet bombers to evacuate [REDACTED] hundreds of Lao combatants and civilians.⁷⁴ [REDACTED]

The fall of Muong Soui, following the action at Xieng Khouang town, left the initiative with the NVA, and the station tried to anticipate what might happen next. The COS wanted more help from the Laotian regulars, and he urged acting FAR commander Gen. Oudone Sananikone to transfer an MR 4 battalion to the Muong Soui front to block further enemy advance to the west. "No," said Sananikone, "MR 4 commander Gen. Phasouk would never permit it." Devlin then suggested moving a battalion from MR 3, then quiescent, but Sananikone assured him that General Bounpone would likewise refuse.⁷⁵ [REDACTED]

To get the Lao to make hard decisions, Devlin sighed, was "like trying to drive nails with ripe bananas." Diplomatic action was no easier, with Vientiane and its allies inhibited, as usual, by hopes that gentle persuasion might get the Soviets to restrain Hanoi. The Indian member of the International Control Commission, meanwhile, despaired even of being allowed to inspect the

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scene at Muong Soui. The Vientiane government protested the attack to the ICC, as usual to no avail.⁷⁶

With the Muong Soui front remaining fluid, the station turned to an analysis of the debacle there. The attack had probably been part of the enemy's usual dry-season offensive, delayed this year by Vang Pao's aggressive moves around Xieng Khouang town. In Devlin's view, the unprecedented targeting of Muong Soui predated the Hmong operation and represented Hanoi's calculated effort to force the Lao into political concessions. Be that as it might, the enemy now had the capacity to turn Vang Pao's western flank, and the tactical balance was now dangerously altered. At the very least, it appeared to the station and the country team that the communists intended to occupy all the territory they had claimed when the Geneva Agreements went into effect in October 1962. Muong Soui represented an encroachment even beyond that, and it was, therefore, imperative to retake it.⁷⁷

On 29 June 1969, the Department of State approved Operation OFF BALANCE. Clyde McAvoy, Devlin's deputy, traveled to the neutralist staging area at Xieng Dat, a few miles to the southwest, and reported that it wouldn't work. The neutralist commander there, Colonel Sing, complained that he was short of weapons, and McAvoy arranged to get him some, but he was merely calling the man's bluff; the lack of will to fight was palpable. Just the night before, 50 men had wandered off and, if Sing hesitated further, he would soon "have the ultimate excuse: no troops."⁷⁸

The atmosphere was very different at Vang Pao's command post, 6 miles to the east. As McAvoy landed there, the hyperactive general was laying a 4.2-inch mortar to mark a target just identified by a Hmong trooper, who had stumbled upon a North Vietnamese command post. Escaping unobserved, the man reported his find to Vang Pao, whose accurate fire gave an aiming point to the tactical aircraft patrolling overhead. The communist position disappeared under a hail of bombs.⁷⁹

As Operation OFF BALANCE got under way, Vang Pao expressed confidence that he would have Muong Soui back within a week. FAR units from Vientiane took the junction of Route 7 with Route 13, which linked Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and initial progress offered the basis for some optimism. But McAvoy had it right: Vang Pao's troops, regular and irregular, lacked the numbers and heavy weapons needed to retake Muong Soui, and the neutral-

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ists, some 1,000-strong at Xieng Dat, would have had to play a major role. They did not; McAvoy reported that they had "a heavy load of lead in their pants which Vang Pao, for all his drive and leadership qualities, has not been able to remove."⁸⁰ [redacted]

One FAR parachute battalion got within 3 miles of the Muong Soui airstrip before being hit from several directions by communist troops, who cut off its supply route and forced its withdrawal. Meanwhile, Hmong positions to the north were falling to North Vietnamese attackers. All of this coincided with intelligence from villagers, radio intercepts, and aerial photography that collectively indicated the arrival on the Plain of Jars of several new North Vietnamese battalions and additional armor.⁸¹ [redacted]

Operation OFF BALANCE had failed, and on 14 July, Vang Pao and the station called it off. The enemy was left with free access to Route 13 and the approaches to the Mekong Valley, and this imposed a new defensive burden on Vang Pao at a time when enemy encroachments threatened all the Hmong bases in an arc running from northwest to south around the Plain of Jars. He had too few troops even to defend what the station had taken to calling the "Meo heartland," let alone try to substitute for the neutralist forces he despised and distrusted.⁸² [redacted]

In addition, Vang Pao now had his own political problems, for the loss of Muong Soui provoked another spasm of despair among Hmong clan leaders, who—apparently egged on by Vang Pao rival Touby Lyfoung—renewed the calls for migration west that had arisen after the fall of Na Khang in early March 1969. If the Hmong were not to give up the fight, some decisive action would be required to restore the tactical balance.⁸³ [redacted]

The station worried about the meaning of Hanoi's unprecedented escalation. The deployment of armor and seven new first-line infantry battalions, in the mud of the rainy season and under constant threat of air bombardment,

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81 [redacted]

82 [redacted]

The Laotian government could think of nothing better to do at this time than to ask the 1962 Geneva signatories to pressure the North Vietnamese to halt their offensive, get the king to order a reorganization of FAR, and ask the United States for B-52 strategic bombers to hit the communists. [redacted]

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must surely reflect a strategic purpose. The station thought it saw one in a recent offer to Souvanna by North Vietnamese ambassador Le Van Hien to withdraw Hanoi's troops in return for a bombing halt and Laotian support of the communists in the Paris negotiations over Vietnam.⁸⁴

Souvanna rebuffed Hien, demanding North Vietnamese withdrawal as a precondition, but in July he also began dropping hints at cabinet meetings about an impending settlement. The station now saw him as vulnerable to a combination of military pressure and the promise—even an empty promise—of peace for a people “dog tired from seven years of war.” Should the Lao take the bait, they would be accepting a “Cambodian-like” neutrality,” one that gave Hanoi unrestricted use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network to pursue the conquest of South Vietnam.⁸⁵

The euphoria that followed the Hmong capture of Xieng Khouang less than three months earlier had now entirely evaporated. North Vietnamese diplomatic maneuvering, the erosion of the government's position west of the Plain of Jars, and frayed morale among the tribesmen combined to threaten catastrophe, not just in Hmong country but in Laos as a whole. As Clyde McAvoy put it, the Lao, “alone among free Far East countries . . . are fighting without a great power commitment . . . [W]ith clandestine American aid that conceivably could end tomorrow, [they] cannot afford to be more tenaciously anti-North Vietnamese than is the United States.” And in fact, some of those in the Laotian elite most conspicuous for their anticommunist fervor were now pressing for a halt to American bombing of communist targets in Laos.⁸⁶

True to form, Souvanna and his military leadership made no move to restore Vientiane's position; if this was to happen, Vang Pao would have to do it. Also true to form, the Hmong general and his Agency advisers devised an expedient solution that took into account both government weakness on the ground and the compensating potency of tactical air. Designed only to secure the web of Hmong strong points south and west of the plain, Operation ABOUT FACE turned into the most spectacular Hmong military success of the war.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The "Meo Heartland"

Vang Pao seems to have had little difficulty meeting Touby Lyfoung's mid-1969 challenge to his preeminent tribal leadership, for the station said nothing more about it or about migration. In a characteristic display of resiliency, the general also shook off the failure of Operation OFF BALANCE, the attempt to retake Muong Soui. Within days of its fall, he and his CIA advisers were discussing ways and means of slowing the North Vietnamese by once again interdicting Route 7. The station suggested hitting either Ban Ban, at the intersection with the main road from Sam Neua, or Khang Khay, on the eastern edge of the plain, but Vang Pao vetoed both. Instead, he wanted a more ambitious attack hard by the North Vietnamese border at Nong Het, home to many of his first supporters.¹

Distrustful as always of FAR security practice, Vang Pao insisted that all forces committed to the new operation (dubbed ABOUT FACE) be station-supported irregulars. The problem lay in the shortage of Hmong SGUs, most of which were trying to fend off the North Vietnamese on the periphery of the Plain of Jars. Fully in sympathy with Vang Pao's aversion to including FAR—even assuming regular troops were available—Clyde McAvoy introduced an innovation that would become standard practice until the February 1973 cease-fire. Every irregular unit had always operated in the military region where its men were recruited. Now, exploiting the permissive attitude of MR 3 commander General Bounpone, McAvoy ordered the airlift of an ethnic Lao SGU battalion from Savannakhet up to Vang Pao's MR 2.²

The plan grew to include cutting the road west of Ban Ban, closer to the Plain of Jars, in order to prevent enemy reinforcements from moving east to Nong Het. On the theory that any leak of preparations for this second phase would only distract the enemy from focusing on the main thrust at Nong Het, Vang Pao proposed to commit a FAR battalion in addition to his Hmong irreg-

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ulars. If all went well, use of the road should be denied to the enemy for as long as three weeks. Combined with massive airstrikes on communist forces on and around the Plain of Jars, this should at least "slow down their offensive to the west" of the plain.³

ABOUT FACE was not the first operation to test the jury-rigged decisionmaking process of a fragmented US command. But it faced its own unique complications. Ambassador Godley, new on the job, was uncertain about his authority and, at this point, less assertive than his predecessor. In addition, a telegram to Washington from his air attaché requesting unneeded military approvals further blurred the line of command. What could have been done on the ambassador's authority now risked being rejected as unacceptable escalation.⁴

Meanwhile, further North Vietnamese encroachments in the "Meo heartland" made the diversion of four SGU battalions to Nong Het a riskier move than Vang Pao had anticipated. With Headquarters scrambling to take care of the policy problem, the loss of four more guerrilla bases along the southern edge of the Plain of Jars became the operative factor, and Vang Pao and the station scaled back the operation, canceling the Nong Het phase and restoring Ban Ban as the main target. The Hmong would try to delay the enemy's reaction to the Route 7 operation with diversionary attacks along the southern periphery of the plain.⁵

Hampered by monsoon rains, among the heaviest ever seen, ABOUT FACE got under way on 6 August 1969. Eight battalions moved on the Plain of Jars while two more battalions and several hundred Hmong militia approached the road between Ban Ban and Nong Pet.⁶ (U)

The weather posed more of an obstacle than the communists, who to the attackers' astonished delight abandoned without a fight not only their defensive positions but also major supply dumps. Despite suspected leaks of Vang Pao's intentions, the government forces had achieved complete tactical surprise, and the overextended enemy simply melted away.⁷

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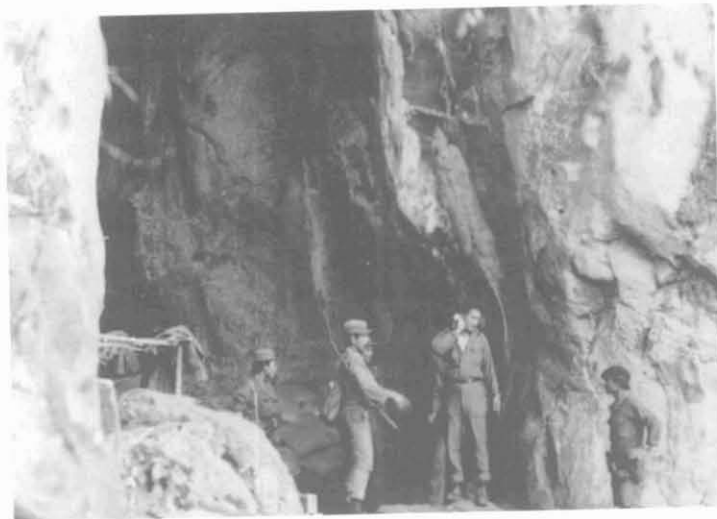
With Ban Ban restored as the main target, the station made no further mention of the leak—the British embassy had somewhere heard about it—and the reported movement of enemy forces toward it as of 21 July.

⁶ Not to be confused with Nong Het, on the Vietnamese border. The significance of Nong Pet lay in its location west of Ban Ban at the intersection of Route 7, leading directly into the Plain of Jars, and Route 71, which bypassed the plain to the north.

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Cave near the Plain of Jars used as communist ordnance depot, captured by Hmong irregulars, c. September 1969

Even where the enemy had time to react, he stood by and watched the irregulars advance. On 20 August, two SGU battalions, one Hmong and the other a Lao unit from Pakse, walked up Phou Nok Kok, the mountain commanding Route 7 between Ban Ban and Nong Pet. The communists did not respond

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Phou Nok Kok translates as "Woodpecker Mountain."

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until two days later, and then not in sufficient strength to threaten SGU positions on the heights. By then well dug in, the irregulars on Phou Nok Kok became the core of the effort to deny Route 7 to the enemy.⁸ [redacted]

Meanwhile, of the eight battalions advancing toward the plain, only two encountered any resistance, and that was suppressed by the Laotian air force, using cluster bombs, before the ground units could close with the enemy. To the northwest, tactical air destroyed trenches and bunkers still occupied by enemy troops, and obviated the need for an assault by an approaching SGU battalion. Units from Bouam Long, including an SGU airlifted there from Savannakhet, were squeezing Ban Ban from the northwest, and by the 25th the enemy had abandoned any effort to reclaim Phou Nok Kok.⁹ [redacted]

On 27 August, Vang Pao's irregulars marched onto the plain itself, taking the southern salient and capturing a PT-76 tank, an artillery piece, and a truck. By this time, the Pakse SGU had cut Route 7, and its troops were patrolling the road west of Ban Ban. The station applauded the irregulars' success, but wanted credit to go where credit was due: "Extremely effective airstrikes have been the key factor in guerrilla successes thus far."¹⁰ [redacted]

Acknowledging the importance of the USAF contribution—some 140 sorties a day—the station wanted Headquarters to understand the indispensable role of the Laotian air force. The T-28's performance characteristics, exploited by Lao (including Hmong) pilots intimately familiar with the terrain and able to work without FACs, facilitated an exceptional level of close air support. With fewer than 30 of these aircraft available for combat missions on any given day, they were averaging over 90 sorties.¹¹ [redacted]

Heavily committed in the Muong Soui sector, to the west, and now challenged east of the plain, the North Vietnamese had contributed to Vang Pao's advance onto the plain by entrusting its defense largely to the Pathet Lao. Of 18 enemy battalions in the Xieng Khouang town-Plain of Jars sector, only two were Vietnamese infantry, and these did not suffice to stem the irregulars' advance. Things were going so unexpectedly well that both the station and Headquarters began to worry about the price of success. Larry Devlin com-

⁸ [redacted]
[redacted]
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⁹ [redacted]
¹⁰ [redacted]
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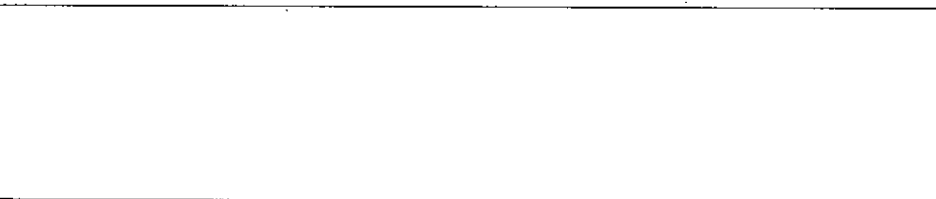
pared the tactical situation to a boxing match in which a lightweight has just flattened a heavyweight champion: "We know he is down, but what will he do when he gets up[?]"¹²

The size and combat effectiveness of the North Vietnamese Army would always exceed the capabilities of the irregulars, and air power could not always be relied upon to restore the balance, especially in bad weather. Once again, the station predicted that the enemy would move to retake all the ground it had claimed in 1962. It might advance not only along Route 7 but also from Sam Neua and along the trail system running east to west below the guerrilla strongpoint at Ban San Tiau.¹³

The lines began to harden in early September, with heavier communist resistance that even scored some local territorial gains east of the plain. But the irregulars rolled into Khang Khay, the administrative capital of both the Pathet Lao and the dissident neutralists. Khang Khay was also home to a Chinese consulate, and Souvanna hoped to avoid provoking Beijing when, with an attack imminent, he asked Mac Godley to prevent "the military," that is, Gen. Vang Pao, from moving in. It was too late; the Hmong were already there. But the Chinese had not waited; everyone was gone except 50 civilians waiting to rally to the government. Also there, in a cave outside town, were 2,500 weapons, including light artillery, mortars, and machineguns, and these added to the numerous supply caches already found and either confiscated or destroyed.¹⁴

Holding On

Souvanna welcomed the victory, achieved in a way that allowed him to have things both ways. He had managed to avoid antagonizing his most valuable but also his most volatile general. And if the Chinese protested, he could claim that the operation had taken place against his orders.¹⁵



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[Redacted]

Having failed to persuade Souvanna to preempt the issue, the embassy and the station were now reduced to appealing to their second-level Lao contacts—generals and politicians—to make an ex post facto case with the press. Headquarters thought it too late, for impending US Senate hearings were about to question the entire American involvement in Laos. Senator John Sherman Cooper (R-KY) had already introduced an amendment that would restrict the commitment of US forces in Southeast Asia, and the future of funding authority for the surreptitious war in Laos was looking increasingly doubtful.¹⁷ [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Meanwhile, Hanoi's failure to reply to Vang Pao's offensive left the irregulars with the tactical advantage. In late September 1969, they captured additional enemy supply caches, one containing 100 tons of ammunition and another with 22 trucks. More artillery, food, vehicles, and armor fell into the guerrillas' hands as they took enemy strongholds on three mountains around the Plain of Jars. The station speculated on the enemy's motives in leaving all this materiel intact: it reflected "either deep shock or a sublime confidence in his ability to recover lost ground."¹⁹ [Redacted]

¹⁵ [Redacted]

King Savang Vatthana was more permissive. The only Chinese communist representation that he recognized, he told Vang Pao, was the embassy in Vientiane. [Redacted]

On 19 September, 10 days after taking Khang Khay, Vang Pao's men entered a cave complex that had served as the north Laos Pathet Lao headquarters. [Redacted]

¹⁶ [Redacted]
¹⁷ [Redacted]
¹⁸ [Redacted]

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THE "MEO HEARTLAND" []

Whatever the reason for the enemy's failure to either protect or destroy his supply caches, there was ample evidence by the end of September that the free ride was about over. Patrols, aerial reconnaissance, and radio intercepts all indicated an ominous level of communist activity. There were still three North Vietnamese regiments holed up in the ABOUT FACE operational area, and intelligence now indicated the dispatch of the 312th Division from North Vietnam into Laos. The station beefed up Route 7 interdiction activity with SGU elements from the Panhandle and intensified roadwatch and agent collection eastward toward the border.²⁰ []

One sign of enemy intentions came at Phou Nok Kok, just south of Route 7 west of Ban Ban, when a North Vietnamese company assaulted the Pakse-based SGU dug in at the summit. The communists displayed their usual grim tenacity, losing 24 dead on the SGU perimeter. Tactical air wiped out another 50, while the irregulars lost six dead. Despite the disproportionate enemy casualties, Phou Nok Kok illustrated the attrition being inflicted on an already numerically inferior Hmong guerrilla force. [] noted that his units, being regularly rotated, did not suffer conspicuous attrition. But the Hmong battalion, there for the duration, gradually shrank as its troopers fell, one after another, to the nightly artillery and rocket barrages and probing attacks.²¹ []

[] was also witness to the growing tension between the original concept of hit-and-run guerrilla warfare and the gradual deployment of the SGU battalions in positional warfare, trying to capture and hold well-defined topographical features. A guerrilla strategy eschewed barbed wire and bunkers in favor of mobility, but Operation ABOUT FACE would succeed only if the

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[] went down by himself into the valley from which Operation ABOUT FACE had pushed the North Vietnamese. The area contained 10 NVA ammo dumps—several as large as a small room—and a truck park containing 14 vehicles. [] wired it all up, with two or three small charges on each truck—engine block, transmission, and winch—activated a timer, departed the scene, and waited for the whole business to go up. The inefficiency of high-altitude bombing came home to him with this incident, for everything he destroyed was surrounded by bomb craters from recent USAF strikes. []

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[] led a patrol from Phou Nok Kok down to Route 7 to let Agency technicians install a device that would count and report on enemy traffic. "The mission was successful but the device proved ineffective." [] recollections.) []

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communist logistical effort could be impeded over a substantial period of time. To do that, Vang Pao had to take and hold key pieces of real estate.²² []

Another aspect of the traditional emphasis on guerrilla tactics was reluctance, [] to indulge the Hmong fondness for hand grenades. CIA managers thought the Hmong much too inclined to use them as a substitute for active night patrolling, content instead to stay under cover, tossing or rolling a grenade at any suspect sound or sight. And grenades lent themselves to frivolous use such as fishing. For these reasons, they were issued only sparingly.²³ []

At Phou Nok Kok, this conceptual conflict came to a head. [] recalled the arrival of a new Pakse SGU battalion, nominally advised but essentially commanded by legendary paramilitary officer [] nicknamed the "Black Lion." Having inspected the defensive positions on the Phou Nok Kok summit, [] flew to Long Tieng with an ultimatum: if his troops didn't get what he thought they needed to hold off the North Vietnamese, he would march them back to Pakse. "The next day," according to [] "the sky was black with parachutes as C-123s belched out barbed wire, ammunition and all the grenades we could use."²⁴ []

Despite this investment, the North Vietnamese managed one night to overrun the hilltop, where they took over the irregulars' heavily fortified bunkers. [] called for airstrikes, organized a counterattack, and retook his positions. Three nights later, enemy soldiers, buried deep in bunkers closed by bombardment, clawed their way to the surface and had to be killed in hand-to-hand combat. It turned out that air holes had been left open when entrances were destroyed, and the bombing left survivors who emerged still ready to continue the struggle.²⁵ []

If Panhandle units needed CIA leadership to back up their indigenous commanders, the Hmong did not. Individual unit leaders might be found wanting, but Vang Pao handled any nonfeasance by himself. After one night action that saw the Hmong driven off a hilltop, Vang Pao arrived to find his battalion commander "busily engaged in repairing a sewing machine which he had 'liberated.'" The station reported that Vang Pao snatched it up, "smashed it on a rock, kicked it down the hill, and with a few well chosen words launched the acting battalion commander and his men back up the hill. They took it."²⁶ []

²² [] recollections; Bill Lair; Jim Glerum. []

²³ Jim Glerum. []

²⁴ [] recollections. []

²⁵ Ibid. []

²⁶ []

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As of early October, communist assaults were limited to the areas of their three remaining troop concentrations: two of them in the hills west of Ban Ban and the third on the slopes on the northwestern edge of the Plain of Jars. Elsewhere, Vang Pao was in charge. He had retaken both Xieng Khouang town and Muong Soui and now occupied the entire plain. He had frustrated what the station saw as Hanoi's intentions to eliminate the progovernment neutralists as a fighting force, isolate the "Meo heartland," and help the Pathet Lao threaten Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The Hmong had not merely disrupted Hanoi's timetable, but had freed some 10,000 civilians on whom the communists relied for food and labor in Xieng Khouang Province.²⁷

The other side of the equation was the exhaustion of the Hmong, who, after nearly a year of continuous major combat, had been pushed to their limit. The question was not how to build on their success but how to cope with the inevitable communist response. Vang Pao had only 5,000 troops—counting the Panhandle units—and no reserves with which to face the three NVA regiments still in the ABOUT FACE area and the 12,000 men reported to be moving into Laos from the border crossing at Nong Het. Plans for resistance to the expected enemy drive therefore centered on forcing Hanoi to concentrate its forces in such a way as to make them vulnerable to massive airstrikes.²⁸

One hopeful sign, for the government forces, was the lower quality of the North Vietnamese units active around Phou Nok Kok. Behaving like raw recruits, they made daylight attacks under aerial bombardment and betrayed their locations by firing at tactical aircraft. In one suicide attack, they lost the equivalent of a light battalion. It was a high price to pay to keep government troops in defensive positions while Hanoi sent supplies along the trail network to the south.²⁹

Despite their losses, the communists persisted with their logistical effort. Watching the continued movement, both Headquarters and Vang Pao worried about the government's weakly defended southeastern flank. The trail network running west from the Vietnamese border and passing south of the Hmong concentrations around Xieng Khouang town constituted a particular danger, for it could carry forces that might evade the Hmong position to attack the Long Tieng-Sam Thong complex. By the end of October, enemy probes gave cause to suspect that this southeastern sector would figure prominently when Hanoi launched its annual dry-season offensive.³⁰

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Conboy says that the SGUs, with 13 percent of Laotian military manpower, took 70 percent of the casualties between late 1966 and late 1969. (*Shadow War*, 249.)

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Paying for Success

November saw sharper enemy resistance to the Hmong occupation of the Plain of Jars and Xieng Khouang town. In mid-December, in a typically well-planned raid, 20 NVA sappers made their way undetected onto the Xieng Khouang airfield. They planted explosives on artillery, armor and other vehicles, and an ammunition dump earlier captured by Vang Pao's forces. When these were detonated, at 0130 hours, another 200 NVA troops hit a similar number of defenders, killing or wounding almost half of them.³¹

Along with the anxiety about the significance of an increasingly aggressive enemy came an outbreak of the recurrent hope that Hmong heroism and endurance might be rewarded with something better than a seasonal dance of death. Long-term occupation of the Plain of Jars would provide at least psychic compensation, for although few Hmong had lived there, the plain had an almost mystical hold over them. In addition, its agricultural and commercial potential fueled the enduring hostility to seeing it controlled by the hated Vietnamese. Even Souvanna Phouma, almost as suspicious of the Hmong as of the Vietnamese, wanted it back, and on a visit there on 1 December, he encouraged Vang Pao to consolidate his hold on it.³²

Larry Devlin recalled that irrepressibly optimistic Ambassador Godley also wanted to see the plain kept in friendly hands. The station, too, hoped to save what could be saved, but the COS recalled reminding the ambassador that the Hmong could not be expected to construct a "Maginot Line" of defense. Devlin's conflicted state of mind revealed itself in a cable that omitted the station's customary recognition of the irreducible military superiority of the North Vietnamese. Instead, it made the more neutral observation that the idea of permanent occupation "carries with it, of course, tactical problems of a sort." More troops would be required for defense, and Vang Pao's "offensive flexibility" would be impaired. Beyond that, Devlin posed no objection.³³

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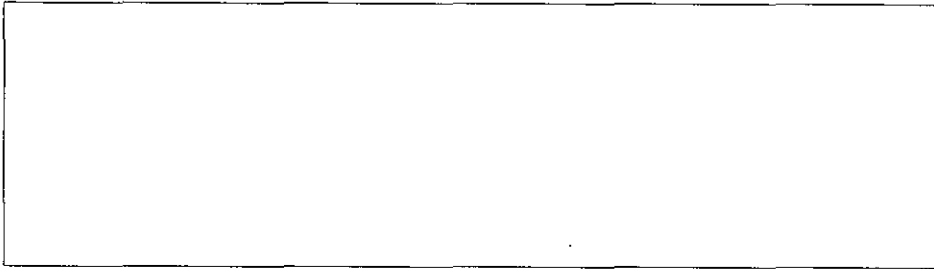
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There were, in fact, to be no more triumphs, anticipated or otherwise, like those of Operation ABOUT FACE. Indeed, by early January 1970, the irregulars were being tested to the limit as they tried to preserve their gains. On the night of the 10th, three North Vietnamese battalions assaulted the 260 irregulars on Phou Nok Kok, key to maintaining the stranglehold on Route 7. Case officers were forbidden to spend the night there, and remembered working the radio from his orbiting aircraft to convince the commander of his SGU not to abandon his positions.³⁵

The persuasion worked, or perhaps the irregulars simply had no escape route. Whatever the reason, they held. Arriving just after dawn in a helicopter, was astonished at the destruction. Using improvised bamboo bangalore torpedoes, the North Vietnamese had destroyed nearly every vestige of the barbed wire that defined the friendly positions, and some 20 enemy dead were tangled in what remained. The command bunker was shattered, and marveled that the SGU commander had survived. It was later in the morning when the sky cleared enough for tactical air to return and pound an enemy who was now reduced to a desperate search for cover.³⁶

The irregulars counted almost 600 enemy dead, but North Vietnamese numbers and tenacity prevailed, and Phou Nok Kok fell on 12 January. Now entirely on the defensive, Vang Pao continued to block Route 7 from North Vietnam for another two weeks. At that point, with the enemy's main supply line restored, it was only a matter of time before the North Vietnamese delivered a counterthrust.³⁷

On 28 January 1970, the general discussed strategy with Larry Devlin and declared his intention to conduct a "fighting retreat." First, he would hold posi-

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tions north of Route 7 as long as possible, to harass North Vietnamese efforts to move back onto the plain. In addition, he would hang on to Muong Soui as a base for T-28 operations. So many Hmong unit commanders had been lost in the recent fighting that Vang Pao felt constrained to preserve the surviving leadership by judicious withdrawal before his units could be hit. Nevertheless, he hoped to slow the enemy advance enough to keep the Long Tieng area from being threatened during the remainder of the dry season.³⁸

Bringing in the B-52s

Devlin's earlier qualified optimism had by now disappeared, and he thought a finely calibrated "fighting retreat" was probably beyond Vang Pao's ability to bring off. But if the communists could not be held off, the consequences would be catastrophic, and the US Mission looked for a way to plug the holes in the dike. One possibility was the B-52 strategic bomber, already deployed over the Laotian Panhandle as well as over Vietnam, but never before used in northern Laos. Flying at and dropping an enormous volume of ordnance on area targets from high altitude, it might be used to decimate the massed infantry traditionally deployed by the North Vietnamese Army.³⁹

On 23 January 1970, with the NVA 312th Division massing for the attack, Mac Godley asked Washington for B-52 strikes. His request arrived at a time of sharpening congressional hostility to the entire Indochina enterprise, and it provoked, according to Henry Kissinger, "a stately bureaucratic minuet . . . that told much about the state of mind of our government." Officials "seeking to protect the American forces for which they felt a responsibility" were "rattled" by "a merciless Congressional onslaught." By Kissinger's account, at least, they retreated into a defensive crouch exemplified by Defense Secretary Laird's private endorsement of the strikes while his representatives at inter-agency deliberations were instructed to recommend against it. In this way, Kissinger wrote, Laird intended to ensure that "the President would take the heat for the decision" if he acceded to Godley's plea.⁴⁰

Policymakers held the issue at arm's length for two weeks, until—as was so often the case in matters involving Laos—Hanoi forced a decision. On 12 February, the communists attacked irregular units on the Plain of Jars, and Souvanna Phouma, presumably encouraged by Ambassador Godley, for-

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⁴⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 451–52. Kissinger says that JCS chairman Gen. Earle Wheeler supported the B-52 idea, while secretary of state William Rogers moved from "opposition to indifference." Kissinger's account contains several chronological inaccuracies in its linkage of policy decisions to events in Laos.

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mally requested B-52 support. Nixon granted it, and on the night of 17 February, three bombers hit the advancing North Vietnamese. Photographs and ground observation revealed grievous enemy losses, despite the time for preparation afforded them by information leaked through insecure FAR radio communications.⁴¹

The reaction on Capitol Hill justified the concerns of administration officials who had been reluctant, for political reasons, to raise the ante in Laos. Immediately aware of the raid, senatorial critics attacked the administration's "secrecy" about a "deepening US involvement." Kissinger rightly pointed out that the responsible Senate committees had already been briefed in substantial detail on the US role in Laos; he did not, however, claim that the administration had given any advance notice of its intention to deploy B-52s there.⁴²

The B-52s certainly raised the price paid by the North Vietnamese, but they did not prevent the NVA from harassing Long Tieng and finally expelling Vang Pao's forces from the Plain of Jars. On 20 February 1970, an enemy battalion spearheaded by sappers and accompanied by armor hit the Xieng Khouang airstrip in the northeastern corner of the plain and scattered the mixed garrison of FAR, neutralist, and Hmong troops. The rout kindled the kind of panic to which the timid Lao and the volatile Hmong were always vulnerable, and Agency advisers could only watch in despair as hundreds of irregulars fled with their families, not stopping until they reached relative safety south of Long Tieng. Only a few hundred effectives covered their flight, and these were "tired, dispirited, and sometimes lacking the will to fight."⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid., 453. Despite the grim effectiveness of this raid, some questioned the value of the B-52 in northern Laos. Jim Glerum, Landry's deputy recalled that B-52s were required to reduce the risk to themselves by making a north-to-south bombing run while headed back to base. But the ridgelines ran mostly east to west, and much of the ordnance exploded on empty reverse slopes.

⁴² Kissinger, *White House Years*, 453-54. With personalities, bureaucratic equities, and genuine policy differences all in play, none of the parties to this imbroglio avoided a degree of dissimulation. The most repellent, self-serving hypocrisy came from Senator Stuart Symington (D-MO), who had earlier met Vang Pao and bestowed high praise on the Agency's stewardship of the war effort, and who now, as popular opposition to the war intensified, feigned outraged surprise at the Agency's "secret war" in Laos. The controversy over the B-52 raid led to President Nixon's 6 March statement describing the US role in Laos; it generated even more controversy because of its mistaken claim that no Americans serving in Laos had been killed there. See *White House Years*, 455-56, for Kissinger's aggrieved account of this episode.

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Muong Soui fell again, and the government's hold on the Plain of Jars and its access routes evaporated. Far from being able to count on a rainy-season respite, let alone retention of the plain, Vang Pao and his patrons once again suddenly faced total catastrophe. With or without more B-52 raids, it was clear that the Hmong resistance would wither unless it got reinforcements on the ground. In a somber cable to Washington, Devlin predicted a decisive enemy move on Vang Pao's network of strong points south of the plain. If this succeeded, an intimidated Vientiane government might very well demand the cessation of all US air operations over Laos.⁴⁴ [redacted]

On 17 March, with what the station called the "smell of defeat in the air," Vang Pao and other senior Hmong began evacuating their families. Sam Thong, the civilian center northwest of Long Tieng, was almost empty; that night, portions of it were variously burned and occupied by the enemy. North Vietnamese infantry, on 18 March, penetrated to the ridgeline above the Long Tieng airstrip. In his customary hands-on fashion, Vang Pao helped serve a 4.2-inch mortar himself, and he and his men forced the enemy far enough back to keep the airstrip open.⁴⁵ [redacted]

With the airstrip at least momentarily secure, [redacted] and limited unit personnel to a daytime presence with Vang Pao. [redacted]

The station later judged that "one company of attackers could have walked into Long Tieng" that night but that the enemy had run out of supplies and did

⁴³ [redacted]

The Xieng Khouang airstrip on the Plain of Jars must be distinguished from the separate strip serving Xieng Khouang town [redacted]

⁴⁴ Ibid.; [redacted]

Desultory negotiations accompanied the seesaw military movement of late 1969 and early 1970. With Vang Pao on the Plain of Jars, Souvanna Phouma offered a new round of negotiations in November 1969. In early March 1970, with the communists again owning the plain, the Lao Patriotic Front (the renamed Pathet Lao) accepted the offer of new negotiations, and a series of sporadic, inconclusive contacts followed! [redacted]

⁴⁵ [redacted]

⁴⁶ [redacted]

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not press its advantage. Having come within a hair's-breadth of losing Long Tieng, Souvanna Phouma finally made good on his promise, given three months earlier, to let the station reinforce Vang Pao. On the 19th, the station began to fly in SGU battalions from Savannakhet, Pakse, and Nam Yu. These started clearing the Long Tieng perimeter while the bedraggled Hmong handled the secondary mission of flank security to the east and west.⁴⁷

At this point, elements of the NVA 316th Division were carrying the burden south of the plain. This left the 312th Division available either to join the attack or to frustrate any spoiling operation with which Vang Pao might try to cut the supply lines of the 316th. Meanwhile, with SGUs from outside MR 2 just beginning operations, the communists had taken a secondary base northeast of Long Tieng. Validating Larry Devlin's prediction, they now threatened the entire arc of strong points south and west of the plain.⁴⁸

A Controversial Deployment

The station estimated that 5,000 to 6,000 men of the 316th Division were positioned to hit Long Tieng itself, with no more than 2,000 demoralized Hmong SGU troops facing them. Seeing no prospect of successful defense

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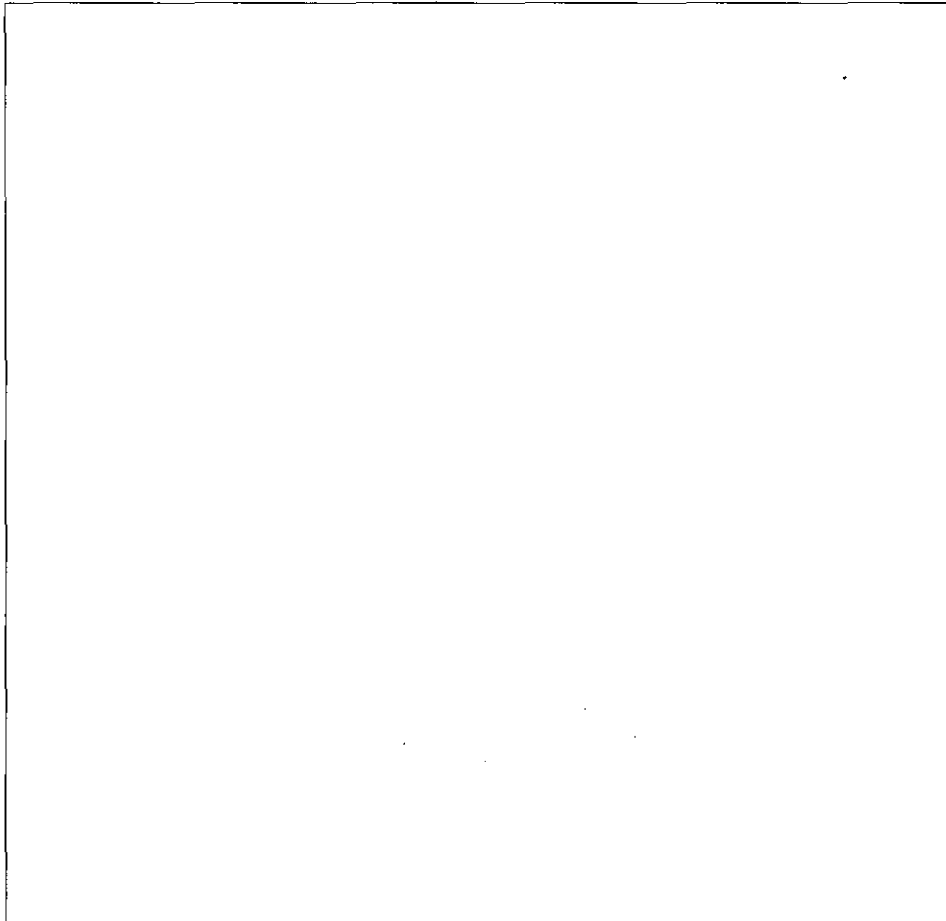
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[redacted] Larry Devlin cited a consensus that included MACV, CINCPAC, and the embassies in Vientiane and Bangkok. Leaving aside the question of Long Tieng's importance, he predicted that, if not further reinforced, Vang Pao could not hold. Should Long Tieng fall, a "considerable number of our irregulars will melt into the bush." A retreat like this would also cost most, if not all, the artillery and heavy equipment. And no one should count on the B-52 missions even then being flown against North Vietnamese concentrations: such strikes "have never won a battle" without "a sufficient number of troops on the ground."⁵¹ [redacted]



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[Redacted]

The Agency was to serve as much more than a communications channel. Secrecy required a covert supply line, and the White House ordered CIA to take on this function as well. And while trying to save Long Tieng and the Lao-tian government's position in northeastern Laos, the Agency was also to ensure that the White House was saved from presiding over a disaster. Kissinger had "made it clear that higher authority, although wishing a maximum defense, [wanted] to avoid a Dien Bien Phu" kind of outcome; "orderly withdrawal" was "without question better than being overrun." Headquarters told Vientiane it was setting up an around-the-clock task force to help keep tabs on the tactical situation and to help "guard against any debacle."

[Redacted]

The Panhandle SGUs had stabilized Hmong defenses, and allowed Vang Pao to send SGU elements to hit the enemy's rear areas. These raids, complemented by several productive B-52 raids, allowed some forward movement on Skyline Ridge, the mountain immediately north of Long Tieng, and at neighboring strong points. Devlin reported that as of 1 April, the Lao were "almost euphoric," but the COS saw little reason to rejoice. Things were indeed much improved, but there had been "no place to go but up." The NVA 312th Division was ready to pounce, whenever Hanoi removed the leash, and the 766th Independent Regiment threatened the southwestern flank. But FAR had moved one regular battalion in from Pakse, and others were promised, and the COS said he was a little more optimistic than he'd been only a week earlier.⁵⁷

At Headquarters, the respite induced more worry about an overaggressive Vang Pao than it did about communist intentions for the remaining weeks of the dry season.

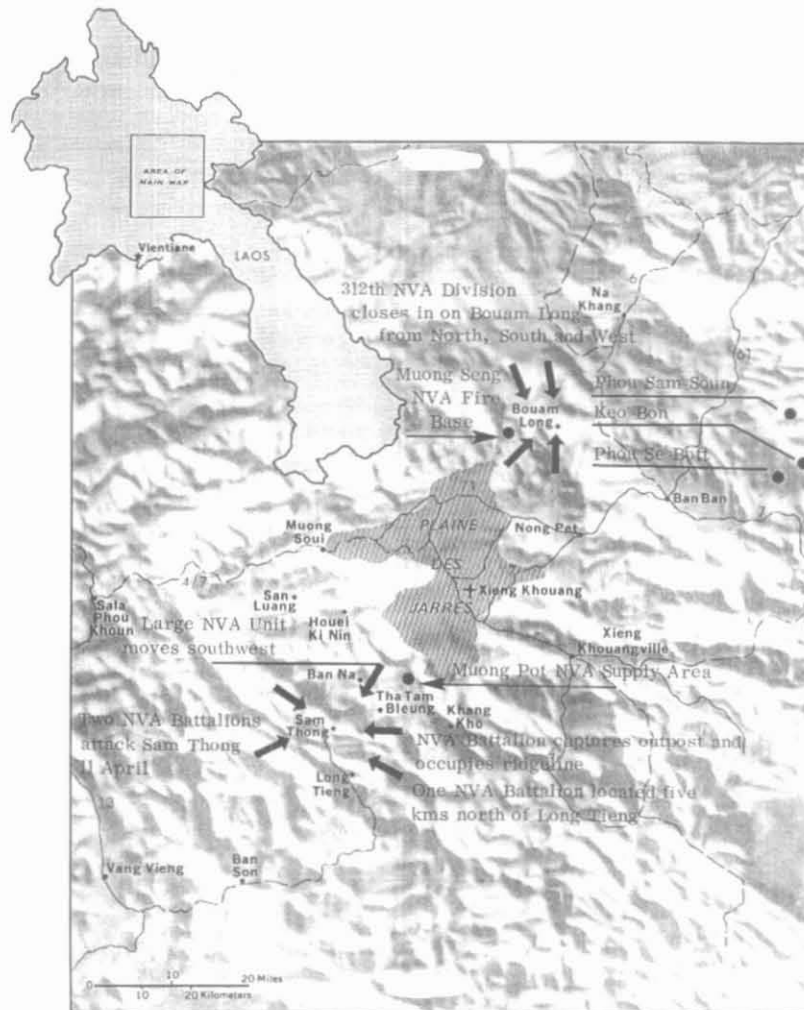
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Tactical situation in MR 2, mid-April 1970

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This anxiety about provoking Hanoi reflected White House pressure for tighter American control of the Hmong more than it did a sober estimate of Vang Pao's offensive potential. Devlin scoffed at the notion that the North Vietnamese could feel threatened by anything Vang Pao had done, and dismissed what he took as Headquarters' implication that it wanted an almost entirely static front. The key to Hmong survival was a continuous campaign of aggressive spoiling operations designed to prevent the enemy from concentrating for a decisive blow, and these operations, he argued, had to take advantage of weak spots wherever they might be found.⁵⁹

The more practical question concerned the prospect of launching such operations in the first place. There had long been more Hmong irregulars on the payroll than were available for duty. Successive Agency managers had tolerated, actually supported, this on the basis that Vang Pao, as much a tribal leader as a military commander, needed more than the Agency's modest subsidy to finance his logrolling among the clans. In any case, they had always calculated that the Hmong contribution to the government's position in MR 2 came very cheap indeed. But of the 5,000 SGU irregulars claimed at the height of Operation ABOUT FACE, only about 1,500 were available for duty in mid-April 1970. Battle casualties accounted for only part of this, and Vang Pao's inability to defend the Long Tieng area without outside help risked some embarrassment to the Agency. Headquarters found the topic all the more sensitive in that it had not yet acknowledged the numbers discrepancy to the other members of the interagency covert operations committee, the Washington Special Action Group.⁶⁰

Numbers were not the only problem. In late April, Vang Pao and his advisers were confronted with a passive mutiny, as several FAR units, Panhandle SGUs, and Hmong irregular units refused to move out on offensive operations. Trying to account for this, the station thought that it had missed earlier signs of a basic "war fatigue" that had begun infecting friendly forces after the communists' 1968 sweep through Sam Neua Province. Contributory factors included Vang Pao's fragile authority over ethnic Lao troops and his consequent hesitation to assert that authority. And some of the borrowed units were cobbled together from a variety of parent organizations, and lacked leadership and cohesion.⁶¹

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There was also, Vientiane might have added, the recent trauma of an enormous success—Operation ABOUT FACE—converted almost overnight into humiliating disaster. Nevertheless, the root problem, in the station's view, remained a more fundamental deficit of combat spirit. The withdrawal of the "Sky" advisers in mid-March had done nothing to arrest declining morale. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] When the enemy failed to press his advantage, the station inferred that events in Cambodia might have forced his attention farther south. The 18 March 1970 overthrow of Prince Sihanouk by his restive army had ended the supply of Chinese munitions to the Vietnamese communists through the port at Sihanoukville. In addition, the allied incursion into Cambodia in search of communist sanctuaries might also have distracted Hanoi's attention. [redacted]

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The Antithesis of Vietnamization []

Having abstained from a decisive attack, the North Vietnamese tested [] on 15 June with an immensely brave if suicidal attack against two artillery positions. Literally stripped for action—wearing no shoes or even trousers—and carrying one-pound blocks of TNT instead of firearms, sappers crawled to the concertina wire at both positions and breached it with explosives. Thirteen of them died there, "literally eviscerated" by the storm of shrapnel from the defenders' hand grenades and claymore mines. The artillerymen suffered five seriously wounded, but no fatalities, and the attack failed.⁶⁶ []

It took less courage for the enemy to attack a refugee village at Phou Cum, some 30 miles north of the Plain of Jars. Ignoring the irregular troops in training less than a mile and a half away, the communists hit the village at night with devastating automatic rifle fire and grenades. Of the 33 refugees killed and 22 wounded, all but four were women and children.⁶⁷ []

The embassy had just reviewed the prospects for the country as a whole, and its evaluation of Hmong morale might almost have anticipated the impact of the Phou Cum massacre. Although Long Tieng might hold out until the approaching rainy season offered a respite, the Hmong "had never been stretched thinner or seemed quite as close to the breaking point. Nor had they ever before been forced to rely as much on outside help." The same dependency characterized the country as a whole. At a time when "Vietnamization" was relieving the United States of much of the burden in South Vietnam, no such process existed in Laos, which had "no inherent capability to defend itself against its large neighbors."⁶⁸ []

Congressional opposition to a larger investment in Laos aggravated the uncertainty engendered by the gradual US withdrawal from South Vietnam. The embassy thought that the fragile Laotian political fabric required preserving the neutralist formula of the Geneva Agreements. The question was whether this would survive an increased [] South Vietnamese military presence in the country. In any case, with 67,000 North Vietnamese troops now committed in Laos, "the last word on priorities belongs not to us or to the Lao but to [Hanoi, which] can tighten or relax military pressure at will."⁶⁹ []

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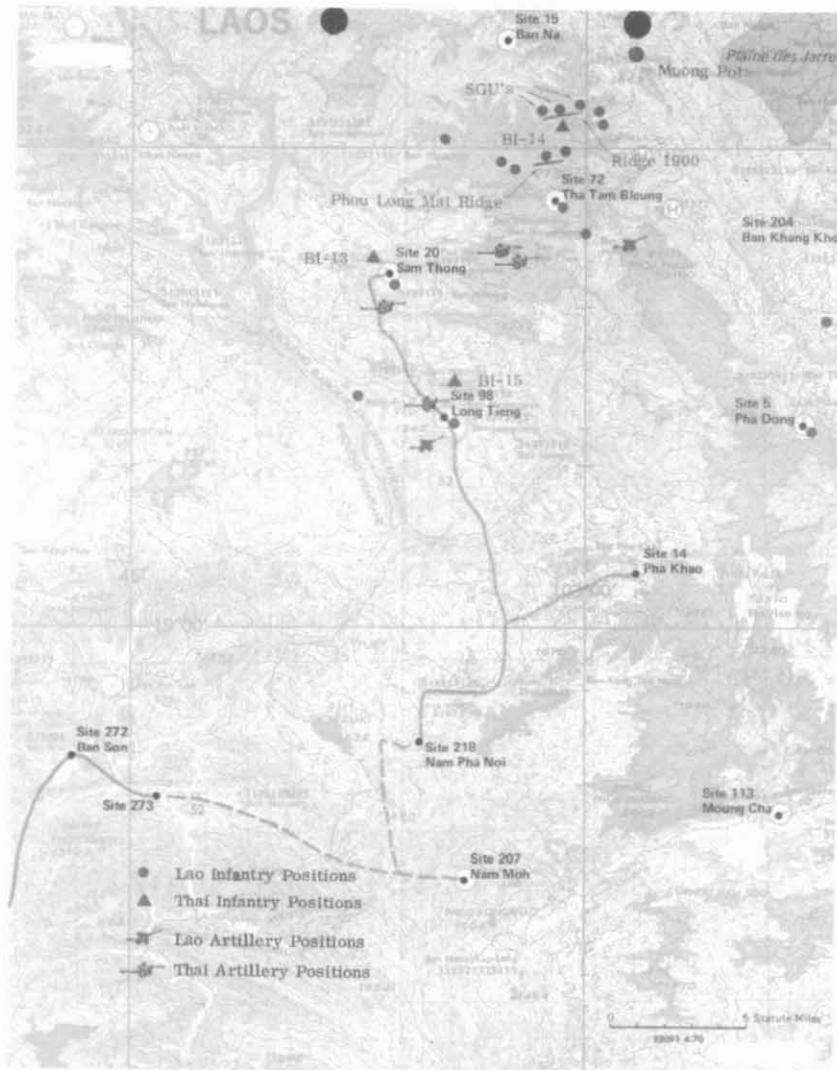
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Tactical situation in Long Tieng-Sam Thong sector, c. late June 1970

Midway through the rainy season, the North Vietnamese—in a departure from their normal practice—had not shortened their supply lines by withdrawing either to bases in Laos or back across the border. They had forgone the opportunity to deliver a crippling blow at Long Tieng, but were well-situated to resume their offensive when the rains ended. Trying to force them back in order to improve his position for the dry season, Vang Pao launched two oper-

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Irregulars awaiting deployment by Jolly Green Giant helicopters, probably at Ban Na, c. late 1970

ations, one of them against enemy forward positions near Ban Na, west of the plain. The infiltration phase succeeded, but the weather promptly closed down. Without the required supplies and tactical air support, the operation bogged down into a series of indecisive skirmishes.⁷⁰

The second effort began in August 1970, when Vang Pao launched diversionary operations in the Xieng Khouang town and Ban Ban sectors. Headquarters nervously asked whether the Xieng Khouang attack might repeat the success of Operation ABOUT FACE and provoke Hanoi into breaking off the peace negotiations then in progress. Devlin and Godley gave the desired assurances, and argued that Operation COUNTERPUNCH, as it was called, offered the only chance to achieve a viable position for Vang Pao in the impending dry season. Washington gave its approval, and the enemy did withdraw from Ban Na; Muong Soui once again changed hands. By October, Vang Pao also occupied at least some of the high ground on the southwestern edge of the Plain of Jars. The Hmong position, buttressed by the Thai, was now strong enough to preclude a decisive strike against Long Tieng, but the enemy still held high ground on the western rim of the plain, and its advantages in manpower would prevail in any battle of attrition.⁷¹

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Vang Pao (c) instructing
enemy positions, c.1970

Arrow directs close-support aircraft toward

By this time, Washington had faced the limitations—both qualitative and quantitative—of Laotian manpower. The response came with new programs whose shape was determined by events not only in Hmong country but also in Washington, Vientiane, Phnom Penh, and the Laotian Panhandle. A look at these developments will set the context for an account of the new programs launched in 1970.

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The success of Operation ABOUT FACE had discouraged the enemy from stationing major supply depots within range of guerrilla operations, and these diversionary attacks, therefore, inflicted relatively little damage.

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1970-72

With its "Vietnamization" doctrine, proclaimed in early 1969, the Nixon administration began the gradual withdrawal of the United States from ground combat in South Vietnam. Seeking to buy time to strengthen the South Vietnamese military, Washington accompanied the drawdown in Vietnam with escalation in Laos. National security adviser Henry Kissinger mandated an Agency-run campaign of harassing attacks into North Vietnam that continued until late 1971, when it had become clear that these would never repay the investment. An expanded program of irregular operations in the eastern Panhandle was more productive. Multibattalion operations there sometimes briefly slowed, if they never interdicted, North Vietnamese infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Vang Pao exploited a North Vietnamese lapse to retake the Plain of Jars in late 1971 but lost it again in a rout that marked the end of all offensive operations in the northeast. From that point on, mobile operations in the Panhandle represented the main CIA response to the demands of Vietnamization.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Taking the War to the Enemy

The domestic pressures for withdrawal from Indochina competed with President Nixon's abhorrence—fully as passionate as Lyndon Johnson's—of presiding over an American military defeat in Vietnam. He would disengage only on terms that could be represented as, at worst, leaving the South Vietnamese ready to defend themselves. But unilateral withdrawal, needed to mollify a restive electorate, reduced the prospects of shaping a Vietnamese settlement from a position of strength. President Johnson's November 1968 moratorium on bombing North Vietnam had imposed yet another constraint, one whose abrogation would further alienate the American public.¹

If Hanoi were to be coerced into an agreement at Paris, other avenues would have to be found. As early as July 1969, just a month before the 9th Infantry Division began the incremental US withdrawal from South Vietnam, Henry Kissinger had asked CIA to propose "high political and psychological impact actions against military targets in North Vietnam." The response came in the form of a plan to use Agency-sponsored Laotian guerrillas to raid barracks and storage facilities at Dien Bien Phu. State, Defense, and even the DDCI thought the costs would exceed the benefit, but Kissinger persuaded Nixon to approve contingent preparations.²

The Dien Bien Phu raid was still being readied when Kissinger asked again in December 1969 for more strikes against "lucrative targets" in North Vietnam. Relaying the requirement to Larry Devlin in Vientiane, Headquarters attributed it to "senior US Government levels." The COS understood that this meant the White House, but he proceeded to voice some objections. The proposal came at a time when Operation ABOUT FACE had run into trouble, and Vang Pao needed every Hmong combatant he could find. A pinprick raid on

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the proposed target—this time Muong Sen, on Route 7 just inside North Vietnam—would leave communist logistical facilities there essentially intact while risking major retaliation against the Plain of Jars. Souvanna and the king would doubtless reject the idea, if they were approached, and would immediately infer Agency sponsorship if it were implemented without their knowledge.³ [redacted]

The White House insisted, and the Dien Bien Phu operation, against the rear headquarters of the 316th Division, took place on 22 February 1970. The Hmong raiders set several administrative and storage buildings ablaze, and the operation's success, however modest, overrode any further objections. So-called Commando Raider operations now became a staple of the Vientiane station agenda. On 10 March, a similar operation sabotaged a pipeline north of the Mu Gia Pass inside North Vietnam. The team worked its way through the massive NVA presence there to an exposed segment and planted time-delay explosives, one of which it reported hearing go off as it withdrew.⁴ [redacted]

The White House intensified the pressure after the change of government in Cambodia in March 1970. The military coup in Phnom Penh severed the supply line that fed Chinese communist war materiel from the port of Sihanoukville (Kompong Som), on the Gulf of Thailand, to the sanctuaries along the border with South Vietnam. In so doing, it made the Corridor the only channel for the large-scale movement of supplies to NVA and Viet Cong forces in the south: Commando Raider operations, originally launched essentially to shake the enemy's confidence in the security of the trail network, were now supposed to contribute to its interdiction.⁵ [redacted]

On 3 April, Headquarters urged the station to try again after a second pipeline operation failed; it was imperative to do "specifically what we have told higher authority we would do." But promise did not guarantee performance. On 25 April, another try ended when the team stumbled upon a North Vietnamese bivouac, which it raked with 57mm recoilless rifle fire before exfiltrating back across the border. The station could only hope that "higher

³ [redacted]

⁴ [redacted]

⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 504. After the fall of Prince Sihanouk, CIA discovered that, from December 1966 to April 1969, the Chinese had delivered over 21,000 tons of ordnance through the port of Sihanoukville, enough light weapons to equip 585 battalions and enough crew-served weapons for 240 battalions. CIA had argued that the port could not handle such a volume of cargo during the known calls by Chinese freighters and suffered a major embarrassment when the facts emerged. [redacted]

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TAKING THE WAR TO THE ENEMY

authority will realize that our teams will more often than not clash with the enemy before they reach the ultimate target."⁶

An Unfavorable Cost-Benefit Ratio

The problem was one of means inadequate to the end; minuscule raiding parties, no matter how competent and courageous, were not going to represent more than a minor nuisance. The early casualty rate aggravated the problem. A mission launched from Hmong country in May 1970 ended in disaster after Air America helicopters landed a raiding party at the border north of Route 7. Its members were soon discovered, and all but four of its 21 members were captured or killed.⁷

Better intelligence and better planning reduced the casualty rate, but results were seldom if ever proportionate to the resources invested. The adventures of one Commando Raider team illustrate the disparity. Undertaken in May 1970, after the administration's incursion into Cambodia, the operation represented the third attempt to cut a pipeline inside North Vietnam near the Mu Gia Pass. Like most such efforts, it involved infiltration by Air America helicopters, themselves protected by USAF fighter aircraft, to a staging area far enough from the target to avoid revealing the operation's target.⁸

The need for concealment dictated, in this case, an infiltration point some 10 miles from the target, the two separated by vertiginous cliffs that the station calculated would be free of enemy patrols. A 10-man support element disembarked there on 28 May 1970 and set off toward its first bivouac, lugging a two-week supply of food for itself and the action element that would follow. On the 29th, the team managed 2 miles, spending four hours hauling themselves and their cargo up a precipitous slope. With the food supplies slung on bamboo poles—two men carrying 150 pounds—it took two more days to navigate less than 1,500 yards of steep terrain in nearly continuous rainfall. At this point, the unit found a cache site under a rock and stored the rations.⁹

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⁷ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 244.

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Returning to the infiltration point to meet the action team, the unit found the medical supplies and additional food left near the landing zone "ruined by marauding bears." Unaware of this setback, the action team landed on 5 June. Next day, the combined unit, this time lugging all the ordnance, struggled up the now-familiar hill toward the cache site. Everything was still packed in its original cardboard boxes, for the support team had forgotten to bring back rice bags from the food cache site when it returned to meet the action element. The cardboard now began to disintegrate in the constant downpour, and the team lost a day improvising cargo nets from vines and bamboo.

Snaking along the crests of ridgelines to avoid the nearly impenetrable vegetation below, it still took until 10 June to reach the Vietnamese border. Next day, the team found itself halted at the lip of a long, steep escarpment. Two days of searching revealed a way down the cliff, and two more days were required to lug the gear down to the valley below, where the support element now halted.

After one more day on the march, approaching the 7,000-foot mountain called Nui Bai Dinh, the action element heard shots ahead and changed its route to pass just south of the peak. This accomplished, they teetered across a river on the rocks that littered the streambed. A second river, much deeper and some 80 feet wide, was a greater challenge, requiring the flotation gear carried for the purpose.

Team leader Thong My and his crew practiced a virtue only rarely found among the Lao Commando Raiders: they would move at night, treating the malignant spirits known to roam the darkness as a lesser evil than discovery by North Vietnamese patrols. Taking just two men, Thong My floated the ordnance across the river under cover of darkness. Having hidden the deflated flotation gear under a log, he led the others across the main road—Route 15, running south down to the Mu Gia Pass—and camped for the remainder of the night.¹⁰

Good intelligence had brought them to within a few hundred yards of the pipeline, but it took all the next day, 18 June, to find it. They finally spotted it where the soil had eroded in the rain, and Thong My planted two charges on it and buried antipersonnel mines on the narrow path running parallel to it. Approaching darkness prevented setting additional charges, and the three men retreated into the jungle.¹¹

¹⁰ The station had earlier flatly stated that these teams "will not travel at night"

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The difficulty of verifying results had long since prompted the station to equip Commando Raiders with small cameras to photograph their work. As anticipated, it was now too dark for that, and Thong My used a 20-hour delay ampule on the charges in order to detonate them in full daylight.

The pipeline charges went off just after noon on 19 June, and Thong My emerged from hiding to take pictures. He and the others then retired in some haste deeper into the jungle. They were moving west as fast as they could go when they heard the blast of four antipersonnel mines; the North Vietnamese had been quick to investigate the first explosions. With all his personnel reassembled, Thong My reached the landing zone three days later. Bad weather and tardy tactical air cover delayed the exfiltration a day, but everyone was lifted out on the 25th.

Apparently encouraged by this modest success, the administration proceeded to make it clear that it wanted the Agency to take any "extraordinary measures" needed to mount more operations against North Vietnam. CIA had already considered and rejected using Gurka mercenaries to add some "necessary stiffening"; it seems that a number of unspecified "political and other problems" precluded it. The focus returned to upper North Vietnam, and in October a case officer circling overhead in a Porter saw a ground team like Thong My's deliver eight 2.75-inch rockets against a storage area just inside North Vietnam. But the target itself was obscured by clouds and steep hills, and the station could not be sure that it had done more than "raise enemy apprehension" about guerrilla operations along the border.¹²

Under continual White House urging, Agency participants tried to persuade themselves that in all of this they were doing something useful. The briefing prepared for DCI Helms during his late-1970 visit described its purpose—apparently quoting Headquarters guidance—as "to prick the political and military sensitivities of the enemy within their own borders." The ques-

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The program had come to include a notional insurgency involving a tribal minority known as the T'ai Dam. Called the Committee for the Liberation of Oppressed Minorities (CLOM), its charter called for intelligence and sabotage activity that would create the impression of active dissidence in the border highlands.

This was abandoned in August 1971 when the CLOM leadership insisted on a serious effort to build a resistance in North Vietnam. After some of the T'ai Dam were converted to Commando Raider activity, security concerns led to the polygraph of 48 CLOM members; 23 were judged to have "past or present association with the NVA/PL."

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tion remained, even when these raids succeeded, whether they justified the risks and the costs. And many did not succeed; a second raid along Route 15—just a year after the first—was intercepted by the enemy, and half the team was lost. The station worried, moreover, about the political and human costs if an aircraft should go down; even if the Porter were replaced by the Twin Otter—safer because of its two engines—accident or ground fire could result in the death or capture of pilots and case officers on North Vietnamese soil.¹³ [redacted]

There remained also the requirement for lengthy overland infiltration imposed by the noise of the helicopters used to insert them. [redacted] [redacted] to modify a Bell helicopter for silent flight, but the Bell aircraft chosen for this was too small to accommodate teams of the size that planted the charges on the pipeline. The rules prevented using American pilots in Hanoi's airspace, and even should more conventional aircraft be suitable, the shortage of Laotian or Chinese pilots qualified to fly on instruments meant that the opportunity might well lie fallow.¹⁴ [redacted]

Common sense dictated more skepticism. But to tell the White House it could not have what it wanted went very much against the cultural grain in the Clandestine Service. It was not until May 1971 that a desk officer in the paramilitary element at Headquarters looked at the record and concluded that the game was not worth the candle. Most of the teams lacked the requisite intense motivation as well as the Vietnamese language capability that might allow them to satisfy at least a casual challenge. And the need for overland infiltration made discovery nearly inevitable. Fully nine months later, the FE branch chief said he agreed. Only 12 of 22 operations had succeeded even to the modest extent of delivering ordnance toward a target. These "meager results," with "little reason to expect [anything better] in the future," had come at a cost of over \$3 million and 29 Commando Raiders lost in action. Unless the president judged that his objectives for the program were being met, the program should be abolished.¹⁵ [redacted]

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~~SECRET//MR~~TAKING THE WAR TO THE ENEMY **Interdiction by Stealth**

The fall of Sihanouk in March 1970 had resulted in a higher priority on cross-border operations and interdiction of Corridor traffic. It also—more indirectly—changed the political equation that set the terms of interdiction efforts. The Phnom Penh government of Gen. Lon Nol was amenable to direct action against the sanctuaries, and the administration resolved to exploit this new opportunity to disrupt North Vietnamese and Viet Cong facilities on the Cambodian side of the border. On 30 April 1970, as we have seen, President Nixon announced the US–South Vietnamese ground incursion across the border into southeastern Cambodia. The area had become, he said, “a vast enemy staging area and a springboard for attacks on South Vietnam along 600 miles of frontier.” If the United States were not to be seen as a “pitiful helpless giant,” he had no choice but to assault the “headquarters for the entire communist military operation in South Vietnam.”¹⁷

The combative tone of Nixon’s speech and the march into Cambodia intensified the domestic clamor, and four students died when National Guardsmen fired on protesters at Kent State University on 4 May 1970. The uproar continued until the end of the incursion in June, and the episode vividly illustrated the president’s dilemma. Exerting enough force to influence Hanoi’s behavior would magnify the bitter resistance at home, and this might signal to the communists a faltering American will to continue.¹⁸

This quandary led, naturally enough, to new emphasis on surreptitious action, with new responsibility for CIA. Headquarters interpreted Nixon’s 30 April speech as committing the United States to the conflicting goals both of “forcing the North Vietnamese to leave the areas of Indochina they have invaded” and of continuing “step-by-step withdrawals of American troops.” The expulsion of the NVA—if that actually remained the administration’s goal—apparently did not apply to Laos, where the United States still aimed

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¹⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 504; Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 52–53.

¹⁸ Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 53.

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only "to prevent a takeover." Nevertheless, Washington wanted the Agency's Laotian operations also to contribute to its aims in Vietnam, and it asked what new resources this would require.¹⁹ [redacted]

Bill Nelson, then visiting Vientiane, pointed out that Laos mattered to Hanoi primarily as a conduit for material support to the conflict in South Vietnam. On the theory that US priorities should mirror those of the communists, Nelson proposed that CIA's efforts in Laos be devoted primarily to obstructing the use of that conduit. The station should, therefore, do no more in MR 2 than reorganize and retrain Vang Pao's irregulars while it concentrated on finding ways to do more against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.²⁰ [redacted]

Support to US forces in Vietnam had already become the declared priority of the Laotian program in 1965. But the weakness of the FAR meant that SGU battalions in the Panhandle were as likely to be deployed in a defensive mode near the Mekong as against Hanoi's lines of communication. There were simply not enough friendly forces sufficiently competent and disciplined to give the NVA serious problems on the Trail complex. The job required more Laotian SGUs and Commando Raiders, [redacted]

[redacted]

¹⁹ [redacted]
It seems most unlikely that a White House influenced by the balance-of-power model that drove Kissinger's calculations still thought in terms of expelling the NVA from South Vietnam. The pressure on CIA to do something, almost anything, suggests rather that the United States was again trying, as it had done until it sent troops in 1965, to stave off defeat with arbitrarily limited means. [redacted]

²⁰ [redacted]
²¹ [redacted]
²² [redacted]
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In the north, Vang Pao would have to be persuaded that his American patrons were serious in their opposition to another try at taking and holding the Plain of Jars. He must develop new bases in MR 2 for a return to guerrilla operations and help "bury forever" the term "Meo heartland." NVA offensive operations might on occasion challenge this strategy,

The Savannakhet Model (U)

As the White House pressed for more action in the Panhandle in mid-1970, the Savannakhet model of the SGU battalion reached maturity. Smaller than the 550-man organization of the Hmong, it had just three companies and a total complement of a little over 300 men. It had evolved under whose case officers discovered that the larger unit exceeded the ability of indigenous officers to control.²⁴

Launched in 1966, the Savannakhet SGU program had endured a tortuous process of negotiations for manpower followed by the construction and manning of training facilities. And when the first units came on line, they were often diverted to bolster FAR static defenses in danger of collapse. In addition, SGU operations had to compete for tactical air support with requirements not only in the rest of Laos but in Vietnam. Only after November 1968, when President Johnson suspended all bombing of North Vietnam, did tactical air support become more freely available for the irregulars, Until 1969, Savannakhet had, therefore, enjoyed only limited opportunities to conduct operations involving even one full battalion.²⁵

irregulars had previously participated in just one multibattalion operation, in June 1968, when a combined force of SGUs and FAR units had recaptured Muong Phalane, east of Savannakhet. But this operation had encountered little resistance, and the SGUs had yet to challenge the enemy on its own turf. Now, almost a year later, was still more concerned with

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²⁴ interview. The larger formation had been intended in the first place as an administrative unit, with its components deployed separately in combat operations.

²⁵ Jim Glerum; interview.

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building his men's confidence than with taking on the NVA in the Corridor.²⁶

□ Preferring to begin by demonstrating SGU superiority to the indigenous communists, □ chose a major Pathet Lao installation south of Route 12 that linked Thakhek and the Mu Gia Pass. On 25 March 1969, 17 helicopters, some of them US Air Force and others Air America, flew two companies of irregulars to landing pads near the karst formation whose network of caves sheltered the enemy headquarters. Four SGU assaults, each preceded by USAF bombardment with 2,000-pound bombs, napalm, and cluster-bomb units, failed to suppress the communist fire, and when two irregulars braved one cave entrance, they were shot dead as they entered.²⁷ □

The irregulars drew blood when 13 Pathet Lao emerged from cave openings on the face of the cliff and tried to climb ropes suspended from a ledge above. Two were shot from their ropes during their climb, and five more died on the ground below. But the advantage lay with the defense. A monstrous thunderstorm was now approaching, and all concerned—the Lao unit commanders, their case officer flying overhead, and the US Air Force—agreed to call it a day.²⁸ □

□ had hoped that Operation DUCK would simply overrun the Pathet Lao, but thought that, given the defenders' numbers and the cover afforded by the cave network, the SGU elements had done acceptably well. At the very least, thanks largely to the air support, the attackers had achieved a highly favorable casualty rate, losing four dead against some 40 enemy killed. The result added its bit to the results of irregular ground operations in Laos in the previous nine months: by the station's reckoning, the enemy had lost 13,000 killed and wounded, with the irregulars suffering just under 4,000 casualties.²⁹

Had the contending sides been working from comparable bases of available manpower, the attrition factor might now have been eroding the enemy's combat effectiveness. But the North Vietnamese, if not the Pathet Lao, could always find replacements. With an irreducible numerical advantage and their superior discipline and skills, they offered a supreme challenge to the case officers and Lao unit commanders trying to reduce the road traffic into South Vietnam.³⁰ □

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TAKING THE WAR TO THE ENEMY []

Not even a numerically superior enemy could be everywhere at once, and the success, however qualified, of Operation DUCK encouraged more ambitious efforts in the Panhandle. In July 1969, four SGU companies swept east and south along Route 9, east of Savannakhet, and meeting no resistance set up a command post about 13 miles east of Muong Phalane. This brought within striking distance the communist transportation hub at Muong Phine, where Route 23, running south from the Mu Gia Pass, intersected Route 9. []

Operation JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR []

Spurred by unconfirmed team reports of American prisoners being held in the Muong Phine area, the station launched Operation JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR, sending three light SGU battalions overland into that area in early September 1969. They met determined resistance at first, but the undermanned defense—much of it withdrawn for training during the rainy season—quickly faded under intense tactical air bombardment. On 7 September, [] [] irregulars occupied Muong Phine.³¹ []

Taking place just weeks after Vang Pao's sweep through enemy supply caches in Xieng Khouang Province, Operation JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR exploited surprise to lay waste to enemy logistics in the Muong Phine area. The irregulars captured 2,000 tons of ordnance, including heavy mortars and machineguns, as they fanned out around the road and trail junctions. Their success led to an expanded agenda: the Savannakhet irregulars would push northeast toward the major logistical center at Tchepone while MR 4 SGU elements prevented communist reinforcements from deploying northward toward Muong Phine.³² []

The best available intelligence— [] showed a local NVA presence inferior in numbers and weakened by disease. There were, however, some 1,600 NVA troops headed south down the coast of North Vietnam; should these be deployed toward Tchepone, they would mean real trouble for the combined force of FAR and irregular units headed that way.³³ []

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The code name JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR honored the US Army's Operation Junction City, the largest American ground operation to date when it was launched in February 1967. (Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 41.) []

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As it worked out, the enemy chose to send the fresh troops down the Trail past Tchepone into South Vietnam and to reinforce the Muong Phine sector with units moving north from the lower Panhandle. These had to concentrate to get past the blocking positions set up by the MR 4 irregulars and took a fearful beating from tactical air. Even so, such NVA and Pathet Lao forces as remained around Muong Phine managed to push the occupying government troops back to the west. After an irregular battalion abandoned its defensive positions around the airstrip, unsuspecting USAF Jolly Green Giants tried to land reinforcements there, and two of them were shot out of the air. It took A-1Es dropping tear gas to distract the enemy long enough for other choppers to rescue the troops and crews in the downed helicopters.³⁴ [redacted]

Stubborn communist resistance frustrated subsequent efforts to retake Muong Phine, and Operation JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR came to an inconclusive end. But it had never been designed to take and hold enemy positions along the Trail, and Headquarters saw it as an important success. Some 500 enemy had been killed and 45 captured, in addition to the thousands of tons of ordnance and supplies captured and then removed or destroyed. Perhaps more significant was the evacuation of 6,000 refugees, whose corvée labor and agricultural production were now denied to the enemy's logistic system. Although it achieved no significant reduction in the carrying capacity of the Trail network, the operation raised the cost of using it even as it boosted SGU morale by demonstrating that the war could be taken onto the enemy's home ground.³⁵ [redacted]

No immediate opportunity presented itself to build on this experiment. As the station concentrated on recruiting and training new SGU battalions, the irregulars in the Panhandle (Military Regions 3 and 4) had all they could handle when the beginning of the dry season in late 1969 restored the communists' mobility. Supported as usual by tactical air, and often operating with elements of the FAR, the SGUs generally held their own, inflicting disproportionate casualties but unable to go on the offensive. Their potential was further reduced in March 1970 when, as noted earlier, two Panhandle SGU battalions went north to help out Vang Pao at Long Tieng.³⁶ [redacted]

The communist dry-season offensive now threatened not only southern Xieng Khouang Province but also key government positions in the south,

33 [redacted]

34 Ibid.; Conboy, *Shadow War*, 220-21. [redacted]

35 [redacted]

36 [redacted]

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including the provincial capitals of Saravane and Attopeu. Rockets harassed Pakse, home to MR 4 headquarters, and various strong points near Muong Phalane and on the Bolovens Plateau changed hands numerous times in early 1970. Not all the irregulars reverted to a defensive posture; a Commando Raider team tapped a multiplex communications line and cut a petroleum pipeline northwest of Tcheponc, and two SGU companies cut Route 23 above Saravane. But such activity, small in scale and relatively rare, did not appreciably impede the enemy advance. Four NVA battalions took Attopeu on 29 April, and Saravane fell on 9 June. With the rain already coming down, the enemy pressed on, taking the last four irregular command posts, one of which also hosted a US Air Force TACAN site.³⁷

Another Start

With these reverses, the government's defensive goals for MR 4 had nearly all been defeated. Its blocking positions at Saravane and Attopeu were gone, and Paksong, the main town on the Bolovens Plateau, had come under pressure during the last dry season. It now appeared that Hanoi had decided to expand and consolidate its supply routes running through Laos down into Cambodia toward lower South Vietnam.³⁸

In late May, with Bill Nelson back in Washington, his call of a few weeks earlier for beefed-up offensive Corridor operations was overtaken by the imperative to stem the tide. Asked what he proposed to do, Larry Devlin responded with a cautious statement of his capabilities. For one thing, it now appeared that government forces might not enjoy the usual wet-season respite, as the communists went all-out to replace the Sihanoukville supply channel. In addition, little help was to be expected from either FAR or the neutralists, not even from the units commanded by the capable Col. Soutchay Vongsavanh,

Whatever was going to be done would have to be done by the "admittedly slim" forces represented by CIA's irregulars.³⁹

However limited, the ranks of the SGUs had begun to swell, as the expansion of training facilities accommodated more Laotian recruits. Devlin had three battalions finishing refresher training and reorganization, with six new battalions also in training, and Panhandle units supporting Vang

³⁷ Ibid. According to one report, NVA forces participated in the attack on Saravane, then retired to nearby villages, leaving the administration of the town to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese advisers.

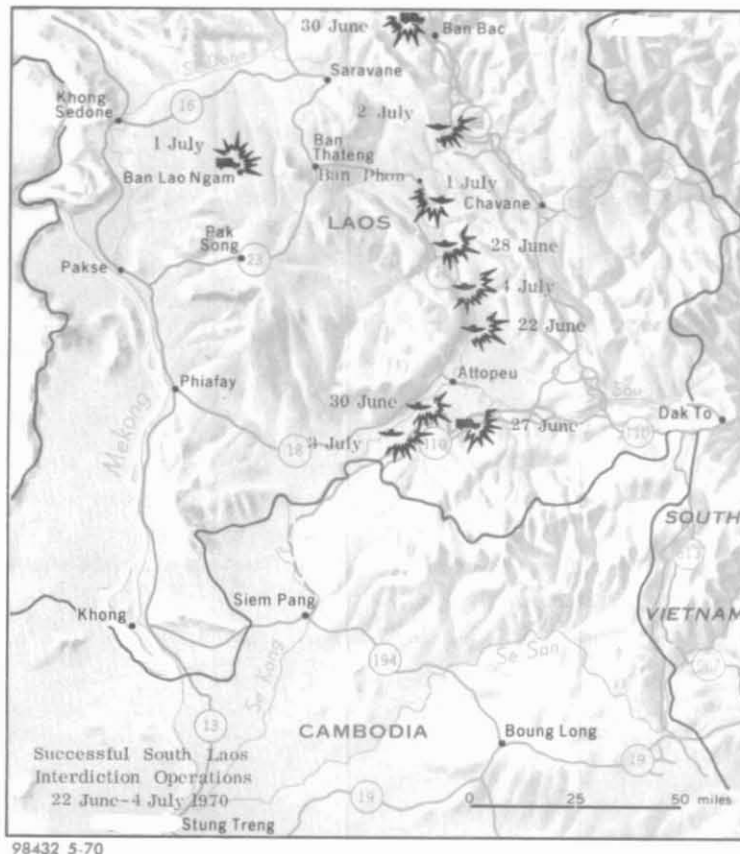
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Southern Laos interdiction operations as of 4 July 1970

Pao in MR 2. Meanwhile, the Vientiane station proceeded to use teams of standard guerrillas and specially trained Commando Raiders. These operated to impede truck traffic while the station prepared battalion-size formations to attempt full-fledged interdiction of at least portions of the Trail network.⁴⁰

Substantially more sophisticated than the early teams run from Ban Pa Dong in the north and Thakhek and the Bolovens Plateau in the south, small guerrilla teams could inflict considerable damage. Now usually infiltrated by

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At this point more receptive than his predecessors to participation by MACSOG, Devlin proposed a joint operation to cut the land and water routes running south from the Tchepone-Muong Phine area to Attopeu; it would also interdict enemy lines of communication across the Bolovens Plateau. MACSOG did not become a player in the operations that followed; perhaps, given long-standing State Department hostility to the idea, Vientiane's suggestion never reached it.

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SGU training camp northwest of Pakse, c. 1970

helicopter, they carried enough ordnance to prepare more than one ambush site, and if they then discovered additional opportunities, they could be supplied from the air by night drops that took advantage of improved radio communications and beacons. ⁴¹ [redacted]

With the intensive specialized training available [redacted]—the teams deployed in 1970 had the extra measure of confidence installed by awareness of their skill. On 11 June 1970, one of them conducted a deadly ambush of two trucks 25 miles south of Muong Phine. The first truck detonated a mine buried in the roadbed, while eight claymore mines, supplemented by 66mm rockets, raked the second. Already on the way to prepare a second ambush site, the team reported that more than half the 40-odd enemy aboard the trucks had been killed or wounded. ⁴² [redacted]

On the same day, east of the Bolovens, another team hit three trucks, the first of which detonated a buried mine. The team then detonated M-18 claymore mines, which disabled the remaining two vehicles. The 30-odd NVA soldiers in the convoy leaped out and took up defensive positions just as anticipated by the attackers, who set off three more claymore mines. As in the first attack, the team estimated the enemy casualty rate at about half. A little

⁴¹ [redacted]

⁴² [redacted]

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Irregulars inspecting camouflaged Polish truck on Ho Chi Minh Trail, probably in MR 3 c. 1971

later, in four separate ambushes, guerrilla teams sank four boats and killed several enemy troops.⁴³ [redacted]

Headquarters applauded these successes, advertised them to the White House, and called for more. CIA wanted to establish its ability to do something about traffic into northeastern Cambodia while the MACV master plan was still working its way through the approval process. Devlin should, therefore, divert at least one good team to this southern sector in order to get a jump on the MACV competition.⁴⁴ [redacted]

In mid-July 1970, Savannakhet undertook the first regimental-size irregular operation in the Panhandle since Operation JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR. Led by a seasoned FAR regimental commander, Col. Touane Bouddhara, Operation MAENG DA forced its way east across Route 23 below Muong Phine. There, progress came to an abrupt halt when it encountered the tough, experienced NVA 9th Regiment. With more communist resistance than it could handle, Bouddhara fell back while awaiting an additional battalion. One battalion was airlifted out, while the other two tried to disengage toward the west. Enemy heavy weapons fire harassed their withdrawal and killed Lieutenant Colonel Chantala, the best and bravest of the program's battalion commanders.⁴⁵ [redacted]

Chantala's battalion, a new one apparently recruited in some haste, now fell apart, and [redacted] recalled that the operation had been named for what he called the "drugstore cowboys" in its ranks. *Maeng Da* means "waterbug," but it is also Laotian slang for "pimp." The choice of code name—represented to

⁴³ [redacted]

⁴⁴ [redacted]

⁴⁵ [redacted]

Shadow War, 269-70. [redacted]

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Vientiane as a reference to the river along the planned route of march—actually reflected CIA officers' judgment of the human material in the unfortunate Chantala's unit.⁴⁶

A More Concerted Effort

Despite the failure of Operation MAENG DA, Larry Devlin now adopted a more aggressive stance than the one he displayed in the May exchange with Bill Nelson. The COS announced "Phase I of the South Laos Interdiction Program," which opened on 29 August 1970. The station committed 5,700 irregulars to several operations against three main lines of communications in the western part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network.⁴⁷



The Se Kong Valley, looking northeast from Ban Bac

To penetrate the enemy's sanctuaries required securing one's own. COS Devlin judged that, if it was to accomplish anything significant east and south-east of the Bolovens, the interdiction program had to hold on to its launch bases on the plateau. The key site, PS-26 on the southeastern edge, had earlier fallen to the North Vietnamese, and Devlin regarded its recapture as essential to the future of MR 4 and indeed to the outcome of the war in general. In mid-September, two battalions began sweeping the Se Kong Valley below the

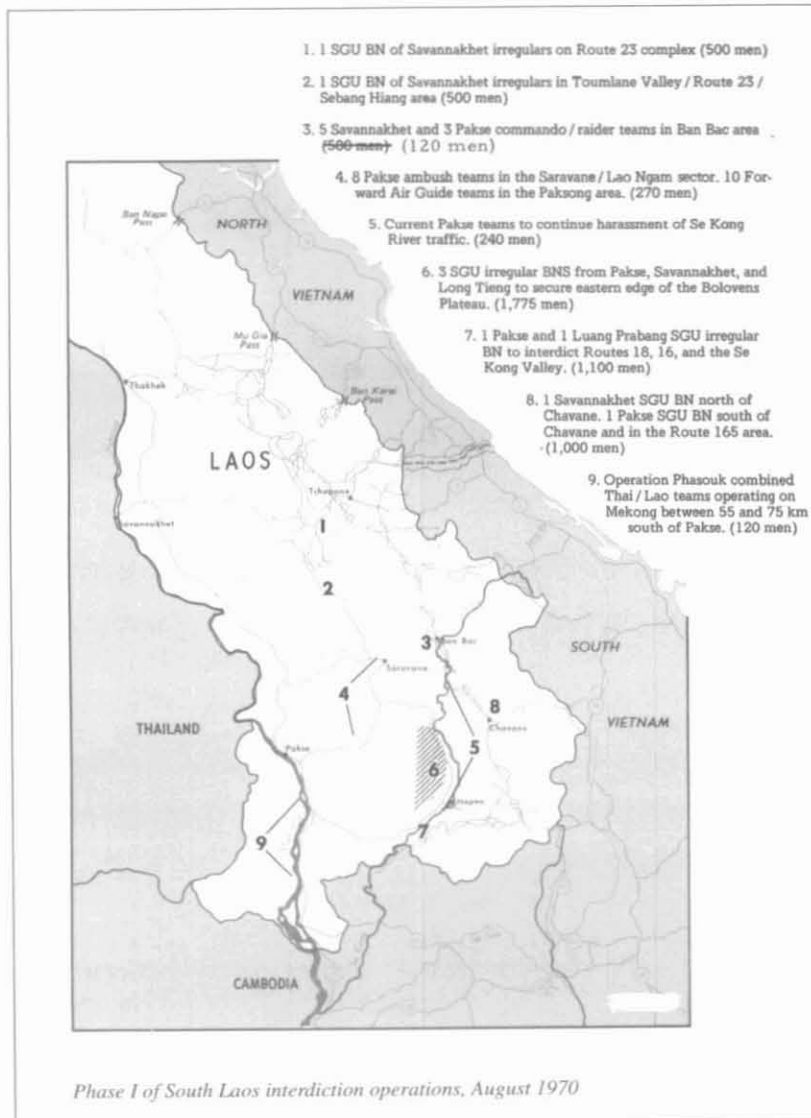
⁴⁶ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 270;

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Phase I of South Laos interdiction operations, August 1970

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Bolovens escarpment to cut off the enemy's supply lines to PS-26. Having only Pathet Lao opposition to deal with, they soon linked up. Then, however, having struggled up the escarpment to PS-26, they encountered an NVA hornet's nest, and progress came to a halt.⁴⁸

The stalemate displayed the leadership problems that had always constituted the principal limiting factor in the effectiveness of the irregulars. Vang Pao had reluctantly allowed a Hmong SGU battalion to be shipped south for the offensive, but its commander would accept only those orders personally endorsed by the general. As for the Luang Prabang unit, after the encounter with the NVA as it reached the plateau at PS-26, it would do nothing at all. With friendly forces back on the defensive, the enemy's supply line was restored.⁴⁹

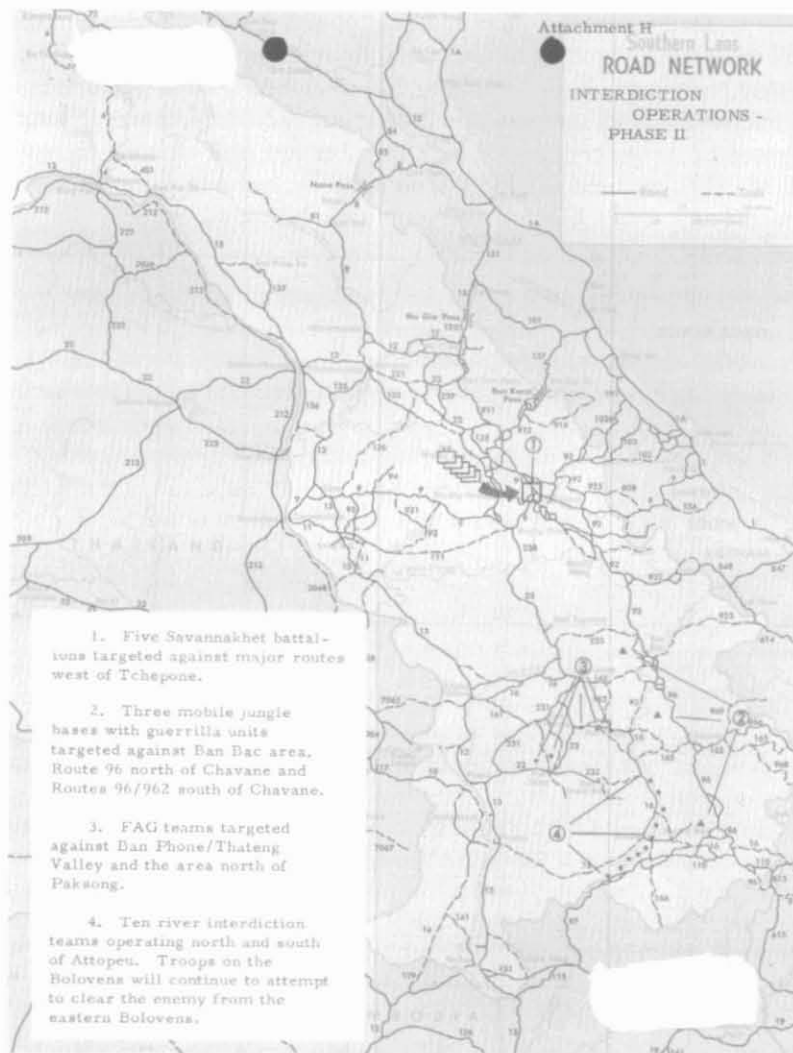
In a spasm of frantic moves to restore forward motion, Devlin sent McAvoy to Long Tieng to pressure Vang Pao into flying to the south. This brought Lao-tian military and regional politics into the equation, and the station had to persuade General Bounpone and MR 4 commander Phasouk to join the meeting before Vang Pao finally yielded. Meanwhile, to bring his disparate forces into some semblance of cooperation, Devlin abandoned the pose, normally so carefully maintained, of adviser to the Lao. He told to "instruct" Colonel Soutchay, the commander of MR 4 guerrilla forces, to use any available tactic, not excluding threats or bribery, to get the MR 1 battalion into action. Meanwhile, influence with the 7/13th Air Force to saturate PS-26 with airstrikes on 22 September and to support the assault scheduled for dawn the next day.⁵⁰

Devlin himself proceeded to Pakse and to two staging points on the plateau. He was greeted with reports of tactical reverses, and developments seemed to be bearing out his somber prediction of the day before: the government had reached "the end of the line . . . on the Bolovens." But Bounpone showed up to help with the Luang Prabang contingent, and Vang Pao also arrived. Showing no sign of resentment at the station's arm-twisting, he came up with his own plan of attack, inspected his troops "in a driving rain storm," and "galvanized [the] battalion commanders with as good a pep talk as has been heard in many months."⁵¹

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Phase II of South Laos interdicted operations, October 1970

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Seven battalions were to participate when the offensive against PS-26 resumed on 23 September. The station credited Vang Pao's charisma for the fact that only one of them—from Luang Prabang—refused to move out, but in the end only two units, neither of them Hmong, performed with any distinction. And even they relied on the ordnance showered on the enemy from above, finally "walk[ing] up on PS-26 virtually unopposed."⁵²

The station cautioned Headquarters not to exaggerate the achievement at PS-26; the enemy had been badly hurt, but his will to fight looked pretty much unimpaired. The irregulars, by contrast, had been "severely mauled," and their combat spirit was "not high." Three Panhandle battalions were essentially ineffective, and desertions were poisoning the morale of others. Phase II of the interdiction plan, intended to start by expelling the enemy from the rest of the plateau, might still succeed. It would fail, however, if the flood of NVA troops reported to be entering Laos was headed toward the Bolovens rather than Cambodia. And the ability of CIA's irregulars to operate against the Ho Chi Minh Trail would continue to depend on the liberal use of tactical air and on the mobility provided by transport helicopters.⁵³

With the Bolovens still threatened, the station briefly turned its attention northward toward Muong Phine and Tchepone and east across the Se Kong waterway. For the next six weeks, into November 1970, activity in these sectors ranged in scope from team-size sabotage to the six-battalion occupation of a Pathet Lao headquarters and an NVA ordnance storage facility northwest of Muong Phine. The latter attack, by far the largest offensive operation to that time, routed a two-company NVA/Pathet Lao garrison and planted over 500 mines on roads and trails.⁵⁴

Getting their supplies from the air, the irregulars did not have to maintain lines of communication to their rear area, and they could maneuver freely, keeping the enemy off balance in his effort to engage them. In early November, the North Vietnamese did manage to encircle three of the six SGU battalions, but the irregulars broke the siege and after a night of eluding the enemy found themselves—to both their surprise and the enemy's—in a North Vietnamese bivouac area only 2 miles from the site of the original action. The SGUs took casualties, but tactical aircraft soon came as usual to the rescue. While suppressing enemy fire, the bombers hit an ordnance depot, setting off a string of secondary explosions that lasted for more than an hour.⁵⁵

Other units encountered little opposition and took the opportunity to plant hundreds of mines on "every major road, trail, road junction and bypass" serv-

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ing Muong Phine and Tchepone. During the irregulars' 16 days in the area, ground fire killed a reported 123 enemy while friendly forces suffered 22 dead. Unprecedented in size, duration, and measurable results, the operation demonstrated the magnitude of the challenge. By the station's reckoning, the enemy had not been "materially hurt, nor has he had to shift forces to meet our threat." On the contrary, while still concerned about defending the Muong Phine-Tchepone base area, the North Vietnamese were busy improving their logistics corridor south from Route 9.⁵⁶

Already large by the scale of previous combat, SGU losses in the Muong Phine-Tchepone sector were dwarfed during a more daring initiative against the enemy logistics center at Chavane, across the Se Kong River east of the Bolovens Plateau. A force of 322 guerrillas ran into fierce opposition, after being airlifted to two staging points, and in three days on the ground managed to destroy only three trucks. When the survivors were finally evacuated, the irregulars had suffered 44 dead and 52 wounded.⁵⁷

The combat spirit displayed in these operations, offered a welcome contrast to that of most of the units at PS-26. But the usual cycle of escalation came once again into play, as the irregulars' more aggressive posture drew enemy counterstrokes that grew in proportion to SGU successes. In late November 1970, the North Vietnamese expelled the two battalions defending PS-26 and neighboring PS-38 on the southeastern Bolovens rim. The irregulars recovered both, then lost them again, along with another base camp 10 miles to the north.⁵⁸

Back on the Defensive

Struggling to hold the eastern rim of the Bolovens, both the irregulars and the FAR units deployed along side them suffered another crisis of morale. Two-thirds of the combined FAR-irregular garrison at PS-22, the principal site on the northeast edge of the plateau, had withdrawn after its positions were

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infiltrated by sappers and then assaulted by NVA infantry. In early December 1970, the only force left, a FAR parachute battalion, was hanging on with the help of round-the-clock support from "Spooky" gunships and USAF and Lao-tian air force T-28s.⁵⁹

Only 2,000 effectives now remained on the eastern Bolovens, and of the two Savannakhet battalions, one had "broken and run twice and the other once." Lost entirely was a Pakse battalion, which had simply "ceased to exist as a fighting unit." Meanwhile, a clearing operation intended to secure the central plateau was inching nervously eastward, getting reports of major enemy concentrations threatening its left flank but making little contact.⁶⁰

Souvanna and his FAR commanders, desperate to avoid losing the Bolovens rim, wanted to cancel the clearing operation and send its three irregular battalions east. The station argued that this would invite an enemy attack from the rear. The Lao finally agreed instead to send a FAR battalion from the general reserve to help defend PS-22. It arrived in mid-December just in time to help meet a fierce three-battalion communist assault with a vicious crossfire that inflicted heavy casualties even as the enemy continued to press the attack. The NVA breached the perimeter and seized one strong point at dawn. Tactical air and the defenders' heavy weapons continued pounding away until the attackers withdrew, leaving 17 bodies behind. CIA estimated enemy losses at some 200 men in all, but friendly casualties were also high: 25 dead and 126 wounded and missing. And despite grievous losses, the enemy resumed the attack on the two nights that followed.⁶¹

PS-22 held, but units elsewhere, both FAR and irregular, had demonstrated their inability to defend against concerted assault. The station persuaded the FAR command to have them revert to mobile tactics, harassing the enemy and exploiting tactical air support to keep the NVA from breaking out to the west. The resumption of the effort to clear the plateau of communist forces would await the arrival of new SGU battalions, now called BGs (*bataillons guerrillas*) after they finished training.⁶²

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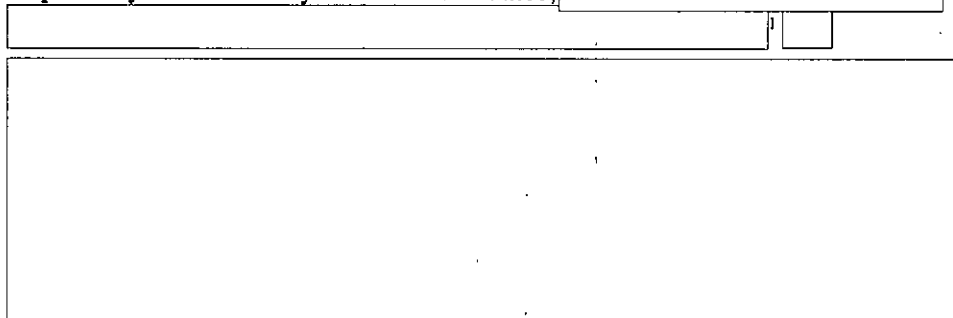
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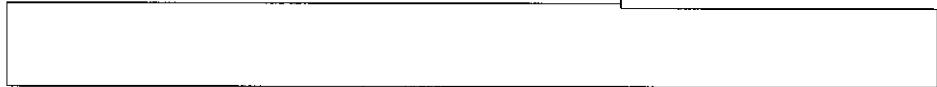
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By the spring of 1970 in the north and by the end of the year in the south, government forces in Laos were all on the defensive, concerned primarily with survival. Occasional initiatives like the Muong Phine-Tchepone operation of October–November 1970 and a Hmong drive south of the Route 7 chokepoint at Ban Ban achieved local successes but did not improve the government's strategic position. Hanoi had reacted to Operation [redacted] and to the abortive South Laos Interdiction Program with counterattacks that left government forces more perilously situated than before. Not even air supremacy could entirely redress the balance, [redacted]



Souvanna Phouma had long since abandoned his airy fatalism about communist military capabilities and intentions. To be sure, he still nurtured the same sensitivities about Laotian sovereignty and political neutrality—for one thing, the communist Neo Lao Hak Sat was still technically a part of his government, even though long since absent from Vientiane. But the prime minister recognized that Laotian manpower simply did not suffice to hold off the more numerous and more combative Vietnamese. [redacted]



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FAR and SGU elements to take the offensive. At the same time, he asked Ambassador Godley for 12 more Laotian SGU battalions, these to be staffed by recruits from FAR units he proposed to demobilize.³ [redacted]

The answers were not as straightforward as Souvanna would have liked, for the three parties involved had divergent interests. The prime minister wanted to concentrate on securing the plateau, while the Americans were preoccupied with the Ho Chi Minh Trail. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

On a visit to Headquarters in mid-July 1970, Larry Devlin was called to the White House, where Kissinger's assistant, Brig. Gen. Alexander Haig, "made clear the White House's continuing desire to bring paramilitary pressure to bear in Laos." [redacted]

³ [redacted]

[redacted]

⁴ [redacted] Senior FAR commanders were even suggesting that CIA's SGUs should be expanded to take over all offensive responsibilities in MR 2 and in the Panhandle, something that was already "practically the case," but which had enormous political and funding implications if made a matter of explicit policy. [redacted]

⁵ [redacted]

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[Redacted] But the enemy would probably respond by threatening friendly launch bases. Only in the unlikely event that he failed to do so, and all the friendly forces could stay on the offensive, would the irregulars have "the capacity to reduce the flow of enemy supplies by as much as 10-20 percent."⁸ [Redacted]

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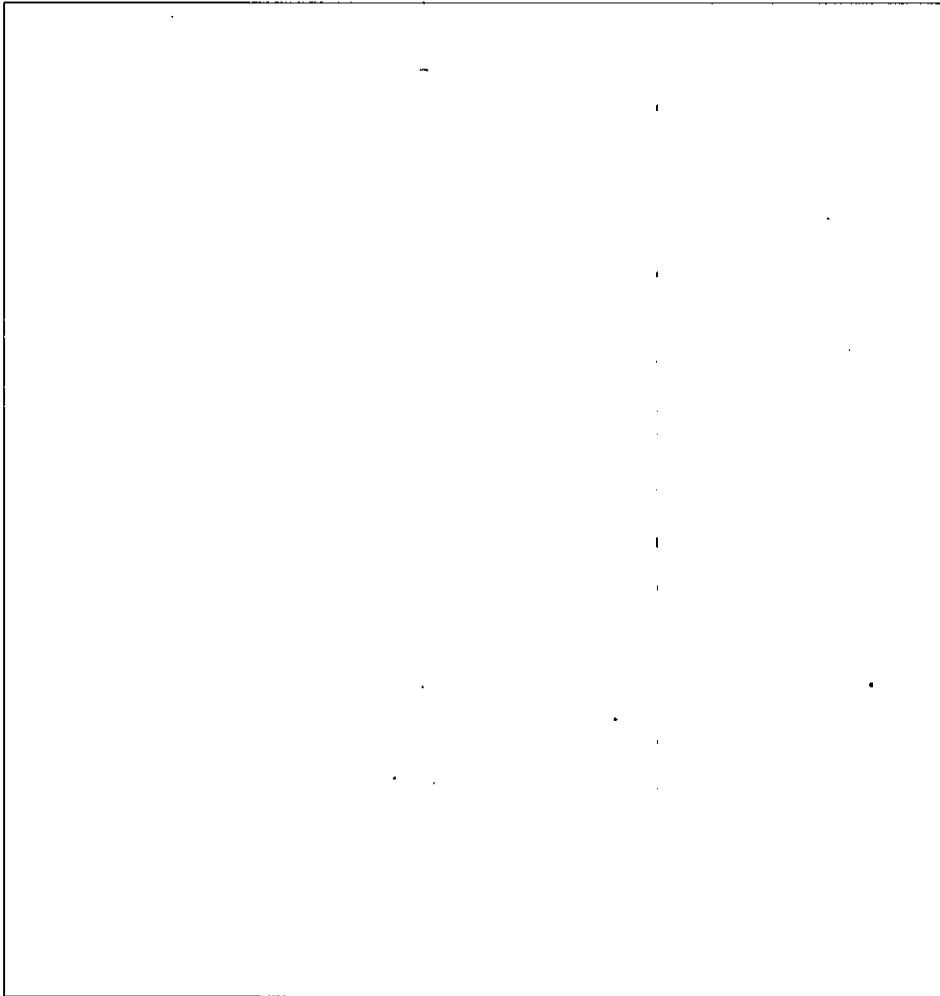
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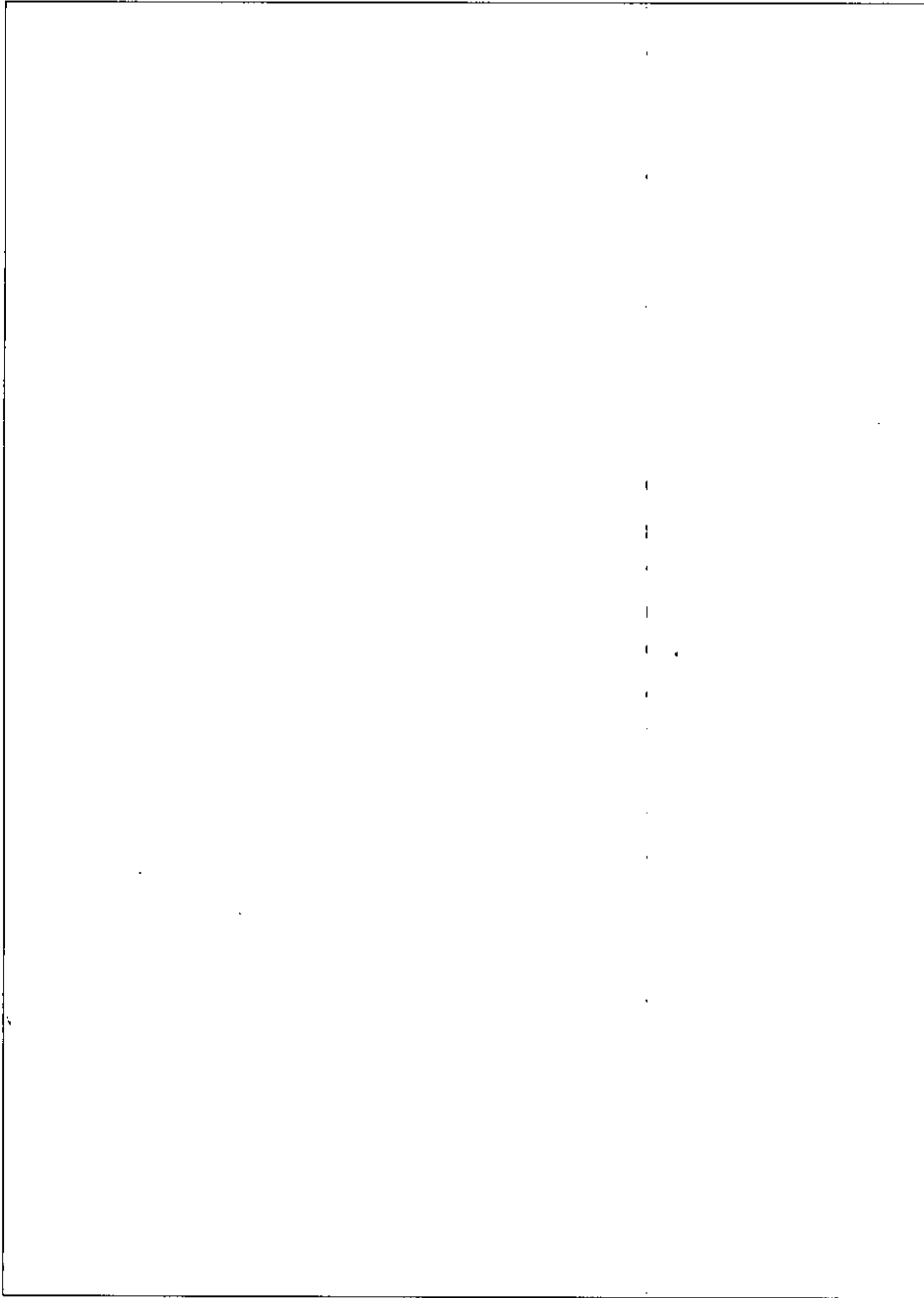
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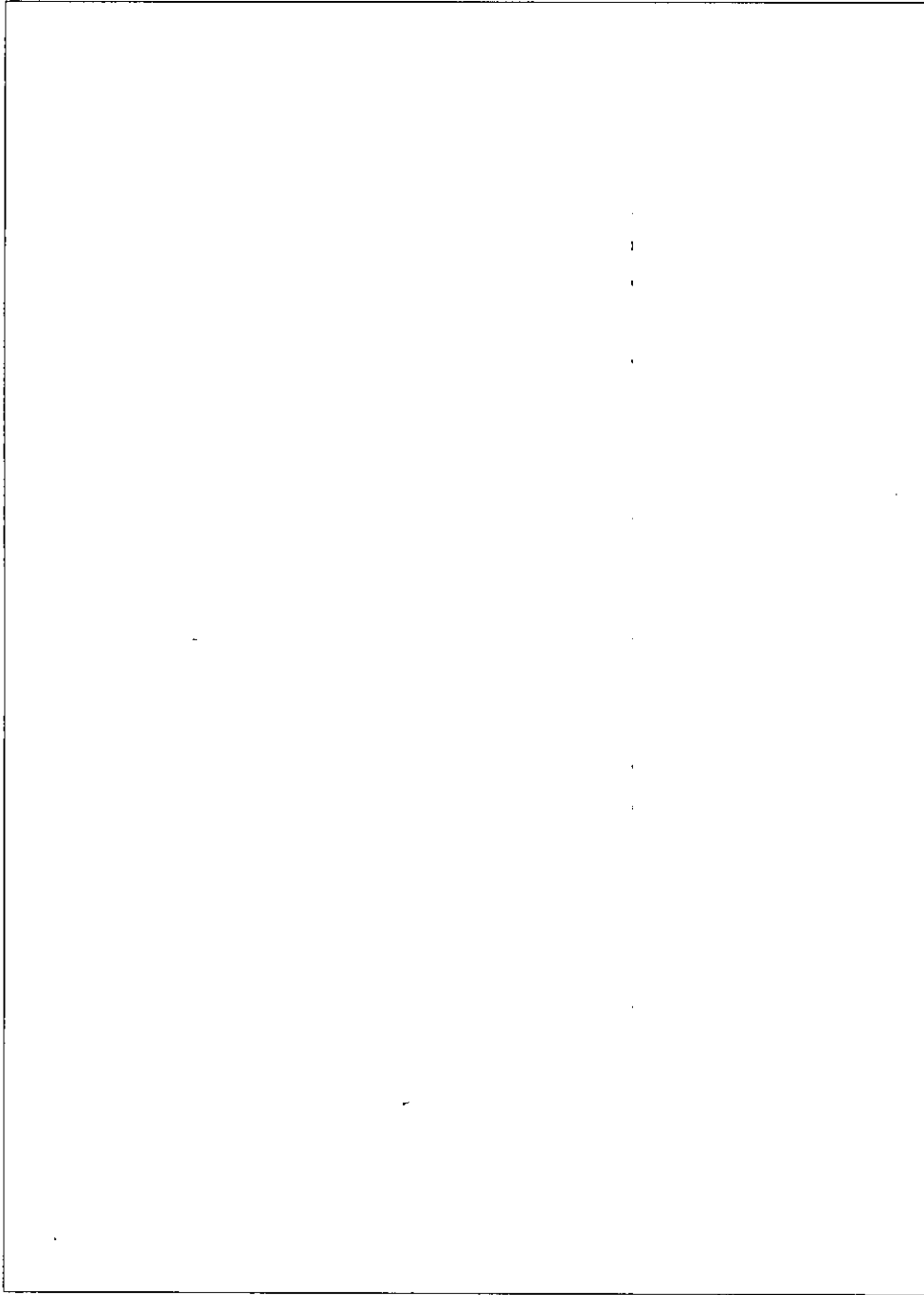
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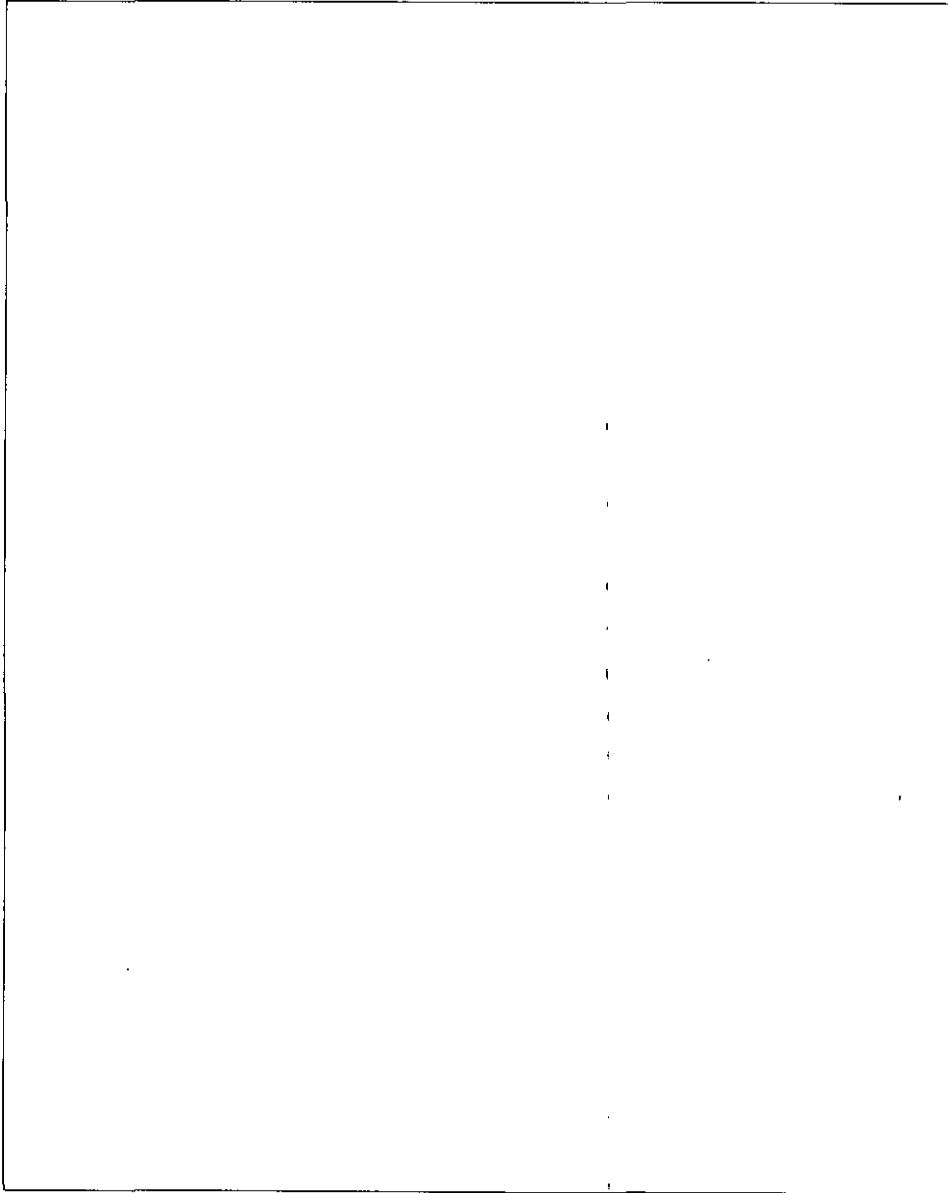
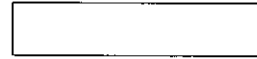
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- 27 [Redacted]
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A New Style of Management [Redacted]

[Redacted]

The DCI said that his American and indigenous interlocutors had been almost unanimous on the central issue: since the defeat of the January 1968 Tet offensive, "Hanoi's fortunes have been headed downward." Loss of the Cambodian sanctuaries and the Sihanoukville supply route had only accelerated the decline, and Helms asked rhetorically why the North Vietnamese did not accept the US peace terms. Answering his own question, he attributed their refusal to the "increasingly threadbare theory" that intransigence would eventually drive the United States into doing as the French had done, that is, "opt out at any price." Vietnamization had "yet to be proved unworkable or unsuccessful," and if the US troop commitment could be reduced to the level of an advisory presence without an "appreciable . . . worsening of our allies' position . . . then for all practical purposes Hanoi will have lost this war."³³ [Redacted]

This ingenuous estimate—perhaps, in fact, disingenuous, tailored to the presumed biases of its audience—was followed by a much more sober evaluation of the prospects in Laos. There, as we have seen, the year was ending with friendly forces in a defensive crouch in both north and south. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

³¹ [Redacted]

³² [Redacted]

³³ [Redacted]

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men in the Vientiane station, Helms hoped for some improvement of Vang Pao's position before the NVA returned to the attack, but even modest gains might not be possible. "The Meo are tired from years of fighting, their ranks depleted and their manpower pool nearly dry."³⁴ [redacted]

Helms limned the melancholy story of Hmong casualties: they had totaled 25 percent of Vang Pao's effectives in 1969, with almost 1,000 more killed and 1,700 wounded so far in 1970. "Some units in Vang Pao's battalions are composed largely of the last surviving males of the bulk of the Meo families from which they were recruited." No team-player boilerplate here; Helms had obviously been moved by a "wounded, uniformed child," 14 at most, "stotically clutching at his carbine as he waited his turn at the emergency table" at the Long Tieng hospital.³⁵ [redacted]

The DCI's reaction at the Long Tieng hospital had its counterpart in the atmosphere at the working level at Headquarters. [redacted] taking over the Thailand-Burma-Laos branch in mid-1970, came to share the oppressive sense that CIA was swimming against the tide, as Headquarters struggled to find the means to help the field continue fighting what [redacted] later called the wrong war. The Hmong manpower pool—and that of the Lao as well—was shrinking as positional warfare subjected it to increasing attrition, and few, if any, at Headquarters saw any light at the end of the tunnel.³⁶ [redacted]

It is not clear why the foreboding that gripped so many Headquarters officers did not communicate itself to new COS Hugh Tovar, who took command of the station in October 1970. When he left Washington, his superiors certainly did not convey it; perhaps they did not share the sentiment so prevalent at the working level. In any event, Tovar remembered getting "practically nil" by way of instructions. Dick Helms admonished him, "Don't get yourself killed," and DDP Tom Karamessines offered just a few words of encouragement. Tovar found nothing anomalous in this; in his view, there was little concrete guidance they could have given. The course of the war was set, and it would be his job to keep things on track.³⁷ [redacted]

This predisposition was reinforced by the short-term perspective of Tovar's subordinates in the station, who tended not to look further ahead than the next change of monsoon. The new COS quickly adopted this emphasis on the here and now, and despite his cerebral style, he did not begin his tenure with a rigorous examination of the kingdom's prospects. Like most field officers at all

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[redacted] interview by the author, McLean, VA, 5 February 1999 (hereafter cited as [redacted]

[redacted] interview).

37 Tovar interview. [redacted]

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levels, ever since the beginning of the war, it did not occur to him that the United States might not stay the course, at least to the extent of ensuring the survival of its Laotian clients. Accordingly, he devoted his attention to the same problems of organization, logistics, and tactics that had occupied his predecessors and still absorbed the attention of his staff.³⁸ []

In any case, the new COS had ample practical reason to emphasize operations over prognostication. He had little choice, for if the working level at CIA Headquarters was pessimistic about the future, the administration was obsessed with the present, demanding more action in support of Vietnamization. As he settled into his new job, Tovar recalled a CIA report on Commando Raider operations that had gone to Henry Kissinger during the summer. It came back with a marginal note in the president's customary blue pencil: "HAK: Tell Helms to double, treble this kind of thing."³⁹ []

Tovar began his tour by strengthening [] authority for day-to-day conduct of the war. Looking at the station's organization, he found it "too strongly centralized," with too many people reporting directly to the COS and his deputy. Reversing Devlin's emphasis on hands-on management, Tovar specified that [] would serve as his "executive agent" for the paramilitary program, with full authority to implement and support approved activity. This did not imply a detached COS, remote from the action, for even had he favored such a posture, Tovar had to deal with President Nixon's obsession with using Laos to pressure the North Vietnamese. In addition, the station had to deal with the growing responsibility of the US military attaché for logistical support [] And there was also the increasing volume of joint ground operations involving both irregular and FAR units. All of this had to be coordinated by the station with the attaché in Vientiane. []

[]⁴⁰ []

The new COS found "Mac" Godley "a wonderful guy, a joy to work with." The ambassador's bluff, hearty style was very different from Tovar's less ebullient personality, but the two quickly bonded and enjoyed a close working relationship. Tovar found Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma an equally attractive personality, "warm and appealing," and fully aware of the contribution that CIA irregulars were making to the survival of the kingdom. Defense Minister Sisouk na Champassak also earned Tovar's respect and admiration for the courage he displayed in visits to the front and in his support of station efforts

³⁸ Ibid.; [] interview. As noted earlier, Bill Lair, in his own recollection, was one of the few exceptions to the rule, having anticipated from the beginning that the United States might someday pull out in circumstances that left the Lao and the tribesmen to their own devices. []

³⁹ Tovar interview. []

⁴⁰ [] Jim Glerum. []

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[Redacted]

to get the military region commanders cooperating with each other and with the irregulars.⁴¹ [Redacted]

Enjoying the trust of the Lao, Tovar and Godley could deploy irregular forces at US initiative, on occasion with no advance notice to the government. Nevertheless, with the exception of a few Commando Raider operations, conducted under the stringent secrecy requirements of the Nixon White House, there was no intent to conceal such movements. Nearly all larger operations were joint, involving FAR as well as irregular troops.⁴² [Redacted]

Testing a New Chief of Station [Redacted]

Hugh Tovar's first challenge in the arena of tactics was to preserve the advantage achieved when, coincident with his arrival, Ban Na and Muong Soui were recovered in October 1970. These gains improved the security of Long Tieng, but if the Hmong position was better than during the crisis of the previous March, it remained tenuous at best. The North Vietnamese had only to avoid the supply shortages that foiled them on that occasion in order to pose an even more devastating threat to the "Meo heartland."⁴³ [Redacted]

Hoping to consolidate recent gains, the COS approved two offensive operations. [Redacted]

[Redacted] The second, more elaborate, ploy was designed to divert the NVA from a renewed campaign against Long Tieng, and called for yet another multibattalion raid on the enemy's massive logistic facilities at Ban Ban, northeast of the plain. [Redacted]

[Large Redacted Block]

⁴¹ Tovar interview. [Redacted]

⁴² Ibid. [Redacted]

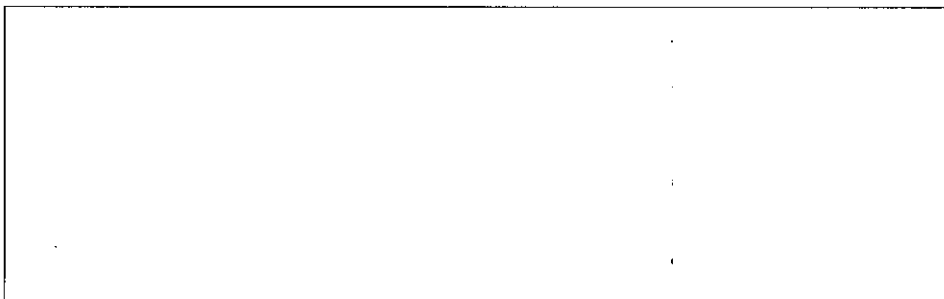
⁴³ [Redacted]

[Redacted]

⁴⁴ [Redacted]

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Meanwhile, planning for the diversion northeast of the plain took place in an atmosphere clouded by shaky Hmong morale. There were two other inhibiting factors, the Agency's sensitivity to residual White House worries about controlling Vang Pao and the increasingly contentious matter of support from shrinking USAF resources. Testy demands from Headquarters for more information on the conduct of the proposed operation were met by an impatient reminder from Vientiane that this was no mere heli-borne raid, with a firm schedule of infiltration and evacuation, but a major ground operation whose exact course was impossible to predict.⁴⁶

The 303 Committee, the interagency body overseeing covert action, hesitated, then gave its approval, then withdrew it again as the various agencies debated the handling of refugees thought likely to want evacuation from the scene. The operation finally got under way in late November, the delay caused as much by bad weather and insufficient USAF support as by the protracted decisionmaking process. The seven battalions committed to the exercise bogged down in continuing unseasonable rains, and on 18 December Bill Nelson advised Tovar of "an increasing restiveness within various government components here . . . and suggestions from some quarters it is time to call [the] operation off." Nelson complained that, "what started out as a quick surgical strike is now obviously bogged down into a static positional fight (if it can be so dignified)." With the attacking forces stymied, it appeared that the enemy was once again free to move against Ban Na.⁴⁷

Landry and then Tovar flew to Long Tieng in mid-December to try to get things going again, and Vang Pao treated them to a familiar litany of Hmong woes. As summarized by Headquarters for Henry Kissinger, these included repeated and debilitating civilian relocation, destruction of livestock, gradual reduction of US tactical air support, and attrition: "Some families have lost all mature males." Faced with a dispirited, even despairing tribe, Vang Pao had

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gone so far as to make the long-postponed visit to Sayaboury Province to scout its suitability as a permanent refuge for his followers.⁴⁸ [redacted]

His pessimism notwithstanding, the general vociferously opposed the termination of the Ban Ban operation, arguing "the enemy would follow him straight back to Long Tieng." His people would conclude all was lost, and might simply abandon Xieng Khouang Province for Sayaboury. Headquarters acknowledged that, even if the damage to enemy logistics was disappointingly slight, the operation had, in fact, already diverted the enemy sufficiently to prevent it from taking Ban Na. The pressure on Ban Ban should therefore continue, and a recommendation to that effect went to Kissinger. The next day, 24 December, the White House agreed to "go along," but only if CIA guaranteed that no "substantial portion" of the Hmong forces engaged—half of the total available to Vang Pao—would be "chewed up by enemy action."⁴⁹ [redacted]

Vietnamization and Tactical Air Support [redacted]

As usual, the station was relying on tactical air to keep the irregulars from being chewed up. But the surge in air support that followed the suspension of bombing in North Vietnam in late 1968 had faded. The Nixon administration's policy of Vietnamization meant the gradual reduction of US combat arms in Indochina as indigenous forces took up, at least in theory, the burden of their own defense. But the Laotian air force, incomparably more effective than the army, was far too small to replace the USAF, and the station now faced a potentially crippling shortage of support, not only tactical and transport but also in the realm of airborne radio direction finding.⁵⁰ [redacted]

The Ban Ban operation thus coincided with an anxious exchange between Headquarters and the station about USAF support. Quantitative limitations were not the only problem. As the station saw it, new weapons systems were sometimes inferior to the old; for example, the faulty weapons-delivery computers in the C-130 gunship and the B-57G bomber. And the air force seemed wedded to a doctrine that put interdiction—"road cutting and truck killing"—ahead of close support to ground forces.⁵¹ [redacted]

48 [redacted]

49 [redacted]

50 [redacted]

[redacted] Box 1. The Vientiane Mission had set the quarterly requirement for north Laos sorties at 9,450, almost equally divided between the USAF and the RLAF. [redacted]

51 [redacted]

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The station acknowledged that a succession of well-disposed 7/13th Air Force commanders had, in fact, accorded CIA a growing volume of sorties—from an average of 400 monthly sorties, as of 1968, to a level that saw peaks of up to 4,000. When the air force vice chief of staff, Gen. John C. Meyer, visited irregular bases in Laos in late 1970, his intelligence officer, Gen. "Rocky" Trantafellu, remarked to him, "We get more bang for our buck here than any place else," and Meyer replied, "Yes, by a factor of 10." But this kind of approbation had to coexist with working-level skepticism, as in the air force assessment that support had been "poured into Operation [redacted] [in 1969] without significant result."⁵² [redacted]

The perceived institutional preference for interdiction activity over close support continued to rankle, and the station vented its frustration by comparing it to "swatting flies on the horse's flank while he is being emasculated by the NVA vet." Meanwhile, Vientiane was doing what it could to meet the self-sufficiency requirements of the Nixon Doctrine, having recently managed to double the number of RLAFF T-28s assigned to MR 2. But the station would still have to pursue the continuous "educative process" required by the brief—only one year—air force tour of duty. In late January 1971, the 7th Air Force staff in Saigon was undergoing another rapid turnover, and sorties in support of the irregulars had declined by 400 per trimester. Hugh Tovar responded to a Karamessines offer of help with the air force by assuring him that relationships were fine; the problem was simply "to pry sorties away from Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Ho Chi Minh Trail."⁵³ [redacted]

As the station pressed its case for air support, Vang Pao was reaching the conclusion that the Ban Ban exercise had done what it could. Godley and the station agreed, and during the first week in January 1971 the irregulars began to disperse, some to the northwest toward the Bouam Long redoubt and the others to the south. On the way, they were to continue smaller scale harassment of enemy supply lines, including the road to Sam Neua and the new road, parallel to Route 7 on the south, then being built by the North Vietnamese.⁵⁴ (U)

Not every diversionary move could enjoy the success of Operation [redacted] [redacted] with its sweep across the Plain of Jars, and the Ban Ban operation did not draw the enemy out of the hills southwest of the plain. In early February 1971, over 6,000 NVA troops were poised to attack the 5,400 defenders in the

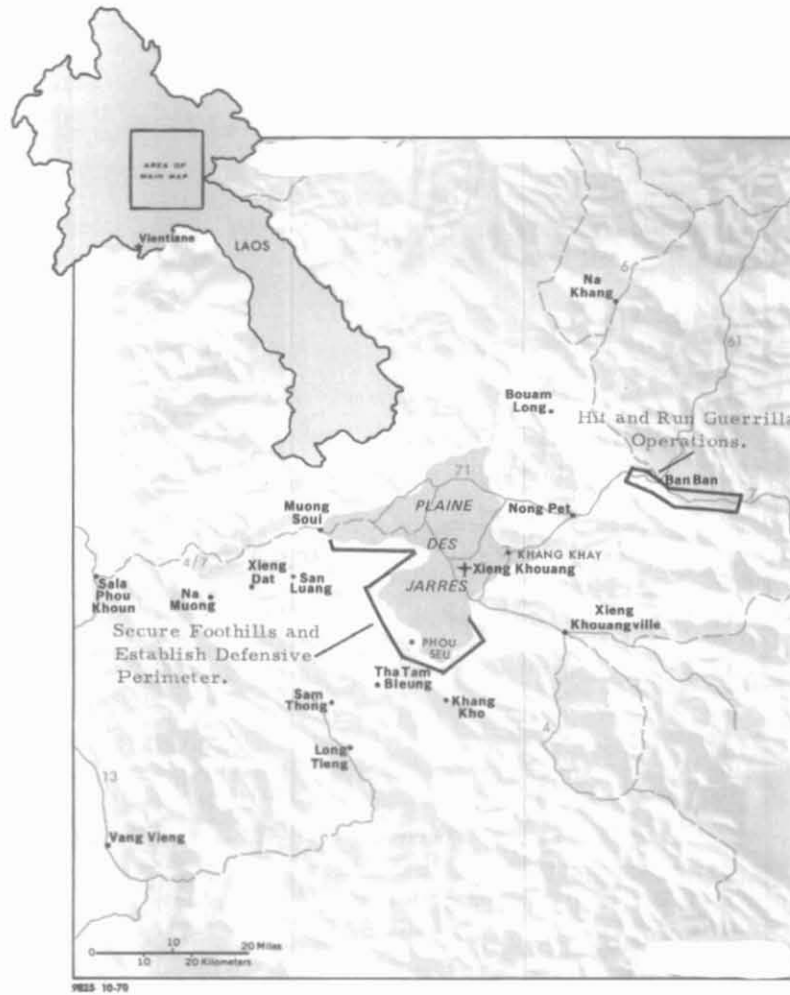
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Dry-season tactical objectives in northern Laos, 1970-71

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Long Tieng-Sam Thong-Ban Na sector, [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] 55 [redacted]

At that moment, Vietnamization, the chief practical expression of the Nixon Doctrine, was about to demonstrate the limited capacity of indigenous forces to foil Hanoi's designs on its neighbors. Operation Lam Son 719, designed to have South Vietnamese forces cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail at Tchepone, got under way with American air support on 8 February 1971. It achieved only limited successes before Saigon's forces wilted before fierce NVA resistance and withdrew back across the border.⁵⁶ [redacted]

In the first days of Lam Son 719, as the South Vietnamese inched toward Tchepone, rockets began falling on defensive positions south and west of the Plain of Jars. Nervous civilians started a tentative migration south from Long Tieng and Sam Thong, and the enemy added an unusually aggressive thrust toward the royal capital at Luang Prabang. With the dry-season offensive under way a month earlier than in 1970, Headquarters and the Vientiane Mission agonized over ways and means of once again forestalling a definitive communist victory.⁵⁷ [redacted]

Salvation was seen, as usual, in more air power. COS Tovar and the ambassador had a contentious session with the air attaché in which they complained about promised sorties being canceled. Ambassador Godley then told Washington what was needed: not just close fire support, but B-52 raids and more air cover for the evacuation of wounded. The B-52 strikes should come at night, both to catch North Vietnamese logistical activity and to avoid interfering with friendly ground operations, which both Lao and Hmong conducted only in daylight.⁵⁸ [redacted]

⁵⁵ [redacted]

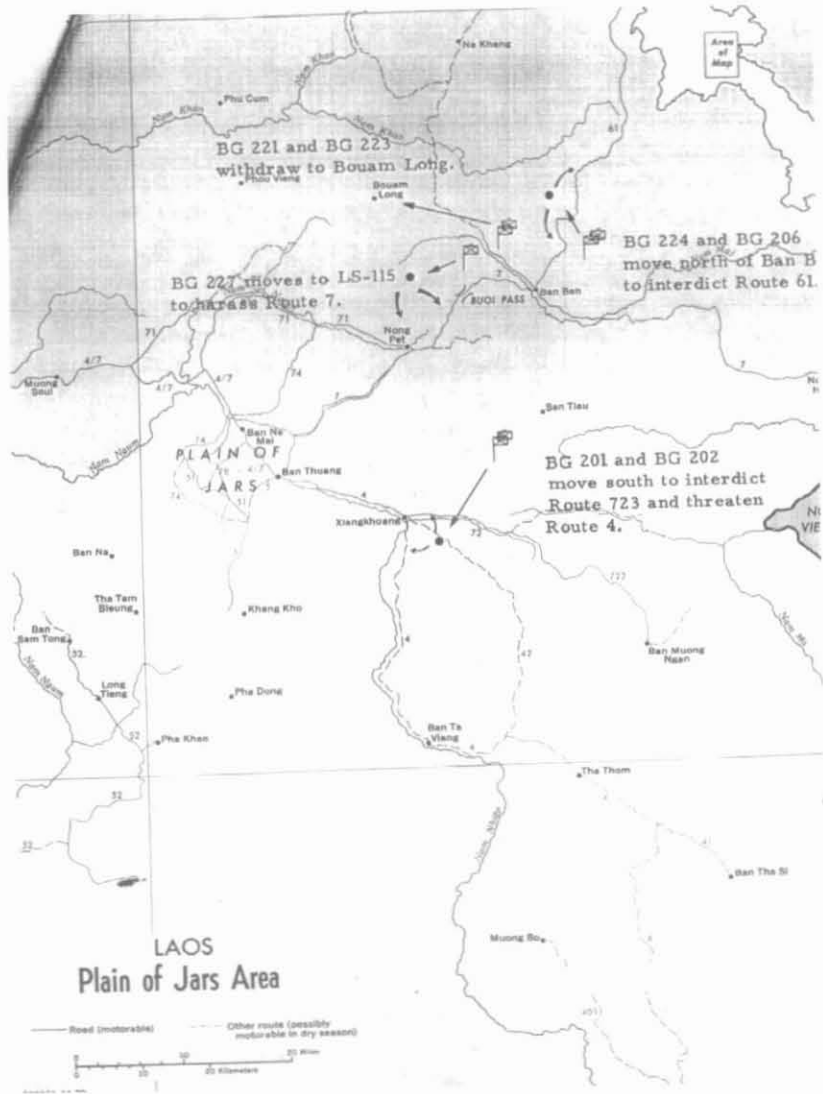
⁵⁶ Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 197.

⁵⁷ [redacted]

⁵⁸ [redacted]

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Tactical situation in MR 2 as of 5 January 1971

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Vientiane also called [redacted] and for more M-16 automatic rifles, M-60 machineguns, and M-18 claymore mines. Without the more modern weaponry, the station pointed out, friendly forces still lacked the firepower conferred by the enemy's AK-47. Meanwhile, the Mission would do what it could to meet the threat posed by elements of two divisions and two independent regiments of NVA troops. Godley and Tovar promised Souvanna that two Laotian SGU battalions would land at Long Tieng on the 15th, and they proposed also to dedicate to MR 2 four newly arrived T-28s and the USAF gunships usually assigned to truck-killing in the area.⁵⁹ [redacted]

There was no doubt about White House priorities, as President Nixon made it "explicitly clear" that "he wanted North Laos held." Headquarters advised Tovar that he had "personally directed that all possible air and other support" be devoted to that end. With this unambiguous marching order, the Washington bureaucracy rushed to accommodate Vientiane's demands. USAF sorties increased immediately, and Headquarters promised to supply the desired infantry weapons. Defense Secretary Laird had resisted, "so far successfully," modifying the authorization procedures for B-52 strikes, but he promised Helms a prompt response to requests for more Arclight missions.⁶⁰ [redacted]

The Long Tieng Imperative [redacted]

These measures did not prevent the NVA from squeezing harder, and on 13 February several 122mm rockets landed in the Long Tieng Valley. Press reports alleged that the command post had fallen, and Headquarters asked for something "to assuage twitching Washington nerves." The station offered the needed assurance, adding that the exodus of some of their families had not yet drawn any combatants off the line.⁶¹ [redacted]

At dawn the next day, a communist raid in force hit a Hmong artillery position on the ridgeline west of the airstrip, and American F-4s roared in to help the defenders. A flashship came to illuminate targets for locally based T-28s, but the enemy—apparently not intending to try to occupy Long Tieng—succeeded in taking the artillery position. Mortar and rocket fire hit Vang Pao's headquarters and destroyed the Air America hostel. [redacted]

[redacted] The action left

59 [redacted]

60 [redacted]

61 [redacted]

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[redacted]

a total of 11 people dead; the numerous wounded included CIA officer [redacted] his back and legs peppered with shrapnel.⁶² [redacted]

According to some panicky reporting to Vang Pao, [redacted] and other Sky personnel had perished, and that shook the general's composure so badly that he diverted an airplane to take him to Vientiane. He appeared at Hugh Tovar's office early that same morning, where the COS reassured him about the well-being of their CIA colleagues at Long Tieng. They flew together back to Long Tieng, where [redacted] and his men were picking up the pieces and assessing the damage. With the compound destroyed, Tovar acceded to Vang Pao's plea to let one officer remain overnight; he would move into the general's house.⁶³ [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] According to the testimony of Raven FACs, the standoff altitude mandated for the F-4s was producing "miss distances" of 1,000 to 5,000 yards. This meant that, with the "shining exception" of the 432nd Fighter Wing at Udorn, which was laying strikes to within 10 yards of the aiming point, USAF support could not be called in near friendly positions. On this occasion, the unhappiness was deepened by what Tovar called "a disastrous performance [by the Laotian air force] flare- and gunships." The COS complained also of the "total absence of the USAF C-119 gunships which we had been assured would be on station with overlapping coverage throughout the night." That this support had probably been diverted to prop up Operation Lam Son 719 offered only cold comfort.⁶⁴ [redacted]

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⁶² [redacted]

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⁶³ [redacted]

⁶⁴ [redacted]

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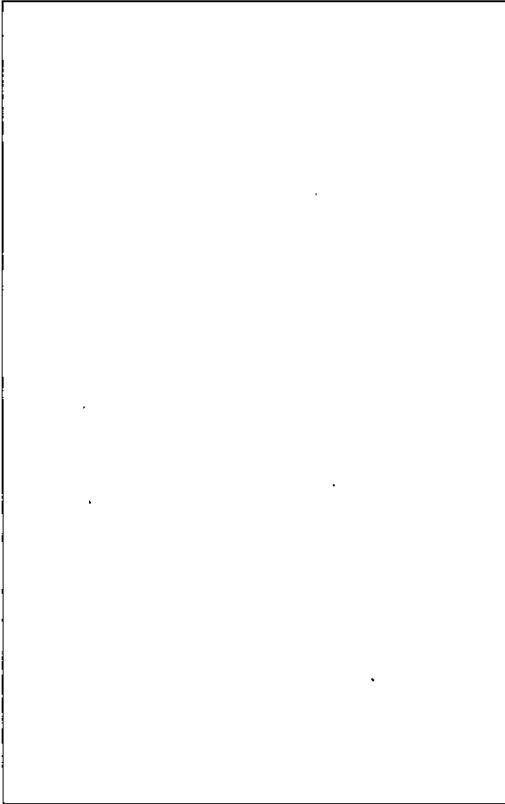
⁶⁵ [redacted]

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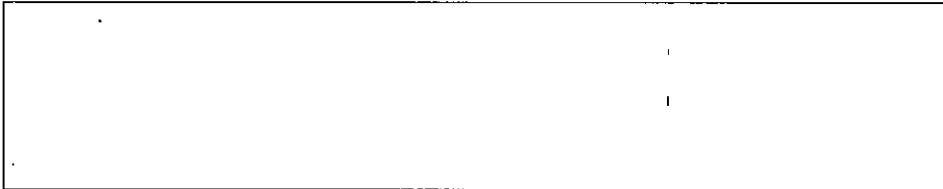


The mood of foreboding prevalent at Headquarters since at least 1970 now infected the station as well. It was not the casualties, which had been relatively light, nor the lack of effective counteraction. The problem lay elsewhere, and Tovar wrote on 16 February that

this was the week Vang Pao ran out of options. There were no more diversionary operations to be run, no more tactical [sleight] of hand moves, and no more uncommitted reserves. Forced into the very type of combat at which the Meo least excel, defense, Vang Pao saw North Vietnamese sappers invade his valley, mortar

his house, and send a rocket through his bedroom close enough to scorch his bed, [and] destroy his people's rice reserves and put his civilian population on trails out of the valley in refugee status.

Tovar lamented the "demonstrated ease with which the Long Tieng area can be infiltrated [and] the psychological impact on the struggle in Laos as a whole." Vang Pao was equally shaken, and he plaintively inquired of Godley and Tovar what importance they placed on Long Tieng. Was he to hold it unconditionally (*absolument*) or merely do the best he could? "*Absolument*," the ambassador replied. Richard Nixon and Richard Helms emphatically agreed, and so did Souvanna Phouma: "The site must be held."⁶⁶



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[Redacted]

[Redacted]

A Policy Pressure Cooker [Redacted]

Dick Helms weighed in with a cable to his Indochina station chiefs that alluded to "evidence of raw nerves both in Indochina and in Washington." The military was "jumping on [the] Agency about intelligence reports," the field was being interrogated by Washington, and stations were being caught in the crossfire even on issues peripheral to their own work. "We recognize that you all are working around the clock and fatigue is bound to take its toll. . . . Let us keep our cool . . . and roll with those punches which we do not have to take on the nose."⁶⁹ [Redacted]

That this was easier advised than practiced emerged in the debate about an offensive designed to take the pressure off Long Tieng and Ban Na. Headquarters had already offered to allow reduced support by Laotian irregulars for Lam Son 719 [Redacted] It, therefore, sharply questioned a Godley cable reporting an American démarche to Sisouk asking for four Panhandle battalions for MR 2. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

⁶⁷ [Redacted]

⁶⁸ [Redacted]


⁶⁹ [Redacted]

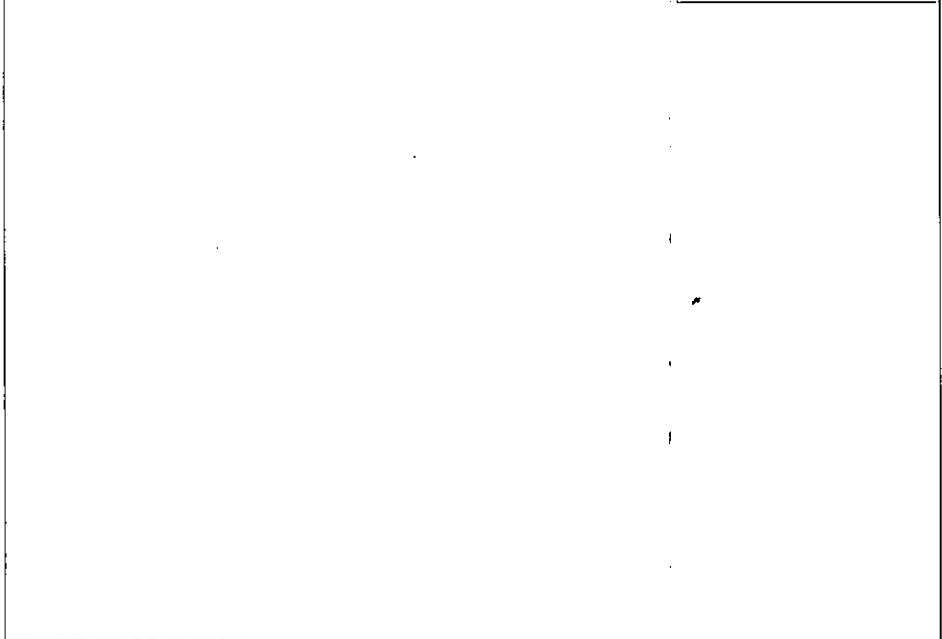
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

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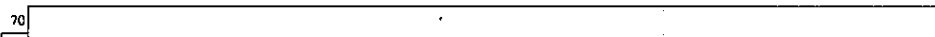

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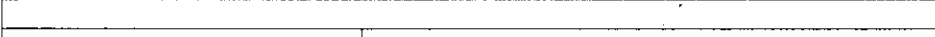





Headquarters changed the subject to the planning itself. It had no problem with a sweep by *Groupement Mobile 31* (GM 31)—four battalions of Savan-nakhet irregulars—on an arc north and east of Ban Na, 

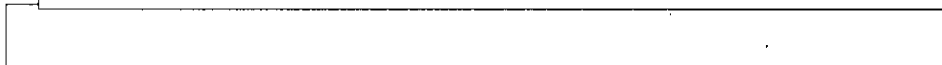
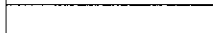


 DDCI General Cushman, clearly doubtful of the station's expertise in tactical maneuvers on the scale being proposed, reminded it of the principles he thought it should have in mind: "retention of mobility, staying within artillery fan"—i.e., within range of artillery firebases—and a direct focus on the "Long Tieng, Sam Thong, Ban Na triangle."⁷³ 

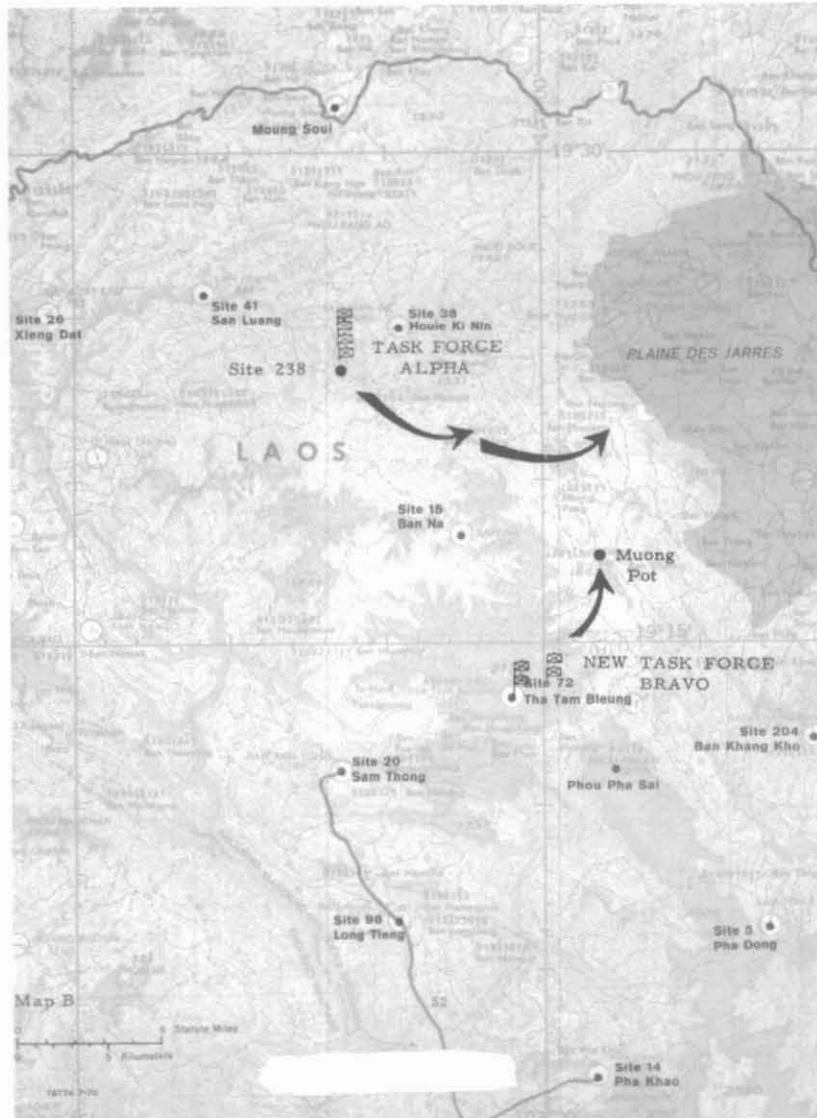
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Planned offensive west of the Plain of Jars, 3 March 1971

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Artillery Firebase Mustang, west of the Plain of Jars, c. 1971

The varying pressures on different parties produced different perceptions of the problem and of solutions to it. Vang Pao had just been challenged by civilian Hmong leaders to put up or shut up in protecting the noncombatants, some 200,000 of them, living south of the Long Tieng-Sam Thong complex. The area was taking communist harassing attacks, and its vulnerability to infiltration from the east renewed Vang Pao's preoccupation with cutting supply routes running through Xieng Khouang town. The station shared that priority,

Nelson replied with the usual doubts about stripping Long Tieng of its reserves and about the likely results of the venture: he would have to take the idea back to the WSAG, and "we had shot a great deal of Vang Pao's and our credibility as military strategists in [the most recent] Ban Ban operation." If another such venture met "disastrous or inconclusive" results, Washington might be tempted to give up on Vang Pao and the Hmong.⁷⁵

An impatient Hugh Tovar dismissed the expression of these concerns as mere "polemics," and the objection to using Long Tieng's reserves as "an

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[Redacted]

unnecessarily facile and inaccurate representation" of the operation's intent. The Ban Ban operation had been hampered by factors beyond the field's control, he wrote, including "off-again/on-again" air support and Washington's arbitrary deadlines. In any case, the only way to keep the enemy from massing to overrun the base was to accept "some initial risk" by moving defensive elements onto the attack. Having, in his own view, set the record straight, Tovar gave up on the Xieng Khouang option, telling Nelson that offensive operations would proceed under the authorities and conditions already stated.⁷⁶ [Redacted]

The Perils of a Lead Role [Redacted]

Events had already reminded everyone that the chess moves of tactical planning might be foiled by intractable circumstances. For starters, the Kha tribesmen comprising BG-308 walked off their defensive positions on 10 March and straggled back into Long Tieng. Refusing to be disarmed, they posed the prospect of internecine violence until it was finally determined that their grievance was the Lao officer installed as battalion commander. It took his removal and replacement by his Kha deputy to get the men back on the line. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

An incident involving a CH-53 crash at Sam Thong put an entire Savanna-khet platoon out of action; it also killed the USAF pilot and copilot. And Long Tieng could not expect much help from MR 1 SGUs. Luang Prabang came under attack in March, and the prospects for implementing any of the four options so vigorously debated began to fade. Hugh Tovar flew to Luang Prabang on the 24th and found the FAR hierarchy in an almost catatonic funk. Whether or not Hanoi actually intended to invest the city—the station thought it did not—the fact remained that CIA irregulars, supplied with CIA photo and signals intelligence, were about all that stood in the way of the North Vietnamese.⁷⁸ [Redacted]

⁷⁶ [Redacted]
⁷⁷ [Redacted]
⁷⁸ [Redacted]

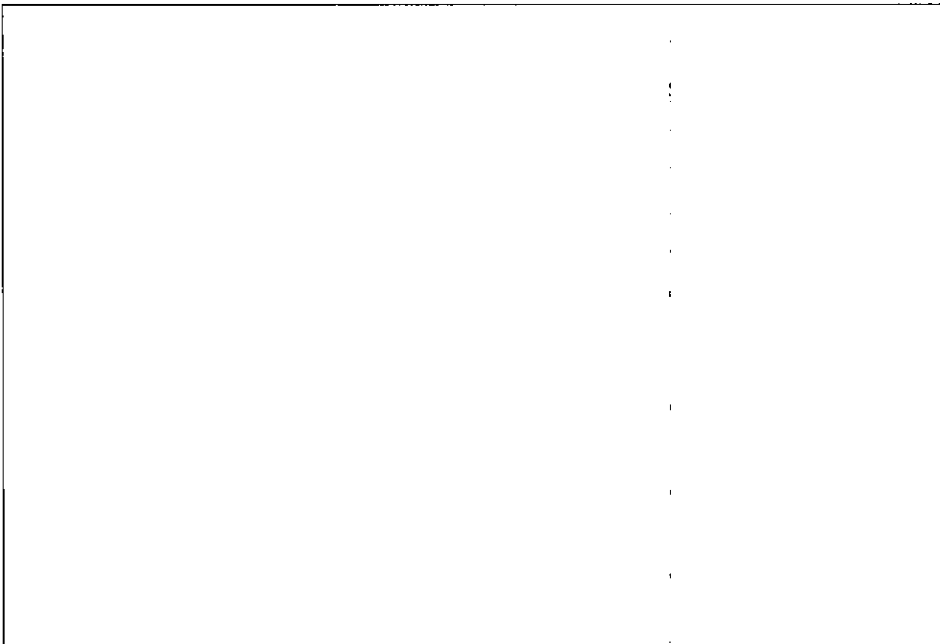
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The incident served to point up the political perils of CIA's lead role in Laos. Bill Nelson prepared Tovar's account of his Luang Prabang experience as a memorandum for Kissinger, with a covering note for the DCI's signature advertising it as expressing "better than anything I have seen recently exactly how things work in Laos." Helms sent it back, saying, "I query whether we should send this to HAK. Aren't we in effect encouraging him to think that Laos will go down the drain without us?" The DCI clearly thought that the risks of a White House perception of Laos as the CIA's baby overrode all claims of pride in the Agency's work there, and the memo never left Headquarters.⁷⁹ [redacted]

Whoever its custodian, the baby did indeed risk going out with the bath water when all the planning for diversionary activity was rendered moot by the fall of Ban Na. On the night of 6 April, recently deployed NVA 122mm howitzers opened up on the command post there, and hundreds of mortar shells followed. The already battle-weary defenders withdrew to the west and south. [redacted]

[redacted] In his view, it threatened to open the way for a communist assault on Sam Thong and Long Tieng.⁸⁰ [redacted]



79 [redacted]
80 [redacted]
81 [redacted]
82 [redacted]

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[redacted]

The heated rhetoric of the Vientiane conference, [redacted] gave way to more practical considerations: What was to be done with resources in hand, and what more was needed to prevent the North Vietnamese from taking over the "Meo heartland"? As part of the answer, FAR units and Hmong BGs would man a defense line, anchored just west of Ban Na by "mobile defense positions," and running southeast to Vang Pao's original command post at Pa Dong, 13 miles south of the Plain of Jars. Holding this line would require more artillery, including the 155mm howitzer, and more air support. The station seemed implicitly to endorse these requirements when it described them as, "viewed from [the Laotian] standpoint, [not] unreasonable."⁸³ [redacted]

A Burden Become Unmanageable [redacted]

Contention in Vientiane was mirrored in Washington. With the enemy poised to continue advancing well into the rainy season, [redacted] the Agency was now simply in over its head. Bill Nelson briefed Karamessines and the DCI, pointing out that projected growth would take place while the US military presence—including tactical air—in Indochina continued to shrink. The Agency had already deployed some [redacted] people to support the irregulars and could not supply the additional manpower to manage an army of 60,000 men with 80 maneuver battalions. And even at the existing staffing level, the CIA profile was going to rise as the overt US military presence continued to shrink.⁸⁴ [redacted]

Writing to Tovar in this vein, Nelson rejected in advance any argument that "minor cosmetic surgery" would permit continuing along accustomed lines; without closer integration with the Department of Defense, "particularly as it relates to air support, logistics, and funding, we will find an increasing divergence between . . . our requirements . . . and what DoD is willing to supply."⁸⁵

[redacted]

⁸³ [redacted]

⁸⁴ [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

⁸⁵ [redacted]

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The COS was not deterred. He responded with a vigorous defense of the status quo, based on considerations like the imperative of continued ambassadorial primacy and the greater effectiveness of CIA's irregulars as compared with the DoD-supported FAR. Godley then chimed in with an appeal for continued CIA management, comparing the Agency's "outstanding" work with a DoD contribution "plagued by its [short tours of duty] and the lack of background of many, if not most, of its personnel."⁸⁶ [redacted]

Without directly addressing Godley's argument, Dick Helms adopted Nelson's view. On 24 March 1971, he wrote a typically cautious memorandum to the Forty Committee in which he rehearsed the Agency's problems as the manager of a conventional, if undeclared, war effort. Looking for backing elsewhere in the administration, he urged the creation of an interagency working group to identify the "implications of the policy options." That group should then recommend "an appropriate governmental framework to support whatever size Laos paramilitary program is decided upon."⁸⁷ [redacted]

DDO Tom Karamessines took a harder line, telling Bill Nelson he found it "extremely disconcerting" that CIA had managed to cut back its investment in Vietnam but now found itself faced with "very significant escalation" in Laos. The answer, he said, was simply to turn the whole thing over to DoD [redacted] [redacted] He recognized that "there would be some legislative hurdles to overcome but the administration has been pretty nimble in dealing with this kind of problem."⁸⁸ [redacted]

Karamessines seems to have imparted some of his sense of urgency to Helms. On 31 March, just a week after his circumspect memorandum to the Forty Committee, the DCI appeared at a meeting at the western White House at San Clemente. There, he informed the president that the Agency simply could not handle the logistical demands of an ever-growing paramilitary program in Laos. Stating the problem did not immediately produce a solution, but it did, at least, gradually compel White House acknowledgement of the Agency's dilemma.⁸⁹ [redacted]

Meanwhile, Tovar and his men had to cope with the chronic war-weariness of the Hmong. [redacted]

[redacted]

⁸⁶ [redacted]

⁸⁷ [redacted]

⁸⁸ [redacted]

⁸⁹ [redacted]

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[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] The Vientiane station judged that Vang Pao was still 1,500 men short of the 10,000 needed to defend against 6,500 North Vietnamese west and south of the Plain of Jars. Alarmed by the tone of Karamessines's briefing on his March meeting with Vang Pao, the White House feared that the Hmong might collapse. President Nixon found this prospect intolerable, and Jim Glerum, visiting Washington, saw a note bearing the characteristic "RN" initials and the injunction that "Long Tieng must not be allowed to fall."⁹² [Redacted]

[Redacted]

In Washington, burgeoning congressional and public opposition to the war in Indochina had Nixon's subordinates staying as far from the issue as they could. [Redacted]

90 [Redacted]
91 [Redacted]
92 [Redacted]
[Redacted]
93 [Redacted]
[Redacted]

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Chapter Seventeen

[redacted] Defense Department and Agency officials quibbled over the funding mechanism. As they saw it, a "political problem"—the phrase understood to mean the hostility of domestic opponents of the war—would attach to whichever Agency was identified as the source of support. Accordingly, each urged the other to take on the burden.⁹⁴ [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] As of mid-April, the long-term prospects might still be grim, for the station believed that, absent a secure refuge in which to resume normal agricultural life, civilian Hmong morale would collapse within a year. But for the present, despite a short-lived mutiny of two Savannakhet battalions—their men thought they had fought long enough for the Hmong—Hanoi elected simply to watch the rains begin to fall.⁹⁶ [redacted]

Hanoi's decision was not yet clear to Vang Pao and the US Mission when, at the end of April, General Cushman weighed in with some advice about mortar counterbattery fire. The COS sent him cool thanks and went on to describe the Laotian topography—especially the vertical limestone formations, karst—and weather that he thought limited its relevance. In any case, the anxiety over enemy intentions that had led the DDCI to address the subject receded as the NVA pulled back. The ever-resilient Hmong responded with more and more aggressive patrolling; [redacted]

[redacted]⁹⁷ [redacted]

Only weeks later, after months of staring at final, irredeemable defeat, Vang Pao and his advisers, [redacted] suddenly found themselves looking at an opportunity for a reprise of 1969's Operation [redacted]

⁹⁴ [redacted]

⁹⁵ [redacted]

⁹⁶ [redacted]

⁹⁷ [redacted]

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This rekindled the perennial debate in Washington about the price of success, an argument that would soon reach a new level of intensity. The discussion would take place in a policy atmosphere complicated by the tension between the reductions mandated by Vietnamization and the new investment required both to secure the Hmong position and to support interdiction operations in the Panhandle.

Meanwhile, despite the force reductions associated with Vietnamization, the program in the Panhandle was operating under fewer constraints. Always smaller than the effort in the north, its focus on Trail interdiction made it more immediately relevant to the administration's desire to leave South Vietnam able to defend itself against the North. A description of the Panhandle effort, as it evolved in 1971, will precede an account of the continuing policy debate and of the tactical developments that led up to the climactic siege of Long Tieng.



To Don Blount of Paul Smith with appreciation for his assistance in the Panhandle effort. DDCI Robert Cushman

DDCI Robert Cushman

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sting Like a Bee

The disappointing results of the South Laos Interdiction Program of 1970 had left the station looking for ways to improve the performance of its irregulars. One weakness—simple inexperience—could only be overcome with time. Meanwhile, as in test of the first Savannakhet BGs in 1969, targets had to be found that were lucrative enough to justify attack but not so heavily defended as to threaten an irregular operation with certain disaster. The station looked for vulnerabilities and in early 1971 proposed to cut a section of the NVA supply line running south from Muong Nong, in lower Savannakhet Province.

On 12 January, 10 USAF Jolly Green Giants with A-1E cover inserted 1,100 irregulars south of the communist logistics center at Muong Nong, in southeastern Savannakhet Province. A dozen B-52 sorties had prepared the way, and the four battalions committed to Operation caught the enemy as he prepared to open a new supply route headed south into MR 4. The deepest penetration in force into the Trail up to that time, the infantry assault was supplemented by commando team ambushes on the periphery, hitting truck convoys with rockets, grenade launchers, and claymore mines.²

The North Vietnamese struck back with unexpected vigor. One irregular battalion was looking for a reported POW camp when the enemy surprised it with a heavy attack by fire on the night of 25 January. Already worn down by

The panoply of techniques included a "specially trained body snatch team." Posing as villagers, its members succeeded twice, in January 1971, in isolating and kidnapping an NVA soldier, each of whom was then evacuated by air to Savannakhet. One of them turned out to be a difficult interrogation subject: "Bound, trussed, and exasperated, the liberated soldier expressed himself eloquently on all this by biting the thumb of one of his captors."

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two weeks of continuous action, it simply disintegrated, and almost a month passed before the last stragglers made their way back to Savannakhet.³ []

Ten days later, one of the other battalions, BG-313, was hit by a series of 13 ground attacks interspersed with mortar barrages. After 20 hours of continuous combat, its ammunition was exhausted, and the other two battalions, trying to relieve it, were stalled in a valley a half a mile away. BG-313 abandoned its positions, and a dozen men died in falls from cliffs as they tried to reach the relief force. Having taken 40 casualties, the survivors fled southwest until contact was broken.⁴ []

The remaining two battalions of Operation [] fared better. These were still planting mines and cratering trails when, on 8 February, the first of 16,000 South Vietnamese troops launched Operation Lam Son 719 when they crossed the border into Laos just south of the DMZ.⁵ []

Much larger than [] Lam Son 719 opened while Vang Pao and his patrons were trying, as we have seen, to stave off disaster in MR 2. In Washington, the operation had been billed by General Abrams and JCS chairman Adm. Thomas Moorer as sure to interdict the logistical flow into South Vietnam for at least two years. But the weather almost immediately closed in, limiting air support and turning Route 9 into a quagmire, and the South Vietnamese faltered in the mud while absorbing relentless enemy fire.⁶ []

DCI Helms and then secretary of state William Rogers had pointed out the dangers, both military and political. The North Vietnamese could be expected to savage any effort to drive them out of the Tchepone sector—they did, in fact, commit some 36,000 men to its defense—and another cross-border incursion would only intensify the hostile climate on Capitol Hill. But President Nixon, looking for a decisive move to cripple the enemy's preparations for the 1972 dry season, had maneuvered his way around the opposition in his cabinet to prevent an open split.⁷ []

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⁶ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 992, 996, 999; Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 224. Kissinger recounts the intricate maneuvering by which President Nixon obtained nearly unanimous cabinet support for the controversial operation. Kissinger, who supported the proposal, later acknowledged that Lam Son 719 "fell far short of our expectations" but claimed that it managed to delay the 1972 Easter offensive in South Vietnam by "several months." (*White House Years*, 1009-10.) []

⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 996, 999 []

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Meanwhile, however confident that Lam Son 719 would succeed, MACV thought it prudent to ask for CIA support. The two remaining [] [] battalions were operating some 40 miles south of Tchepone and could be of little help. They were, in any case, nearly exhausted and about to be evacuated. Instead, the Station proposed Operation [] aimed at an important trail segment some 25 miles southwest of Tchepone. Like [] [] it would employ a *Groupement Mobile*—in this case, GM 33—with four battalions. Moved to its staging area by helicopter, it would stay until the NVA 48th Regiment eventually kicked it out. CIA hoped this kind of diversionary effort would suffice, for there was no question of seizing and holding ground. []

[] opened, in fact, with encouraging results. Infiltrated by helicopter on 16 February, GM 33 interdicted Trail segments south of Muong Phine until mid-March. Light enemy resistance encouraged the station to plan hitting the town itself, but resistance increased as the task force approached the important junction of Routes 9 and 23, west of Tchepone. On 20 March, a battalion-sized assault scattered the irregulars, and brought the operation to an end. Having suffered only a dozen casualties, the task force regrouped and began an orderly withdrawal to the west.⁹ []

At this point, MACV and the South Vietnamese command had already declared victory at Tchepone; just two weeks earlier, a helicopter-borne force briefly—and only symbolically—occupied the deserted village, after which Saigon's forces spent two grim weeks fighting their way back across the border. Before it was over, they had taken some 9,000 casualties.¹⁰ []

The Imbalance of Forces []

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⁹ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 290-91; []

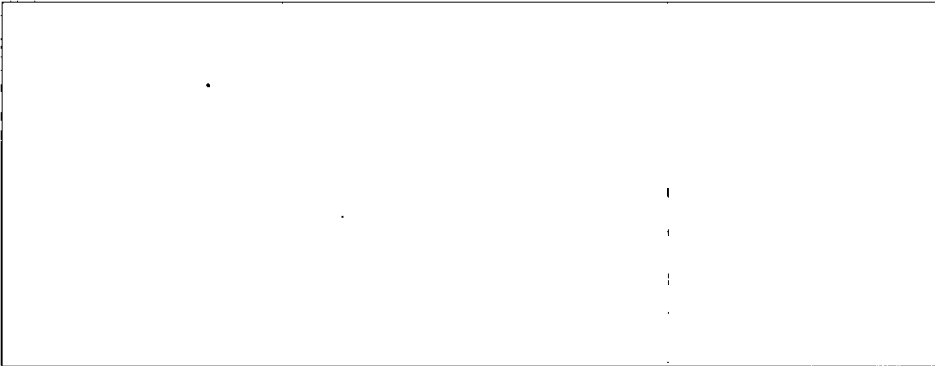
Headquarters had hoped to support Lam Son 719 with an operation nearer Tchepone, but the station demurred; the only available forces, those of GM 33, were "no match" for the expected opposition. []

¹⁰ Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 224. []

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Helms noted that, on 4 January 1971, the NVA 559th Transportation Group had announced the beginning of a "great general offensive," followed on 7 February by a "crash program" of shipments to the south. Operation Lam Son 719 was disrupting some traffic north and east of Tchepone, but elsewhere—the DCI made no claims for Operation [redacted]—a flood of materiel was stretching the capacity of the way stations to handle it. One of these stations, south of Tchepone, reported that more trucks were arriving each night than the local work force could handle.¹² [redacted]

By late February, it was already clear that the joint efforts of South Vietnamese regulars and Laotian irregulars, with massive US combat air support, had not cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. What Headquarters judged to be the "main crest" of the enemy's dry-season logistic flow was now moving through the Tchepone area.¹³ [redacted]

The modest results achieved by Lam Son 719 and Operations [redacted] [redacted] illustrated the immensity of the challenge. It would have taken many more, and more combat-effective, irregulars to make a significant dent in the Corridor traffic. [redacted] always the main contributor to the irregulars' mobile reserve, plaintively described why any such expansion was not in the cards, even if Washington wanted it. Facing 33,000 NVA troops in MR 3, [redacted] was trying only to recruit one more battalion, but despite the efforts of 10 recruiting teams "scouring the provinces," the new unit was "still without a trainee."¹⁴ [redacted]

¹¹ [redacted]

¹² [redacted] The way stations were known by the Vietnamese term *Binh Tram*. [redacted]

¹³ [redacted] A MACV report estimated that the North Vietnamese lost the equivalent of 16 of the 33 maneuver battalions committed to battle against Lam Son 719. Said to have been understrength, these presumably totaled less than half Summers's figure of 36,000 men. [redacted]

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Alluding to the morale problems that afflicted MR 3 units sent up to Hmong country, declared it "self-defeating" to make preservation of the military balance in Laos depend on deploying the irregulars outside their own localities. They did not "give a hang for country or king or Gen. Ouane. Their interest is their own rice paddy, and rather than try to overturn this centuries old tradition, we should make the most of it by letting [them] fight close to home." Having vented its frustration, acknowledged that "the usual seasonal crisis is again upon us," and the station had no choice beyond robbing Peter to pay Paul if Hanoi's dry-season moves in the other military regions were to be contained.¹⁵

"Five Weeks at Phalane"

The results of an operation to retake Muong Phalane supported view about esprit de corps while at the same time it demonstrated that the irregulars fought at a disadvantage even when deployed in their home territory. The enemy had taken the town—until then the easternmost government stronghold on Route 9—with little resistance from FAR, and was now rocketing the FAR garrison at Dong Hene, 18 miles to the west. With enemy troops approaching the Mekong, something had to be done, and local FAR units and two battalions of GM 30 were assigned to push them back beyond Muong Phalane.¹⁶

The operation quickly became the exclusive preserve of the irregulars. The commander of the FAR contingent offered to bet Major Vathsana, leading the irregulars, that he would be back in three days "with his feet in his ears." And when GM 30 moved out on 24 March, FAR "limited its attack," in case officer words, "to leaning forward in its foxholes."¹⁷

Major Vathsana took a deserted Muong Phalane by nightfall. Next morning, the irregulars advancing again to the east, dropped strings of homemade firefight simulators to help confuse the surprised NVA units being flushed out by Vathsana's forward elements.

The irregulars then dug in, just in time to meet a three-battalion North Vietnamese counterattack on the 26th. As the communists charged across paddy fields, US and Laotian fighter-bombers began chewing up their ranks, and it looked to Vathsana as if NVA soldiers were actually looking for shelter when they crowded up against the irregulars' perimeter. Hit by air if they withdrew and taking pointblank ground fire if they stayed, the communists suffered

14 15 16 Edwin K. Stockinger, "Five Weeks at Phalane," *Studies in Intelligence*, Spring 1993 17 Ibid ~~SECRET//MR~~

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massive casualties. Their commander later radioed his superiors, in an intercepted message, that he had lost 375 men dead and "many" wounded.¹⁸ []

Intelligence from friendly villagers pinpointed other NVA units. Meanwhile, the Lao had arrested 15 informants identified on a document taken from the body of a North Vietnamese intelligence officer. Blundering about without guides in unfamiliar territory, the NVA continued to present a ripe target to tactical air. The scale of enemy losses made it look, at least to [] [] as if the irregulars might hold Muong Phalane until the rains came, and perhaps through the rainy season until the fall of 1971.¹⁹ []

This optimistic forecast counted on weather to frustrate an enemy counter-attack. The irregular battalions lacked the numbers to mount a spoiling operation to the east, and now could only wait. Then, on 1 May, six NVA infantry battalions, supported by an antiaircraft battalion, attacked the arc of defensive positions around the town. One of the communist units repeated the mistake of its compatriots in late March. Inexplicably advancing "in parade ground formation, at sling arms," its men were mowed down by cluster bombs from American F-4s and Laotian T-28s. But the communists kept coming. The next day, most of BG-301 was again surrounded, and the NVA now had its antiaircraft guns deployed.²⁰ []

The T-28 pilots had long since fought their way out of any lingering association with the FAR's reputation as averse to combat. One of them radioed that, bombs gone and guns empty, he would bluff the remaining enemy back into the paddy field ditches. Making a low pass, he saw the casualties inflicted by his earlier strafing runs: "There's more than a hundred of them lying there!" But he had pushed his luck. Hit by a 37mm antiaircraft shell, his plane fell in flames.²¹ []

The civilian [] did not all share the élan of their Lao counterparts, but two of them braved intense fire to deliver ammunition to Major Vathsana's command post at the Muong Phalane schoolhouse. They debated the wisdom of descending to cargo-drop altitude, and [] understood enough [] to get the gist of their conclusion: "Screw it. They need this stuff." "OK." And with that they dove through the communist fire to deliver all four parachutes directly onto the CP. The lone

¹⁸ []

¹⁹ Stockinger, "Five Weeks at Phalane." One of the 15 detainees insisted that she'd been fingered by fellow villagers for being a "chronic borrower and troublemaker. The interrogation center . . . came, sadly, to agree," at least about the troublemaking []

²⁰ Ibid. []

²¹ Ibid. []

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American pilot, carrying [] was not so enterprising. [] pointed out that it was now their turn to make a drop. "Where are the T-28s [to provide suppressing fire]?" was the reply, and they carried their ammunition back to Savannakhet.²² []

One of the two surrounded companies broke the NVA siege, then tried and failed to relieve its battered sister unit. The North Vietnamese then assaulted that unit, which radioed, "We're fighting hand to hand . . . no ammunition . . . will call you back later." They never did, for they were then overrun, losing 70 men killed or captured; only eight made it back to Savannakhet.²³ []

By this point, late in the day, another battalion—BG-306—had disintegrated under a fierce enemy assault. The command post now came under massive infantry and heavy weapons attack, and the defenders began to withdraw. The communists failed to lift their own supporting fire, and fleeing defenders later said they had heard NVA troops cursing their own gunners as casualties mounted. But the irregulars, too, sustained serious losses. One company commander, carrying his wounded brother, took bullets through both legs and fell to the ground. Survivors later reported that they saw him pull the pin from a grenade; the blast killed him and his brother and knocked down several NVA troops converging on him.²⁴ []

Air America helicopters landed along Route 9 to pick up the wounded, and [] was pleasantly surprised to hear their pilots tell of able-bodied troopers who refused offers of a ride, preferring to make their way west on foot with their units. On the whole, the irregulars had turned in a valiant performance, even in ultimate defeat, and [] was astonished to see the cocky bravado of the survivors as they reached Savannakhet. As to the broader significance of the action, he was unsure. The GM 30 operation had bought five weeks' delay, slowing the NVA's subsequent drive on an important center on Route 9, called Dong Hene, until it was too late to beat the onset of the rains. But the Vietnamese once again owned Muong Phalane.²⁵ []

Contesting for the Bolovens Plateau []

[] These two setbacks had been preceded by the loss of several of the irregulars' bases on the eastern rim of the Bolovens, which the communists found the will and resources to overrun even while still heavily engaged against Lam Son 719. With the South Vietnamese back

²² Ibid. []

²³ Ibid.; []

²⁴ Stockinger, "Five Weeks at Phalane." []

²⁵ Ibid. []

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across the border, Hanoi was free to quicken the pace and, in mid-May, drove the last of Vientiane's forces off the Bolovens Plateau.²⁶ [redacted]

Washington saw the balance of forces in the Panhandle as now dangerously tilted in favor of Hanoi. The NVA could take Pakse or Savannakhet anytime it wished; the only question was Hanoi's intentions in the matter. In this climate, Headquarters judged that the Agency had contributed to the imbalance with excessively ambitious interdiction operations. Conducted with insufficient reserves to relieve combat-weary units or those under heavy enemy pressure, these efforts had left MR 4, for example, with only three functioning battalions. The other seven had to be reorganized and retrained and even that had to await enough new recruits to fill the gaps in their ranks.²⁷ [redacted]

[redacted] The NVA decided not to exploit its advantage—the onset of the rainy season was doubtless a factor—and as of early June 1971, the government's position had stabilized in both north and south. Headquarters' fears of a march on the Mekong now gave way to talk in Long Tieng and Pakse of rainy-season offensives against the communists. In the north, despite Vang Pao's enduring dream of Hmong mastery of the Plain of Jars, the objective would be entirely tactical: to push the enemy far enough from the "heartland" area, south and west of the plain, to deny it the opportunity for a decisive move against the plain when the weather cleared once again. In the south, the motivation was more complicated.²⁸ [redacted]

To begin with, Lao proprietary feelings toward the fertile Bolovens Plateau equaled the Hmong attachment to the Plain of Jars. Also, the Bolovens lay between the Trail network and Route 13, the main road into northeastern Cambodia. Prince Sisouk, Souvanna's deputy defense minister, judged that the government must hold the plateau at least as far east as Paksong in order to deny Hanoi easy access into northeastern Cambodia. Finally, there was the sudden and violent rift between the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese in southern Laos that offered the government the prospect of reclaiming the loyalty of villagers long under communist sway.²⁹ [redacted]

26 [redacted]

27 [redacted]

28 [redacted]

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The Neo Lao Hak Sat and its military arm, collectively known as the Pathet Lao, had tolerated their status as junior partner, but tensions with the North Vietnamese were inevitable. When an outspoken Pathet Lao general named Phomma Douangmala died in an NVA field hospital in late 1970, word spread that he had been murdered, and armed confrontations followed. After negotiations with MR 4 commander General Phasouk, one Pathet Lao battalion commander brought half a company with him when he defected in March, fleeing under NVA fire. In addition, there were reports of two occasions on which the North Vietnamese executed dissident Pathet Lao officers. One of these, a colonel, had been openly encouraging resistance to NVA exactions of food from the villagers. Another Pathet Lao officer, a propagandist, was urging villagers to report to FAR the locations of NVA concentrations so that tactical air could "bomb them to hell."³⁰

These incentives combined to obscure the likelihood that a drive on Pak-song, like the interdiction operations criticized by CIA Headquarters, might exceed the irregulars' capacity to seize and hold territory. Given the momentary shortage of irregular battalions, FAR would have to make a major contribution, and General Phasouk proved to be more an obstruction than a participant. The favorite of the Agency officers devoted to the territorial defense program of the mid-1960s, he had perhaps just burned out; clearly, he resented the general sent to him by the FAR command to help plan and command the operation.³¹

The two did manage to pick a first-class task force commander in Col. Soutchay Vongsavanh, the competent and courageous infantry officer who was also in charge of CIA-backed irregulars in MR 4. But not even this exceptional man could instill any aggressive spirit into the units assembled for the attack. His men had hardly left their positions at Ban Gnik, on the western edge of the plateau, before they ground to a halt. The next night, 10 June 1971, the North Vietnamese—supported by three PT-76 light tanks in the first appearance of armor in MR 4—struck the exposed Laotian positions. The regulars fell back through Ban Gnik before they could reform their lines, and when waves of NVA infantry returned to the attack the next morning, the Lao faced being wiped out.³²

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As many as three Pathet Lao battalions may have deserted in MR 4 in the first half of 1971. (Conboy, *Shadow War*, 286.)

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³² Conboy, *Shadow War*, 287-88.

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As they had so often done in years of bitter but inconclusive combat in Laos, the Vietnamese counted on cloud cover to avoid becoming targets for the rockets and cluster bombs of the US and Laotian air forces. They had sometimes lost this gamble, as at Muong Phalane, and they did so again on 11 June. The sun burned off the overcast while the NVA was still advancing over open terrain, and the Lao decimated them with 88 T-28 sorties. This blunted the attack, but NVA still managed to circle around behind Soutchay's defenders, blocking the road back to Pakse.³³ [redacted]

[redacted] But the NVA facing Soutchay's task force, just to the east, had suffered even more grievously—as many as 700 men killed by air, so many that vultures became a hazard to aircraft in the area for several weeks.³⁴ [redacted]

Operation SAYASILA [redacted]

The tactical result of this carnage was the restoration of the status quo, with the front line just west of its earlier location at Ban Gnik. Despite the feeble performance of the FAR task force there, the Lao were unprepared to accept this outcome. The ever-cautious General Phasouk had counseled against it, but during a visit to Pakse on 1 July 1971, King Savang Vatthana explicitly ordered a renewed effort to retake Paksong and the western Bolovens.³⁵ [redacted]

The US Mission supported the proposal. The joint effort, called Operation SAYASILA, was to begin with a diversionary helicopter-borne infantry attack on Saravane, north of the Plateau, to interdict the roads and waterways in that area. It would serve to divert the NVA from the Paksong sector even as it interrupted some North Vietnamese logistic activity along the Trail.³⁶ [redacted]

Seven of Operation SAYASILA's 17 battalions—nine from FAR plus eight BGs, [redacted]—would require helicopter infiltration and evacuation. The record reveals no Headquarters anxiety about the unprecedented scale of

³³ Ibid. [redacted]³⁴ [redacted]³⁵ [redacted]³⁶ [redacted]~~SECRET//MR~~

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the operation; its earlier concerns about overambitious ventures had apparently subsided, at least for the time being. What did become contentious was the question of transport helicopters.³⁷

On 26 July, with COS Tovar at Savannakhet to watch the first BG loaded onto helicopters, Headquarters fired a cable to Vientiane that relayed the Pentagon's sudden reversal. Someone had invoked Defense Secretary Laird's recent assurance to Senator Symington that US helicopters would be ferrying no troops in Panhandle operations in the immediate future. Accordingly, Defense had now ordered the airlift canceled. Bill Nelson demanded to know why Vientiane had waited until two days before D-day to ask for helicopter support, "and who is at fault for so doing."³⁸

Either Nelson was being uncharacteristically disingenuous or—more likely—Headquarters was not always a player in the coordination process, for CIA in Washington had been advised of the airlift requirement almost two weeks earlier. Cliff Strathern, acting for Tovar in Vientiane, acidly pointed this out, adding that coordination with the 7/13th Air Force had been accomplished on 14 July, the same day the operational plan went to Washington.³⁹

Some failure of communication in the military hierarchy had apparently kept the requirement from reaching the JCS and Laird's office, but this was cold comfort to the station. It complained that, even with the imbroglio now finally sorted out and the helicopters released, any further postponement risked vitiating carefully orchestrated deception measures. FAR had issued orders by radio for attacks on the eastern Bolovens, and these had, in fact, led the enemy to move forces away from the real targets.⁴⁰

Much face had already been lost with the Lao, including the prime minister and the king, and an anguished embassy telegram to the JCS argued that "we cannot . . . now inform [the] Lao government" of further delay "without jeopardizing [the] success of [the] entire [government] effort in southern Laos." The Mission could only repeat its requirement—15 heavy helicopters and six escort aircraft—and hope for the best.⁴¹

These appeals finally broke the logjam, but it took Washington the rest of 27 July to get the airlift restored. The next day, the irregulars took Saravane with no opposition, and FAR units starting east along Route 23 toward Pak-

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song made substantial progress, sometimes overcoming substantial resistance to do so. In addition, by way of further diversion, irregular detachments began sweeping the southeastern rim of the plateau.⁴² []

The diverging and always contingent goals of the American and Lao [] participants gave even large, meticulously planned operations like SAYASILA a somewhat unfocused look. The NVA's spoiling capacity meant that any objective might be changed or abandoned with little notice. Moreover, the differing Laotian and American emphasis on individual targets—Saravane and Paksong, for example—might produce different responses to changed circumstances. []

Headquarters, constantly under pressure from apprehensive policymakers, seems to have expressed some such perception about Operation SAYASILA. Within a week of the first deployments, COS Tovar was objecting to what he judged to be its "unrealistic" preoccupation with orderly progress toward predetermined goals. Initial planning had called for holding Saravane just a week, on a diversionary basis, but its easy capture had encouraged Souvanna—Tovar, too—to start thinking about installing a permanent garrison there and letting its civilian population return.⁴³ []

But Washington had reason to worry about the always-erratic Lao. Four FAR and neutralist battalions were blocked by the NVA short of Paksong, and were then routed by a barrage of heavy weapons fire. As they fled in disorder, a second FAR column, nearing Paksong from the northwest, was halted and driven back almost to its original infiltration point on the western Bolovens escarpment.⁴⁴ []

Soutchay [] American advisers responded with a three-pronged operation involving eight irregular and seven FAR battalions. Moving out on 21 August, the various commanders inexplicably failed to synchronize their advances on Paksong, and the North Vietnamese 9th Regiment, the perennial nemesis of the Lao in MR 4, chewed them up piecemeal. Four FAR battalions simply disintegrated, and four others were put out of action.⁴⁵ []

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⁴⁴ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 305. []

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 305-06. Soutchay was nominally in charge of Operation SAYASILA, but he enjoyed full control only of the participating FAR units and presumably consulted with [] and US advisers on the deployment of the irregulars. Many years later, Hugh Tovar did not recall the exact sequence of events but identified four factors that he thought probably contributed to the debacle: weakness of the FAR units; relatively well-trained and well-led but inexperienced [] newly installed MR 4 commander Soutchay's uncertain control of his subalterns; and the fact that many units moved on foot, giving the NVA ample opportunity to scout their dispositions. (Note from Hugh Tovar, 31 January 2001.) []

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STING LIKE A BEE []

Even the fatalistic Lao found this outcome repugnant, for their attachment to Paksong and the Bolovens nearly matched the importance of the Mekong Valley. In addition, the FAR command was undergoing a shakeup. Colonel Soutchay's CIA backers still saw him as the best hope for military leadership in the south, but his prospects for replacing the fading General Phasouk as MR 4 commander might not survive a debacle on the Bolovens.⁴⁶ []

Savannakhet [] long the source of whatever the irregular program could claim as a general reserve, came to the rescue. One of its best regiments, GM 32, had recently driven the NVA 335th Regiment 22 miles back from the outskirts of Luang Prabang. On 11 September 1971, GM 32's four battalions launched a leapfrog operation from helicopter landing zones behind enemy lines east of Paksong. The enemy retreated into Paksong, which still harbored some civilians and where the rules of engagement precluded airstrikes. GM 32 took substantial casualties from mortar fire as it advanced, but cheered on from Pakse by the prime minister and the king, it repelled determined counterattacks on 13 September.⁴⁷ []

The town fell on the 14th, but it took until 20 October for GM 32 to link up with the FAR [] units inching their way from the west. But a war that seemed never to produce a durable result or a conclusive victory continued its seasonal pattern. By the end of 1971, government forces still held Paksong, but once again had been expelled from Saravane. The communists enjoyed uncontested control of the eastern Bolovens, and therefore also of the Se Kong Valley and the rest of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in MR 4.⁴⁸ []

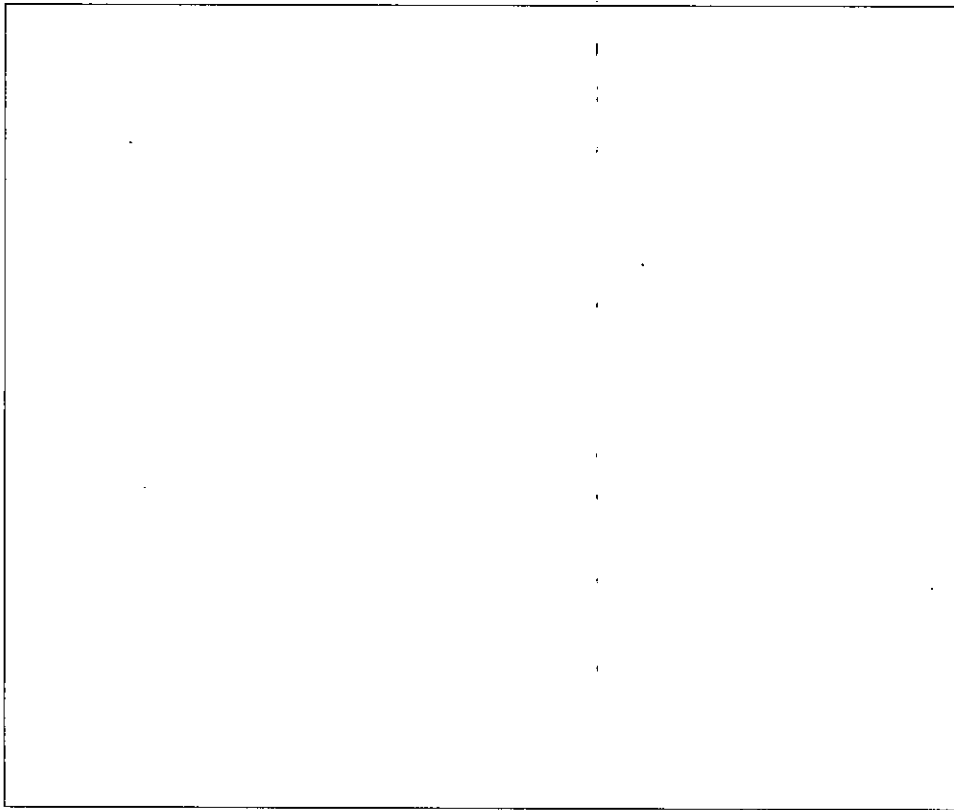
⁴⁶ [] Conboy, *Shadow War*, 306. []

⁴⁷ []
⁴⁸ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 306-09; [] interview; []

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CHAPTER NINETEEN
Vietnamization and Escalation



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The session arrived at agreement on one thing: the Defense Department would begin to provide all equipment and conventional military supplies to both FAR [redacted] and Laotian irregulars. [redacted]

[redacted]

Godley would have no part of it. He wanted no new military headquarters in Udom whose title suggested escalation of US involvement in Laos "contrary to stated US policy." Even less did he want to see it deciding what materiel to supply; according to the station, "the Ambassador considers that he is the manager of the . . . program."⁵ [redacted]

Reading the handwriting on the wall, the station was disposed to be more accommodating; it had already submitted all its FY 1972 requirements through the military. But a bigger obstacle remained: Washington's budget figure did not specify how the money was to be divided between regular and irregular forces. Tovar reminded Headquarters that this had to be negotiated with the Vientiane embassy's military advisory group, whose history of "internecine jealousy" with its military counterparts at Udom put the station in a delicate position.⁶ [redacted]

The subsequent battle over semantics reflected the competition for control. Godley rejected the idea of a FAR "coordination element" at Udom—he thought it would dissolve the last pretense of Laotian neutrality and invite the Lao to make end runs around the Vientiane Mission. Hugh Tovar, abandoning his earlier, more neutral stance, adopted the ambassador's objections to the "MCLaos" concept: "I will say quite frankly that . . . it has all the earmarks of a monstrosity."⁷ [redacted]

Bill Nelson moved to put out the fire, pointing out to Tovar that, at San Clemente, CIA had formally declared its inability to handle the logistics for a program that even now was still growing. "It had become very clear . . . that without closer consultation with DOD at [the] early stages" CIA was simply not going to get the support it required. "The Udom office [MCLaos] is the immediate result of our efforts to shift the burden to DoD." Nelson

4 [redacted]
5 [redacted]
6 [redacted]
7 [redacted]

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acknowledged that Congress, and Secretary Laird as well, would prefer to limit DOD responsibility for Laos. But the "highest levels of government" had approved enlarging it, and that was that.⁸

This emphasis on short-term enhancement of the administration's proxy army in Laos reflected Kissinger's preoccupation with bargaining chips for his negotiations with Hanoi. and retention of the A-1Es represented a "sweetener package" with which to "help sell Souvanna on accepting the risks of a cease-fire and later withdrawal from the [Plain of Jars]." The package authorized most of what the station wanted—including even M-60 heavy machineguns—with which to enter the dry season, but it had the perverse effect of expanding the Agency's managerial role in Laos just when Headquarters was trying to reduce it. And the transfer of materiel costs to Defense was partly offset by the irregulars' burgeoning payroll, still a CIA responsibility.¹⁰

Another Chance at Long Tieng

While CIA and the Defense Department wrestled over the responsibility for materiel costs, in the spring of 1971, the station and Vang Pao were preparing the annual wet-season offensive in MR 2. The melancholy history of Hmong wet-season offensives followed by devastating NVA counterattacks might have counseled a conservative approach, but Vang Pao's advisers shared his conviction that the survival of the Hmong depended on exploiting the rains to improve their tactical position. In addition, the NVA was threatening to overwhelm Bouam Long, Cher Pao Moua's redoubt 19 miles north of the Plain of Jars, and something had to be done to divert this campaign. The prime minister and the king added to these pressures, urging offensive action at a time when a surge in the pace of cease-fire negotiations in Paris placed a premium on territorial advantage.¹¹

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*Skycrane helicopter delivering 105mm ammunition at Firebase Mustang, August 1971
(Courtesy of Hugh Tovar)*

At this point, in early June 1971, Hmong patrols infiltrated onto the southern Plain of Jars, and the NVA 866th Regiment, probably short of supplies, put up only modest resistance. Vang Pao had by now met the station's demand for a consolidation of the line southwest of the Plain of Jars, and Ambassador Godley considered that he had the authority to support a Hmong offensive. At the US Mission in Vientiane, the tactical and political circumstances seemed clearly to favor aggressive action.¹²

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¹³ Tovar interview.

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VIETNAMIZATION AND ESCALATION



Vang Pao at the breech of a 105mm howitzer (date unknown) (Courtesy of James Glerum)

[REDACTED]

The undersecretary of defense John Irwin had visited Long Tieng in late May, where Vang Pao outlined his offensive plans, and Tovar and Godley had told Washington what they had in mind. But the plan the COS submitted on 5 June was as much an activity report as a proposal, as Headquarters tartly noted in a reply that imposed the usual policy constraints. Tovar should bear in mind that the operation must not grow either beyond the US ability to support it, or to the point of provoking a "major NVA reaction." And he should remember that the full Senate was about to meet in closed session to hear a staff report on Laos, a prospect that only intensified administration sensitivity to surprises of any kind.¹⁵ [REDACTED]

By the time Washington read the plan, Hmong irregulars had captured artillery pieces, two NVA soldiers, a truck, and assorted ammunition and supplies. In one local setback, NVA sappers overran an artillery position on the south-

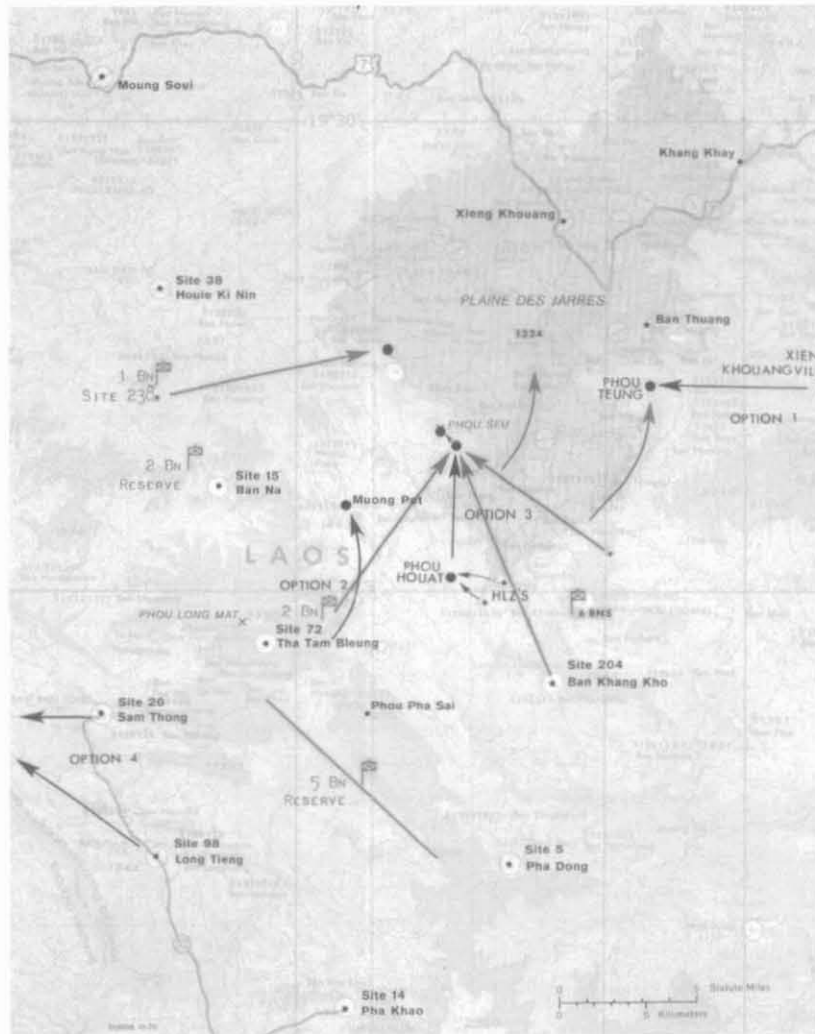
¹⁴ Ibid.; [REDACTED]

¹⁵ Ibid.; [REDACTED]

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Planned offensive against the Plain of Jars, 21 June 1971

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Hugh Tovar and prehistoric stone jar on the Plain of Jars, July 1971 (Courtesy of Hugh Tovar)

ern edge of the Plain of Jars, but elsewhere, small patrols fanned out to the north as the enemy declined to fight. Advancing much faster than they had during Operation Vang Pao's men walked up Phou Teung, the mountain dominating the southeastern portion of the Plain of Jars, claiming it in mid-June. Headquarters had explicitly promised to get advance approval for any operation against Phou Teung, and an embarrassed memorandum to Kissinger tried to finesse the accountability issue: Vang Pao had made his move "without seeking full station concurrence, although the station was informed prior to its execution."¹⁶

Tovar insisted that the Phou Teung action had respected the plan, already approved in Washington, that envisaged "adjusting to the developing situation, in order to threaten the flank and rear of NVA forces operating to the south and southwest of the PdJ." Headquarters and the State Department found small comfort in this, especially after Vang Pao proceeded to take other

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Vang Pao's tactical position was so much improved that the station had sent a Hmong BG down to reinforce the Bolovens sector on 3 June; another battalion was to follow it a week later.

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high ground farther to the northwest. A worried cable to Tovar urged his attention to indications of enemy movements that might presage an attack in which an overextended Vang Pao might "get his forces chewed up."¹⁷ [redacted]

Headquarters and State messages reflected continuing doubt that the Mission had enough influence on Vang Pao to prevent Souvanna and the king from raising their sights. Washington's anxiety provoked an acerbic message from Mac Godley, who pronounced himself "bemused by the Laotian scene where we appear to be more concerned when friends capture appreciable enemy booty, and improve their defensive and negotiating status than when they have their backs to the wall." But he offered the desired assurances that not only Vang Pao but also Souvanna and the king understood the need to avoid excessive risks on the Plain of Jars.¹⁸ [redacted]

A Reactive Hanoi? [redacted]

Headquarters tried to put things in perspective for the station. It doubted that "State has a very precise idea of what its objections are to Vang Pao's current offensive." But it seemed that, as in the case of Operation [redacted] the "enemy's withdrawal and Vang Pao's rapid follow up has [sic] caught State by surprise." Behind all this lay the existence of "two schools of thought on the north Laos military equation." Some—Headquarters attributed this position to the Vientiane Mission—believed that the North Vietnamese were applying all the military pressure they could "in order to achieve political leverage on Souvanna Phouma." Others, including "many in State," thought that "over the past six years the North Vietnamese military moves in north Laos have been reactive."¹⁹ [redacted]

On the latter view, enterprises like the bombing guidance radar at Phou Pha Thi and Operation [redacted] had converted northern Laos into a primary theater for Hanoi, ultimately drawing a second infantry division into the fray. Thus reinforced, the NVA had nearly taken Long Tieng in 1970 [redacted]

[redacted] Explicitly abstaining from taking a position on the controversy, Headquarters pointed out only that, "in the aftermath of Operation [redacted] [in 1969], CIA took a con-

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siderable pounding in the Washington community for 'unleashing' Vang Pao" and provoking the "full weight of the North Vietnamese attack."²⁰

Now, two years later, the equation was complicated by the "genuine hope in many quarters here" for a negotiated cease-fire in north Laos. Some proponents of this line aspired to some kind of tacit arrangement with the North Vietnamese, with the United States "restraining Vang Pao from doing much more than defending the approaches to Long Tieng in the mountains south and west of the [Plain of Jars]." The idea of a Hmong advance onto and beyond the plain did "not sit well with those who espouse this view." It would be simply impossible for CIA to "hide behind the notion that [Vang Pao] operates independently or at the behest of [Souvanna] and we have no element of control."²¹

A day later, on 7 July, Washington's *Evening Star* charged that the Hmong offensive was courting "massive Hanoi retaliation" like that which had answered Operation and that it risked killing negotiations between Vientiane and the Pathet Lao. As the article was being read in Washington—the State Department expected a "tough time from [the] press and possibly Congress"—Vang Pao was once again reminding Tovar and Chargé Stearns that he deferred not only to his American advisers but also to the prime minister and the king. These two had ordered him to set up "as strong a defensive position as possible in and around the [Plain of Jars]."²²

Washington considered ordering the Mission to threaten Vang Pao with the withdrawal of tactical air, but forbore after consideration of the likely effect on his and Hmong morale. In any case, the general acknowledged that his forces had been moving into a "military vacuum" unlike any earlier such seasonal void. According to Chargé Stearns, he harbored "few illusions" about his ability to take enemy fortifications north and east of the plain.²³

Tovar reported separately, with less emphasis on Vang Pao's responsiveness to American preferences. He had found it prudent to warn the general that air support could not be guaranteed for moves against targets like Nong Pet, on Route 7, or Xieng Khouang town. There seemed to be mutual understanding about the boundaries of US support, but the COS wanted Headquarters to "bear in mind that Vang Pao is something of a bird dog on a very long leash."²⁴

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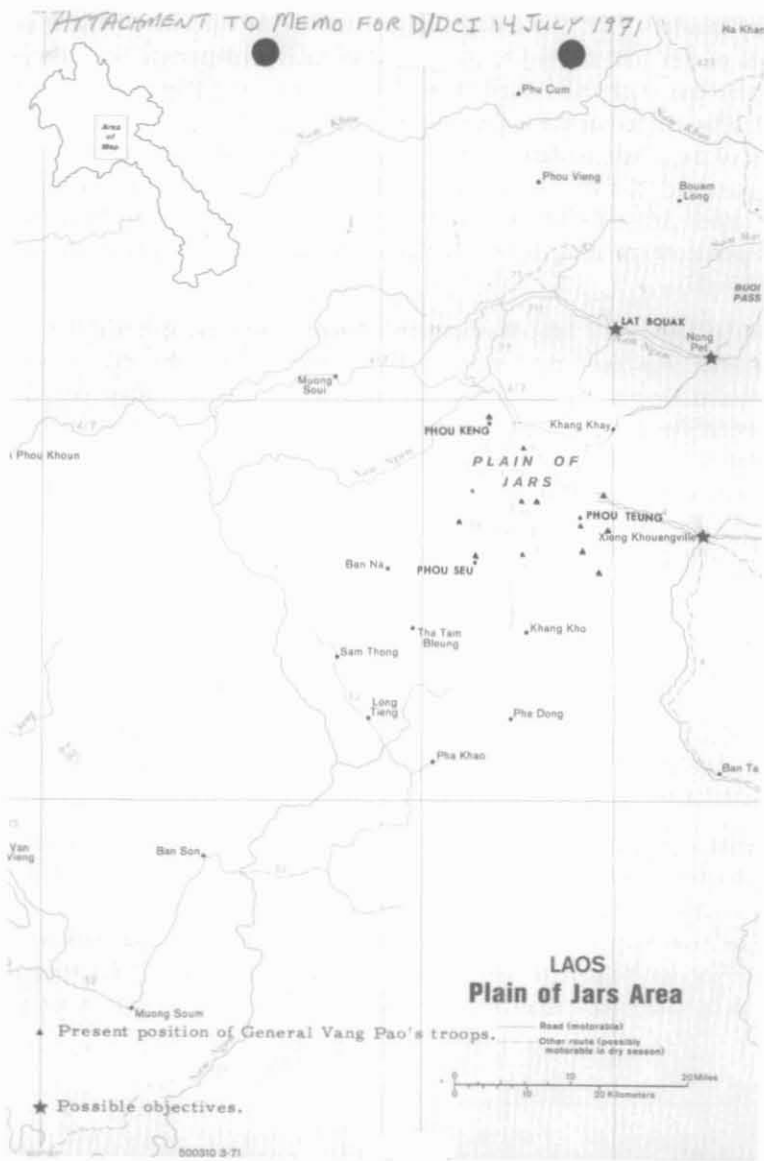
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Tactical Situation in MR 2 as of July 1971

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The COS unequivocally associated himself with "Vang Pao's contention," which he had "heard him voice repeatedly and with great emotion, that the Meo people cannot exist indefinitely in their present condition and in the restricted and inhospitable area to which they are now confined." He went on to point out that

we speak often of the "plight" of the Meos. The word is apposite. And the interrelationship between their current condition and the extent to which that condition stems from their involvement in the pursuance of US interests cannot be ignored.²⁵

The plight of the Hmong could perhaps not be ignored, but Tovar tacitly recognized that it would not be the operative factor in Washington's policy decisions. He followed his *cri de coeur* with the assertion that Souvanna's continued willingness to discuss with the Pathet Lao a cease-fire in the north, even while he allowed the United States a free hand in the Panhandle, depended heavily on sustaining Vang Pao's progress.²⁶

Despite its greater emotional detachment, this calculation did not prevent a surge of opposition in the US Senate to any kind of offensive stance in northern Laos. In mid-July, Senator Symington sponsored legislation to cut military expenditures in Laos almost in half. Facing legislative hearings on the bill, Kissinger told CIA he wanted Vang Pao restrained from "any particularly spectacular operations."²⁷

On 19 July, Dick Helms relayed Hugh Tovar's assurance that Vang Pao was contemplating no precipitate moves. At the same time, the DCI was cautiously trying to prepare the policy ground for more aggressive exploitation of the Hmong advantage. He acknowledged Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong's charge that Vang Pao's advance was jeopardizing cease-fire talks with Vientiane, and he noted the difficulties posed by congressional and press attention to the Hmong offensive. Having stipulated these obstacles, he went on to ask Kissinger and the other members of WSAG for a determination that there would be "no policy objections" to Vang Pao's seizing strategic points north and east of the Plain of Jars. This overture got a cool reception, and Nelson told Tovar that the chance of his enjoying any "more flexibility during [the] days to come is extremely remote."²⁸

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Nineteen***Unleashing Vang Pao**

Tovar answered on 26 July with an appeal to "release Vang Pao at once" from restrictions that the two agreed were tactically dangerous, rendering the Hmong immobile while failing to interrupt enemy preparations for a counter-attack. He argued also that these constraints ignored Souvanna's fervent desire, in the context of peace negotiations, to reclaim the northeast periphery of the Plain of Jars and, in so doing, complete a viable area in which to settle the Hmong.²⁹

—but also the more advantageous deployment of the Hmong units. But his advocacy, seconded by Chargé Stearns, had only a marginal effect; Washington would allow Vang Pao to enter a village at one key road junction north of the plain at State Department insistence only "for defensive purposes."³⁰

State was not the only Washington player reluctant to see the ante raised. Defense Secretary Laird offered a cold-eyed analysis that noted the endless conflict in MR 2 and predicted that, given the continuing US military withdrawal from the Indochina theater, "our leverage in moving toward settlement in northern Laos is likely to decrease . . . in fiscal year 1972." Given the importance the North Vietnamese attached to the Plain of Jars, this meant that the best that could be hoped for was its neutralization, though Laird still hoped that this might come "as part of the final ceasefire rather than just [as a concession] to get ceasefire talks going."³¹

The argument, often resembling a dialog of the deaf, persisted for two months. Hugh Tovar maintained that only by attacks on NVA logistics along Route 7 could Vang Pao forestall a major counterattack when the rains stopped in November or December. Even if they failed to forestall it, spoiling

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Tovar complained that State's position, as conveyed to Stearns in a "remarkably tortured specimen of English prose," was too "confusing and contradictory" to be suitable for passage, as requested, to Vang Pao

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VIETNAMIZATION AND ESCALATION

operations would leave the Hmong incomparably better situated than at the end of Operation ³²

The administration doubted Vang Pao's ability to deter a North Vietnamese counterattack by striking along Route 7 and refused to make the military investment required to support Hmong resettlement on the Plain of Jars. Administration policy therefore aimed at helping the Hmong hold Long Tieng and the mountains between the Plain of Jars and the Vientiane Plain. Vang Pao would simply have to understand that "it is just not in the cards that Washington will involve itself in operations east and north of the [plain]." ³³

The bottom line: Vang Pao should indeed hold the Plain of Jars as long as possible into the dry season, but should rely on "local offensive operations within the area he now holds" to consolidate his base area. Otherwise, he would "predictably take excessive casualties" in major engagements, and would then "complain that these setbacks are due to Washington restraints." ³⁴

All of this meant "shattering with some finality Vang Pao's long-held dream of returning the Meos to the Plain of Jars and even further to the east." Looking for the "best choice among bad ones," he might finally lead his people westward to Sayaboury. But Nelson still doubted that lands to the west, with hostile Hmong supported by the Chinese and the North Vietnamese, offered a better option than the Long Tieng region, where "it should be possible to work out a reasonable settlement of our debt to the Meos for their long years of fighting." ³⁵

Hugh Tovar found almost nothing to agree with in Nelson's position. He saw inconsistencies in Washington's guidance, which seemed both to expect him to hold the Plain of Jars and, as in Nelson's message, assumed this to be impossible. "In all honesty I confess that there are moments when we are not sure what you really want us to do. (I mean really, really!)" ³⁶

The COS assured Nelson that he would do whatever policy required. But he thought that facts had to be faced, and one of these was recent agitation by Hmong village and district leaders to evacuate the war zone and return to normal life as farmers. Tovar doubted that Vang Pao's authority extended to keeping on the line troops whose civilian leaders had opted out. ³⁷

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Nelson's response addressed very little of Tovar's argument, saying merely that he doubted "any serious difference of view." He did dispute one point, that of the motives behind the Laotian government's encouragement of an effort to hold the plain. He paraphrased Bill Sullivan's opinion about Souvanna and the king, both of whom "treated Vang Pao in less than candid fashion." They regarded the Mco as expendable and would tell Vang Pao almost anything to keep him in the fight, as "their principal interest was not in the Meo but in buying time."³⁸ [redacted]

Nelson went on to summarize earlier guidance: There would be no support to operations "far off" the Plain of Jars, and Vang Pao should be ready instead for "an orderly withdrawal to prepared positions to the west and south." For Washington, the main imperative was still defense of the area between the Plain of Jars and the Vientiane Plain, partly as a "buffer" for the Vientiane government and partly as a home for Vang Pao's Hmong.³⁹ [redacted]

Bringing in the Big Guns [redacted]

Not everyone with experience of the Hmong shared Hugh Tovar's faith in the ability of howitzers [redacted] to help them put up a fight for the Plain of Jars. [redacted] mocked Nelson's call for a "phased withdrawal," writing in early December that "there never has been such a thing . . . in Northeast Laos and there won't be one now." The Hmong would not fight a defensive action on the flat terrain of the plain; they would simply run, [redacted] The end result might well be the collapse of both the Hmong will to fight [redacted]

As [redacted] saw it, the only prudent course was full evacuation of the plain at the first evidence of NVA massing for a counteroffensive. The very surprise of it would disrupt the thorough but rigid North Vietnamese planning, and the Hmong would, at worst, be back fighting on terrain that favored them instead of the enemy. [redacted] saw his argument strengthened by the enemy's recent introduction of 130mm field guns, whose range and power dwarfed the performance of the US 155mm howitzer [redacted] Hmong withdrawal would force the NVA to move their big guns south and west, exposing them to destruction by tactical air.⁴¹ [redacted]

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prescription resembled Nelson's in his call for emphasis on defending the southwest periphery, but Vientiane was more optimistic. On 5 December, Tovar described himself as still in a somewhat "pollyanna'ish frame of mind." The enemy's buildup was well under way, but the station thought it had enough irregulars to bring in as reinforcements.

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To Bill Nelson, the glass looked at least half empty. The very substantial improvements in friendly dispositions since the previous dry season—these included six artillery fire support bases on and around the plain—risked being "more than offset" by an even more massive NVA commitment. It now appeared that the Hmong would face two divisions this year, and the NVA was moving 16 of its 130mm guns toward the front. If these were dug into hill-sides, tactical air would find them very hard to touch.

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Vang Pao had sent up his brave but pathetically tiny squadron of T-28s, and two were promptly shot down by the heavy machineguns protecting the North Vietnamese artillery. begged for US tactical air, but it was all committed to the search for two pilots downed in southern Laos. For the first three days, Ambassador Godley's inter-

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⁴⁴ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 324-25;

Tovar wrote that one could only admire the brilliant logistic effort that supported the brutally intense heavy-weapons fire supporting the NVA infantry.

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LAOS: PLAINE DES JARRES AREA



Tactical situation in late December 1971

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VIETNAMIZATION AND ESCALATION [redacted]

vention brought neither fighter-bombers nor—for reasons unknown—even B-52s to try to slow the enemy infantry sweeping down the plain.⁴⁵ [redacted]

It took just 72 hours to confirm [redacted] gloomy forecast as the North Vietnamese blasted all the Hmong [redacted] defenders off the Plain of Jars. One Hmong regiment, only 800 men strong to begin with, suffered 50 percent casualties, almost half of them fatalities. Ten days later, only half of 4,000 Hmong troops had been accounted for. Most were expected to straggle on down toward Long Tieng, but in the meantime, the units still intact were too demoralized to respond to Vang Pao's frantic efforts to organize a defensive line on the edge of the plain. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] ⁴⁶ [redacted]

On 20 December, with the last fire support bases succumbing to the North Vietnamese assault, Vang Pao rejected the advice of his advisers and went to Vientiane to tell Souvanna it was time for the Hmong to leave MR 2. When Tovar flew up to Long Tieng the next morning, he found Vang Pao close to despair. The COS found a little hope in reports that some of the elders were promising Vang Pao to try to hold the tribe together, but it was clear to the station that, at best, Long Tieng itself would soon be empty of civilians.⁴⁷ [redacted]

[redacted]

It was none too soon. Ban Na, anchoring the upper end of the defensive arc curving to the south and east, had fallen to the enemy on the 21st, and the Vietnamese were dragging their heavy guns southward to threaten Long Tieng. Just as in early 1970, [redacted] US officials scrambled to bring up the replacement units without which the Hmong resistance would collapse. By 28 December, six Laotian [redacted] battalions had arrived at

⁴⁵ Hugh Tovar, "Managing the Secret War in Laos," review of *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam* by Timothy N. Castle, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 374; [redacted]

[redacted]

⁴⁶ [redacted]

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⁴⁷ [redacted]

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Long Tieng, and 11 new howitzers had been delivered, with 25 more on the way. But the three MR 2 *Groupements Mobiles* were "depleted, tired, and very shaky," and for the immediate future the defense would depend more on new units, including an additional *Groupement Mobile* from Savannakhet, and on the eight battalions earlier provided from outside MR 2.⁴⁹ []

On the 28th, the ambassador and the COS visited Long Tieng, where in the week since Tovar's last visit Vang Pao had seemed to be "losing his grip" and his troops to be "drifting beyond effective control." Now, he and his forces had recovered to the point at which defense plans could be made with some hope of their being carried out. But documents taken from the body of a North Vietnamese soldier suggested the imminent deployment of the dreaded 130mm field gun within range of Long Tieng, which might fatally undermine the irregulars' will to resist.⁵⁰ []

Long Tieng Under Fire []

On 31 December, the first 130mm shells landed in the Long Tieng Valley, destroying the main ammunition dump and the Lao air force facilities there. [] kept the airstrip facilities working, but in the midst of the cleanup effort, Vang Pao suddenly and apparently without notice to CIA moved his command post to Ban Song Sai, 13 miles to the southwest. Alarmed by his abrupt departure, [] flashed word to Vientiane, where the COS was attending the prime minister's New Year's gala. Apprised at the embassy of Vang Pao's absence, the COS [] where he and Pat Landry summoned an Air America helicopter crew to take them to Long Tieng and on to Ban Song Sai.⁵¹ []

They found the bedraggled general in a dark, smoky little hut. Tears streamed from his eyes, partly from the smoke and partly from what seemed a heavy cold, and perhaps also out of grief over the losses of the last two weeks. He summoned the strength for a half-hour diatribe on the absence of air support when the NVA attacked the Plain of Jars, and the COS, understanding his need to vent his rage and frustration, offered no rebuttal. When calm returned, Vang Pao consented to accompany them [] where he was diagnosed with viral pneumonia and admitted to the hospital.⁵² []

⁴⁹ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 327; []

⁵⁰ []

⁵¹ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 328; Tovar interview, []

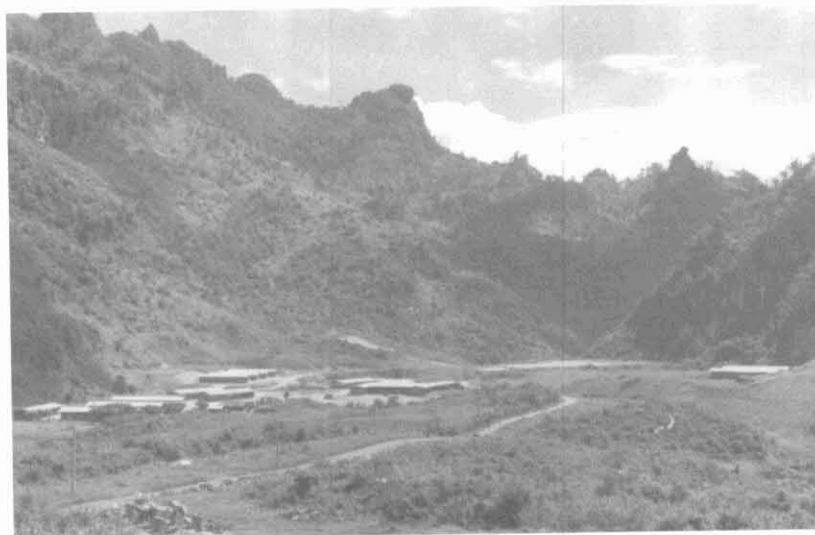
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VIETNAMIZATION AND ESCALATION



with bear cage at rear, after NVA attack, c. December 1971



Long Tieng training camp, c. 1972

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Tovar returned to Long Tieng, where the menace of the 130mm field guns was wearing down morale, and not only that of the Hmong. [redacted]

[redacted]

With the survival of Long Tieng and the irregular army far from assured, the Agency was smarting under criticism from an American military establishment much of which had always questioned its competence to run a war. The Laos desk chief warned Bill Nelson about "an increasingly vocal undercurrent of US military . . . skepticism" about CIA's ability to "read enemy intentions; evaluate the performance of irregular forces, and make the kind of adjustments . . . needed to cope with an increasingly bold and effective enemy." [redacted]

The imperturbable Nelson saw it as a case of chickens coming home to roost. For years, the Agency had been telling the military that the Agency's conduct of the war in Laos

was really the way to run a counterinsurgency effort in contrast to what DoD did in Vietnam. Now that some of the shine has worn off our wagon . . . we can be certain that there will be all sorts of smarting egos crawling out of the woodwork and pelting us with almost any kind of droppings that happen to be lying around.

The only way to respond was to

be scrupulously honest [in] our reporting, answer questions as best we can, and accept criticism where it is warranted in good grace. I do think we can gently remind our critics that with neither the Meo, Lao [redacted] forces are we working with troops who have had the kind of massive on-the-ground hand holding that has occurred in Vietnam, that we are in this effort because the Administration has continually asked us to stay in it, and that although we do not pretend a capability that is beyond our reach, we think that . . . both the intelligence collection and paramilitary effort[s,] for the resources invested, [have] been a good show. [redacted]

A week later, Defense Secretary Laird fulfilled Nelson's anticipation of more second-guessing in a memorandum promptly attacked by the DCI's spe-

⁵² Tovar interview; [redacted]

⁵³ [redacted]

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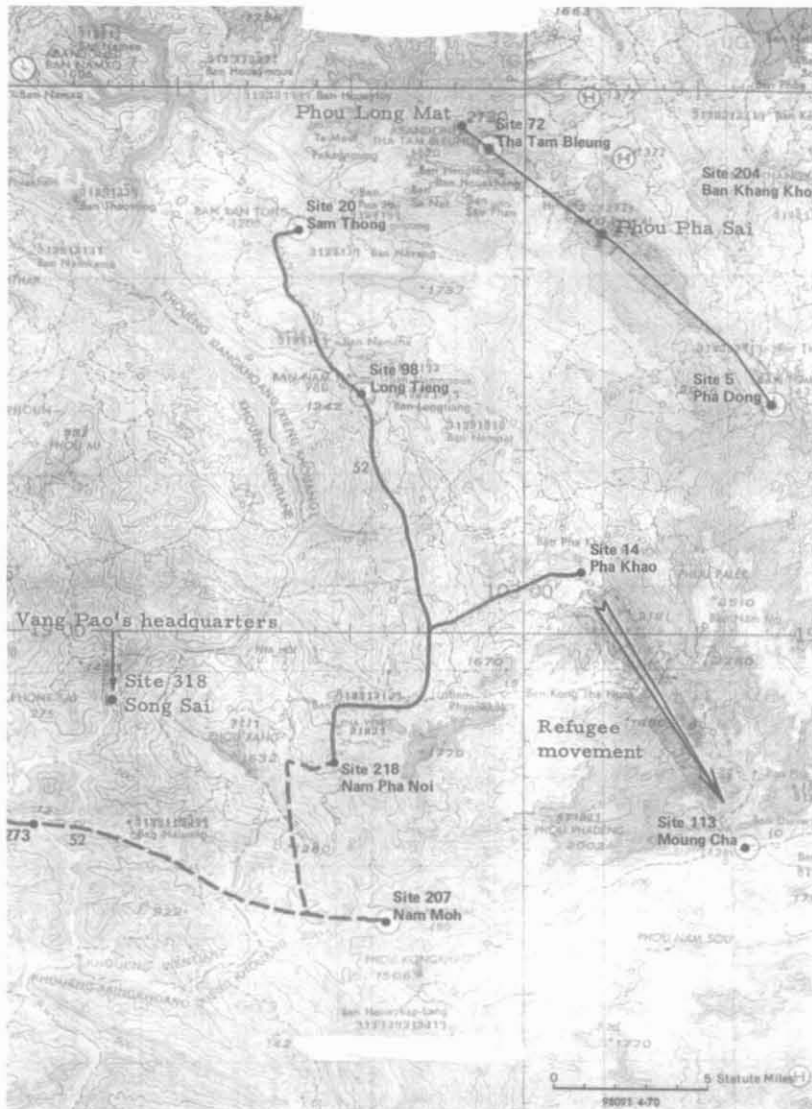
cial assistant for Vietnam affairs George Carver. According to Carver's reading of it, it called for a military "assistance program . . . one whose costs run significantly below present aid levels, that will enable the Lao to accomplish the manifestly impossible." Laird was wrong, Carver wrote, when he implied that permanent occupation of the Plain of Jars had ever been an Agency or administration goal; the whole point had been to achieve just what Laird said he wanted, that is, to secure the Vientiane Plain.⁵⁴

Carver's memorandum to the DCI credited Laird with being right about two things—one, the political impossibility of increased aid and, second, the need to adopt a longer term approach to the gradually declining American investment in Laos. But the answer, he insisted, lay not in some fanciful scheme for turning the Laotian soldier into a do-or-die defender of the realm, but in Thai acceptance of some of the regional defense responsibilities still being borne by the United States. American efforts should focus on this, perhaps with some South Vietnamese participation in southern Laos. The United States should abandon "the impossible [task of] trying to develop an army capable of containing the NVA in a non-country whose generals are unlikely, in this generation, to be much but local warlords."⁵⁵

Like the Pentagon, CIA was grasping for some formula that would save Laos from Hanoi even as US military withdrawal from Indochina removed the only serious obstacle to a communist triumph. Meanwhile, the existing distribution of American roles and missions continued as the Vientiane Mission and Vang Pao waited for the next blow.

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Tactical situation in MR 2 in early January 1972

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Red Light at the End of the Tunnel

As the North Vietnamese moved ordnance and supplies south, in late December 1971, Washington continued its search for more troops to help man the defense line between the Long Tieng-Sam Thong complex and the Plain of Jars. Enemy probes near Luang Prabang and an expected NVA dry-season offensive in the southern Panhandle dictated caution in stripping those areas of their reserves.

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The fate of Long Tieng thus rested on the ability of air power and new artillery to delay the NVA [redacted] In a climate of grim pessimism, Washington engaged in another round of the perennial strategy debate. Should the effort be directed at the military and psychological benefits of holding Long Tieng, or should scarce manpower be conserved by having the irregulars revert to mobile guerrilla warfare?⁴ [redacted]

As had been the case before Vang Pao's move onto the Plain of Jars, Washington tried to split the difference. Alluding to the early 1968 siege of US Marine positions in South Vietnam, the authoritative interagency committee—WSAG—asserted that “we do not want another Khe Sanh.” The goal should be more limited, to force the enemy to concentrate his forces, making them vulnerable to air attack, but with friendly forces withdrawing before casualties became excessive.⁵ [redacted]

All three regiments of the NVA 312th Division had now infiltrated southwest toward Vang Pao's defensive arc above Long Tieng. Other elements managed to go around or through it and closed in on the base itself. Sappers raided it twice in early January 1972, inflicting embarrassing damage [redacted] [redacted] Vang Pao's house, and on reconnaissance aircraft and an ammunition dump. [redacted]

A Journalistic Junket to Long Tieng [redacted]

In the midst of all this, Hugh Tovar found himself under a different kind of siege. Word of the December rout from the Plain of Jars had reached the press, and journalists were converging on Vientiane, demanding to see what they called “the most important battleground of the Indochina war.” Wanting to protect the identities of its personnel, the station had always resisted this, but Mac Godley found the pressure too much and told Tovar to work out some accommodation.⁷ [redacted]

3 [redacted]

4 [redacted]

5 [redacted]

⁶ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 329–30. Hanoi had been so confident of taking Long Tieng that on 14 January the NVA's newspaper, Nhan Dan, published the disposition of NVA forces there and proclaimed imminent victory. (Tovar interview.) [redacted]

7 [redacted]

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The COS elected not to burden Headquarters with this hot potato and simply did as he was told, offering a trip to the front in exchange for an embargo on names and photographs of the CIA men the reporters might encounter. On 19 January, Tovar accompanied the newsmen on a tour of the Ban Son refugee center and the defenses at Long Tieng and Sam Thong, with briefings along the way from Vang Pao and other Laotian officials.⁸

At Long Tieng, Savannakhet's GM 30, "with the Lao obviously and vociferously in charge," was clearing out the last of the North Vietnamese from Skyline Ridge. A few journalists wanted to see the action, and Tovar flew with them to a landing pad on the crest. Mortar rounds suddenly started dropping on the command post, and shrapnel gave the Lao commander a bloody head wound. "They had us bracketed," Tovar later recalled, and the defenders and their guests might have been pinned down indefinitely, but the firing abruptly and mysteriously stopped.⁹

The Lao called in a helicopter to evacuate their wounded commander, and Tovar watched in disgust as the journalists elbowed him aside as they scrambled to board the aircraft. Having had their fill of combat, the visitors were content to end the day at the king's house, across the valley, while T-28s and artillery pounded the last enemy positions on the ridge. A few had asked, in the morning, if they could stay the night, but by four in the afternoon "all were most anxious to go home."¹⁰

However unimpressive their comportment under fire, the newsmen did honor their commitment to respect case officer anonymity. The COS went so far as to arrange an on-camera interview with who appeared only in silhouette as he described life under siege at Long Tieng.

When it was all over, he described the day's events in a flash cable intended to ensure that Headquarters got its first word of the event from the station, not from the newspapers.¹¹

Skyline Ridge was hit hard the next night, and GM 30 took 45 casualties. But a Hmong battalion was lifted up to a neighboring helicopter landing pad and succeeded in relieving the pressure. With the immediate threat contained,

8 9 Tovar interview. 10 11 Interview with Vienna, VA, 5 July 1999 (hereafter cited as the interview) ~~SECRET//MR~~

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View across Long Tieng Valley north toward Skyline Ridge, c. January 1972. Helicopter landing pads Charlie Charlie, Charlie Whiskey, and Charlie Alpha were situated along the crest. (Courtesy of Hugh Tovar)

the familiar dilemma presented itself once again. The protective line between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars had now largely evaporated, with most of the defenders now concentrated around the command post. [redacted]

[redacted] Washington noted indications of North Vietnamese units concentrating for the assault. Therein lay the quandary: If abandoning Long Tieng risked shattering Hmong morale, defending it risked the destruction of the irregular army and opening the road onto the Vientiane Plain.¹² [redacted]

Washington wanted as "coldly objective" an assessment as Tovar's "intimate involvement" with the situation would allow. The COS responded with a reminder that the Lao [redacted] had a voice in the proceedings, and all of them were confident that a reinforced Long Tieng would hold. Indeed, the main thrust of current dealings with Vang Pao was to postpone a proposed diversion onto the plain, intended to threaten the 130mm guns, until base defenses were complete. But both Godley and Tovar saw reason for optimism. The enemy was being bloodied by tactical air, and the long history of Bouam Long's resistance to enemy ground assault proved that well-led Hmong could defeat a siege.¹³ [redacted]

¹² Conboy, *Shadow War*, 331; [redacted]

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Bouam Long—the Hmong commander there, Cher Pao Moua, was reported to still be resisting years after the official end of hostilities

Headquarters acknowledged some skepticism that this represented the objective opinion it was looking for. Tovar had earlier labeled Vang Pao's desire for a diversionary operation as "the ultimate in unrealism," and on 1 February, Washington noted the "apparent contradiction" with a station assessment, only 10 days old, that most of the Hmong were incapable of taking the offensive. Some of them, indeed, had been said to be questionable for any kind of combat. Tovar replied that Vang Pao had now bounced back, both physically and psychologically, from his bout with pneumonia, and his recovery had worked wonders on Hmong morale. ¹⁴

In any case, as the Vientiane government grew increasingly desperate to stem the threat to the Mekong Valley, it was asserting itself in an unprecedented way into tactical planning. CIA might be paying the piper, Tovar said, but it was no longer calling the tune.

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¹⁴ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 335;

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Chapter Twenty



Hugh Tovar (l) and Mac Godley in Volpar aircraft, February 1972 (Courtesy of Hugh Tovar)

[redacted]

Washington continued to question Vang Pao's ability to mount any kind of offensive. In response, the COS asked Washington to start taking into account what he saw as a sea change in the Lao attitude toward the struggle. The Lao, he thought, had until recently hoped for—even expected—the survival of Laos in something like its existing form. Now, he believed, many of them were “thoroughly fed up with the war and thoroughly jaded with the results of their own efforts to drive out the enemy.”¹⁶ [redacted]

Tovar acknowledged that the \$350 million budgetary cap for 1972 was “certainly not to be sneezed at,” but noted that the Lao “need not be masters of the new math to compute how much more . . . we are spending on Laotian territory that is of no . . . interest whatsoever” to them. And a comparison of casualty rates and population figures would reveal “a proportionate . . . loss of life in the war in Laos vastly greater than that which the United States has suffered in the Indochina war.” [redacted]

[redacted]

It was not lost on some of the Lao, Tovar wrote, that

we the Americans can perhaps better afford our . . . expenditure of treasure . . . than they can afford their loss of life . . . Stretching this analogy one step further, it . . . is construed by certain Lao elements that there might not be any real war on Lao territory were it not for the fact of US bombing of the [Ho Chi Minh] Trail which in turn brings down upon the Lao the vengeance of the North Vietnamese.

¹⁵ [redacted]

¹⁶ [redacted]

¹⁷ [redacted]

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RED LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

The COS concluded that many in the Lao leadership were in a "very dicey frame of mind. If the intermingled currents of frustration and fear [were to] intersect," leading them to despair of any gain from the present course, they might well "precipitately adopt the first . . . step toward an exit from the war by calling for a cessation of bombing throughout the country."¹⁸

Operation STRENGTH

Washington, still preoccupied with Vang Pao's tactics, ignored Tovar's anxiety about keeping the Lao in the war. Instead, an interagency message sent cautionary instructions, calling for a "thinning out" of the Long Tieng defenders. Tovar protested this as "disastrous" and told Headquarters to ensure that the DCI was apprised of his "personal convictions on this matter." Meanwhile, the diversionary operation, called Operation STRENGTH, was already under way. A week earlier, on 3 February, Air America had begun ferrying irregulars to Pa Dong, east of Long Tieng, whence they headed north on foot, carrying rations for a week and maintaining radio silence.¹⁹

With Hmong elements already at the edge of the Plain of Jars, the COS and Mac Godley supplemented Tovar's initial protest with a cable arguing against "thinning out" the Long Tieng defenses and dispersing them for a defense in depth. This, they claimed, would only set up the defenders for seriatim plucking if the enemy were not distracted by a threat to his rear. And with or without a diversionary operation, they now saw no prospects for a phased withdrawal. The COS and Godley maintained that the debacle on the Plain of Jars had proved the point, and they adopted argument when they predicted that any reprise of that action would suffer the same fate.²⁰

Tovar and Godley acknowledged Washington's anxiety about President Nixon's imminent visit to Beijing, and the embarrassment of having it accompanied by a military disaster in Laos. Nevertheless, they insisted, the most promising alternative lay in the current deployment of 5,000 men to the northeast while the remaining 7,000 effectives dug in around Long Tieng.²¹

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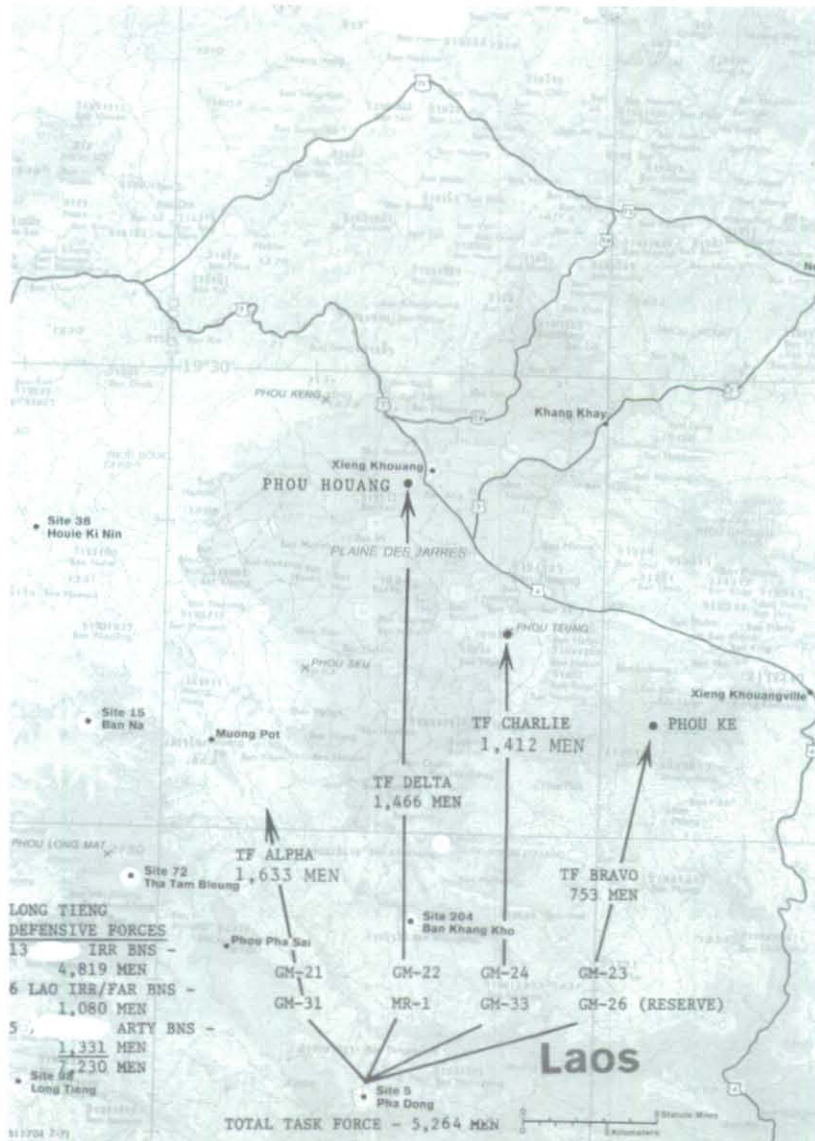
Washington's guidance has not been found, but its thrust is evident in Vientiane's response. Godley and Tovar modified their position on a defense-in-depth, saying that, ever since December, Vang Pao had been organizing militias to protect civilians concentrated between Long Tieng and the Vientiane Plain.

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Chapter Twenty



Planned offensive operations in MR 2 as February 1972

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While the policy debate continued, so did Vang Pao's flanking movement to the northeast. Washington never approved it, so far as the record shows, but did not suspend the Mission's authority to request combat air support, if only at programmed levels. By 10 February, Vang Pao's men had reached their objectives on the edge of the Plain of Jars and along Route 4, running south-east to Xieng Khouang town. The NVA, apparently uncertain of Vang Pao's intentions, reacted so slowly that on the 16th Mac Godley was moved to predict victory. In the last month, he told Washington, the chances of holding Long Tieng into the rainy season had improved from three-to-one against to two-to-one in favor.²² []

Once the North Vietnamese had scouted out the magnitude of the threat to their communications, their artillery-supported infantry began driving the Hmong back to the south. Profiting from past mistakes, Vang Pao did not wait for any of his forward positions to be overrun, but withdrew his forces in good order; in all, he lost only 29 dead and 138 wounded. In early March, his forces were back in the Pa Dong area, and the general was planning the second phase of the operation, which had already diverted 11 NVA battalions from the Long Tieng-Sam Thong sector.²³ []

Phase two resembled earlier operations in its return to air-mobile tactics. The demand for heavy helicopter lift, on very short notice, sparked a protest from MACV commander General Abrams, who was already anticipating the massive enemy incursion into South Vietnam that became known as the Easter offensive. In Washington, Defense also objected, and State wanted a meeting to ensure that the White House understood the risk of breaking the \$350 million legislative cap on military expenditures.²⁴ []

What must have looked like bureaucratic quibbling to the hard-pressed managers in Vientiane delayed Washington's approval until 11 March, at which point the NVA, in Tovar's rueful words, had "beaten us to the punch." Having recovered from Vang Pao's diversion, the NVA returned to the offensive, [] driving the Hmong off a strategic height on Skyline Ridge. Six days later, with Vang Pao still assembling forces for phase two of the diversion, enemy armor—including five T-34 tanks—rumbled down the Sam Thong airstrip []

[]²⁵ []

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Other goals were only partly realized. Enemy road construction from the plain toward Long Tieng was delayed, if not halted, and tactical air compensated for the one disappointment in Operation STRENGTH when it hit some of the supply dumps targeted for destruction by ground forces. []

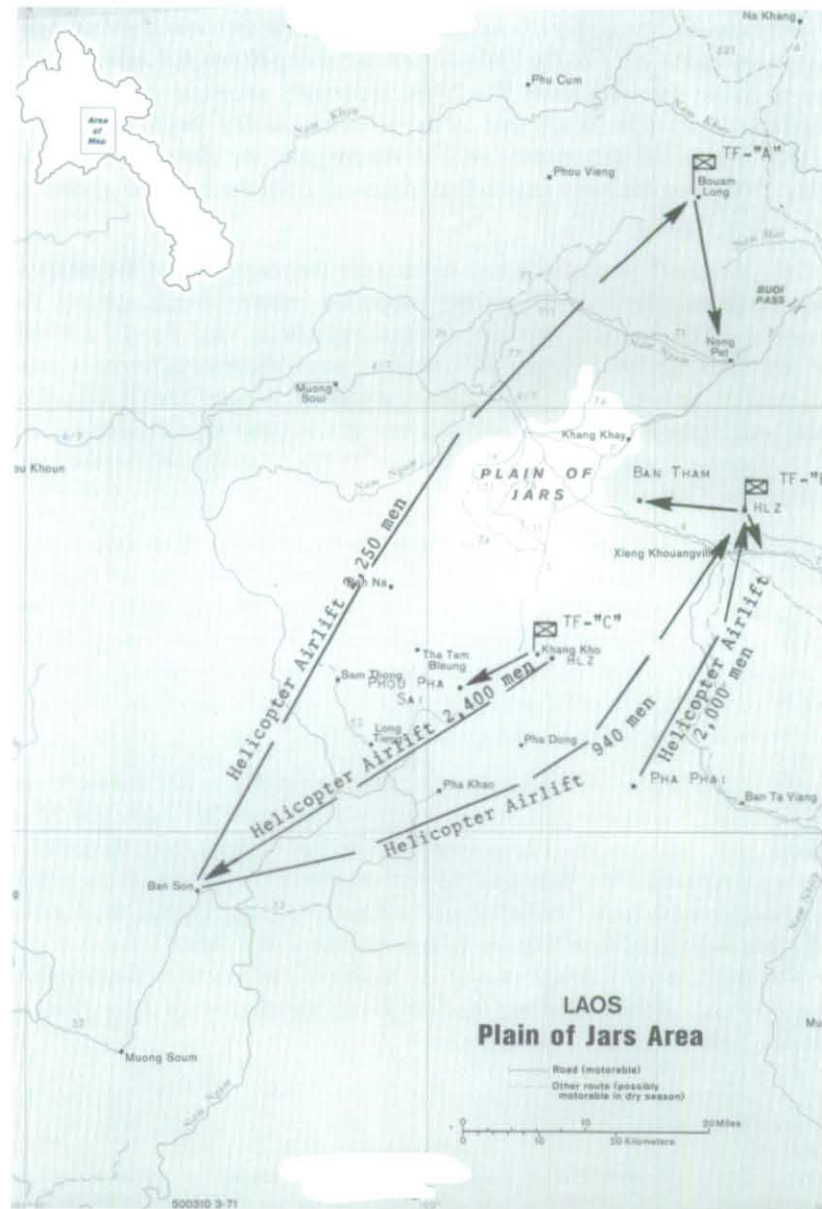
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Chapter Twenty



Planning for second phase of Operation STRENGTH, 14 March 1972

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One of the defenders' only two antitank missiles misfired; the other took out a tank. T-28s arrived and disabled at least one more tank, but two T-34s overran the bunkers, firing down into them,

One artillery fire support base was withdrawn, presumably by the heavy Skycrane helicopter, but another fell intact to the enemy, who turned its guns on defenders at Skyline Ridge.²⁶

Meanwhile, Vang Pao and the station were trying to cope simultaneously with a mutiny and an NVA ground assault that had just overrun Hmong positions on the eastern end of Skyline Ridge. Two Savannakhet GMs to be ferried up to Bouam Long on 15 March for the diversionary operation announced that their term of deployment in MR 2 was over, and they weren't going anywhere but home. Vang Pao was absorbed at Long Tieng, for the rare daylight attack against the heights there meant to him and to the COS that the North Vietnamese "clearly mean business."²⁷

Tovar flew to the Pha Khao staging point to try to restore discipline in the Savannakhet units. As their officers stood around looking helpless, some of the troops greeted him by ostentatiously working the action of their weapons. The COS found one despairing GM commander on his knees in his tent, praying before a Buddhist altar. Unable to turn things around, he appealed to FAR commander General Bounpone. The general belied his reputation for risk aversion by joining the COS next day on a dawn flight to Pha Khao to face down the 2,000 mutineers.²⁸

Their leaders had at least managed to maintain unit integrity, and the troops stood at parade rest to hear the general's half-hour exhortation. At the end, they cheered, and their case officer called in the five CH-53s orbiting overhead. Carrying some 50 men each, these left for Bouam Long, and when a second flight also loaded up and lifted off, it looked as if the mutiny was over. But when bad weather delayed later flights, several battalions had another change of heart, and all the station and Bounpone could do was to ship them home.²⁹

²⁵ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 336-37;

Tovar interview.

²⁶ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 336-37;

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Tovar interview.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Tovar interview. Standing behind the ranks while Bounpone spoke, Tovar was startled to notice that some of the troops, uniformed and armed like the rest, were unmistakably female. Asked about this, the GM's case officer just shrugged; the girls' presence reflected merely the Laotian style of meeting the deprivations of life in the field.

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Weakened by Savannakhet defections, and then starved of air support when the Easter offensive broke out in South Vietnam, the second phase of Operation STRENGTH diverted fewer communist forces from Long Tieng than the earlier foray. Having occupied Sam Thong, the NVA was once again installed on most of Skyline Ridge. This threat to Long Tieng had to be countered, [redacted] [redacted] departed from their customary defensive role and worked their way to the crest. There, they retook a key chopper pad overlooking the dirt road linking Sam Thong and Long Tieng. The NVA countered with armor, sending several T-34 tanks south toward the ridge. Their accurate fire intimidated [redacted] who abandoned the helicopter pad in some disorder.³⁰ [redacted]

By this time, the irregulars and their Agency advisers had seen enough NVA armor to anticipate its reappearance, and a team led by [redacted] [redacted] had sown mines on the road. These now disabled two of the tanks, and the remainder retreated toward Sam Thong. The failure of the armored thrust [redacted] successes elsewhere above Long Tieng bought time, and at the end of March 1972, just as NVA divisions were pouring over the DMZ into South Vietnam, [redacted] some Hmong irregulars were grinding their way along Skyline Ridge, trying to clear it of its stubborn NVA defender.³¹ [redacted]

“No Brownie Points” [redacted]

With the North Vietnamese still holding out on the ridge, the US Mission in Laos engaged in another spasm of competition for combat air support. In late March, with the fate of Long Tieng very much in doubt, COS Tovar and Ambassador Godley visited Saigon to ask MACV commander Gen. Creighton Abrams for more air support. Abrams gave them a cordial reception; more than his predecessor, Gen. William Westmoreland, he had always regarded the conflicts in Laos and Vietnam as “one war.” In addition, Abrams seemed—at least to Hugh Tovar—to be free of the spirit of institutional competition that infected the civilian side as well as the military. Aware that some on the MACV staff, including a general present at the briefing, disparaged Vang Pao and his demands for support, Tovar acknowledged in his presentation that not

³⁰ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 338–39. [redacted]

³¹ [redacted]

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everyone recognized his competence. Abrams yanked his cigar out of his mouth long enough to say that Vang Pao was a general by anybody's standards, and before the session was over, he assured his guests of all possible help.³²

Godley thought a show of restraint would help to keep the atmosphere clear, and when the Easter offensive coincided with a short lull on Skyline Ridge, he suspended the so-called tactical emergency bombing area that established Long Tieng's priority. MACV may have appreciated this gesture, but Henry Kissinger did not.

Kissinger noted "with some asperity that [Godley] should ask for what he needs and Washington will decide if it can be given to him."³³

Helms cabled Tovar that the ambassador would "get no brownie points for playing an Alphonse and Gaston act with Saigon." Even President Nixon had weighed in, for he wanted both to defeat the Easter offensive and to hang on to Long Tieng. He expected to "get no credit for 'elegant restraint,'" and "the military must go for broke."³⁴

Events immediately demonstrated the merits of a more assertive stance. Spotter aircraft flying north of Long Tieng had scored a rare success, finding two 122mm howitzers and—seen firing from its emplacement—a 130mm gun. Although MACV was assuring Saigon station that bad weather over Vietnam was freeing resources for Laos, the 7/13th Air Force rejected Vientiane's plea for bombers to silence the communist guns. The ambassador, spurred by Kissinger's encouragement, responded with a "solid blast" to the 7/13th, and the Long Tieng priority was restored.³⁵

It seemed that chronic problems with the air force reflected working-level hoarding of resources, not lack of command level sympathy for Laotian requirements. Their sympathetic reception in Saigon encouraged Godley and Tovar to invite Abrams to visit Laos, and a few weeks later he did so, going to Long Tieng as well as to Vientiane and Udorn. The COS winced when Vang Pao, arguing for more B-52 support, pulled out of his pocket a panel torn from

³² Tovar interview.

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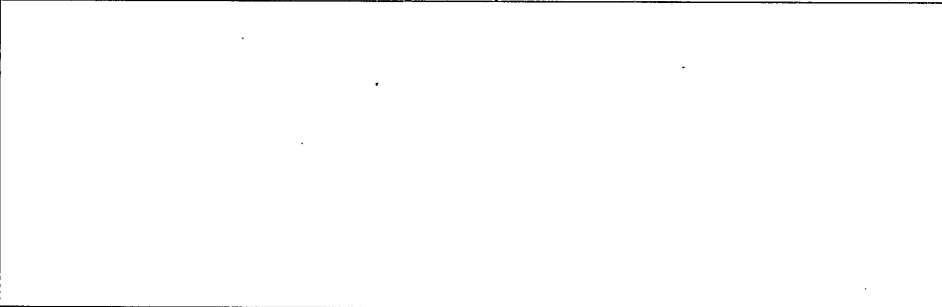
a box of film. Exactly the size of a bombing grid on the tactical map, it served perfectly well to delineate the target area he was proposing, but Tovar worried that Abrams would find it amateurish.³⁶

Not at all. The two ground soldiers formed an instant bond, and the session wound up with Abrams promising more air support. Later, Abrams sent his deputy, an air force general named John Vogt, to discuss the air support question. Vang Pao had some difficulty working the same magic on him, but Vogt made and delivered on a promise of more Arlight strikes. He also, in Tovar's recollection, volunteered to deploy the new F-111 attack plane in support of MR 2.³⁷

Air force technicians soon arrived to install the required three guidance beacons around Long Tieng. Battery operated, they had to be set up on heights inaccessible to an enemy trying to reach them from below, but level enough for a helicopter landing. Long Tieng unit and its Hmong colleagues helped find suitable sites, and within a few months F-111s, carrying 36 500-pound bombs each, were helping suppress enemy artillery and disrupt troop concentrations.³⁸

"The Waning of a Tribe"

The disaster on the Plain of Jars in December 1971 had induced a bout of soul-searching in Washington about the ravages being inflicted on the Hmong by unending, inconclusive combat. It came to fruition in March 1972—while the North Vietnamese were still tightening their stranglehold on Long Tieng—



³⁶ Tovar interview;

³⁷ Ibid.; interview;

The F-111 got mixed reviews from CIA men in Laos, but Tovar credited it with a major contribution. who saw it take out a 130mm gun, also became a believer. At the very least, he thought, it was better than the "fast movers," whose bombing runs he learned to link with the F-111 via the Raven FAC. Flying in formation with the conventional jets, the F-111 would guide them over the target and signal them to release their bombs.

³⁸ interview;

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RED LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

As far back as the early 1960s, officers close to Vang Pao had worried about the transitory nature of the US commitment and the future of the Hmong under a disdainful Laotian government. But at least one of these officers, Bill Lair, bridled at the paper's suggestion that the United States and the Vientiane government had enticed into the struggle a tribe that might otherwise have escaped such long and bloody involvement. Lair pointed out that he had been chosen to offer American arms to Vang Pao, but only after determining Hmong intentions. His first meeting with Vang Pao had persuaded him that the die was already cast: the Hmong were going to fight the North Vietnamese, and the only question was whether and how much to help them.⁴⁰

agreed: By the early 1960s, the Hmong had run out of migration prospects, with the Vientiane Plain on the south and Sayaboury and northeast Thailand all uninviting, and they had nowhere to go. They could either fight or accept subjugation at the hands of the Vietnamese. This argument left open the larger issue, that of the tribe's fate once it had committed itself. Bill Lair remembered having been concerned from the start with what he saw as the fickle quality of US alliances with dependent partners;

⁴¹

Bill Colby, FE division chief in those days, shared Lair's position on both points. He contested the idea that the United States had inveigled the Hmong into fighting the Vietnamese, but he had once told case officer "We have a terrible track record of destroying the people we try to help." There were others who harbored uneasy feelings about great-power exploitation of feeble clients. Ambassador Godley had been quoted as saying, "We used the Meo. The rationale then, which I believed in, was that they tied down three first-rate North Vietnamese divisions that would otherwise have been used against our men in South Vietnam. It was a dirty business."⁴²

As Headquarters officials debated the ultimate effect on the Hmong of the tribe's alliance with the United States, Vang Pao began to acknowledge to his case officers that the Hmong combat spirit had been declining since 1965.

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⁴⁰ Bill Lair.
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⁴² Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 223, 380.

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Implicitly moderating his criticisms of FAR [redacted] he credited these forces with bearing an increasing share of the combat burden while young Hmong, especially those from prominent families, were avoiding service. Hmong cohesiveness was suffering as casualties and desertions shrank the original units; these formations were now perforce being consolidated, and a new company might contain the remnants of half a dozen of the old. Disgruntled former commanders, now subordinate to onetime peers, were beginning to desert. When they left, they would take with them such combatants as remained from their original commands.⁴³ [redacted]

Back at Headquarters after eight years with the Hmong, [redacted] saw their military decline driven as much by social disruption as by attrition, material hardship, and the seasonal specter of a North Vietnamese breakthrough. That decline accelerated in 1972, he wrote, when "thousands of [Hmong] disappeared into their villages and left the war for others to fight. These troops didn't return to the military fold until the tide of battle had turned," and then only when they were assured of several months of retraining and refitting.⁴⁴ [redacted]

As [redacted] saw it, it was the decay of the bond of reciprocal dependency between villager and traditional leader that weakened the will to fight. Over the years, most of these natural leaders had disappeared, either for want of military skills or because enemy pressure had scattered their communities. Their replacements owed their loyalty to Vang Pao, not to their village constituents, and their ability to elicit villager participation in the war effort suffered accordingly. [redacted]

Traditional local leaders had identified their own prosperity—indeed, their survival—with that of their communities. When villages were scattered by the threat of enemy incursion, and their populations turned into refugees, leaders suffered along with their people. The new military commanders, by contrast, settled their dependents in Long Tieng. When the NVA threatened, many evacuated their families not to their constituents' villages in resettlement zones like Ban Son, but to Vientiane. In [redacted] view, only the reintegration of the new military elite with the traditional political village and clan leadership would restore the health of the Hmong body politic. [redacted]

Getting Another Chance [redacted]

The tribe's political integrity depended first of all on military survival. "The Waning of a Tribe" appeared just as Hmong fortunes began rising—more than ever before like the phoenix—from the ashes of the disaster on the Plain of

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Jars. In early April, after the failure of the NVA armored thrust at Skyline Ridge, Tovar still expected the NVA to make a grab for Long Tieng. Sixteen enemy infantry battalions were supported by armor, antiaircraft, and artillery, and the suspension of B-52 bombing—diverted to deal with the Easter offensive—had boosted the enemy's morale and accelerated his attack preparations.⁴⁵

But the decisive assault did not come. Government forces— —gradually reclaimed the promontories along Skyline Ridge, and the COS found their “willingness to attack the entrenched NVA” a most “refreshing surprise.” Vang Pao's own depleted forces were making no conspicuous contribution to this momentum shift, but the tactical air (A-1Es and “fast movers”) that the Vientiane Mission had demanded was inflicting grievous attrition on the communist forces. In addition, intelligence reporting suggested that the enemy, previously well informed about Vang Pao's order of battle, was now confused by the rotation of friendly units and by the “shifting positions” of units on the line.⁴⁶

This confusion reflected, in part, the success of a new stratagem devised by the commanders Alarmed by the NVA's prowess at overrunning they had worked out a tactic that kept the enemy at bay without exposing the sometimes unsteady volunteers to human-wave ground assault. Heavy helicopters, each carrying 40–50 combat-equipped troops, would deposit a detachment of perhaps company strength on a selected height between Long Tieng—or another Hmong base—and a known enemy concentration. The NVA would prepare an attack, signaled by ground probes or artillery or perhaps spotted from the air, and just as the assault looked imminent, the airlift would return. The troops would be flown to another peak or ridgeline, and the game would begin again. Case officer recalled that the NVA never decided simply to stop playing this game, with the result that entire communist battalions were deterred for months from posing serious threats to major bases.⁴⁷

The uneasy standoff at Long Tieng, after the disaster on the Plain of Jars, represented a triumph for Vang Pao and the Lao irregulars. Hugh Tovar took advantage of the respite to address the issue of rainy-season objectives. The government's wobbly position in MR 4 continued to cause anxiety, and the COS did not exclude the possibility of still another enemy thrust toward Long Tieng. Nevertheless, the prospects for improving the govern-

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ment's position in MR 2 looked increasingly real. Vang Pao had 1,600 men in training—a typically charismatic harangue at a late March session of tribal elders had produced new recruits—and Savannakhet's elite GM 30 would deteriorate if not deployed.⁴⁸ [redacted]

There were also political considerations. King Savang Vatthana and Souvanna both anticipated "some sort of political breakthrough" by the end of 1972, and they abhorred the prospect that it would come while the NVA occupied the entire Plain of Jars. Acknowledging his preference to put his forces to work, Tovar stopped to pose the larger question—generated by the Easter offensive—of the implications for Laos of the "final climactic act of the Indochina drama" then playing out in South Vietnam. "If Laos has a future, it is undoubtedly contingent upon the outcome of the current action in Vietnam." Washington would have to decide whether Vientiane should "simply ride out the current course of events in this country and hope for the best, or . . . attempt to make a contribution to the allied effort on a scale larger than our present defensive maneuvering." If the latter, Washington was going to have to deal with the funding cap imposed by the Symington Amendment, for a higher level of operational commitment would presumably drive costs through the legislated roof.⁴⁹ [redacted]

Bill Nelson temporized, saying that Defense seemed to favor larger scale action but that State's Bill Sullivan doubted it would help. In any case, Nelson observed, Tovar was right: a major thrust would require raising the budgetary ceiling. Meanwhile, Headquarters shared the station's gratification over the standoff at Long Tieng and offered credit where credit was due: "Given the odds you faced this year, this successful defense has been nothing short of magnificent."⁵⁰ [redacted]

This praise did not dispel the station's preoccupation with money, and Tovar complained about Washington's silence regarding Vientiane's proposal to boost the Symington Amendment ceiling to \$400 million. Nelson replied with a categorical "no"; there was "simply no appetite in State, White House or DOD for tackling Congress on [the] Symington ceiling." Tovar and Godley would have to do what they could with what they had until 1 July, the beginning of the new fiscal year, when the amendment would expire.⁵¹ [redacted]

48 [redacted]

49 [redacted]

50 [redacted]

51 [redacted]

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Applause in Washington, Sour Grapes at

Vang Pao and Hugh Tovar flew to Washington in late May 1972 for a review of the strategic bidding. At a meeting in the White House, Kissinger bluntly asked why the general had not yet launched his rainy-season offensive. A startled Vang Pao, having for weeks been pressed to "keep the lid on," wanted to avoid blaming the United States and muttered something in French about everything depending on international politics. A perplexed Kissinger repeated the question and got a similarly opaque answer. Tovar explained that the general had proposed a major offensive and had been discouraged from proceeding with it. Kissinger overturned that stance when he retorted, "We want you to take the offensive; we want you to attack."⁵²

Bill Nelson later wrote, "Vang Pao left the meeting considerably buoyed up . . . with promises of continued strong support in both materiel and policy ringing in his ears." Tovar left it wondering about the quality of communication between Kissinger and the Washington Special Action Group. The national security adviser never explained the apparent volte-face, and the COS could only infer that it was keyed to the peace negotiations with North Vietnam "and a perceived need to maximize pressure on Hanoi."⁵³

Not all of Washington harbored Kissinger's enthusiasm for an offensive in MR 2. Ex-Ambassador Sullivan betrayed his skepticism with an impassive response to Vang Pao's account of current tactical planning. The general encountered some reserve also at Defense, where Laird quizzed him skeptically on the effectiveness of B-52s against NVA troop concentrations.⁵⁴

Elsewhere—at State, with army chief of staff Gen. William Westmoreland, and on Capitol Hill—Vang Pao was treated as an oracle on the North Vietnamese psyche. The United States had just begun mining North Vietnamese ports as a device to force Hanoi into a peace settlement, and Vang Pao seized the opportunity to disabuse his interlocutors of their hope for substantial results. To Secretary of State Rogers, he made it explicit that he expected little relief from this gambit; so far as Laos was concerned, the only alternative to a

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Tovar interview; Tovar, "Chronicle of a Secret War,"

⁵³ Tovar interview; Tovar, "Chronicle"; Vang Pao later told his CIA escort from Long Tieng, that he understood Kissinger to have denied, at this session, ever having placed any restrictions on MR 2 offensive operations in 1972.

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renewed Hmong offensive was a negotiated settlement. Like Sullivan, Rogers chose not to comment on the merits of taking the military initiative. But material aid would not, it seemed, be denied by the Congress; Vang Pao understood Symington as assuring him that the new military appropriations bill would carry no explicit restrictions on Laos.⁵⁵ [redacted]

With Vang Pao back at Long Tieng, Headquarters reflected Kissinger's continuing enthusiasm for an MR 2 offensive in a late July cable asking for the station's plans. Tovar acknowledged that NVA tenacity, "abominable" weather, Hmong fatigue, and a continuing chronic drought of tactical air support had combined to limit wet-season gains, but he applauded the new "sense of urgency" in Washington. Vang Pao had 15 battalions being retrained and refitted, and when these were ready, they would join 13 [redacted] battalions in a multipronged campaign to retake the Plain of Jars and cut enemy communications to the east. These gains would be consolidated with a resurrection of the defense-in-depth strategy—the COS made no allusion here to the failure of earlier such efforts—in the form of "mobile defensive zones."⁵⁶ [redacted]

Another Try for the Plain of Jars [redacted]

When Vang Pao launched Operation [redacted] ("plateau") on Sunday, 6 August, official Washington had reached no consensus on the means of supporting it. The preceding week had been marked by "foot dragging in both State and Defense," and Headquarters had declined to coordinate two inter-agency guidance cables that it found unresponsive to "highest authority's desire to press retaking" the Plain of Jars.

Kissinger had issued a presidential ukase on the subject at a WSAG meeting on Friday, but Headquarters expected another week to pass before formal guidance reached Vientiane.⁵⁷ [redacted]

Explicit approval did not arrive until the 12th, and when it did, it included only Phase I, dealing with [redacted] Hmong efforts to divert or immobilize the

55 [redacted]

56 [redacted]

It appears that a defense-in-depth in the mountains looked more feasible than the unsuccessful effort on the Plain of Jars in late 1971. [redacted]

⁵⁷ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 345; [redacted]

State guidance sent to Godley on 7 August called for "securing the high ground west and south of the Plain of Jars"; it said nothing about offensive operations onto the plain [redacted]

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two NVA regiments still in the hills between Long Tieng and the plain. Strenuous station efforts to ensure that the air force got the word in its own channels bore little fruit—it may be that military inattention to reflected a change of MACV priorities after Gen. Fred C. Weyand replaced Abrams in June. Mac Godley unaccountably hesitated to complain to Washington about scanty tactical air support. As a result, Vang Pao's Task Force Delta—ferried to a landing zone north of the plain that was secured by troops inserted in a daring midnight parachute drop—drew a sharp enemy response. Lacking air support, it risked being destroyed, and Tovar worried not only about its fate but also about perennially shaky Hmong morale throughout the force.⁵⁸

The COS had ample cause for anxiety. With air support still scarce, Task Force Delta was sent scrambling across the monsoon-swollen Nam Ngum River by NVA infantry supported by tanks and artillery, and survivors reported that numerous Hmong troopers drowned in the attempt. An emergency message to Saigon on 31 August drew two Arlight (B-52) strikes, but Vang Pao nevertheless “hit the roof” over the niggardly allocation of tactical air.⁵⁹

Godley finally appealed to Washington for more help, but seems to have conveyed little sense of urgency. A soothing reply from State—it could as well have been drafted in the Pentagon—told him to count on MACV for “every possible consideration” consistent with the “overall situation” in Southeast Asia. On 1 September, Godley finally acceded to station urging for a more forceful démarche to Washington, but even where it was not being thrown backward, Operation had ground to a halt.⁶⁰

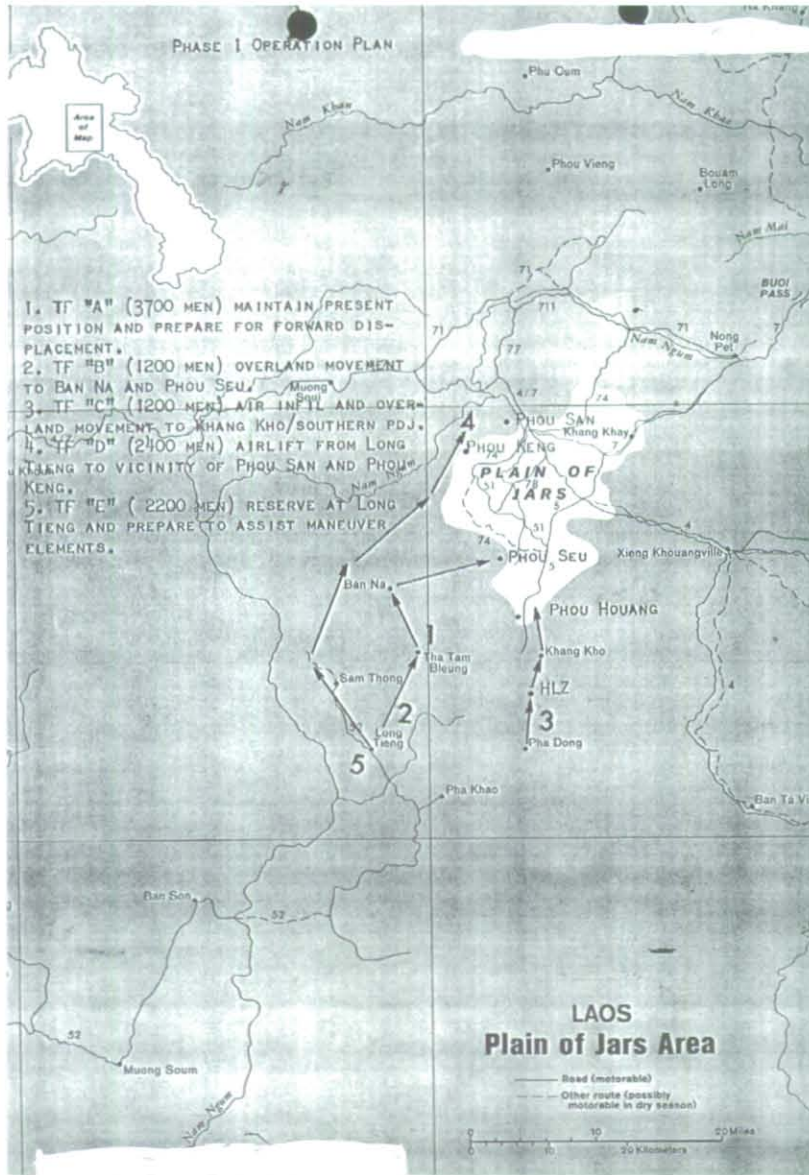
Godley and presumably the station did not agree with Vang Pao that scanty air support was the sole reason for the lack of progress: poor unit leadership and rampant trench foot were important contributing factors, and weather would have restricted air support no matter what MACV was disposed to provide. The bottom line remained: Vang Pao had only two or three days to decide whether would continue or whether his forces would have to be withdrawn, conceding to the enemy full control of the Plain of Jars as the rainy season receded.⁶¹

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Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 360.⁵⁹ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 348;
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Phase I of Operation PHOU PHIANG, August 1972

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At this point, in the first days of September, another Hmong task force south of the plain was repulsed after making some promising gains, and its effectiveness evaporated when two accidental bombings by Laotian T-28s killed 64 and wounded 43 of its troops. These disasters might have impelled Vang Pao to write finis to Operation [] but the fast-movers finally arrived, and additional B-52s as well, and the morale of the irregulars rose as the NVA gave some ground. By mid-September, one task force was making good progress along and into the northwestern Plain of Jars, and Task Force Delta, the one mauled by the NVA north of the plain, had a new commander. In addition, several hundred of its troops were discovered to have stayed behind—AWOL or on leave—at the initial deployment and were now available to help reconstitute its constituent BGs. The ever-reliable GM 30 was back from Savannakhet, []

[]⁶² []

These modestly encouraging developments drew no applause from the newly appointed CINCPAC, Adm. Noel Gayler, when he arrived at Udorn on 14 September. He had visited Laos before, and [] remembered him as having been impressed by the effort at Long Tieng and visibly moved by the sight of the wounded at the Sam Thong hospital. Now, he surprised his hosts when he refused to see Vang Pao, on the ground that such a visitation might generate false hopes of expanded support. It also seemed that he was determined, in [] words, to avoid “losing his objectivity through intimate contact with a situation about which he had deep misgivings.”⁶³ []

Gayler derogated Operation [] as a hopeless failure, and questioned the authority for launching it in the first place. [] efforts to explain the various equities—Vang Pao’s military and strategic considerations, the conditions for a peace agreement, and explicit White House encouragement of []—elicited only Gayler’s assertion that he worked for the JCS, and no one else. If the terms of reference were as [] had stated them, he might well approach “higher authority” to get them changed. Concerned that Gayler might substantially influence “what we do or do not do out here,” [] described the encounter in grisly detail for the benefit of Headquarters.⁶⁴ []

[] attended the session and later pointed out that the JCS had just ordered Gayler to determine “why there was not more bomb-

61 []

62 Conboy, *Shadow War*, 348; []

63 []

[] Tovar inter-

view. []

64 Ibid. []

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ing in North Vietnam." This reinforced the predisposition that Gayler shared with many of his peers, to "consider Laos and Cambodia as side shows, while the main feature is playing in Vietnam." [] thought the assertion of White House sponsorship of [] had genuinely shocked the admiral, and [] doubted that he could do much to help Vientiane without Washington's "clarification . . . regarding Vang Pao's priority." Headquarters did not undertake to obtain this, but promised to keep [] apprised of situations in which he might be able to influence the admiral to the benefit of the Laotian program.⁶⁵ []

Another Run at the Plain of Jars []

On 19 September 1972, [] confided to Headquarters that the seasonal rhythm of warfare in MR 2 seemed now to be "a thing of the past." Friendly forces might be making modest progress, but with the rain still coming down, the enemy looked determined "not only to blunt Vang Pao's offensive but to wipe him out if he can." To this end, the NVA was frustrating Hmong maneuvers by employing the same small-unit tactics so often used against it by the Hmong. Small teams, each with a heavy-weapons crew, were harassing the irregulars, and their success made it unlikely that the NVA could be expelled from the southwest periphery.⁶⁶ []

[] did not recant his measured optimism of a week earlier, but he acknowledged that air power would have to overcome the enemy's advantage in artillery if the irregulars were to succeed. Meanwhile, although Vang Pao was giving the southwest the emphasis it needed, he had not abandoned his intention to retake the Plain of Jars. That effort brought to an end a long streak of luck, for not since [] died in June 1968 had a CIA case officer been killed by enemy fire. On 26 September, former marine [] was on the southern Plain of Jars with his unit from Nam Yu. Helicopters ferried in the regiment's third battalion, and when the last aircraft departed, Seaborg was supposed to go with it. But he was still absorbed with the Lao GM commander in logistic and tactical planning, and stayed behind, intending to call later for a ride back to Long Tieng.⁶⁷ []

At about 1800 hours, [] forward air guide radioed for a helicopter. He made no mention of [] presence, probably to avoid revealing it to the NVA, and Long Tieng, unaware of [] failure to return and bedev-

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Conboy, *Shadow War*, 348-49 []~~SECRET//MR~~

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RED LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL []

iled by helicopter mechanical failures, replied in the negative. That night, two artillery barrages preceded a ground probe, and an attack in force followed at 0700 hours. Radioed appeals for tactical air went unanswered, and the NVA was within 40 yards of the defensive perimeter when [] took an M-16 from a dead irregular to fire at the advancing Vietnamese. Bounleuang later thought that the M-16's muzzle flash betrayed [] position, for he was killed almost immediately by fragments that tore into his head when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded just in front of him.⁶⁸ []

[] death led to tightened requirements on case officers to account for their movements, but Vang Pao and his advisers shook off the rout of the Nam Yu regiment. Still working within the framework—now considerably reshaped—of [] phase one, Udorn described plans to move onto the Plain of Jars from the west and to send other forces against enemy concentrations on the periphery. Then, on 1 October, with all of this still in the planning stage, [] announced to a startled Headquarters that Vang Pao was about to launch phase two.⁶⁹ []

The effort would involve 1,200 men in diversionary operations well east of the Plain of Jars. It would require major airlift support, and Bill Nelson expected the proposal to have "rough sledding" in Washington. He asked [] to explain the benefits of attacking what he called little-used roads at a time when—as Headquarters saw the matter—the North Vietnamese had stopped reacting to such diversions. Why not concentrate government forces to clear the high ground southwest of the plain?⁷⁰ []

[] thought the question should have been asked two months earlier. The original plan had not made phase two contingent on the success of phase one, and—more to the point—one small diversionary maneuver was, in fact, tying down two NVA battalions. [] asked Headquarters to accept that "the main battle in this year's 'dry season' is being fought now at the end of the wet season." Phase two, in his judgment, represented just the kind of flanking maneuver that had always brought Vang Pao his best success. Furthermore, Souvanna had vigorously endorsed it, hoping to exploit it in negotiations with the Pathet Lao.⁷¹ []

⁶⁸ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 348–49; []

After overrunning the irregulars, the enemy withdrew, and [] body was recovered the same day. []

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Chapter Twenty



Phase II of Operation

as of 6 October 1972

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On 6 October, [] with a detailed account of Vang Pao's ambitious plans to cut or harass the roads from North Vietnam that converged on the Plain of Jars. There followed a massive communications gap between [] and Headquarters, as Washington used State and JCS channels for communications []

[] At one point, the Vientiane Mission believed it had approval for phase two when, in fact, a JCS message was intended only to confirm the authority for existing levels of US Air Force support.⁷² []

Confusion on the American side was accompanied by a mixed performance from [] and Laotian irregulars who were trying to bottle up NVA forces above Long Tieng and reclaim at least part of the Plain of Jars. One [] [] commander, irritated by the nonfeasance of his regiment's other two battalions, took his unit forward alone and briefly dislodged the enemy from fortified caves in a ridge northeast of Long Tieng. But the general course of events supported [] later conclusion that the NVA—and a suddenly combative Pathet Lao—now intended not merely to block any advances onto the plain but to eradicate, once and for all, Vang Pao's army.⁷³ []

GM 32, one of Savannakhet's better units, was deployed onto the plain on 25 October and was moving to occupy some strategic high ground when it was swept away by a tide of NVA armor and infantry. Of almost 1,500 men, 140 died and 143 were wounded or missing. A week later, in an attempted counterthrust, the regiment suffered another 80 killed and had to be declared unfit for further combat. Other [] Laotian irregulars were driven off the plain in November, and the regiment that had finally been airlifted to Bouam Long to begin phase two of Operation [] failed to penetrate the Ban Ban Valley. Vang Pao, with the energy born of desperation, struggled to regain the initiative, but his troops were, [] "war weary, to say the least, and he is having a hard time keeping them in the fight."⁷⁴ []

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[] essentially abandoned the recovery of the ridgelines between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars. The vaguely worded rationale presumably referred to the traditional Hmong preference for mobile offensive operations: "We do not believe that—given the tactical measures being employed by Vang Pao which, for better or for worse, are unique for him—[recovery] should be so emphasized." []

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chapter Twenty***The Perennial Question** []

[] visited Long Tieng on 4 November, and Vang Pao asked him whether there was anything to be gained by further combat. Souvanna had accepted a Neo Lao Hak Sat delegation in Vientiane in October, and the general was only too painfully aware of widespread anticipation of a cease-fire. Posing the same question he had asked in February 1971, he wanted to know whether the United States expected him to persevere, and if so, whether he could count on the necessary air and logistic support.⁷⁵ []

The reply was less categorical than the "absolument" of early 1971. [] urged Vang Pao to continue trying to secure the southern approaches to the Plain of Jars; in return, "we would do everything we could to back him up in this endeavor." The ambassador adopted the same position, and General Vogt promised air support. Godley assumed an increased availability of tactical air after a cease-fire in Vietnam, but Vang Pao wanted to know how long he'd have to wait for it. His men were "beating their heads . . . against the wall," as [] and "by the time the cease-fire arrives, they will all be dead." No one could offer a date certain, and the discussion returned to immediate tactical problems.⁷⁶ []

By late November, Vang Pao and his advisers had narrowed their goal to defense of the traditional line running southeast from Ban Na to Ban Pa Dong.

[] acknowledged that he had "little to cheer about," but thought that, barring NVA reinforcements, "we are going to be able to hold what we have." And he expressed some confidence that a major buildup was not what Hanoi had in mind.⁷⁷ []

The North Vietnamese did not, in fact, break through to Long Tieng. Nevertheless, the irregulars continued to be hard-pressed, and they lost a major defensive position when one Hmong and [] battalions were overrun northeast of Long Tieng on 8 December. []

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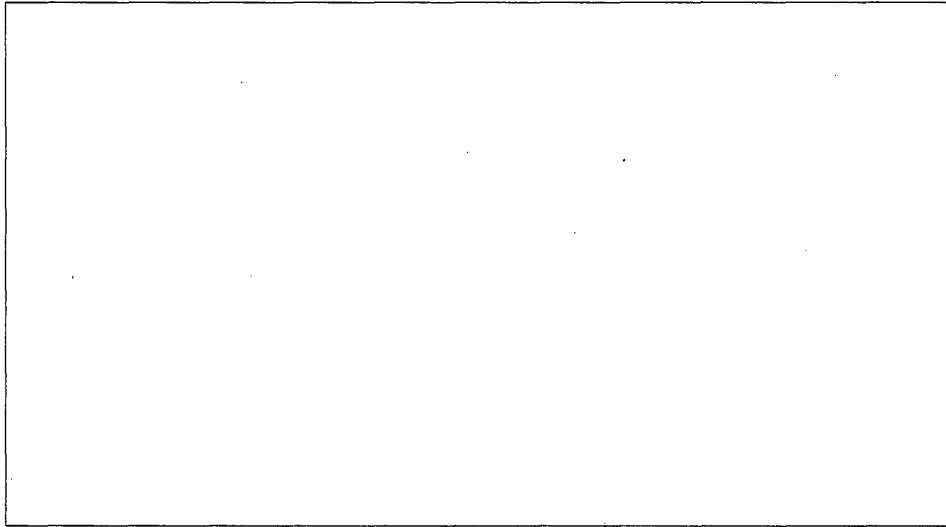
Also see Conboy, *Shadow War*, 387-88. [] remembered that the disaster inflicted a hammer blow on the professional pride of GM 32 case officer [] took casualties for granted, but a fate like that of GM 32 was not supposed to befall a unit under his de facto command. And he had, in fact, become very attached to his Lao officers, all of whom were lost. []

75 Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 56; []

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And despite the terrible attrition of the Hmong people and the loss of much of their land, the tribesmen still revered their leader. remembered a round of visits by Vang Pao and to small villages around Long Tieng during the Lunar New Year holidays in 1973. Hmong protocol called for some gift as a gesture of respect to their leader, but one of the villages on this circuit was so dirt-poor that it could make no offering whatsoever. Or so it seemed until the visitors returned to the helicopter, where on one seat they saw a rusty tin dish containing a bouquet of wild flowers. The villagers, ashamed of their poverty, would not let Vang Pao leave without making at least this tiny offering, and —a very tough, unsentimental ex-marine—later told how close to tears the sight of the pathetic little gift had brought him.⁸⁰

This kind of veneration did not necessarily translate into combat spirit, and attributed the combat reverses of late 1972, at least in part, to what he called an “end-the-war syndrome” among the Lao. A US agreement with Hanoi seemed imminent, the US Army was about to give up its last installation in South Vietnam, and a confident, truculent Pathet Lao delegation in Vientiane was challenging the government’s very legitimacy. Souvanna Phouma was absent just when he was needed, and both acting Defense Minister Sisouk and the FAR command looked “confused and unable to concert their energies in the face of an opposition that seems to know exactly what it wants.”⁸¹

78 79 interview. 80 Ibid. 81 ~~SECRET//MR~~

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In what had historically been something of a military backwater, northwest Laos was now threatened. [] six irregular battalions in MR 1 had done little more than FAR, with its "characteristic ineptness," to prevent enemy territorial gains. Presenting a very weak reed to lean on—these units were "displaying . . . a complete absence of combative spirit"—they constituted, nevertheless, the "only viable force between the enemy and Luang Prabang." [] anticipated increased enemy pressure on friendly forces rendered "at least temporarily impotent" by an insidious "'peace' mentality" in which "no one wants to be the last man to die."⁸² []

Action in the Panhandle []

The same judgment applied to the Panhandle, especially MR 4, which by late 1972 was also permeated by the "peace" syndrome. Morale had been declining ever since May, when the NVA launched a two-pronged attack against Mekong Valley population centers in the lower Panhandle. The northern thrust seized Khong Sedone, the base for the village defense program of the mid-1960s. Farther south, communist troops were advancing toward the mountain that commanded the provincial capital of Pakse and MR 4 headquarters. To the Lao, communist occupation of important towns in the Mekong Valley was even more odious than losing the Plain of Jars, and in late May, Souvanna had sent acting Defense Minister Sisouk down to Pakse with orders to restore the government's position there.⁸³ []

CIA had always contributed more to territorial security in MR 4 than it did in other areas, but it had at the moment little to offer, as several existing units were being refitted and new ones were still in training. [] therefore, joined General Soutchay—Phasouk's successor as MR 4 commander—in a holding operation, aimed partly at filling the gaps in order-of-battle intelligence, until more combat units came on line.⁸⁴ []

Ambassador Godley, in his uninhibited take-charge fashion, instructed Sisouk not only in military and intelligence matters but also in more delicate matters of local administration. Sisouk was to give unqualified support to General Soutchay's efforts to "clean up the 'Mafia,'" that is, to bring a halt to "FAR . . . accommodating with the enemy." And he was not to be a commuter; he must reside in Pakse, returning to Vientiane only for the weekly cabinet meeting. Government officials and FAR officers were destroying popular morale by evacuating their families from Pakse, and Sisouk must "put a stop

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War. 349-50. []

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[] Conboy, *Shadow*~~SECRET//MR~~

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to this." Meanwhile, [] would be preparing MR 3 irregulars to throw into the campaign to retake Khong Sedone and expand the Pakse defensive perimeter. It seems that no one mentioned using FAR to do this—all parties apparently took its impotence for granted—and [] sent two of its *Groupements Mobiles* down to implement Soutchay's attack plan.⁸⁵ []

The king injected his own ideas, deprecating the importance of Khong Sedone and insisting on a thrust to the east, first eliminating the communist armor threatening Pakse and then retaking Paksong, on the Bolovens Plateau. The Mission hoped to accommodate him, but there were other considerations: the main road had been cut both above and below Pakse, []

[] Even if [] emergency request for a heavy helicopter lift was approved, restoring surface transportation would remain an imperative.⁸⁶ []

The usual complications attended the coordination process in Washington, for if the Defense Department did not run the war in Laos, it exercised progressively greater control over the resources given to the irregulars. As the launch date approached, Godley appealed to Under Secretary U. Alexis Johnson for intercession with Melvin Laird, and Defense approved the necessary airlift just in time for Operation [] to be launched on 15 June.⁸⁷ []

The Savannakhet irregulars' officers—all of them still detailed from FAR—and their CIA advisers were adept by then at directing multibattalion operations. They moved their troops to two helicopter landing zones, one 7 miles north of Khong Sedone and the other northwest of it. From these launch points, a two-pronged advance would try a squeeze play. After two days, the irregulars reached Khong Sedone, but the North Vietnamese stiffened, and it appeared that they had committed at least one, maybe two, more battalions to the area than originally thought. But they had most of their infantry on one side of the Se Done River and the artillery and anti-aircraft weapons on the other; this asymmetrical deployment, combined with good intelligence from friendly villagers, gave the attackers the edge. [] estimated over 300 enemy killed in the first three weeks of the operation and asserted that, if the NVA commander wanted to stand and fight, "we are willing to accommodate him."⁸⁸ []

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It had been a long time since the mere presence of NVA troops sufficed to intimidate Savannakhet's irregulars, and Lao pilots in their T-28s made repeated low passes over enemy concentrations. While GMs 32 and 33 pressed the attack on the ground, the aircraft pounded the defenses with bombs and rockets. On 16 July, for example, the T-28s softened up a village just north of Khong Sedone. The irregulars followed with a ground assault on NVA survivors in their bunkers, killing all but the few who managed to escape. [redacted] laconic report of the action graphically described the carnage: "Irregulars found parts of 60 NVA bodies in the village."⁸⁹ [redacted]

The grim tenacity of the North Vietnamese eventually cost them almost an entire regiment—the 39th—as they first tried to hold Khong Sedone and then conducted a fighting retreat up the slope of the mountain to the west. This departure from traditional practice may have been intended, by maintaining a foothold in the Mekong Valley, to intimidate the Lao into concessions at the negotiating table. As it worked out, by design or otherwise, the sacrifice of the 39th did have the effect of delaying until August a government drive onto the Bolovens Plateau.⁹⁰ [redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] The goal was Lao Ngam, formerly a government strong point on the western Bolovens but now occupied by the NVA. Once again, the Vietnamese used armor—PT-76 light amphibious tanks—to good effect, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

Land Grabbing [redacted]

If nothing was to be done on the Bolovens, to the north there remained Saravane, which, as a provincial capital, offered politically valuable real

88 [redacted]
[redacted]

89 [redacted]

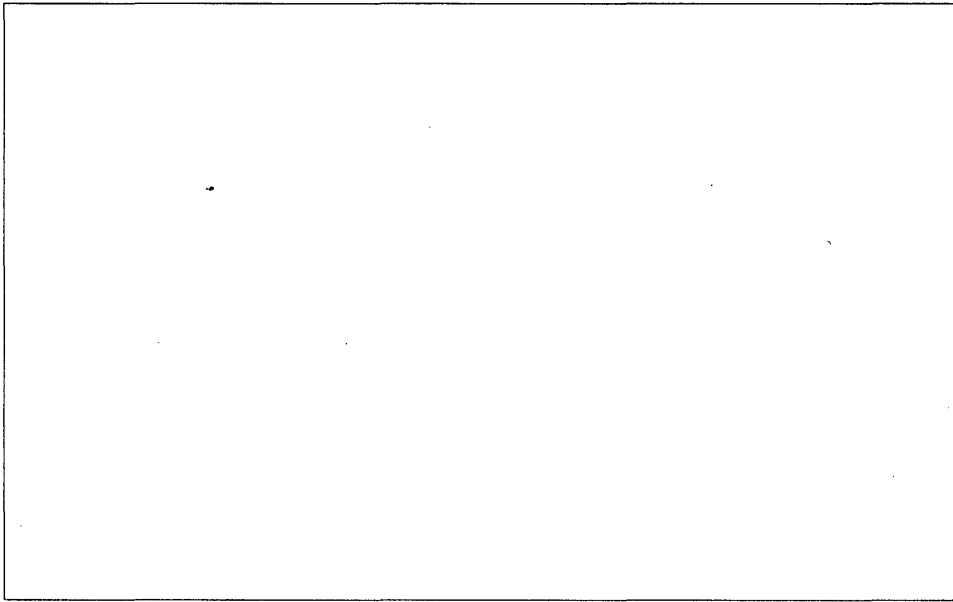
90 Conboy, *Shadow War*, 351. [redacted]91 [redacted]
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RED LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL [redacted]

estate. Lightly defended by the remnants of the 39th Regiment, its recapture would strengthen the government's position in negotiations with the Neo Lao Hak Sat. Accordingly, on 10 October, [redacted] announced plans for offensive operations that would also include another try for Lao Ngam.⁹² [redacted]

A Commando Raider team parachuted onto the Saravane airfield on the night of 18 October to secure the landing zone for the helicopter lift. It reported the area void of any enemy presence, and eight CH-53 helicopters disgorged their cargo of irregulars the next morning with no opposition. But when they returned with more troops, the NVA surprised them with heavy automatic weapons fire. Six birds were hit, and that ended the USAF part in the operation.⁹³ [redacted]



The decimated 39th was unable to put up a protracted defense, and it quietly slipped away, leaving Saravane to the irregulars. Offensive operations were now conducted with one eye on the negotiating clock; just days after [redacted] death, Kissinger announced that agreement had been reached and "peace is at hand." As Washington struggled to get Hanoi to accept changes demanded by South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, the possession

⁹² [redacted]
⁹³ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 352-53; [redacted]
⁹⁴ [redacted]
⁹⁵ [redacted] interview; [redacted]
[redacted]

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of politically significant real estate became the driving imperative for both sides in Laos as well as in South Vietnam.⁹⁶

In late October, while was still trying to get the Lao to reestablish civilian administration of the "liberated" area around Saravane, the NVA revived the dormant front in MR 3. Driving west toward Savannakhet, the Vietnamese veered south to rout the FAR garrison at Keng Kok. GM 31 came to the rescue, recovering the town on 2 November. The irregulars of GM 30, apparently happy to be home after the beating they had absorbed on the Plain of Jars, then headed north in pursuit, eventually taking Dong Hene, the town on Route 9 where the NVA advance had begun. proposed to exploit reported "confusion and near panic" in NVA ranks by capturing Muong Phalane taken by GM 30 in March 1991 before being lost again that May.⁹⁷

A cleanly executed advance by one regiment blocked the enemy's retreat to the east while two others launched a frontal assault, and the defending NVA regiment broke and fled, leaving behind ordnance that included an 85mm field gun and a T-34 tank. The operation displayed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the irregulars, as they first chased the enemy eastward and then began to weary; their unresponsiveness to orders signaling to experienced case officers that another mutiny was at hand. GM 31 and then GM 30 were pulled back for refitting, leaving only GM 32 to continue the advance.⁹⁸

During this same period, General Soutchay and his CIA advisers seized similar opportunities in MR 4.

With Lao Ngam back in friendly hands, Savannakhet irregulars took the bombed-out town of Paksong on 5 December.

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⁹⁶ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 353; Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 219.

⁹⁷ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 393;

⁹⁸ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 393-94.

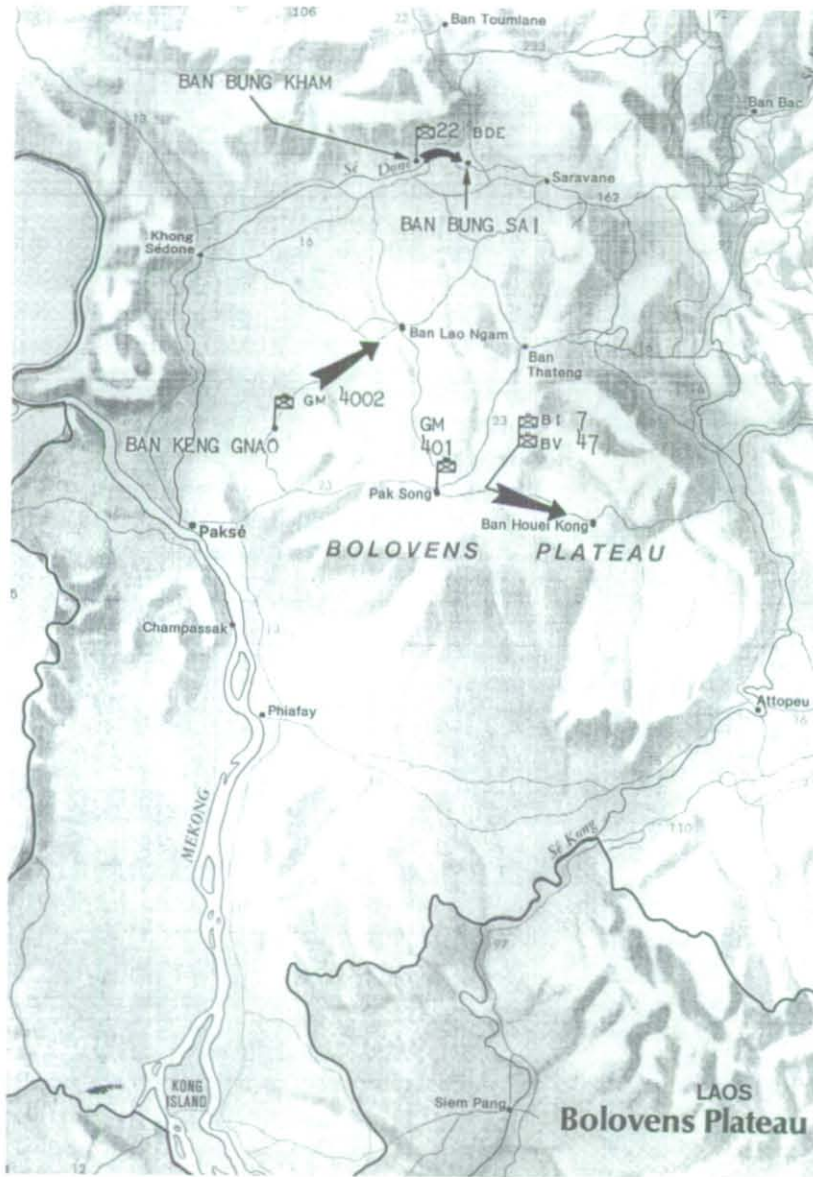
⁹⁹ Ibid., 396.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

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Chapter Twenty



Tactical situation on the Bolovens Plateau as of 15 December 1972

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RED LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL



Captured T-34 tank at Muong Phalane airfield, November 1972 with Porter STOL airplane approaching to land

[redacted] and five other men also died. The loss of three case officers in less than three months raised the pitch of the discussion between [redacted] and Bill Nelson regarding the acceptable level of risk. [redacted] pointed out that "the close-in guidance that our case officers have been able to provide to the troops for whom they are responsible almost certainly accounts for the success that has been achieved here over the years."¹⁰¹ [redacted]

[redacted] thought [redacted] had "enjoyed incredibly good luck" not to have taken even more casualties: to have gone unscathed through "the months of January to May at Long Tieng in the face of enemy shelling and ground attack was, I think, downright miraculous." Recent misfortunes were unsurprising when viewed against accelerating casualties among CIA's indigenous counterparts. [redacted] had, after all, "pressured the Lao to carry the fight to the NVA and they by and large have shown a remarkable willingness to do so." This pressure had the inevitable consequence of driving [redacted] "to greater lengths . . . to match and sustain the effort demanded of the Lao [redacted]"¹⁰² [redacted]

¹⁰¹ [redacted]
[redacted]

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Chapter Twenty



Unidentified case officer holding radio in turret of captured T-34, c. late 1972

[redacted] had followed the loss of [redacted] [redacted] with new controls on case officer movement in the field, but he saw a limit to the restraints that could be imposed without crippling his men's ability to create and lead effective combat forces. If their safety was to trump all other equities, they could not go into the field at all. They were indeed under orders to avoid exposure to enemy fire, but had been given the latitude to determine for themselves whether, for example, a helicopter landing zone was secure enough for them to accompany a unit being inserted into a staging area.¹⁰³ [redacted]

[redacted] acknowledged his officers' "tendency to hang on to contact with their troops." It was "very strong," given their "enthusiasm, drive, and courage." But he also noted the longstanding effort to devolve case officer duties to Lao [redacted] operations assistants, and some of them were handling the day-to-day contact with irregular units in the field. Indeed, [redacted]

[redacted] continued to think that he had struck a reasonable balance between security and performance, but Nelson disagreed. With the war winding down, the Lao would soon have to manage without their American advisers. Meanwhile, he would accept "some degradation of combat capability" to

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RED LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

secure safer working conditions for paramilitary officers. Except for those in the Long Tieng Valley, they would no longer accompany troop infiltrations or visit forward areas. As far as Nelson was concerned, it was not only the Lao who had reason to shun becoming "the last man to die."¹⁰⁵

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[REDACTED]

1973-75

The Paris Agreement in January 1973, like the Geneva Agreements of 1962, contained no provisions to enforce the withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Likewise, the Laotian cease-fire of 21 February 1973 accepted, in effect, the military status quo. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] and the Panhandle irregulars lost their identity when they were integrated into FAR. The fall of Saigon on 1 May 1975 sealed the fate of the anticommunist forces in Laos. On 14 May, surrounded by enemy forces, Gen. Vang Pao was evacuated from Long Tieng. With his departure began the Hmong struggle to survive under a hostile regime. [REDACTED]

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

With an Eye on Paris

On 18 December 1972, President Nixon unleashed the US Air Force on Hanoi and Haiphong in a drive to break a new deadlock in the peace negotiations in Paris. This bump in the road toward a cease-fire did not substantially affect peace expectations in Vientiane, where the US Mission continued its struggle to secure for the Laotian government a chance of surviving the formal end of hostilities.¹

This effort took place in two arenas. One of them was the battlefield, where the RLG still hoped to expand the range of its control over territory and population. In the other, inside the RLG itself, the United States continued trying to create a Laotian military establishment capable—within the constraints imposed by US withdrawal—of defending noncommunist interests in a post-war Laos. (See page xxx for a CIA-drawn map depicting relative areas of control in June 1962 and February 1973.)

As early as mid-1972, even while they debated the wisdom of Vang Pao's Operation official Washington and the US Mission in Vientiane were engaged in a parallel discussion of the future form and size of anti-communist military forces in Laos. The conflicting pressures on CIA

¹ Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 57.

On 5 December 1972, two former Commando Raiders, flown in from southern Laos by Air America pilots in a silenced Hughes helicopter, tapped NVA multiplex landlines southeast of Vinh, in lower North Vietnam. Success capped a 20-month parade of technical failures and operational and training mishaps; in an aborted early mission, for example, a window panel popped out over North Vietnam, and the pilot's chart, marked with the route and destination, was sucked out through the opening. The taps produced a readable signal for 10 days but went off the air before Nixon launched Linebacker II, the bombing of North Vietnam that was followed by the cease-fire of 25 January 1973. The operation enjoyed extraordinarily high priority; Jim Glerum requested and received diversionary air force bombing missions on the day of the final mission. It is not known, however, whether the intelligence product gave significant support to Kissinger's negotiations during this period. (Jim Glerum; Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andradé, *Spies and Commandos*.)

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represented a variety of interests, not all of them directly concerned with the kingdom's military security. [redacted]

[redacted] Defense also wanted a peace agreement to be followed promptly by integration of the Laotian irregulars into FAR, despite the army's notoriously weak high command. And influential legislators on Capitol Hill were pressing to get CIA out of its role as manager of the war even as the Congress imposed a \$375 million FY 1973 ceiling on all forms of aid to Laos.² [redacted]

Only Souvanna Phouma was promoting exclusively Laotian equities. He hoped to expand his government's reach before a cease-fire but lacked the independent means to do so. He implicitly acknowledged the feeble state of his own army when in mid-October 1972 he pressed for a concerted effort by Laotian irregulars, [redacted] and the US Air Force; it eventually scored important victories, as we have seen, in MR 4.³ [redacted]

With the training of new units still under way, the tortured history of American intervention in Indochina reached a climactic point. On 27 January 1973, the four parties—North Vietnam, the United States, the Saigon government, and the Viet Cong's National Liberation Front—signed what became known as the Paris Agreement.⁵ [redacted]

2 [redacted]

Colby rejected the idea that the "wisdom [of integration] is 'obvious,'" pointing out that FAR had "contributed little to the defense of the realm, while the irregulars contributed much." [redacted]

3 [redacted]

4 [redacted]

⁵ Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 57. [redacted]

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The terms of that pact did not cover Laos, where the North Vietnamese had never acknowledged being directly engaged. Two days before the signing ceremony in Paris, described the psychological and military conditions that would greet it in Laos. Some in Souvanna's government were exhibiting "arrant cynicism" about North Vietnamese compliance with any accord, while others exuded a "blissful certitude" that Hanoi could be trusted to implement a cease-fire in good faith. In the FAR high command, a few of the generals were eager to exploit recent military advances in MR 4, but others were displaying a "ludicrous" and "pathetic" apathy.⁶

The apathy stood in boldest relief in MR 1, where the nonfeasance of the regular army had left the defense of Luang Prabang to CIA's Lao Theung irregulars. noted the irony of the Lao abdicating the protection of their royal capital to members of a despised ethnic minority. He warned against expecting too much from them: they were now "at the lowest level of combat effectiveness" in their history. The deterioration of the government's hold on Houa Khong (Nam Tha) Province was exemplified by continuing Chinese roadbuilding activity there; one road had reached the Mekong River at Pak Beng, above Luang Prabang. Farther south, three indigenous irregular battalions—none of them impressive, but all "tigers" in comparison with FAR—had been required to stave off an attack by NVA armor and infantry that could otherwise have broken through onto the Vientiane Plain.⁷

Some of what called the "lassitude" prevailing in MR 1 could again be found among Vang Pao's irregulars, who had always borne a much heavier burden of combat. One regiment had been in the field since mid-August, and the remnants of another, once the best of all the Hmong combat formations, had gone almost as long without rest. A third had suffered "terrible casualties" south of the Plain of Jars, and a fourth had "for all practical purposes been eliminated from the roster of effectives."⁸

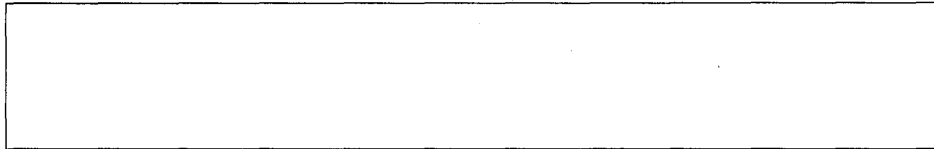
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Chinese road construction began in the early 1960s, apparently with the consent of Souvanna Phouma, but its purposes remained obscure. Various station officers speculated that it facilitated Chinese aid to the Pathet Lao, either in support of or in competition with the North Vietnamese in northwest Laos, or perhaps support to the Thai insurgency that peaked in the early 1970s. But these roads played no apparent role in the conduct of the war. (Glerum, Shackley, and Tovar interviews.)

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[redacted] described MR 3 as offering a more complicated picture. The "superb performance" of the Savannakhet irregulars in the Dong Hene-Muong Phalane sector was now offset by the "wretched show" put on by FAR defenders near Thakhek. Two irregular battalions had just saved the day there, but they had been in the field for months "and by normal criteria should be considered close to the breaking point." Loss of Thakhek, [redacted] would put the enemy in control at a point directly across the Mekong River from the US air base at Nakorn Phanom.¹⁰ [redacted]

Only in MR 4 had both FAR and the irregulars truly distinguished themselves. Victories at Khong Sedone, Paksong, and Saravane had been followed by continuous combat around Saravane, and the campaign as a whole, reflecting the unparalleled leadership of General Soutchay, represented "a performance of truly epic proportions." GMs 31 and 42 were still in the field after suffering casualties "approaching 50 percent of the forces originally involved," something that "cannot be equaled in the annals of Laos."¹¹ [redacted]

"Everything is Committed" [redacted]

But even in the far south, [redacted] saw only trouble. The NVA was sending reinforcements to Saravane and into the Bolovens sector, and the "brutal attrition" suffered by two irregular regiments there threatened collapse in MR 4. "All our cards are now on the table. There are no reserves, everything has been committed." [redacted] was thankful for unstinting tactical support from the US Air Force and anticipated a "massive increase" as soon as the ink dried in Paris. But even with B-52s and the "fast movers," [redacted] saw a window of only two weeks. If hostilities continued after that, there might be nothing left to negotiate.¹² [redacted]

Headquarters responded with assurances about USAF support and a description of an uncompromising mood in Washington with respect to North Vietnamese withdrawal. There was no disposition to repeat the formula of October 1962, when Hanoi got by with token withdrawals. [redacted]

[redacted] As for the Chinese road, Souvanna seemed not to care, and

9 [redacted]
10 [redacted]
11 [redacted]
12 [redacted]

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Washington was prepared to hope that, with a cease-fire in effect, the Chinese would decide it was "time to go home."¹³

The irregulars' base at Nam Yu, in the northwest, fell on 7 February. At the same time, in MR 3, elected to save what was left of GMs 30 and 32 by having them stage a phased withdrawal with pauses to attract enemy concentrations that would then come under air attack.¹⁴

With the need for a cease-fire increasingly desperate, Washington marveled at Souvanna's insouciance about timing. explained that he was mesmerized by the prospect of unlimited air support; he and Sisouk both believed that B-52s would keep the enemy at bay while Vientiane's chief negotiator, Pheng Phongsavan, haggled over cease-fire terms.
 repeatedly urged Ambassador Godley to get the Lao focused on the need to save what could be saved, and take whatever agreement they could get. Godley finally did so, meeting Souvanna on 6 or 7 February, and said it hoped for a cease-fire within the week.¹⁵

Henry Kissinger visited Vientiane on 9 February 1973. There he found Souvanna resisting a new communist demand—one inconsistent with an understanding reached with Le Duc Tho in Paris—to make a cease-fire contingent upon a "political settlement," that is, replacement of the Vientiane government. It is not clear what stand Kissinger urged on the prime minister—his own account is sympathetic to Souvanna's position—but three days later the impasse had not been resolved.¹⁶

At this point, was still trying to improve the government's bargaining position and also that of Kissinger, then in Hanoi, to negotiate a final agreement over a cease-fire in Laos. began by arranging Arclight strikes on Paksong (it had been lost again after its recapture on 5 December) and Saravane. In addition, despite earlier disclaimer of any offensive capability, two GMs, would be ordered to take Paksong. And two Savannakhet GMs would move on Muong Phalane after it, too, was softened up by B-52s.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 21–22;

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Despite these efforts to enlarge Vientiane's territorial control, [] and the ambassador found themselves under bitter attack by one of their most stalwart allies in the government, Sisouk na Champassak. Souvanna was suddenly proposing to accept cease-fire terms that many in his government saw as barely disguised surrender. As the cabinet approached collapse, Sisouk upbraided [] over the Mission's pressure to conclude an agreement. He accused the United States of coercing the Lao into surrender, provoking [] to warn that, whether or not they had any practicable alternative, the so-called rightists in the cabinet could produce political chaos if they were to resign.¹⁸ []

The fact remained that B-52s could not indefinitely stave off collapse on the ground, and, in any case, a cease-fire had become for Washington an end in itself. [] tried to split the difference by instructing [] in touch with senior Lao to continue pressing for an agreement even while they maintained a "detached position vis-à-vis details of the negotiation." Meanwhile, still anticipating an early accord, [] consummated an agreement for the "cosmetic" integration of its irregulars into FAR. They would be called Lao Irregular Forces and be given the same regimental designations employed in the grandiosely named FAR 1st and 2nd Strike Divisions. The existing regulars would then be demobilized, and the irregulars would surreptitiously replace them.¹⁹ []

On 21 February, Souvanna's government and the communists signed the cease-fire; it would go into effect the next day. []

[] On the 22nd, the NVA recaptured Paksong from the irregulars, who had briefly occupied it. []

[] Kissinger promptly encouraged Souvanna to request a retaliatory B-52 raid. The suggestion may have been intended to enlist the prime minister to help overcome presidential hesitation, for Kiss-

¹⁸ []
Apparently responding to some expression of impatience from Washington, [] parenthetically wondered why the "'rightists' evoke such negative reactions on our side," with all their frailties, he wrote, they had, over the years, done far more to preserve Souvanna Phouma than had the prime minister's own "neutralist faction." []

¹⁹ []
[]
Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 34-35. The bitter criticism leveled by many of CIA's contacts at US pressure for a cease-fire made [] worry that his reporting might lead Ambassador Godley to think [] was soliciting their complaints. []

Also: Conboy, *Shadow War*, 403-04. At the same time, [] were designated the Lao Guerrilla Command []

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WITH AN EYE ON PARIS

inger knew that Nixon feared giving Hanoi a pretext to delay releasing American POWs.²⁰

Kissinger argued that the North Vietnamese would stall only if they wanted a showdown for other reasons, and the USAF carpet-bombed three area targets—"boxes"—around Paksong on 23 February. Meanwhile, the NVA had just followed heavy shelling of one of Vang Pao's positions with a ground assault, and the prime minister approved B-52 bombing there as well.

Checking NVA Compliance

was already turning its attention to the verification question, and Savannakhet proposed an intelligence operation into the Mu Gia Pass area that would draw on the roadwatch activity of the 1960s and the logistic techniques developed for the later Commando Raiders. In mid-March, Kissinger approved the concept, which assumed that electronic sensors would need supplementation by human sources.²²

From the executive director's office, Bill Colby noted another problem; the potential for vulnerable roadwatch teams to inhibit air force planning for possible strikes on NVA concentrations remaining in Laos. There were political sensitivities as well: in Paris, talks were continuing in an atmosphere of bitter contention about cease-fire implementation, and, in early June, Headquarters suspended a team operation until after the impending session. Washington

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Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 316-17.

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complained again about targeting—Mu Gia was still being proposed—and [] agreed to try infiltrating the harder targets, too, using new night-vision equipment.²⁴ []



Observation point of roadwatch team Eagle, near the Mu Gia Pass

Four teams tested the potential of direct observation of NVA activity in the Panhandle. Two of them were found to be fabricating, and the meager reporting of the others, compounded by unavoidable delays [] [] for dissemination, led to increasing dependence on high-altitude reconnaissance. At the end of June, []

[] proposed one more team infiltration, but the entire roadwatch program was then absorbed into the FAR under the integration rubric, and CIA support came to an end. The tactical intercept program continued, but it was aerial photography that revealed North Vietnamese cease-fire violations, such as construction work on a two-lane highway running south from the Ban Karai Pass.²⁵ []

The logistic activity revealed by this reconnaissance was directed, for the most part, at South Vietnam and Cambodia. In Laos itself, despite continual minor skirmishing, the months after the cease-fire saw only two major confrontations. These, at points still being contested when the agreement was signed, cost the government Phou Vieng, 18 miles north of the Plain of Jars, and Ta Viang, about the same distance to the southeast.²⁶ []

²⁴ []

²⁵ []

²⁶ []

~~SECRET//MR~~WITH AN EYE ON PARIS **The Specter of Watergate**

As the level of combat dwindled, became progressively engaged in trying to preserve an anticommunist military establishment for a government half of whose ministers would be communists. Not even the friendly half could be counted on to be helpful, for real integration of the irregulars could not be avoided, and these risked discrimination at the hands of a FAR command dedicated to the status quo. Even without discrimination in matters like promotion, the irregulars' morale would suffer from their subjection to a system in which "skimming of pay and allowances is so widespread . . . as to be considered normal." Responding to apprehension of trouble ahead, to ensure that the Mission brought the "full weight of US leverage to bear to obtain not only assurances, but effective [government] action."²⁷

There could be no assurance that any degree of American pressure would obtain equitable treatment for the irregulars, who in MRs 3 and 4 would now be at the mercy of their FAR commanders. Any serious deterrent on the ground to communist infractions would probably have to come from Vang Pao's Hmong

Meanwhile, there were the terms of that agreement to worry about. Washington had ordained "meticulous" American compliance, and, in late March, submitted a plan for reduced air support that assumed the expulsion of Air America when the projected coalition replaced Souvanna's government.²⁸

Kissinger wanted it both ways: the cease-fire had to be observed, but he had "repeatedly made it clear," "that there will be no reduction of the present reaction capability" until the North Vietnamese withdrew. No withdrawal deadline could be set before a new government was formed, and in order to keep the pressure on the communists,

²⁷
The FAR paymaster was to begin administering the Laotian irregulars' payroll on 1 July 1973; at that point, free "beer, Mehkong [sic], coffee, Ovaltine, milk, sugar, cigarettes, Cokes, tooth brushes and paste," etc. would no longer be issued. As late as June, the benefits and entitlements of demobilized irregulars had not been addressed.

²⁸ Kissinger, *Years of*

Upheaval, 318.

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[REDACTED]

Meanwhile, with a continuing standoff on the ground, the only available riposte to violations of the Paris Agreement on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was bombing. But Nixon still worried that this might delay the return of American POWs. In mid-March, from a vacation refuge in Acapulco, Kissinger continued to press for the air action that he thought essential to prevent the collapse of the Paris Agreement. Earlier, he had argued that the concentrated application of air power twice had compelled Hanoi to change course. Now, he urged Nixon to strike on 22 March, in the interval between the release dates of two groups of POWs.³⁰ [REDACTED]

But there were countervailing pressures, not necessarily all known to Kissinger. White House counsel John Dean had just informed the president that Watergate threatened not just his aides but Nixon himself: there was a "cancer growing on the Presidency." And Ambassador Godley added policy inhibition to political distraction when he objected to airstrikes being launched before the scheduled formation of the new coalition government in Vientiane. Nixon, dealing with the issue in what Kissinger later called a "curiously desultory fashion," continued to vacillate.³¹ [REDACTED]

It was not until 14 April, Kissinger later wrote, that he discovered the mortal danger that the Watergate scandal now posed to Nixon himself. When the WSAG met three days later, the JCS insisted that any bombing of the Trail had to be preceded by attacks on the surface-to-air missile batteries along the DMZ. Kissinger decided, he says, that he now found it impossible to "urge Nixon to put his diminishing prestige behind the new prolonged bombing campaign that the situation required and that his own hesitations had made necessary." Washington would, therefore, wait for a "clear-cut provocation from Hanoi" before acting against the Trail in the weeks that remained before the rains began and road traffic dwindled.³² [REDACTED]

29 [REDACTED]

³⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 318-21. Kissinger says he came to see Nixon's indecision as abetted by the looming specter of Watergate. [REDACTED]

³¹ Ibid. Kissinger cited the May 1972 mining of North Vietnamese ports, in retaliation for the Easter offensive, and the "Christmas bombing" (Linebacker II) that brought agreement in Paris. [REDACTED]

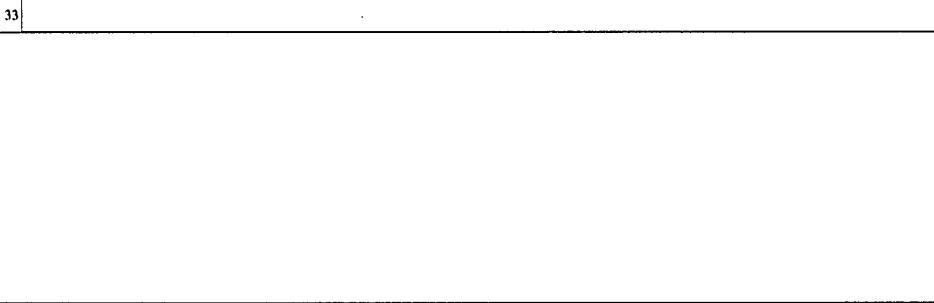
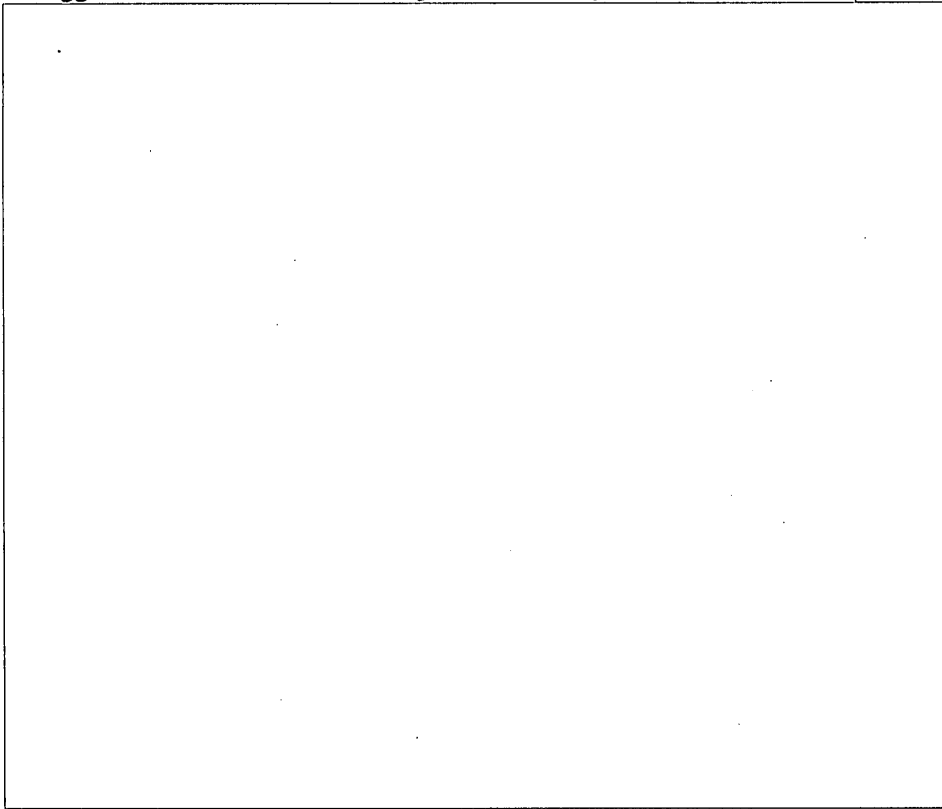
³² Ibid., 325. Kissinger dismisses the 16 April bombing of MR 2 targets, after the fall of Ta Viang, as irrelevant to the primary concern, the flow of men and materiel down the Trail. [REDACTED]

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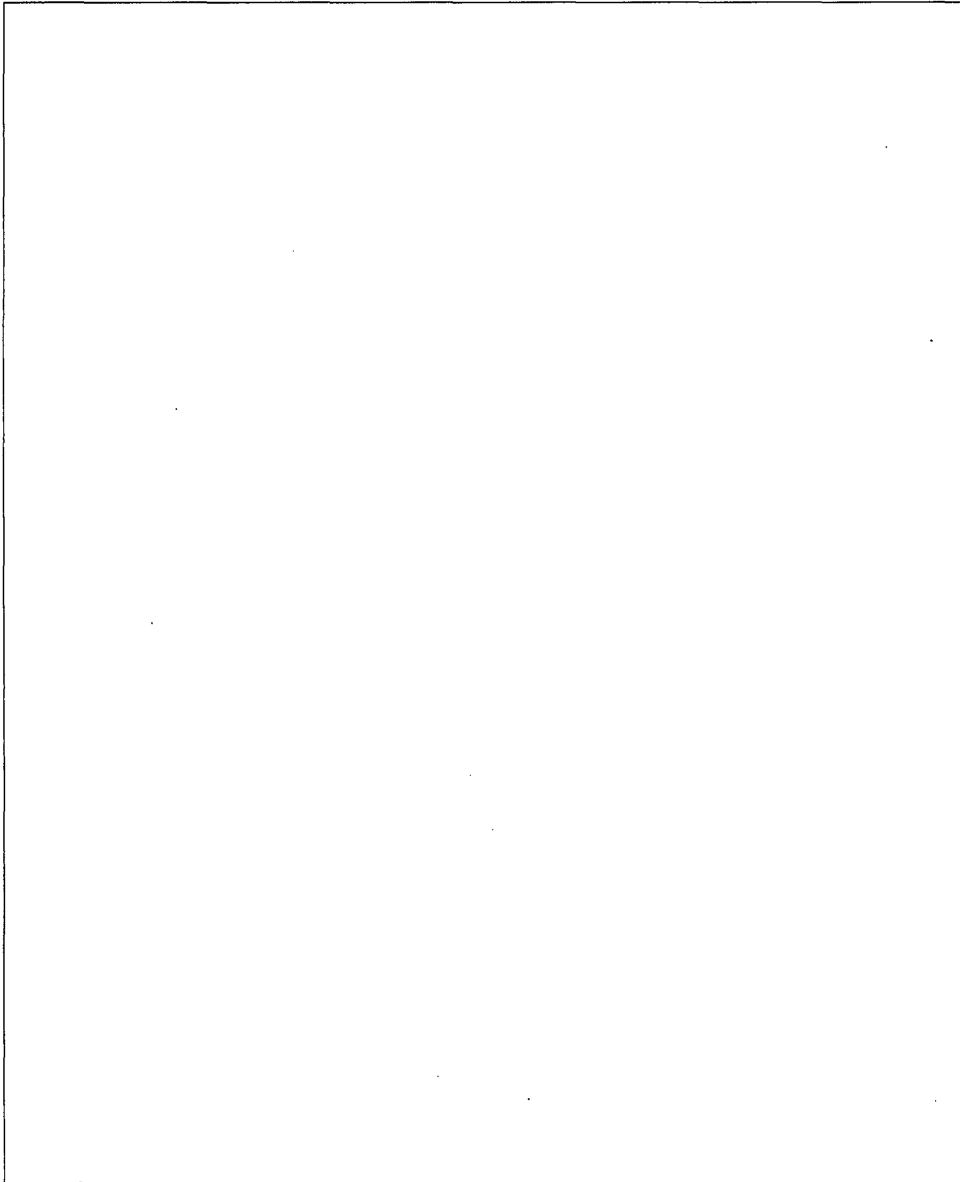
WITH AN EYE ON PARIS

In the midst of the indecision over North Vietnamese cease-fire violations, Vientiane was dealing with the mundane reality that idle troops would soon become restive troops. As an administration preoccupied with Watergate struggled to reconcile its tactical goals with congressional constraints,



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Some of subordinates were alienated enough to defy explicit orders, among them a prohibition on CIA investment in civilian construction projects. The enclave at Bouam Long became the locus of this quiet mutiny when its leader, Cher Pao Moua, asked for a small sawmill to cut boards for civilian housing. Carroll Hauver, not aware of tension at the managerial level, was puzzled when Pat Landry told him to buy the components one at a time, in a way that concealed their intended use. Only after their delivery to Bouam Long did Hauver become aware of the reason for the subterfuge.³⁸

Meanwhile, the Hmong had pretty much stripped the near slopes and were cutting trees on the reverse side. An appeal for a helicopter to move logs over the crest and down to the sawmill came to Long Tieng on a day when the movement of had just been canceled. The pilots wanted to fly, and ignoring prohibition on civilian missions for the USAF, sent them off to Bouam Long.³⁹

The driving motivation, for both Landry and was less their resentment of management style than it was their concern for Hmong welfare, a concern that the cease-fire in some ways only intensified. And it appears that the conflict provided an outlet for men grown accustomed to continual combat. Hauver thought that, with fighting reduced to desultory skirmishing, the tension with became something of a surrogate war for the upcountry officers.⁴⁰

Concern for the future of the Hmong, and for the Agency's relationship with Vang Pao, had generated a valedictory cable from saw the tribe's involvement in the war as driven, in the first instance, by hostility to Vietnamese domination, but also deepened beyond anyone's original expectation as the United States pursued its larger aims in Indochina. The Hmong had indeed "walked in with their eyes open," but "were it not for their intimate association with [CIA and the US government] their condition today would be vastly less acute than it is."⁴¹

identified the tribe's future with that of Vang Pao, in whom saw the potential to become, someday, minister of defense. The general's standing derived not only from his relationship of trust with Souvanna, but also from his reputation among ethnic minorities as distant as the Kha (Lao Theung) of the Bolovens region. Further, he had formed a bloc of 32 National Assembly deputies responsive to him—and to the monthly subsidy he

³⁸ Hauver, interviews.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hauver interview.

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offered—and [] expected him to become a major political figure on the national scene.⁴² []

All this would be contingent upon security and economic development for the Hmong. [] effort to ensure that the Hmong get their fair share of Laotian government resources, and that the US government, especially USAID, give them adequately high priority. []

[]

The project was still being refined at Headquarters, in preparation for inter-agency coordination, when USAID predicted famine conditions by December if some 90,000 mountain people were not promptly moved out of the MR 2 refugee centers. The barren soil on the slopes around the refugee centers had supported the original scattered villagers at a bare subsistence level, and the current population far exceeded its productive capacity. Bill Nelson, sharing [] sense of moral obligation, wanted an immediate authorization to prevent catastrophe. []

[]⁴⁴ []

Fire-fighting in Vientiane []

The symbiosis between [] and its local counterparts allowed it to head off the collapse of Souvanna's government—and, therefore, of the peace negotiations—when the prime minister decided to accept a five-battalion Pathet Lao security force in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. He intended to present the idea to the FAR command on the afternoon of 21 June; if the generals did not accede, he would resign.⁴⁵ []

Having been alerted that morning by sources in the government, [] leaped to exploit its relationships of trust in order to head off a confrontation. [] briefed General Phaitoon, then flew to Long Tieng to consult with Vang Pao. [] urged both to intervene with Souvanna, and they did so in a joint meeting early in the afternoon. After Phaitoon left, Vang Pao urged the prime minister to avoid a rift with his own supporters. The North Vietnamese seemed unwilling to give unlimited support to the demands of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (the Pathet Lao's political arm or NLHS), he argued, and Souvanna

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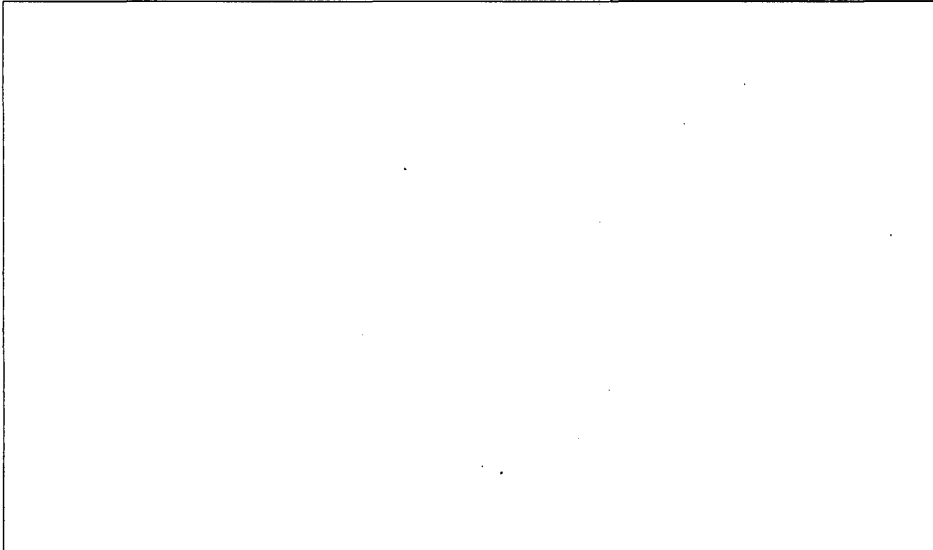
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should exploit this, accepting an NLHS police presence but not a communist military force in the two capitals. The prime minister acceded, briefed his generals accordingly,

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This hair's-breadth escape from an internecine confrontation illustrated the erosion of US influence, a trend accelerated just days later when Congress prohibited further US military operations anywhere in Indochina. At this point, there had been no combat air missions since February, but the threat of retaliation for cease-fire violations had remained.



The end of direct US military leverage changed the climate in Vientiane as well. doubted that major NVA aggression would result but feared the corrosive effect on Souvanna's resolve of disappearing US sanctions. Not always steadfast under pressure, the prime minister might well make damaging concessions in order finally to get an agreement. The embassy, whose political officers tended to disparage both the loyalty of the

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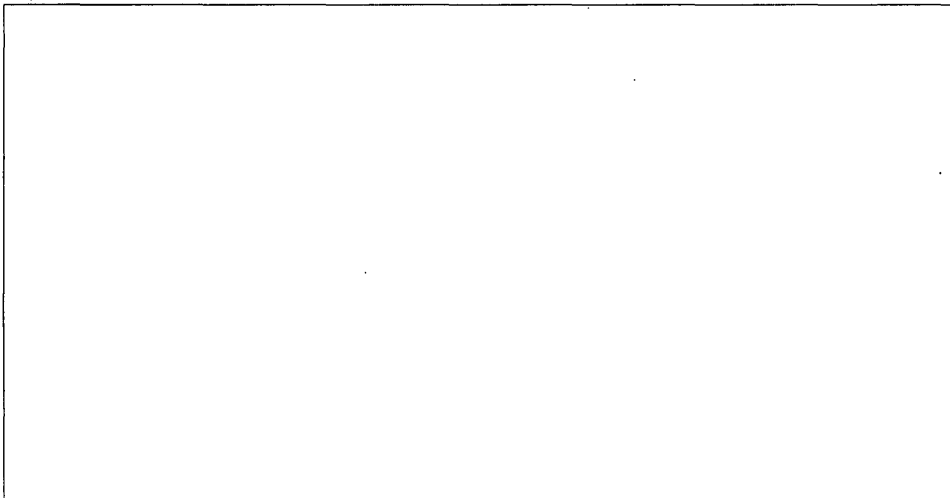
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FAR command and the cogency of its concerns for security arrangements, also began to worry about a coup instigated by alienated generals.⁴⁹ [redacted]

[redacted] had to scramble to offset what it thought was a mistaken reading of the military's intentions, and finally persuaded the embassy to urge on Souvanna a more sympathetic hearing of his generals' concerns. Having done so, Dean relayed Souvanna's demand [redacted] reciprocate his concessions on security matters by pressing FAR to give the prime minister its unconditional support.⁵⁰ [redacted]

CIA's confidence in the generals' loyalty did not extend to dissident Laotian air force general Thao Ma Mahaanosith, who had been exiled to Thailand in 1966 after a coup attempt. Someone in his coterie dropped intimations to Vientiane's defense attaché staff of another coup, this time designed to frustrate the peace talks. These hints went unreported, and General Ma and a small cohort crossed the Mekong on 20 August 1973. Taking the Wat Tay Airport garrison by surprise, they passed out armbands and shoulder patches, and commandeered combat aircraft. General Ma betrayed his frivolous purposes when he took off to bomb the residence of his archenemy, Gen. Kouprasith Abhay. Hit by antiaircraft fire, he crash-landed at Wat Tay. Still alive, although wounded, he was thrown onto a truck and hauled to Kouprasith's headquarters, where he was summarily executed.⁵¹ [redacted]



⁴⁹ [redacted]

⁵⁰ [redacted]
⁵¹ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 158, 406-07. [redacted]

⁵² [redacted]

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[Redacted] 53
[Redacted]

On 14 September, Vientiane and the NLHS signed a military and political protocol that prescribed a three-step withdrawal of foreign combat forces, to be completed within 60 days of the formation of a provisional government.

[Redacted]

53 [Redacted]

54 [Redacted]

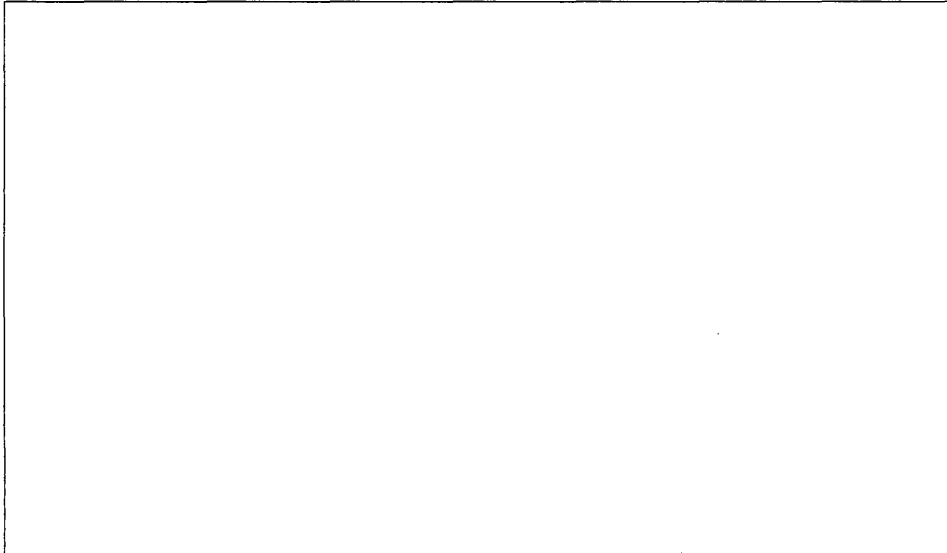
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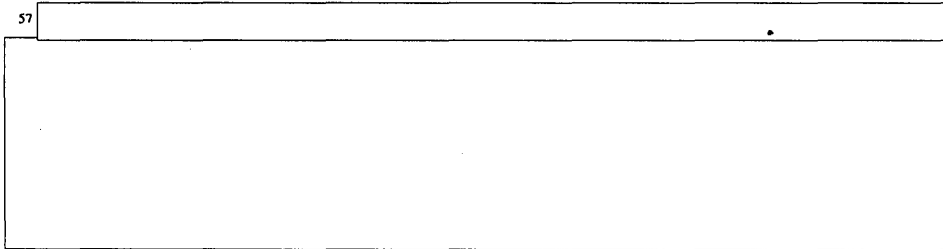
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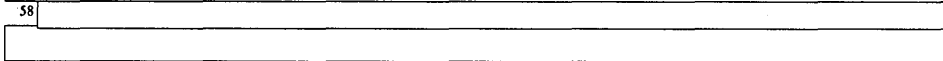


There was a great deal of talk, however, about the Laotian Irregular Forces—the designation under which all CIA-supported forces had formally been integrated into the FAR. No one anticipated any difficulty with the actual incorporation of the irregulars into the FAR structure in MRs 3 and 4, but painful choices would have to be made in Gen. Vang Pao's MR 2. There, a "highly inflated rank structure"—Ambassador Whitehouse called it "grotesque"—would have to be trimmed. But Whitehouse also wanted to "accommodate soldiers who had served the Kingdom well," even if they did not meet the "rigid education standards of FAR." Overall, government forces, regular and irregular, would have to shrink from 78,000 in late 1973 to 60,000 by 30 June 1974.⁵⁹

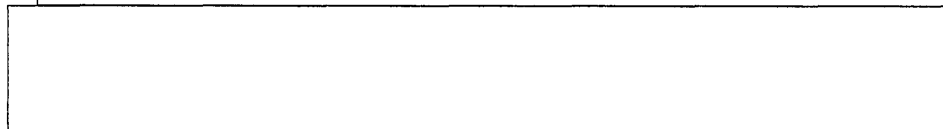
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[] traditionally protective of its Hmong protégés, now fell into line with the ambassador's determination to reduce the armed forces to the negotiated ceiling. In January 1974, Vang Pao's administrative aide confided [] that the general feared dropping "thousands of personnel now on his payroll" and that he had had no choice but to "confer officer rank on village chiefs among the irregulars." Headquarters worried about the resulting slow progress toward integration in MR 2, and [] blamed Vang Pao. Yes, the general had a "feudal structure" to deal with, one "far more complicated than elsewhere," but he had to integrate his irregulars on a "reasonable and rational basis." It was implicitly left to Vang Pao to define that basis, and the issue remained for the moment unresolved.⁶⁰ []

Moving On []

In mid-February 1974, Congress cut the Defense Department budget for the integration of the Laotian irregulars. Whitehouse [] saw the abrupt suspension as subverting the "constancy of US government support to the Lao Government," something that risked losing Souvanna the support of anticommunist elements in Vientiane.⁶¹ []

Two anxious weeks passed before administration efforts got enough money restored to fund continued integration in the third quarter of the fiscal year, already almost ended. This included no funds for continued combat pay, for which Vang Pao pleaded on the ground that he now had to care for 250,000 refugees, 12,000 war widows, 16,000 orphans, and 2,000 disabled veterans. [] "Vang Pao the tribal leader that CIA created needs some funds for public relations if he is to retain his prestige with [the] populace."

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[]⁶² []

The size of that fund is not known, but it did not come close to offsetting the twin burdens of reductions in force and the end of combat pay. Hmong disaffection grew, and one of Vang Pao's senior colonels, a leader of the important Yang clan, threatened to resign. Such a move would devastate the Hmong military organization at a time when Vang Pao was receiving threatening let-

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In mid-1974, Vang Pao asserted that the war had cost 11,000 Hmong fatalities. []
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ters from veterans faced with compulsory demobilization. His authority was further challenged by a series of explosions at Long Tieng. After one of these, when a grenade wounded two civilians outside a drama performance at the community hall, an anonymous note was found in which self-proclaimed veterans aired their grievance at having been charged an admission fee.⁶³ [redacted]

Vang Pao's troubles continued, as rumors that he had sequestered a fund destined for troops returning to civilian life threatened anarchy at Long Tieng. CIA had set up a social and economic aid fund intended to support long-term development projects for the Hmong in agriculture, education, and health. This was already the source of the revolving fund for Vang Pao's use, and drawing on it further for demobilization payments would detract from efforts to promote self-sufficiency. But the demand had to be met, and [redacted] of the fund to match a contribution from Defense Minister Sisouk for demobilization bonuses to be paid through the end of June 1974.⁶⁴ [redacted]

The crisis of Hmong morale was echoed throughout Laos after Souvanna and the communists finally agreed, on 5 April 1974, on the composition of a Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU). Coming after more than a year without serious combat, the accord seemed to Charles Whitehouse to lull Washington—specifically Kissinger—into the delusion that “everything will be dandy from now on.” [redacted]

[redacted]

65 [redacted]

⁶³ [redacted]

Demobilization problems were more severe in the northwest, where an ethnic mix and the lack of centralized leadership like Vang Pao's led to disaffection and occasional defection. The station later regretted not having taken simple measures—like issuing certificates of service—that for many veterans turned into a festering grievance. [redacted]

⁶⁴ [redacted]

[redacted]

⁶⁵ [redacted]

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The ambassador complained that, as of 11 April, Washington had not yet given assurances of any military assistance funding at all in the fiscal year beginning on 1 July. His jeremiad produced an assurance that Washington would give Laos "highest priority" during the breaking-in period of the new government. But this did not mean continuing support for either regular or irregular forces at wartime levels. Like Vang Pao's guerrillas, the regular army now faced disintegration, a prospect the anticommunist faction in Vientiane was evading with its customary fractiousness and irresolution.⁶⁶ [redacted]



Pathet Lao police, representing the communist element in the provisional government, disembarking from Soviet transport plane at Vientiane, c. 1974

[redacted]

Whether Sisouk had the requisite desire and force of personality remained open to question. Meanwhile, in the Agency's judgment, the communists had "seized . . . the initiative" in the principal organs of the provisional government. The communists, in [redacted] view, had won popular support for their political program; when King Savang Vatthana and the cabinet accepted it, it would "set in motion a strong leftist trend in Lao foreign and domestic

⁶⁶ [redacted]
⁶⁷ [redacted]

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politics." Communist organization and discipline made for a melancholy contrast with the Vientiane side, "leaderless, fragmented, and without common political goals or grass roots support."⁶⁸ [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] One man— [redacted] —would remain at Long Tieng, representing [redacted] interest in Vang Pao's potential as political leader. [redacted]

[redacted] The Commando Raiders, representing the most nearly unilateral aspect of the entire paramilitary program, were dissolved in May.⁷⁰

[redacted] expressed the tone of the proceedings with an elegy to Air America: "So ends the last sentence of the final paragraph of a saga that may have an epilogue, but never a sequel." The "common bond" of those who experienced it included a "slight sense of pity for those lesser souls who could not, or would not, share in it." The "last flight schedule is dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny."⁷¹ [redacted]

The Last Days of the Hmong Resistance [redacted]

Even at their peak, US and allied ground forces had never been able to drive the NVA out of South Vietnam or Laos. Now, with US combat forces gone,

⁶⁸ [redacted]

⁶⁹ [redacted]

[redacted]

⁷⁰ [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

⁷¹ [redacted]

The Agency had been committed since February 1974 to "divest itself of Air America as soon as orderly sale or disposal can be arranged." [redacted]

[redacted]

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Washington lacked the means to enforce the provisions on withdrawal of foreign troops from either country. In early July 1974, a month after the 60-day deadline for withdrawal of foreign troops, Souvanna Phouma received the North Vietnamese ambassador in Vientiane. Souvanna noted the continued NVA presence on Laotian soil and pressed the point that the success of the provisional government rested on its withdrawal. The ambassador did not deny the charge and promised to convey Souvanna's message to Hanoi. The prime minister, always disposed to see a glass almost full, took this as a harbinger of the NVA's imminent departure.⁷²

meanwhile, no longer possessed the military means that—in the unlikely event of policy approval to use them—could have influenced, even at the margins, decisionmaking in Hanoi. The most CIA could do was to try to preserve the Hmong as a political and military factor to be reckoned with by all factions in Vientiane.

credited Vang Pao with being "politically perceptive and closer to the people than almost all other senior military commanders." Despite the trauma of demobilization and American withdrawal, the general remained "on top of the situation and in command."⁷³

saw economic growth as a prerequisite to continued Hmong loyalty and worked to buttress Vang Pao's position, primarily by supporting the civilian development projects that now constituted the main agenda in the relationship with the Hmong. The general himself was now often in Vientiane, representing the Hmong interest in building a vigorous unified anticommunist faction in the provisional government. Meanwhile, busied himself at Long Tieng solving problems, such as the mortality among chicks being raised for broiler meat. In late 1974, the poultry facility at Long Tieng was self-supporting, with a capacity of 12,500 chicks and was producing 5,000 broilers a month for the local market; a similar facility at Muong Decha would also soon be paying for itself. Pork production was on the rise, and a slaughterhouse was completed in October.⁷⁴

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The FAR command complained of a problem familiar to Vang Pao's CIA advisers, namely, the difficulty of determining the exact number of effectives on the payroll.

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From its earlier concentration on such things as the performance characteristics of various kinds of weapons, reporting now dealt with the arcana of [] agricultural projects:

An additional 50 hectares adjacent to the essential oils project was selected and cleared for expansion of pigeon pea plantings, and the distillery unit for essential oil production was delivered to Long Tieng . . . brood-lac for the pigeon pea trees was procured for the infesting process to begin in November.

Crop diversification would raise the standard of living and substitute for poppy production, and new projects included 4,000 coffee trees planted at Long Tieng. [] Vang Pao were distributing water buffalo, and the grass needed to raise these essential animals was being planted at a village west of Long Tieng.⁷⁵ []

Economic progress required a physical and institutional infrastructure. Vang Pao's Xieng Khouang Savings and Loan Cooperative, [] [] was gradually introducing the Hmong into the use of agricultural credit. Meanwhile, construction of a water distribution system proceeded at Long Tieng.⁷⁶ []

However fragile the prospects for the survival of a noncommunist Laos, [] [] had little choice but to try helping the Hmong achieve political integration. [] worked with Vang Pao to emphasize cooperation with the executive agencies now run by the provisional government. When 32 Hmong students graduated from veterinary school in October, the provisional government agriculture officer for Xieng Khouang Province presented the students their diplomas. In December, the provincial college, evacuated to Vientiane during the war, was about to be moved north again, this time to Sam Thong, near Long Tieng.⁷⁷ []

Hopes for these civilian programs, and for Vang Pao as a major postwar political figure, were encouraged by the relative quiet that had prevailed in Laos after the February 1973 cease-fire. Previously—or at least since 1964, when the Johnson administration launched the first airstrikes on North Vietnam—the entire effort in Laos had been linked to the contest between Hanoi

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Another effort, the Committee for Reconstruction and National Development, seems to have tried to apply the Agency's Census-Grievance Program, developed in South Vietnam. After the appropriate training, FAR officers were to serve as PGNU advisers to Hmong communities, conducting a census and identifying economic and social needs. They would also counter Pathet Lao "propaganda and encroachments." []

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and Saigon. Prospects in Laos were seen as subject to developments in Vietnam, with the RLG's survival contingent on that of South Vietnam.

This perspective seems gradually to have blurred, at least among Americans in Vientiane, especially after the formation of the PGNU. reporting of efforts to stabilize the noncommunist elements in the PGNU and smooth the way to a permanent government says nothing about Laotian vulnerability to events in neighboring South Vietnam. There seems to have been a tacit assumption that the Saigon government would hold its own, and that as long as Hanoi was engaged in South Vietnam, it would abstain from a decisive move in Laos. Programs in the latter could, therefore, be pursued on the basis of their own perceived merits.

Bloody combat had continued in South Vietnam even after the Paris Agreement, but as late as November 1974, Saigon COS Thomas Polgar saw the South Vietnamese position as improving. In that same month, however, came the first prediction of a decisive campaign drive by Hanoi to annex the south. Events confirmed the intelligence, and on 6 January 1975, Phuoc Long Province in South Vietnam fell to a massive NVA assault.⁷⁸

The handwriting on the Vietnamese wall was now clear, but and the rest of the US Mission there, now proceeded in the wan hope that Hanoi would be satisfied with victory in South Vietnam. As Saigon's forces were driven back, concentrated on problems with the agricultural programs in Xieng Khouang Province and with agitation by dissatisfied clients like the "widows and orphans association." While it tried to placate discontented Hmong protesting inadequate benefits, worked in Vientiane to promote Vang Pao as a truly neutralist voice of the noncommunist Lao. This effort led to a cordial meeting between him and NLHS leader Prince Souphanouvong, and the fraternal atmosphere of early February encouraged continued hopes for the survival of the coalition government.⁷⁹

But this kind of cosmetic activity—it included a number of civilian politicians as well as Vang Pao—did not arrest the decay of the noncommunist position. In early January, students had rioted against the monarchy in the Panhandle town of Thakhek, and the FAR reaction, bloody yet ineffectual, led to the first Pathet Lao occupation of a major population center. In South Vietnam, government forces in the Central Highlands began a strategic withdrawal in late March. Aimed at shortening the lines of defense, it collapsed into a frenzied rout. Then, on 17 April, the communist Khmer Rouge, supported by

⁷⁸ The author's *CIA and the Generals* describes the Vietnam station's reaction to declining South Vietnamese fortunes in late 1974 and early 1975.

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the NVA, marched into Phnom Penh; thus began the agony there that climaxed with the regime of the genocidal Pol Pot.⁸⁰ [redacted]

Impending disaster finally broke the redoubtable Souvanna Phouma. When the communists mounted an attack on the Sala Phou Khoun road junction in mid-April, Defense Minister Sisouk ordered T-28s stationed at Long Tieng to drive the attackers off. This they did, but Souvanna lashed Sisouk in a public rebuke for having authorized the counterattack. Sometimes naïve, often vacillating, the prime minister, over the years, had displayed astonishing resilience in the face of foreign aggression, domestic insurgency, even the early hostility of the US government. He had also suffered the continuous feuding of self-interested subordinates, and he now repudiated them. On 8 May, a week after the fall of Saigon, [redacted] reported that "there is no one here that he has not now turned against."⁸¹ [redacted]

This reversal reflected, in part, the revived influence on Souvanna of his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, who now belied the cordiality of his session with Vang Pao with a torrent of vituperation aimed at both the general and Defense Minister Sisouk. Souvanna did not yet know that Washington was still holding the remainder of the demobilization funds approved in mid-1974, and that FAR had been dipping into its own reserves to pay discharge bonuses. [redacted] feared that, when he discovered this new budgetary crisis, he would repudiate Sisouk, Vang Pao, and the legitimacy of his own armed forces.⁸² [redacted]

[redacted] deputized by the chargé to speak for the Mission, vigorously argued for fulfillment of what he and his colleagues regarded as a US obligation. But Washington maintained that the Lao were no longer satisfying the conditions under which disbursement could continue. Sisouk simply gave up and fled the country. Through his son, Prince Mangkra, [redacted] retrieved the contents of his safe, which included the agreement on demobilization bonuses. [redacted] it tried to use Mangkra to withdraw demobilization funds already advanced to the Ministry of Defense, but the governor of the national bank refused, and instead notified Souvanna.⁸³ [redacted]

⁸⁰ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 413; Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 59 [redacted]

⁸¹ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 414; [redacted]

⁸² [redacted]

⁸³ [redacted]

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Souvanna now demanded Vang Pao's resignation. On 9 May, [] was struggling to meet the general's frantic demand for air evacuation of key Hmong officers and tribal leaders to Thailand. Vang Pao reminded [] that Washington had once implored him to hold Long Tieng "at all cost." Now it was he who needed, "at all cost," C-130 sorties to rescue those most identified with the resistance to the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese.⁸⁴ []

In the absence of Ambassador Whitehouse, [] found itself hampered by what it saw as [] dilatory and indecisive style, something it said had prevented it from addressing this issue earlier. Headquarters also temporized, saying, "If American policy continues to be [the] preservation of neutral Laos . . . [the] timing of any withdrawal of Vang Pao from MR 2 or Laos must be coordinated with [the] totality of American moves in Laos." Kissinger, now secretary of state under President Gerald Ford, would not be available to review the issue until the next day.⁸⁵ []

Still awaiting the airlift, Vang Pao prepared his resignation that, for unknown reasons, [] was to hold until he gave the word to submit it to Souvanna. Meanwhile, State had "acknowledged" [] obligation to a "certain number" of Hmong. But concern for appearances led it to impose a condition on [] use of contract aircraft for the evacuation. This could be permitted only if it could be made to "appear that Vang Pao has privately chartered them for the purpose." And, in any case, the numbers of evacuees must be severely restricted: State's insistence on an unspecified "modest" number clearly meant "hundreds of people rather than some number in excess of 1,000."⁸⁶ []

Communist forces now surrounded Long Tieng, and Vang Pao insisted that at least 300 families—some 2,000 souls—had to be evacuated to avoid reprisals when the last bastion finally surrendered. Just as two C-46 transports arrived on 12 May, the government imposed a moratorium on flights into Long Tieng, effective the next morning. Souvanna ordered Vang Pao to Vientiane, but the former general refused, [] to comply. [] Souvanna accepted a three-member team, to include the Indian and Polish representatives of the Geneva-era International Control Commis-

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State, overwhelmed by the influx of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees, hoped that "most if not all" of these evacuees, "bc they Mco or Lao," could be resettled in Thailand or elsewhere outside the United States. []

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sion. [] would fly them to Long Tieng to accompany Vang Pao back to Vientiane as a guarantee of his safety.⁸⁷ []

Headquarters, meanwhile, was arguing with State and Defense for the deployment of four-engine C-130s to bring out more Hmong evacuees. But the main thing, it told [] was the "Agency obligation to Vang Pao," and [] must "ensure that he gets out of Laos even if some other Meo have to stay behind. Vang Pao is [the] symbol of CIA involvement in Lao paramilitary ops, and he should not be left to Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese justice."⁸⁸ []

Still, on the morning of 12 May, [] warned that "every passing hour" increased the danger to rescue aircraft and their crews. The provisional government was trying to halt all evacuation efforts, the Pathet Lao were advancing on Long Tieng, and the departure of Hmong commanders was gradually stripping the command post of its leadership. The few flights already made had proceeded under radio silence and with the shield of radar suppression. But at some point, rescue aircraft would incur the risk of ground fire both from the approaching communists and from disgruntled Hmong being left behind. The longer the evacuations were strung out, the greater the risk. [] reported that the C-46s were now down for repair, and only 150 people had been lifted out to the reception camp at Nam Phong, in Thailand. "We have only one or at best two more days" to evacuate as many as were going to get out, and [] wanted aircraft of any kind available to continue the airlift.⁸⁹ []

Kissinger approved the C-130, and Headquarters scrambled to arrange the message from Defense that would allow Gen. "Heinie" Aderholt at Udorn to dispatch it to Long Tieng. On the 13th, [] reported a total of three transports in the air. Vang Pao had refused to accompany the mediator team back to Vientiane, and his presence at Long Tieng was expected to keep things sufficiently under control to allow dispatch of the C-130 then ready to go. Meanwhile, a helicopter and a Porter STOL airplane were standing by for the "possible emergency evacuation of Vang Pao []"⁹⁰ []

Vang Pao signaled [] through [] to entrust his letter of resignation to General Bounpone for delivery to Souvanna. But the now ex-general stayed at Long Tieng and so did [] Two C-130 missions took out 425

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people, and raced to install the emergency runway lights, just delivered from Vientiane, that would permit evacuation flights to continue into the night. Prince Mangkra, Sisouk's son, postponed for a day his proposed return to Long Tieng with the ICC officers, and seized the opportunity to schedule more airlifts for 14 May.⁹¹

Early that morning, firing was reported east of Long Tieng, but the airstrip and its approaches remained secure, and reported that the airlift would continue as long as security and weather permitted. Only an hour-and-a-half later, he flashed Headquarters that as of 1050 hours, Vang Pao and were on their way out, headed for and was canceling all flights to Long Tieng. Arnold noted that, with Vang Pao's departure, the Pathet Lao and the NVA "will effectively have control of Long Tieng." took what comfort he could from the knowledge that, "while they will have it, they never were able to take it by force of arms."⁹²

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Going the Way of Vietnam

By noon on the 14th of May 1975, when the airlift ended, more than 2,400 Hmong had arrived at called the "contingency base" at Nam Phong, in northeast Thailand. Left behind at Long Tieng were 14,000 tribesmen. Displaying the stoic adaptability born of long experience with upheaval and disruption, the evacuees did not waste time bemoaning their fate. Instead, they promptly began looking for facilities to serve as a school for their children. Meanwhile, the overland exodus continued, and Thai border police looked aside as other Hmong made their own way across the Mekong.¹

A week later, the refugee population had reached 6,200, including 4,000 children. The Royal Thai Government had no desire to accommodate a permanent addition to its own minority population and was already inquiring about American intentions regarding the Hmong. On 20 May, presumably in deference to Thai wishes,

Two days later, with some 1,500 additional refugees stranded, Vang Pao acknowledged that the United States had long-term responsibility for only 120 of his key people and their families. But he angrily refused to believe that the Agency would cut off its help to loyal Hmong trying to reach the evacuation center.²

noted the potential for bad publicity in "the more distressing aspects" of the Hmong plight, for refugees risked hunger, medical emergency, and even arrest, if they strayed into the countryside. Accordingly, despite Washington's reluctance to become more involved,

There, with essential Hmong

¹ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 415.

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needs provided for, Thai and American doctors could deal with the malignant form of malaria now being encountered.³ [redacted]

The State Department hoped to limit harm to the Laotian anticommunists by maintaining correct relations with the PGNU. In pursuit of this goal, State favored as little further commitment to the Hmong as possible, and CIA was left with the lead role in discharging what many of its people regarded as a moral obligation to defeated allies. Its involvement was deepened by the influx into Nam Phong, and on 24 May, Headquarters accepted that the initial restrictive policy had been overtaken by events. It was now impossible to limit CIA support to the 2,400 "key indigenous personnel" comprising the approved 120 extended families, and the Agency would at least temporarily care for all the refugees at Nam Phong.⁴ [redacted]

By late May, there were 1,800 additional refugees in Thailand at Nong Khai, across the Mekong from Vientiane, and Washington was also considering "stopgap assistance" to this group. But the American objective remained the resettlement of the Hmong refugees in Thailand. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] But the US administration was no less committed than the Thai to a not-in-my-backyard stance on Hmong resettlement. Headquarters cautioned [redacted] not to think of relocation to the United States as even a possibility.⁵ [redacted]

[redacted] was instructed to deflect Thai queries on large-scale movement to the United States, and [redacted] was told to discourage Vang Pao from the trip he wanted to make to Washington to plead for more help. Instead, both should point out to the Thai the virtues of Hmong resettlement in underpopulated areas contiguous to Laos.⁶ [redacted]

Several of Washington's arguments for relocation in Thailand—especially the Hmong contribution to the war effort and the resulting "moral and social responsibility" to an ally—could equally well have been made for relocation in the United States. But Ted Shackley, now heading the East Asia Division, stated the bottom line: "We want Vang Pao and his 2,400 [key indigenous personnel] resettled in Thailand." US help would come in the form of a "package

3 [redacted]
4 [redacted]
5 [redacted]
6 [redacted]

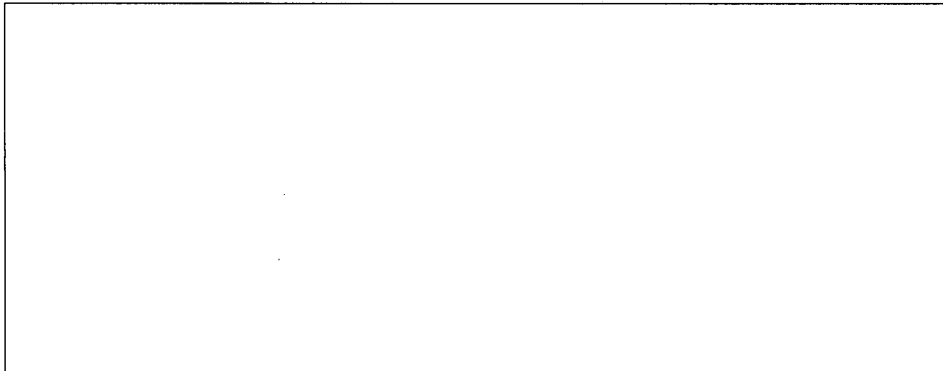
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deal," and any resources devoted to moving Hmong to the United States would reduce, perhaps to zero, the help available for those who stayed in Thailand.⁷

Shackley related the disposition of the refugee question to the safety of US personnel still in Laos. He wanted to do nothing with Vang Pao that might give the PGNU or Pathet Lao a pretext for action against Americans. As to the prospect of even more Hmong refugees streaming into Thailand, should "make [this] a Thai problem." Shackley also left it to to figure out how to persuade the Thai of the security, economic, and public relations benefits of local resettlement. found itself squarely in the middle. It had to get the Thai to shoulder the resettlement burden and prevent a massive new influx of refugees. Meanwhile, it had to fend off Vang Pao's passionate appeals not to abandon a people who had served the joint cause for so long and at such cost.⁸



Not in Our Back Yard

Reports were coming in of many more Hmong, perhaps 50,000, already on the move or planning to head west to find Vang Pao. The general agreed to send messengers to their leaders to get them to hold in place, if possible; if forced from their homes, they should assemble at the southern tip of Sayaboury Province, west of the Mekong River but still in Laos. This effort to brake the exodus was only partly successful, and by late July the Hmong population at Nam Phong grew to almost 13,000, with 10,000 more in Nan Province, adjacent to Sayaboury, and another 7,000 at Nong Khai.¹⁰

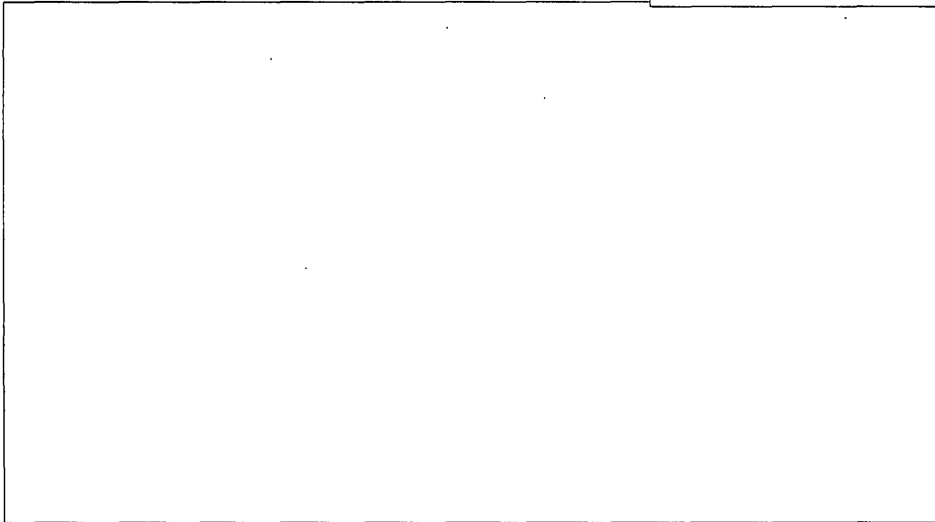
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CIA wanted no part of any commitment to refugees other than the Nam Phong contingent. EA Division feared that a more active Agency role would only encourage more of the Thai neglect of new arrivals that CIA saw as intended to drive them back into Laos. Meanwhile, [redacted]



The Thai backed off a little, still wanting the Hmong back in Laos but also still prepared to discuss the terms of American support to local resettlement. Headquarters made its own concessions, giving ground on Vang Pao's eventual relocation and relaying to the field Washington's agreement to finance refugee resettlement. Ambassador Whitehouse adopted a somewhat more restrictive stance, telling the Foreign Ministry in Bangkok only that the Thai could expect "some help" with this. On one point, however, he and the ministry— [redacted]

[redacted]—were in full agreement: Resettlement in a Sayaboury "buffer zone" would create more provocation than protection. If Hmong refugees were to stay in Thailand, they should be moved to the northwest.¹³ [redacted]

The parallel and perhaps even more contentious issue of Vang Pao's ultimate destination led [redacted] to counsel a more "realistic" approach at Headquarters. For the Thai, the Hmong constituted a "very hot political

¹⁰ [redacted]

¹¹ [redacted]

¹² [redacted]

¹³ [redacted]

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issue," and assurances given one day might evaporate the next as events increased Bangkok's anxiety about communist pressure on its Laotian border. If the Thai political leadership were to be counted on to guarantee the tribe's future, it would have to become directly engaged. Hoping to promote this, [] mediated a 17 June invitation to Vang Pao to join Prime Minister Kukrit at dinner. Vang Pao left Bangkok a couple of days later, but the cordiality of his session with Kukrit led [] to expect him back after visits to France and the United States.¹⁴ []

When the general reached Washington, in early July, he aired his concerns in his usual candid fashion. Thai morale was low, he thought, and many in the army expected the country to follow Laos in a slide into communism. In his view, the Thai blamed the United States for the fall of South Vietnam; in their resentment of the US failure of will, they had little interest in accommodating the American desire for Hmong relocation in northern Thailand.¹⁵ []

Whatever the accuracy of this assessment, Prime Minister Kukrit did not honor his assurance to Vang Pao to permit the general's early return to Bangkok, and CIA began to look for a long-term refuge for the general and his family in the United States. [] the former smoke jumper from Missoula, Montana, had earlier suggested the mountainous terrain there as a good prospect, and Vang Pao flew out to look at potential lodgings for his household of 63 souls. A telephone call from Ly Tou Pao, his deputy at Nam Phong, then nearly put him on a plane back to Washington, for the news was all about illness and death at Nong Khai and Nam Phong.¹⁶ []

[] The refugees at Nam Phong saw the camp "more as 'prison' than point of refuge," and their depression was probably contributing to the mortality rate. Fifty, mostly children, had already died, mainly of influenza and malaria. [] regretted that it had little to offer by way of solutions but suggested that living standards could be ameliorated by injecting CIA money into the communal fund that the Hmong had already asked [] to administer.¹⁷ []

Preoccupied more with refuge for Vang Pao than with refugee welfare, Headquarters was working with the Immigration and Naturalization Service to find a legal way around the proscription of polygamists as resident aliens. Trying to get the general and his family admitted under the provisions of Public Law 110, it was on a steep learning curve as it tried to reconcile tribal ways

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with the strictures of both Thai and American law. [redacted]

[redacted]

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Diaspora [redacted]

Vang Pao and [redacted] now his escort, found a house for the family in Missoula, and the search for suitable farmland continued. But the trauma of defeat and wretched conditions at Nam Phong were taking their toll, even on a family as favored as that of the tribe's leader. One of the general's daughters attempted suicide by poison, and a son, only 16, shot himself in the face after being forbidden to marry a girl at the camp.¹⁹ [redacted]

Vang Pao, convinced that camp conditions were responsible for all this turmoil, was frantic to get back to Thailand. He wrote a desperate appeal to Prime Minister Kukrit, who replied with masterful Thai ambiguity, and the general was reduced to doing what he could by telephone to arrest the slump in morale at Nam Phong.²⁰ [redacted]

Persuaded now that he was "being given the run-around," the general talked wildly about simply giving up on the Agency and flying to Washington from Missoula to beg for help from Henry Kissinger and from his friends in Congress. Prolonged separation from most of his family and continuing reports of slow resettlement in Thailand provoked more spasms of despairing rage.²¹ [redacted]

With resettlement stymied by legal and diplomatic impediments, the Agency fell back on ceremony to try to restore Vang Pao's equanimity. On 15 December 1975, DCI William Colby bestowed the Distinguished Intelligence Medal on this "man without a country," as Ted Shackley described him. The

18 [redacted]

[redacted]

19 [redacted]

[redacted]

20 [redacted]

21 [redacted]

[redacted]

Surviving files do not specify how many of Vang Pao's family eventually joined him in the United States. [redacted]

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occasion fell something short of a reunion of comrades-in-arms, as neither Bill Lair nor Pat Landry was present. Nor was
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Meanwhile, a presidential determination of early August had acknowledged that many Laotian refugees were fated never to find new homes in Thailand. Skeptical of both the capability and the intentions of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees,

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At first hostile to any substantial Hmong immigration, most of official Washington came to accept it as an equitable solution to the refugee problem. The exception was Gen. Leonard Chapman, commissioner of the INS, who believed that most Hmong were "active in narcotics" as well as "culturally unadaptable." And he had a point: It was not long before Vang Pao, frustrated by intractable problems of assimilation afflicting the Hmong refugees already in the United States, began warning his people in Thailand against such relocation. Nevertheless, when INS finally softened its grudging stance on Hmong immigration, the flow increased, and some 35,000 arrived by mid-1980. ²⁴

Having at least formally abjured the practice of polygamy, Vang Pao became a US citizen in 1981.

²⁵

Hmong hostility toward the lowland Lao and their Vietnamese patrons did not die, and it appeared that well into the 1990s the Bouam Long enclave, for example, was still holding out. But Vang Pao's hopes to recapture the tribe's

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A later estimate put the Hmong population in the United States in 1989 at 100,000. (Ruth E. Hammond, "Sad Suspicion of a Refugee Ripoff," *Washington Post*, 16 April 1989.)

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homeland had never been more than pathetic fantasy. The end of the Cold War only confirmed the transformation of American purposes in Indochina that the defeat of 1975 had set in motion. []

The Laotian Legacy []

No one, Hmong or American, had anticipated the ferocity or the duration of the struggle that began in early 1961. Its cost to the Hmong in human life and in economic and social disruption, therefore, was equally unforeseen. The modest beginnings of the Hmong program reflected its modest aim: to preserve at least part of northeastern Laos from Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese domination. []

The limited objectives and surreptitious management of the early program, imposed by the imperative to preserve Laotian neutrality, were abetted by the structure and style of the instrument chosen to arm, train, and advise the Hmong irregulars. Bill Lair's self-effacing style [] encouraged the evolution of indigenous leadership. At the same time, the relatively easy assimilation [] into the Hmong community kept their visibility low even while their flexibility and multiple skills ensured a maximum return on their modest numbers. []

Only the unique circumstances governing the conflict in Laos permitted CIA to continue as the field manager of the paramilitary effort there. The Hmong program was still proving itself in the spring of 1961 when the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion inflicted a grievous blow to the Agency's reputation for competence in covert warfare. But the Kennedy administration wanted both Laotian neutrality and an effort to keep the "cork in the bottle," and the only way to square that circle was to let CIA run the Hmong program. The Agency would operate, however, under Department of State direction and specifically under an ambassador who would enjoy unprecedented authority over the agencies—State, Defense, USAID, USIS, and CIA—represented on his country team. Rather than presiding over an array of autonomous agencies, each with its Washington-based agenda, the ambassador would function more like a military commander, setting priorities and organizing resources on a missionwide basis.²⁶ []

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The experiment worked, thanks largely to the exceptional quality of the people involved both in Vientiane and upcountry. An extraordinarily cooperative style quickly evolved, in which USAID and Agency men collaborated in the field as well as in Vientiane to integrate their respective programs of refugee relief, economic and social development, and military security. They routinely and informally loaned each other aircraft and supplies to meet emergency needs, knowing that they could count on the ambassador to furnish protective cover when their masters in Washington questioned their departures from normal bureaucratic practice.

This kind of unified command applied, of course, only to the members of the ambassador's country team. Command authority at theater level, by contrast, was fragmented and by no means always marked by fraternal spirit. Military commanders frowned on civilian control of US military activity in Laos, while the ambassador's Vientiane team resented its status as a supplicant for military resources, especially airstrikes and air transport.

The ambassador's veto power over US ground operations into Laos from South Vietnam, consistently upheld by Washington, remained an irritant until the end of the war. Successive ambassadors and station chiefs doubted the US Army's ability to operate effectively in the Panhandle, either independently or in concert with the station irregulars. To them, the results seemed unlikely to compensate either for shredding the Geneva Agreement or for the consequences of defying Souvanna's refusal to have the RLG openly associated with operations in the Corridor. In these circumstances, a somewhat edgy, competitive relationship emerged, tempered but never fully dissipated by the recognition that everyone was fighting the same war.²⁷

Station officers in the field sometimes thought that the combination of policy restrictions and the prejudices of the ambassador and the COS in Vientiane resulted in wasted opportunities for useful joint operations. A few such opportunities may well have been lost, but it seems unlikely that more enthusiasm for them in Vientiane would have led to operations frequent and large enough to do much about NVA traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.²⁸

In any case, the major constraints on operations grew not out of competition between the Vientiane embassy and MACV but out of the terms of the Geneva Agreements of 1962. These forbade outside military intervention in Laos, but created no effective means of enforcing North Vietnamese compliance. At

²⁶ Douglas Blaufarb's superb study, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970*, provides much of the basis for the discussion here of the system's merits and defects.

²⁷ Tovar interview

²⁸ interviews.

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first enjoying both sanctuary on its own territory and immunity in Laos, Hanoi remained free to choose the level of engagement that served its strategic purposes, the primary of which was the annexation of South Vietnam. []

Laos played a relatively minor role in Hanoi's calculations until the 1964 decision to deploy NVA units into South Vietnam, and to expand Laotian lines of communication in order to infiltrate and supply them. Up to that point, CIA and Vang Pao had been able to concentrate on expanding and consolidating guerrilla forces in the mountains, challenging Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese influence over the hill tribes. Then, in 1965, the Johnson administration sent ground forces to save a prostrate Saigon government. With the Ho Chi Minh Trail now the main conduit for NVA men and materiel, Washington began to treat Laos in general—and the Hmong in particular—as instruments of its program in Vietnam. []

Even then, the United States never treated the Hmong as mere pawns, thrust into battle to serve American interests in Vietnam. If any of the Laotian irregulars could fairly be called mercenaries, they were the battalions raised in the Panhandle for use against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a target of little interest to the RLG. In the north, Vang Pao always remained at least an equal partner in tactical planning, and he inspired the most ambitious and least successful campaigns, sometimes over his advisers' objections. But it is difficult not to agree with Bill Nelson, who wrote more than a year before the 1973 cease-fire that, in the end, the Hmong would have been less badly off had they never chosen to cast their lot with the United States.²⁹ []

To most of the CIA people involved, abandoning the Hmong in the aftermath of defeat had been simply unimaginable. A few, however, seem to have feared such an outcome. Bill Lair recalled having wanted to preserve a leading role for [] out of fear that the United States would eventually weary of its commitment in Indochina. And [] remembered Bill Colby's strictures to the same effect. In their view, if the program's survival depended on American-style communications and logistics—and especially on massive air support—US withdrawal would bring on total collapse. Accordingly, they believed that a more modest, defensively oriented guerrilla effort, [] stood a better chance of discouraging Hanoi from investing the Hmong's highlands after the United States departed.³⁰ []

²⁹ Blaufarb's study echoes Nelson's sentiment []

³⁰ The prospects for a postwar resistance crumbled with Vang Pao's departure. Early CIA associates like Lair and [] saw the general as having, over the years, been seduced by high-level Washington attention into thinking of himself more as military commander than as tribal leader. Observers holding this opinion tended to see him as having abandoned his people when he fled Long Tieng in May 1975. []

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Bill Lair and like-minded colleagues remained a small minority. Most continued to indulge the unexamined assumption that US support of the Hmong would never be withdrawn as long as it was needed. This belief stemmed more from emotional identification with a brave but needy partner than from a sober view of American constancy toward client allies. It also bore a paternalistic tone; like the French before them, the Americans had adopted an oppressed hill people, whom they then cherished as one might a dependent child. The emotional tone of the relationship inhibited any tendency toward skepticism, and most CIA men dealing with the Hmong, from the impulsive Stuart Methven to the more reflective Hugh Tovar, took American fidelity entirely for granted.³¹

A different question, only occasionally addressed during the war, looms larger in retrospect. During the course of the war, nearly all the Americans involved—CIA and others—assumed that the impetus for escalation lay entirely with the North Vietnamese. Given Hanoi's need to use Laotian territory to infiltrate men and munitions into South Vietnam, this was hardly unreasonable. And in the Panhandle, the perception certainly reflected the fact: it was the vast expansion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex beginning in 1964 that prompted the creation of the Savannakhet and Pakse irregular battalions.

The causal sequence of the gradual escalation in the north is less clear. There is no doubt that the origin of the conflict lay in Hanoi's decisions first to support the Pathet Lao against the RLG and then to violate Laotian sovereignty with the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And it was Hanoi that, in 1963, began the piecemeal abrogation of the Geneva Agreements. But even as early as mid-1961, State had pointed out that a proposed guerrilla expansion south of Luang Prabang would give the communists, still superior in numbers, a "pretext for more aggressive activity." The precise scope of the enemy's territorial ambitions being always obscure, any preemptive move by Vientiane always had the potential to attract an enemy commitment that might otherwise not be made.

It is true that after 1963 the North Vietnamese had reasons, more or less independent of the scale of RLG operations, to expand their military commitment in northeastern Laos. As Hugh Tovar noted, they had to protect the northern entry points into the Trail, and security forces would naturally grow along with the volume of the traffic. In addition, there were the Chinese, whose ant-like roadbuilding southward toward the Mekong might have been seen by Hanoi as a threat to its hegemony in northern Laos.³²

³¹ Methven, Tovar interviews.

³² Tovar interview

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Nevertheless, some CIA managers speculated that escalation pressures were reciprocal and that Hanoi might have defensive considerations of its own. [redacted]

[redacted] But he thought that this escalation may well have provoked fear in Hanoi of a US airborne operation to seize the Plain of Jars as a staging point from which to threaten North Vietnam itself. On this view, the NVA's subsequent deployment of its superior 130mm field gun and additional infantry might have been preemptive moves designed mainly to preserve the status quo in MR 2. [redacted]

Successive NVA sieges of Long Tieng looked to the defenders and their advisers like attempts, not merely to keep the Hmong penned up below the Plain of Jars, but to extinguish the Hmong resistance once and for all. Doug Blaufarb, by contrast, saw an almost automatic tit-for-tat process of mutual escalation, in which any increased investment by either side tended to look to the other like an effort to achieve a definitive change in the strategic balance. Like [redacted] Blaufarb credited the possibility that Hanoi saw the Hmong presence in Sam Neua, still expanding in 1967, and the TSQ-81 bomber guidance system at Phou Pha Thi as presaging an American leapfrog operation into North Vietnam. To him, no other answer seemed to account for the scale of the NVA's commitment, in the face of grievous losses inflicted by US airpower, against a guerrilla army that itself posed no threat to North Vietnamese territory.³³ [redacted]

And if Hanoi's subsequent testimony is to be believed, the NVA command did, in fact, see the irregulars in northeastern Laos—supported by US combat air [redacted]—as a genuine threat to North Vietnamese territory. As early as 1962, tribal unrest led by Hmong dissidents in Nghe An Province, bordering Xieng Khouang, seems to have made Vang Pao look to Hanoi like a threat to the DRV's territorial integrity. Recollections of French encouragement of minority separatism made it easy to see the unrest as revealing a device by which “the American imperialists and their lackeys” would seek to control and exploit “reactionaries among the tribes on both sides of the border to sabotage the revolution in both Vietnam and Laos.”³⁴ [redacted]

³³ Blaufarb recalled having advanced this heterodox theory shortly after the war to former assistant secretary of state William Bundy, one of the Kennedy administration's architects of Indochina policy. A proponent of the conventional view that American programs invariably responded to communist aggression, Bundy was “aghast” to hear it suggested that even communists might act for reasons of preemption or defense. He did not, however, in Blaufarb's recollection, offer any rebuttal. (Blaufarb interview.) [redacted]

³⁴ Nguyen Hung Linh and Hoang Mac, *Anti-Reactionary Forces: Chronology of Events (1954-1975)*, trans. Merle Pribbenow, 210. [redacted]

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There seem to have been mirror-image perceptions of the importance of the Plain of Jars. An NVA military history prefaces a discussion of Operation this way:

The Plain of Jars was a strategic area, an extremely important location not just because of its vital military, political, and economic influence on the life or death of all nationalities in Laos, both in the short-term and over the long-term, but also because it was a strategic theater in the resistance war against the American imperialists throughout the Indochinese peninsula. It was an extremely important supporting theater, intimately connected to the preservation of the security of the Vietnamese-Lao border area and our strategic supply line from our rear area in North Vietnam to support all the theaters in the war against the Americans.

The Americans considered the Plain of Jars as the key to Laos . . . By taking the Plain of Jars, the United States hoped to change the balance of forces in its favor, to maintain the upper hand militarily to resolve the situation in Laos, to support the implementation of the "Vietnamization" doctrine in South Vietnam, to threaten the western border of North Vietnam, and to carry out a strategy of "long range defense" to protect the US-Thai line of defense along the Mekong and to protect the nerve center of Vang Pao's bandit army at Long Tieng.

This account mistimes the entry into northeast Laos, and ignores what we have already seen to be the adventitious quality of Vang Pao's victories in 1969. But it may well represent a genuine estimate of the importance of the Plain of Jars. It may also reflect a belief that Washington intended the irregular operations of that period to create a decisive strategic advantage capable of serious damage both to the DRV's territorial integrity and to its ability to support the war in South Vietnam.³⁵

Hanoi's approach to the war in northeast Laos can also be seen as reflecting, at least in part, a doctrinal preoccupation with maintaining an offensive posture. This can, at times, look like nothing more than a rhetorical tic, as in General Giap's description of the NVA reaction, necessarily defensive, to US bombing and commando raids on North Vietnamese territory:

We have turned the enemy's attacks into passive reactions to our attacks, neutralizing or reducing the effects of his attacks, while our side constantly has aggressively taken the initiative in attacking the enemy.³⁶

³⁵ Dao Trong Lich, Do Van Nhai, and Tran Thu, *Northwest: History of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation (1954-1975)*, trans. Merle Pribbenow, 268.

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Nevertheless, the insistence on holding the initiative, framing as it does the entire North Vietnamese discourse on the war, may account, at least in part, for the willingness to commit resources and absorb losses well in excess of the immediate gains to be expected from major offensive operations on and around the Plain of Jars.

With Hanoi's perceptions even now not entirely clear, it may be that more attention to them at the time would have had little effect on American strategic thinking. Be that as it may, there seems never to have been much discussion of strategic purpose in Vientiane recalled that, to the extent he and his colleagues thought about the objective in Laos, they saw it as one of buying time while the conflict in Vietnam played itself out. Meanwhile, their job was to keep the NVA out of the Mekong Valley, divert communist forces from South Vietnam, and inflict what disruption they could on Ho Chi Minh Trail logistics.

In MR 2, these aims had to be pursued under certain constraints, of which the superiority of North Vietnamese infantry and artillery, only partly offset by tactical airpower, was just one. Another, the inseparability of the Hmong irregulars from their families, meant that the war in northeast Laos diverged sharply from classical guerrilla practice and eventually became a struggle for territorial control. As the NVA escalated its commitment, especially after late 1967, Hmong dependents concentrated on gradually shrinking enclaves. These lay mostly in the so-called Meo heartland south and west of Long Tieng, where their protection became one of Vang Pao's principal objectives. In this respect, irregular warfare in MR 2 differed sharply from the insurgency in South Vietnam, where most of the peasantry remained in the villages, fought over and proselytized—and subject to coercion—by both sides.

Operations in the Panhandle more nearly resembled the war in South Vietnam, with the irregular battalions conducting the equivalent of sweeps against Viet Cong strongholds and lines of communication, and the Se Done Valley project imitating the Vietnamese village defense programs. Especially before the reverses that began in late 1967, CIA managers of the war in Laos sometimes prided themselves on the discovery of a new paradigm for guerrilla warfare. The new model substituted airpower, both tactical and transport, for the inherent limitations of tribal guerrillas. Its weakness lay in its failure to acknowledge the unique combination of circumstances that made it successful in Laos: total air supremacy, the presence of a charismatic indigenous leader in the northeast, Laotian acquiescence in American control of the Panhandle units, and the limited objectives of an enemy stronger on the ground.

³⁶ Vo Nguyen Giap, *Liberation War and War to Defend the Nation*, trans. Merle Pribbenow, 462. I am also indebted to Mr. Pribbenow for calling to my attention the importance of the strategic initiative in NVA doctrine

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The pervasive ambiguities of the sideshow in Laos preclude any confident judgment about its relationship to the timing of the decision in South Vietnam. It is one thing to note that, at their peak, NVA forces in northeastern Laos alone reached the equivalent of three divisions and that, after the Laotian cease-fire, two of them—the 312th and the 316th—returned to Vietnam to spearhead the final drive on Saigon. It is another and more dubious thing to infer that Hanoi could not have deployed these forces earlier to South Vietnam, or that they were indispensable to turning the tide there at the beginning of 1975.³⁷

It remains that when the cease-fire came into effect in February 1973, the Royal Laotian Government controlled nearly as much territory and represented at least as many people as it did when the Geneva Agreements were signed in 1962. When Saigon fell on 30 April 1975, Vang Pao still ruled the mountains southwest of the Plain of Jars. In addition, Operation Lam Son 719 aside, CIA had run the only serious ground incursions into Hanoi's supply corridor in the Panhandle. Its flexibility—tactical, logistic, and managerial—and the economy of its effort represent admirable features of the Agency's performance in Laos. But no amount of American aid or advice could make the Lao the masters of their own fate. If their unfortunate country began the war as a dependency of the United States, it finished it as a pawn of the regime in Hanoi.

³⁷ Jim Glerum.

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CHRONOLOGY



1954

May — French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

July — Geneva Accords signed, establishing the Viet Minh-controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi and a provisional noncommunist regime in Saigon.

1957

November — Souvanna Phouma named Laotian prime minister.

1958

May — Communist Pathet Lao victory in parliamentary elections.

August — Souvanna forced out of office by US economic pressure.

1960

August — Mutiny by 2nd Parachute Battalion led by its commander, Capt. Kong Le; Souvanna Phouma restored as prime minister.

14 December — US-supported units under Col. Phoumi Nosavan retake Vientiane after Souvanna Phouma flight to Cambodia.

1961

January — First airdrop of ordnance to Hmong irregulars at Pa Dong, south of the Plain of Jars.

Mid-1961 — Creation of upper Panhandle program

1962

Early 1962 — Creation of Kha program in lower Panhandle and multiethnic units in the northwest.

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July — Geneva Agreements on Laos concluded, their implementation to be completed within 90 days.

1963

April — North Vietnamese attack Kong Le neutralists on the Plain of Jars.

1 November — Military coup deposes Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon.

1964

April — Abortive coup against Souvanna Phouma by Phoumi Nosavan.

7 August — Joint congressional Tonkin Gulf Resolution authorizing US military action against North Vietnam.

October — Creation of village defense program in lower Panhandle.

1965

March — US Marines deploy to Da Nang, South Vietnam.

March — New Hmong SGU battalions take most of Sam Neua Province.

December — NVA dry-season offensive.

1966

February — First battle of Na Khang; Vang Pao wounded.

December — First deployment of radio with roadwatch teams.

1967

January — Second battle of Na Khang; high point of RLG territorial control in MR 2.

Early 1962 — Creation of Panhandle SGU battalions and cancellation of village defense program in the southern Panhandle.

1968

21 January — NVA siege of US Marines at Khe Sanh.

30-31 January — Tet offensive in South Vietnam.

11 March — Phou Pha Thi falls; loss of USAF bomber guidance system.

12 May — Beginning of US-DRV peace negotiations.

December — Operation

1969

First US troop withdrawals under "Vietnamization" policy.

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~~SECRET//MR~~*Chronology*

August–September — Operation [redacted] in MR 2.

September — Operation [redacted] in the Panhandle.

1970

February — First of a series of White House–mandated harassment operations in North Vietnam.

March — First siege of Long Tieng, [redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted]

August–October — Operation COUNTERPUNCH.

29 August — Launching of the South Laos Interdiction Program.

[redacted]

1971

January — Operation [redacted] in the Panhandle.

8 February — Launching of Operation LAM SON 719.

February — Second siege of Long Tieng.

July — Operation [redacted] in the Panhandle.

December — Expulsion of RLG [redacted] from the Plain of Jars.

1972

January–April — Third siege of Long Tieng.

March — NVA Easter offensive in South Vietnam.

15 June — Operation [redacted] in the Panhandle.

6 August — Operation [redacted] in MR 2.

18 December — First airstrikes in “Christmas bombing” of Hanoi and Haiphong.

1973

23 January — The United States, North Vietnam, the Saigon government, and the National Liberation Front sign cease-fire agreement.

21 February — RLG and NHLS sign cease-fire agreement.

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Chronology

1974

5 April — Agreement on composition of a Provisional Government of National Union for Laos.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

1975

1 May — Fall of Saigon.

14 May — Evacuation of Vang Pao from Long Tieng.

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APPENDIX

The Narcotics Question

Beginning in the early 1970s, allegations of CIA complicity in the illegal narcotics traffic helped fuel public opposition to the surreptitious US effort in Laos. They acquired enough currency to encourage a long series of such attacks, and almost a quarter-century after war's end the Agency was fighting off charges of similar involvement in Latin America. Although the Agency's record of the war in Laos provides no evidence of any such activity, one cannot prove a negative, and no such proof is attempted here.

The most influential set of allegations against the Agency's handling of the narcotics issue in Laos—and elsewhere in Southeast Asia—did not accuse CIA or any of its officers of direct participation in the trade. Alfred W. McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, first published in 1972, faulted CIA instead for complicity in trafficking by several of the indigenous allies it had recruited to help shore up anticommunist dominoes. And it is probably fair to say that the Agency, like the rest of the US government, paid relatively little attention to the traffic as a target of either intelligence or counteraction until the heroin epidemic struck US troops in South Vietnam.

Until then, countermeasures were aimed more at insulating the Agency from the traffic than at suppressing it. Throughout the war, CIA performed an uneasy balancing act, trying to keep its skirts clean while exploiting the military potential of the hill peoples that constituted the only buffer to Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese ascendancy in northern Laos. Even after the epidemic in South Vietnam gave a quantum boost to the antidrug priority, narcotics production continued in sometimes uncomfortably close proximity to the irregular forces managed by CIA. Indeed, at least one of its tribal leaders—the Yao chieftain Chao La—was personally engaged in the trade until Agency pressure apparently drove him out of it. Given the enduring tension between the paramilitary project and the rising imperative to suppress the drug traffic, it seems appropriate to summarize the record of CIA's handling of the narcotics question in Laos.¹

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The hill tribes of northern Laos, like those in neighboring Thailand and Burma, had long engaged in growing poppies and producing and selling opium. In Laos, at least, no statute prohibited this until 1971, when under US pressure the Laotian government declared the traffic illegal. When case officer Stuart Methven set out to explore tribal resistance potential in the northwest in early 1961, he discovered that opium was the tribesmen's "mainstay" commercial crop.²

The so-called war on drugs in the United States was still years away, but even so, this constituted an obvious impediment to an association with the tribesmen. Looking for a way around the problem, Methven chanced upon a Catholic missionary in Luang Prabang. The priest told him of the French practice of buying Hmong loyalty along with the tribe's opium production, and Methven suggested to Headquarters that, until "adequate [crop] substitutes" were introduced, the United States might do the same.

Headquarters consulted the US Narcotics Bureau, which reacted with an "unequivocal negative." There was no legal market for the crop, the Bureau said, and in any case, it would fetch a better price in the illegal trade. Purchase by the Agency would result only in greater total production, and the station was instructed to table Methven's suggestion.³

The creation of the Hmong resistance in Military Region 2 had just begun, at that point, and prohibited allowing the tribesmen to carry opium onto any US-chartered aircraft. Only large packages were inspected, and it was understood that small quantities, destined for local consumption, might well move between upcountry sites. But the prohibition on commercial trafficking was unequivocal, and Vang Pao's case officers made clear to him that any Hmong involvement in the opium traffic risked ending the Agency's support of the resistance.⁴

¹ This appendix summarizes material only from the interviews and file material used in preparing this history of the irregular warfare program. It does not, therefore, constitute a comprehensive study of CIA knowledge of, or possible operational or intelligence contact with, parties to the illicit narcotics traffic in Laos.

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⁴ Author's recollection.

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~~SECRET//MR~~THE NARCOTICS QUESTION

In the early years, the narcotics traffic was not the subject of any intelligence requirement, nor was tasked with suppressing consumption among the Hmong. was required to report any information on the subject that came to its attention, but CIA interest in the subject was focused on ensuring that project assets—indigenous and American—abstained from participating in the commercial traffic.⁵

Considerations of military necessity persuaded successive and ambassadors in Vientiane—also CIA Headquarters and presumably the State Department—to ignore the participation of local chieftains known or suspected of being involved in the traffic. One such was a Hmong named Lao Chu, a prominent opium producer in Sayaboury Province. Although there were few other Hmong in the area, his wealth had made him the de facto area leader, and in 1962 he raised a militia, supported by of 375 men. It appears that his influence faded as his nominal subordinates transferred their loyalty to advising them.⁶

Vang Pao's leadership depended partly on maintaining an alliance with the Ly clan, headed by Touby Lyfoung,

suspected that Vang Pao had cemented the alliance by ceding to Touby the handling of whatever opium might be moving from Long Tieng to Vientiane. Replying to queries from Headquarters in about 1964, noted that the evidence for this was entirely circumstantial; it included Vang Pao's delegating to Touby the management of his Pioneer aircraft, used to bring consumer goods from Vientiane to Long Tieng. In any case, saw little commercial potential around Long Tieng. By 1963, the poppy fields there had been converted to corn, and the more numerous fields around the Plain of Jars were under enemy control.⁷

If Vang Pao did allow Touby a free hand, he firmly resisted efforts by FAR officers to use project aircraft for commercial purposes that included transporting opium. A cable from mid-1963 gives an example of an apparently successful effort to cut off their access to an American-supplied Porter aircraft.⁸

⁵ Landry interview.

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⁷ interview. No correspondence with Headquarters on this topic has been found.

A US narcotics agent named Taylor, visiting Vientiane to try to make a drug arrest, identified Touby as a direct participant, with Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, in a transaction involving 100 kilograms of opium. Vang Pao asserted that Touby's role was peripheral, more as an accessory than as a principal.

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Appendix

[REDACTED]

In September 1963, Vang Pao described to Bill Lair the status of the opium market, asserting that 90 percent of the traffic through Laos originated in China and Burma. Only half a ton was on hand in MR 2, and production was declining further as the tribesmen responded to Vang Pao's 1965 deadline for the termination of all production. Vang Pao thought this goal achievable if the irregular forces continued to be paid and remained in the market for food commodities.¹⁰ [REDACTED]

Vang Pao's analysis may have left out of the account some disgruntled *naikhong*, clan chiefs loyal to Touby who had been displaced by the increasing dominance of an evolving Hmong military leadership. A CIA study found that these chiefs had "turned to commerce with a vengeance," doing business with Touby's family in opium. As of spring 1964, Vang Pao was keeping "most of them" at Phao Khao, and was rigidly controlling the aircraft serving that site. Nevertheless, according to the study, these *naikhong* "still exerted influence [not further described] in Long Tieng."¹¹ [REDACTED]

From 1964 to 1968, the station was led by Douglas Blaufarb and then by Ted Shackley. According to Blaufarb, the opium trade was neither an enforcement problem nor a formal intelligence target during his tenure, which ended in 1966. Gen. Ouane Rathikoun was generally regarded as monopolizing the Laotian narcotics traffic, but Washington never encouraged or even authorized any interference with it. Blaufarb never received any credible allegation of drug trafficking by either Agency or Air America/Bird & Sons personnel.¹² [REDACTED]

Ted Shackley recalled having been sensitized to the drug problem while running the anti-Castro Cuban project and described himself as "fanatical" about preventing the diversion of any CIA resources into supporting narcotics trafficking. Like Blaufarb, he said he never saw credible information about collusion by any American personnel under station jurisdiction.¹³ [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED]

10 [REDACTED]

11 [REDACTED]

12 Blaufarb interview. [REDACTED]

13 Shackley interview [REDACTED]

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By mid-1968, when Larry Devlin was preparing to replace Shackley, the first allegations of CIA participation in narcotics trafficking had already appeared. As Devlin recalled it, *Rolling Stone* magazine had just accused the Agency of financing its Laotian operations with proceeds from heroin trafficking. Upon his departure, new DDP Tom Karamessines told him that many mistakes could be forgiven, but failure to prevent any Agency involvement in the traffic would cost him his job. Devlin wound up with nine people from the Office of Security, most of them assigned to keep narcotics off CIA-controlled aircraft.¹⁴

Devlin put his emphasis on the only traffic of commercial importance, that which took opium or heroin out of Laos into the international market. Field case officers were under instruction to be on the alert for commercial-scale movement between or from upcountry sites, but most physical searches were of aircraft leaving Laos. A well-intentioned acting chief of security once proposed a sting operation, with narcotics on an Air America plane going to Saigon used to lure traffickers there into a trap. Devlin imagined the press hysteria that would result if word got out about drugs moving on the CIA's airline, and he rejected the idea on the spot.¹⁵

Field officers encountered occasional tension between the proscription on commercial trafficking and the tolerance of narcotics use by the tribesmen themselves. Vang Pao strongly discouraged the use of opium by the able-bodied, and any smoker would be ostracized. Even a clan chief would incur the penalty of being denied any real command responsibility. But Vang Pao tolerated opium smoking by the elderly, who used it as an analgesic against such things as chronic dental pain and cancer.¹⁶

recalled becoming interested in the opium question after camping once on an extraordinarily beautiful poppy field on Phou Pha Thi. He inquired about cultivation, use, etc., and was thus alert to any indications of a commercial traffic to the outside world. Despite the easy availability of the drug and its common use among the Hmong and other tribes, said he never encountered any evidence that CIA people participated in or allowed any such traffic. To be sure, not every Hmong or Lao passenger was searched before boarding an aircraft. Some pathetic refugee might be carrying a bundle shaped rather like an opium brick and still be allowed on a plane. But could see, not only no systematic commerce, but no suggestion whatever of malfeasance by either CIA officers or American aircrews.¹⁷

¹⁴ Devlin interview.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ interview; interview.

¹⁷ interview.

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The recollection of Jim Glerum regarding the emergence of narcotics as an intelligence and enforcement priority differs from that of Larry Devlin by about a year. Glerum remembered Washington as displaying little interest in the question until about 1969, the first year of the Nixon administration. But even before that, [] had been making a conscious and continuous effort to stay on top of the subject, mainly to ensure that Hmong or other project units were not using US assets, especially air transport, to move illicit opium. The upcountry units were aware of this interest—case officers were required, for example, to enforce the prohibition on opium aboard Air America and CASI planes—and sometime in late 1968 or early 1969, [] reported the progress through Laos of an opium caravan from China.¹⁸ []

[] thought the information detailed and authoritative enough to merit dissemination, and put it on the wire. Headquarters reacted with a yawn, wondering in its evaluation of the report why [] had even bothered with it. []

Headquarters had expressed no more interest, at the time, in covering Lao-tian military involvement in the traffic. Vientiane station [] regarded FAR, from Gen. Ouane Rathikoun on down, as “up to its ears” in the opium trade. But information on specific transactions, let alone comprehensive coverage, would have demanded a major clandestine collection effort. At this point, the topic did not enjoy that high a priority. []

In any case, CIA officers in Vientiane [] saw little chance that the Hmong could contribute to the heroin traffic even if they wanted to. High-grade, No. 4 opium was required for conversion into heroin, and Laotian opium, in Glerum’s understanding, never reached that level. The result was that most of the Hmong product went to feed the habit of smokers in Laos. And the volume of Hmong production in any case remained small, with most of the poppies grown by individual users or petty traffickers. [] knew of just one commercial-scale enterprise, and that was at Bouam Long, in northern Xieng Khouang Province. []

In the view of [] officers, the tenacious defense of Bouam Long by Hmong leader Cher Pao Moua and his irregulars owed something to their determination not to lose this source of income. [] also assumed that the Bouam Long defenders would exploit any access to CIA-sponsored liaison

¹⁸ Material dealing with the emergence of Nixon administration concern about narcotics, including Bouam Long and the Nam Yu raid and its aftermath, is from Jim Glerum. Other recollections of CIA managers and case officers differ on such points as the prevalence of poppy fields in the mountains of MR 2, the ultimate size of the Office of Security contingent, the significance of Burma as a point of origin or a destination of drug shipments, the suitability of Laotian opium as a heroin base, and the chronology of the emerging priority of the drug traffic as an intelligence target. []

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and supply flights, but and other officers stationed there at other times, made sure that if opium found its way aboard, it was in quantities so small that a body search would have been required to find it.

Headquarters demonstrated its indifference to the subject of the opium traffic in an episode that unfolded during the first year of the Nixon administration. got a detailed report on the location of a heroin refinery near the Burmese border. being absent, radioed asking permission to land a squad of irregulars to confirm its presence. Jim Glerum, approved a reconnaissance mission on the condition that the helicopter would withdraw if it took any fire.

and a squad of irregulars—perhaps Yao, perhaps Lu, as the Shan were known on the Laotian side of the border with Burma—climbed aboard the helicopter and headed north. The huts alleged to house the refinery looked deserted, and the helicopter settled in for a landing in a nearby clearing. A few startled traffickers, probably including Chinese chemists, emerged from the huts and dashed into the surrounding jungle. As predicted, the site sheltered chemicals and equipment for heroin production. The squad loaded on the helicopter as much apparatus as could be carried, and destroyed the rest.

report of this impromptu drug raid drew a sharp rebuke in a cable from the Office of General Counsel. The mission represented a gross “violation of property rights,” as Jim Glerum recalled its wording, and was under no circumstances to be repeated. But the Nixon White House had by now begun to worry about heroin consumption in South Vietnam. Perhaps responding to this concern, or maybe to avoid the appearance of covering up a mistake, Headquarters had sent report to the national security adviser. Less than 24 hours after the lawyers’ reproach, another cable reached expressing President Nixon’s admiration for the raid. Headquarters now thought to dramatize the affair by displaying the captured paraphernalia, which Nam Yu forwarded for shipment to Washington.

This episode marked the emergence of the narcotics traffic as a collection priority, and intensified efforts to keep the Agency and its air transport contractors clean. Beginning in 1970, or perhaps late 1969, at least one and sometimes two men from the Office of Security were stationed with the project and charged primarily with drug interdiction.

An episode similar to the raid out of Nam Yu took place a little later at Na Khang. remembered that fellow case officer had spotted a suspicious package being stowed on a Laotian air force T-28. This sparked a helicopter reconnaissance that spotted an anomalous building out in the jungle, and the party descended for a look. Finding a level spot, they landed

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nearby and headed for the building. Its occupants had obviously departed in haste, for heroin was cooking as they entered. From a safe distance, [] and company fired M-79 grenades into the building until one hit the container of ether used in the refining process, and the lab went up in a fireball. [] took photos that, he said later, appeared on American television.¹⁹ []

[] never saw any poppy fields at Na Khang itself or any other evidence of opium production or trafficking there. Black opium paste was available at the market at Long Tieng, presumably for local consumption. During the year he flew out of Long Tieng, he saw one poppy field. He could not remember where; it was not at Bouam Long. []

As Jim Glerum believed, Laotian opium may not have been suitable for conversion into heroin. Nevertheless, at least once, the Vientiane station paramilitary program encountered an effort to exploit one of its units as a transit point. []

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By late 1970, when Hugh Tovar took over the station, the heroin plague had spread from South Vietnam to the United States, and he recalled narcotics becoming a hot political issue. White House staffer Egil Krogh once visited Vientiane, and his zeal to promote the government's campaign against drug traffic led him to question any further Mission dealings with the likes of Yao leader Chao La. It seemed to the COS that Krogh was edging toward proscription even of further Agency support to Vang Pao, but the centrality of Vang Pao's role—and presumably the absence of evidence of personal involvement in the traffic—prevented this from coming to a head.²² []

An influential book on the Southeast Asian drug trade published in 1972 drew close Agency scrutiny. A review done for CIA's General Counsel judged *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* to be "solidly researched and elabo-

¹⁹ [] interview. []

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rately documented." Quoting the introductory chapter, it noted that McCoy rejected the notion of direct CIA participation in the traffic:

Unlike some national intelligence agencies [i.e., the French], the CIA did not dabble in the drug traffic to finance its clandestine operations. Nor was its culpability the work of a few corrupt agents, eager to share in the enormous profits.²³

McCoy made numerous allegations of Air America complicity in the traffic, but of the Agency itself said only that "CIA's role in the heroin traffic was simply an inadvertent but inevitable consequence of its cold war tactics." If by that he meant intelligence and paramilitary activity conducted with indigenous officials alleged or even, on occasion, accepted to be principals in the traffic, he was right. If he meant indifference to or even passive collusion with that traffic, he would seem, from the surviving record, to be mistaken. It does appear that defensive measures aimed at preventing CIA resources from being exploited by traffickers were conducted on an active, if informal, basis until the late 1960s. After that, enjoined to impose a more formal regime of countermeasures, the station moved to systematize its defensive program.²⁴

Vang Pao was visiting Washington in June 1972 when the station heard that one of his associates, a Hmong National Assembly deputy named Mua Su, was using one of the general's vehicles to transport opium. Headquarters accepted Vang Pao's protestations of ignorance, and forwarded to Vientiane his message urging the prime minister to investigate and, if evidence was discovered, arrest the miscreant.²⁵

Case officer remembered hillsides of brilliant red poppies as a common sight from the air. He assumed that some small part of the opium product found its way to the indigenous lowland market, but he never saw any indication that Vang Pao or any other Hmong leaders were parties to commercial narcotics traffic.²⁶

²² Tovar interview. The COS recalled another visit, that of a congressional staffer named Brady, in about August 1972. Brady interviewed Ouane Rathikoun, who denied—as he had to Tovar—any role in the narcotics traffic. In this connection, Tovar recalled Alfred McCoy's assertion, in his book, that Ouane had confessed to running a heroin laboratory. Given Ouane's steadfast denials to US officials, Tovar thought this claim an invention, one designed to bolster McCoy's thesis of American tolerance of trafficking by indigenous allies. On the other hand, it appears that in late 1973, Ouane admitted to a Laotian newspaper to having controlled the opium traffic through Laos on behalf of General Phoumi during 1962–64, at the time when the United States was pressuring Phoumi with threats of reduced aid in order to get him to accept the coalition government.

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²⁶ interview

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The topic was not an intelligence target—the mission of upcountry people was to help run the war—and [redacted] impressions were based solely on casual observation. But widespread addiction among the troops would have created an enormous problem, and he never saw evidence of this in the Hmong force, [redacted]

What he did see suggested to him that Vang Pao was actively opposed to commercial trafficking even as he wanted opium to remain available to those Hmong for whom it was the only refuge from pain. At one point, USAID officials visited Long Tieng, and [redacted] was present as they proposed to Vang Pao a crop-substitution program that would replace the poppy fields. By way of response, Vang Pao led them to the front porch of his house, where three or four painfully thin, jaundiced addicts, dressed in rags, lay passively on the floor. Opium was all they had, he said. If Americans built a hospital to take care of the underlying medical needs of such people, he would cheerfully cooperate to eradicate the drug. [redacted]

The AID men went home, and [redacted] heard no more about crop substitution. He was inclined to accept that Vang Pao had not used the elderly addicts as a pretext to protect a commercial traffic in the drug. When the AID mission appeared, Vang Pao had already banned flights into Hmong strips by an American entrepreneur, flying an old C-47, who was widely suspected of picking up opium consignments. [redacted]

New allegations against Yao leader Chao La surfaced in August 1972, and Headquarters called for a thorough review of the station's exposure to charges of complicity in the drug traffic. Washington feared that

among existing Station [controlled] assets, overt contacts, and collaborators there may be more "Chao La" types whose past or present drug related activities, if surfaced, could cause further embarrassment to CIA. We want to be in position to protect ourselves from charges of guilt by association and from charges that CIA looked the other way and permitted the activity to continue.²⁷ [redacted]

Headquarters noted the declining level of tolerance in Washington for any association, however innocent or operationally productive, with contacts who were vulnerable to charges of illicit dealings. Henceforth, the station would have to keep Headquarters advised even of "those who could indirectly cause embarrassment because of their or their families' association with CIA."²⁸ [redacted]

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A companion cable, "written at Helms' explicit direction," ordered the station to

end once and for all any association with Chao La or his subordinates that can be used in any way to perpetuate the innuendo the CIA is involved, through association with Chao La, in the drug business. It matters little that this charge is utterly false. It also matters little that it is impossible to prove in court that Chao La is directly involved. What does matter is that we can no longer tolerate any connection or association that can be twisted into an insinuation or charge of CIA involvement in drugs or with people who traffic in drugs. This is a matter of extreme importance requiring prompt and decisive action, even if such action requires unprecedented moves to pressure (or terminate association with) individuals who have long been associated with anticommunist guerrilla efforts in Laos.

Headquarters wanted Chao La confronted with information on his acknowledged possession of opium and ordered either to turn it in "without any quibbling over reimbursement from anyone or [to] face the consequences." These included closing and urging the cancellation of all USAID assistance to the area. Leaving no room for interpretation, Headquarters made it explicit that "the anticommunist war effort that we have been supporting in northwest Laos triangle area is secondary by far to our achieving the desired results and we are willing to face a total pullout in this particular area if necessary."²⁹

wondered aloud what had so suddenly forced Headquarters' attention on Chao La, whose participation in the drug trade had long been alleged. Maybe it was the quantity—over three tons—of opium whose destruction Chao La had just proposed to the prime minister. pointed out that, at best, cutting off Chao La and demobilizing all the irregulars from the northwest would do nothing to change the record for the time covered in McCoy's allegations. But assured Headquarters that he was not fighting the problem; he had on his own initiative already undertaken to deliver an ultimatum identical to the one he'd received from Washington.³⁰

A month later, in September, the opium question came head-to-head with the Agency's core responsibility of intelligence collection. who was furnishing the product of intelligence teams directed at the "Pathet Lao infrastructure" in MR 1. Headquarters ordered the agent terminated because of opium purchases being made by his teams. argued that these small

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transactions—a maximum of 30 kilos per month, and only as cover for action—were made by team members not supported by CIA and were known to and controlled by FAR. [redacted]

[redacted] In any case, the liaison relationship would presumably have to continue [redacted] and the risk of being tarred with the narcotics brush would not be substantially reduced.³¹ [redacted]

Tovar took Washington's logic one step further. If the official connection was also to be severed, then all liaison with FAR in MR 1 should go, too. That, in turn, would mean the end of the Nam Yu irregulars, who depended on a cooperative relationship with FAR. Hoping to avoid such a drastic solution, [redacted] offered to get [redacted] to terminate all team personnel either currently or formerly involved in opium purchases. This would materially reduce the program's intelligence potential but would leave the agent something to work with. Headquarters accepted the bargain, on the condition that [redacted] explicitly agree to cease any and all participation in the traffic.³² [redacted]

Headquarters had asserted as a "fundamental fact" that Chao La's people depended on the opium trade to sustain themselves, and argued that this required cutting the connection with him. [redacted] replied that the same fact applied to many Hmong, Lao Theung, and other ethnic minorities supplying manpower to the irregulars. Did this mean that Headquarters wanted him to abolish the whole program? Before mandating any such move, it should take into account that one regiment-size unit currently supporting Vang Pao's Operation [redacted] was composed mostly of Yao.³⁴ [redacted]

Washington reacted with surprise to the assertion that tribesmen other than the Yao depended on the traffic. Elsewhere, it had believed, production served only local demand. Asking for Tovar's comment on this, Headquarters went on to offer a compromise on Chao La and the other tribes. So long as the troops themselves did not participate in the traffic in any way, the fact that rel-

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atives "in the jungle" might be growing opium would not require demobilization of affected units. Tovar's reply to this has not been found, but he presumably seized on the suggested compromise, and increased his emphasis on keeping the troops quarantined from the opium traffic.³⁵

The compromise formula offered by Washington appears to have ended the tortured argument over the mutually exclusive goals of total quarantine from the drug traffic and maximum paramilitary exploitation of tribal manpower. No other material has been found that refers to any CIA association with parties alleged or known to be involved in commercial narcotics production, distribution, or sale.

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SOURCE NOTE AND SUGGESTED READING

This volume is the fourth in my series about CIA participation in the Second Indochina War. As with the first three, I have benefited from unrestricted access to Directorate of Operations files. Another invaluable source has been the Department of State's *Foreign Relations of the United States*, and the work of authors such as Douglas Blaufarb and Kenneth Conboy has been most helpful. Finally, key participants have been extraordinarily generous with their time. I am grateful to all my interview subjects, and especially to Bill Lair and Jim Glerum, whose long tenure in key positions in Laos made them the targets of repeated requests for more information and interpretation. Former chiefs of station Doug Blaufarb, Ted Shackley, Larry Devlin, and Hugh Tovar were also most helpful. The other station officers interviewed for this story are acknowledged in the narrative. But I am keenly aware that their help is largely responsible for whatever success this account has in conveying the flavor of the enterprise.

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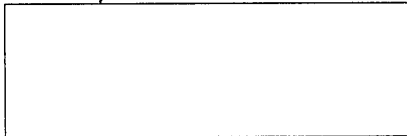
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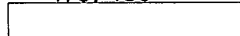
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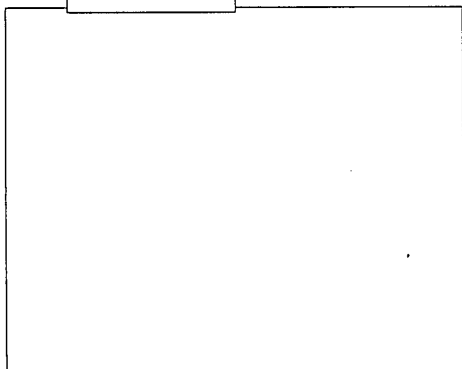
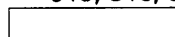
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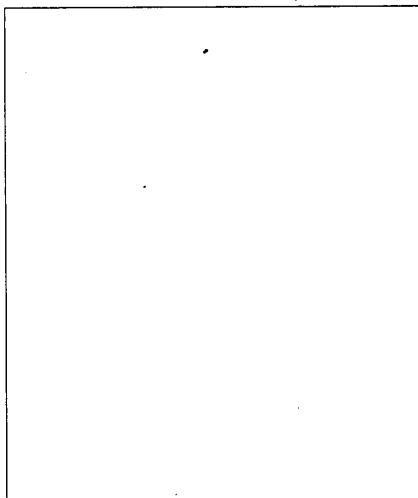
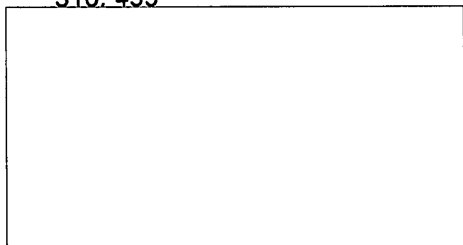
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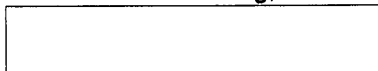


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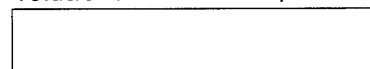


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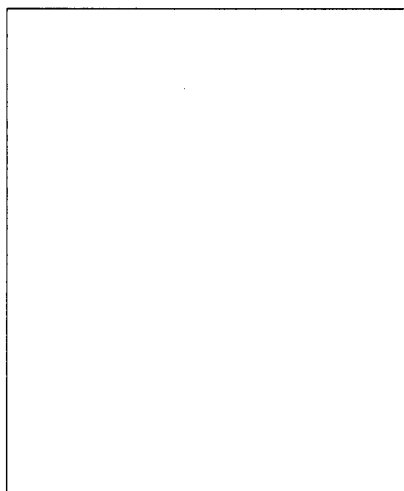
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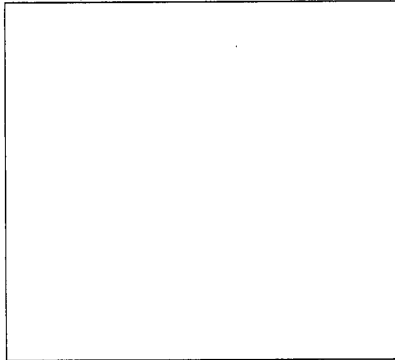
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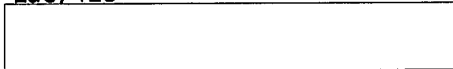
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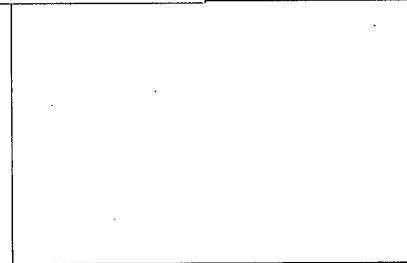
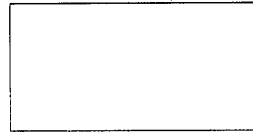
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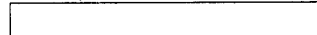
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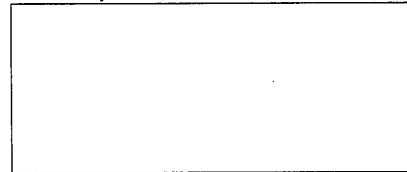


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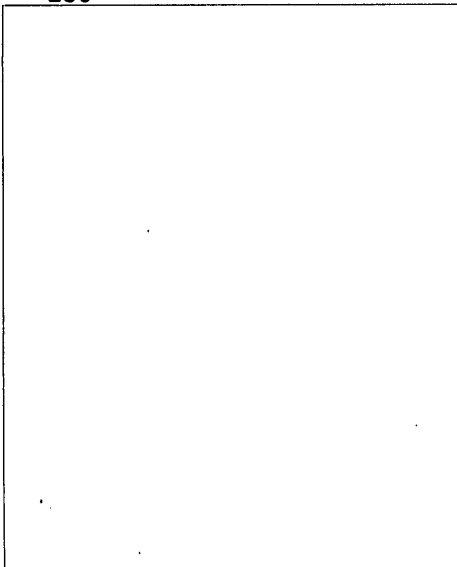
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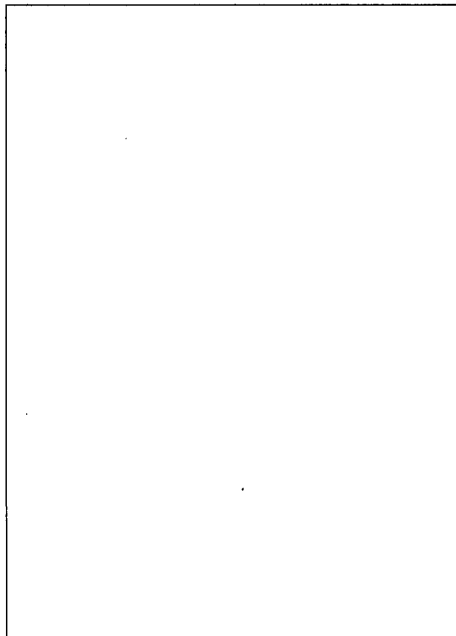
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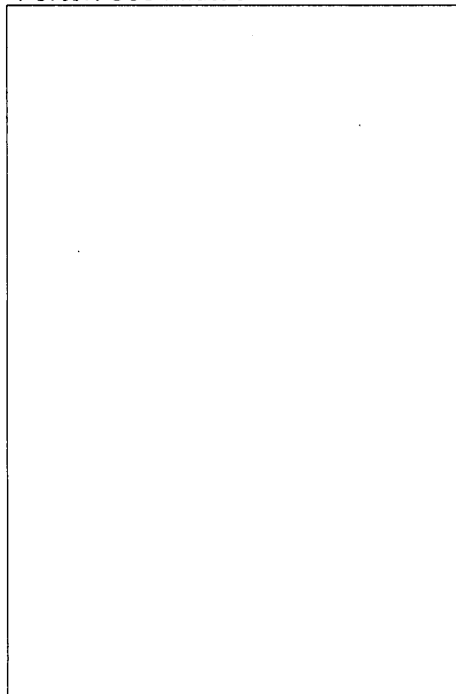

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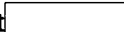
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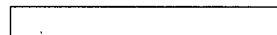
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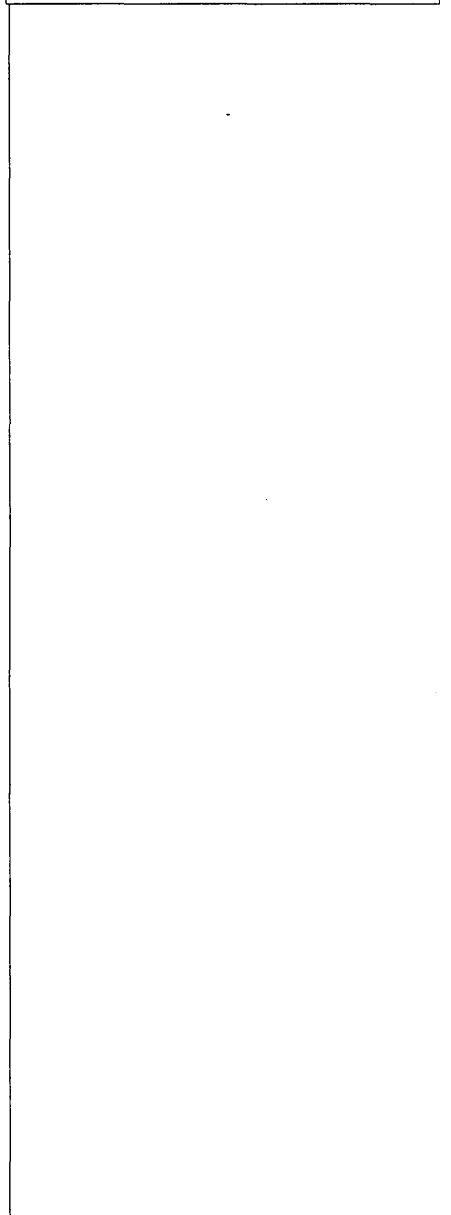
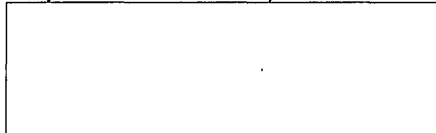
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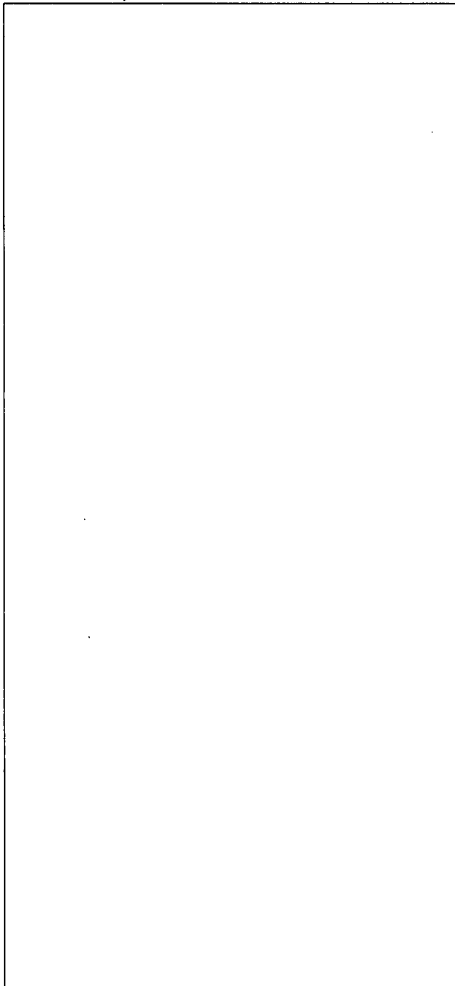
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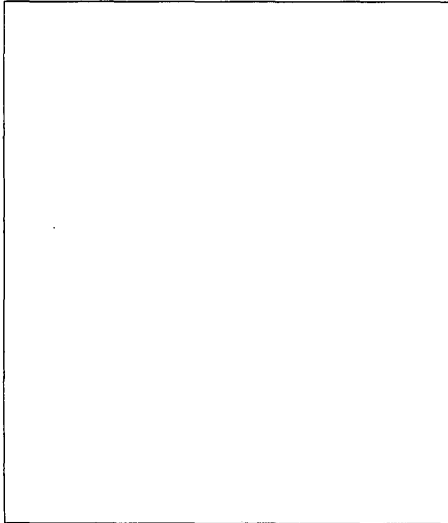
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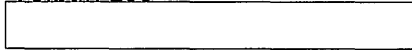
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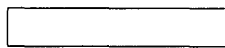
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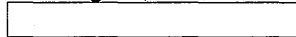


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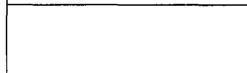
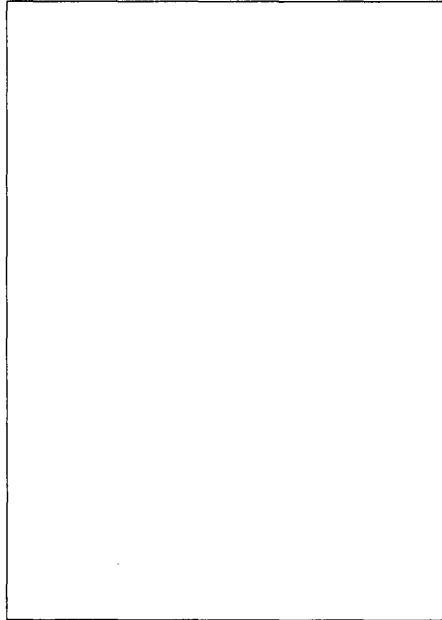


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