

Vietnam Studies Group

War In Laos

1954-1975

By Kenneth Conboy



squadron/signal publications

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Color By Don Greer & Tom Tullis



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An overall Olive Drab Air America H-34 helicopter brings in supplies to a Fire Support Base which was armed with 155mm howitzers.

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1115 CROWLEY DRIVE CARROLLTON, TEXAS 75011-5010

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ISBN 0-89747-315-9

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Overleaf: An Air America Bell 205A (XW-PFJ) overflies Hmong guerrillas on the edge of the *Plaine Des Jarres* during Operation KOU KIET, which was conducted in September of 1969. (T.L. Arkansas)

Introduction

The size of Oregon and the shape of Italy, Laos is landlocked in the north-central portion of mainland Southeast Asia. It is surrounded by five more populous neighbors: China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia and Thailand to the south and Burma to the west. The northern half of the country is covered in towering hill masses and slate-black limestone karst spires. In the northeast, the mountains give way to the "Plaine Des Jarres," known commonly as the PDJ, a diamond-shaped patch of dairy land covered with giant stone burial urns dating back thousands of years.

The southern half of the country runs in a narrow panhandle, which empties onto the Bolovens Plateau. This area was covered earlier this century by French coffee plantations and vacation villas. Down the eastern edge of the panhandle are the Annamite Corilleras, a towering mountain range that covers most of the 1,323 mile border with Vietnam. On the western edge and forming a common border with Thailand is the Mekong River.

The climate of Laos roughly divides the year in half. Beginning in late May are five months of heavy tropical rains. Five more months, beginning in December, have high temperatures and little rain. A short spring and fall connect these rainy and dry seasons.

During the Second Indochina War, Laos was home to approximately three million persons. Of these, nearly half were lowland Laotians from the Tai linguistic group that migrated from southern China beginning in the Thirteenth Century. The vast majority of these lowlanders are peasant farmers and Buddhists.

Living along the mountain slopes are the diverse Lao Theung, which account for up to thirty percent of the total population. Descended from the Mon-Khmer ethnic group, the darker skinned Lao Theung historically have been discriminated against by the lowland Laotians. the Lao

Theung are fragmented into dozens of tribes, with northern and southern tribes speaking mutually unintelligible dialects.

On the mountain tops live the Sino-Tibetan hill tribes, comprising twenty percent of the population. The most important of these tribes are the Hmong (Meo) and the Mien (Yao). The Hmong, in particular, are renowned as among the most fierce warriors in Southeast Asia.

Beginning in the 13th Century, Lan Xang, *the Kingdom of a Million Elephants*, as Laos was then known, covered current-day Laos, as well as portions of Thailand and Cambodia. Centuries of incursions by Burmese, Thais, and Vietnamese; however, split Lan Xang into three weak kingdoms. When the French colonialists pushed across mainland Southeast Asia in the late 1800s, they found the remnants of Lan Xang to be a primitive backwater with few exploitable resources. Fusing most of Lan Xang back together, the French dubbed their new protectorate the Kingdom of Laos. Laos then joined the Kingdom of Cambodia and Vietnam (divided into Tonkin, Annam, and Conchin China) within French Indochina.

The relationship between France and Laos was strictly a marriage of convenience. The French left the Laotians to their own devices, and the Laotian peasantry, for its part, caused the French little trouble. This state of mutual indifference was not shattered until the second World War.

The First Indochina War

Japanese Imperial forces spread across Southeast Asia early in the Second World War, evicting British, Dutch and United States forces from their colonial holdings. Because of the cooperative nature of the Vichy French government in Europe the French authorities in Indochina

A French officer and men of the 1 Bataillon Parachutistes Laotienne (1 BPL) relax before boarding a French Air Force C-47 for an airborne jump north of Vientiane during Operation AVRIL, conducted during April of 1952. The 1 BPL was the primary fast-reaction unit of the Armee Nationale Laotienne (ANL). (ECPA via Grandolini Albert)





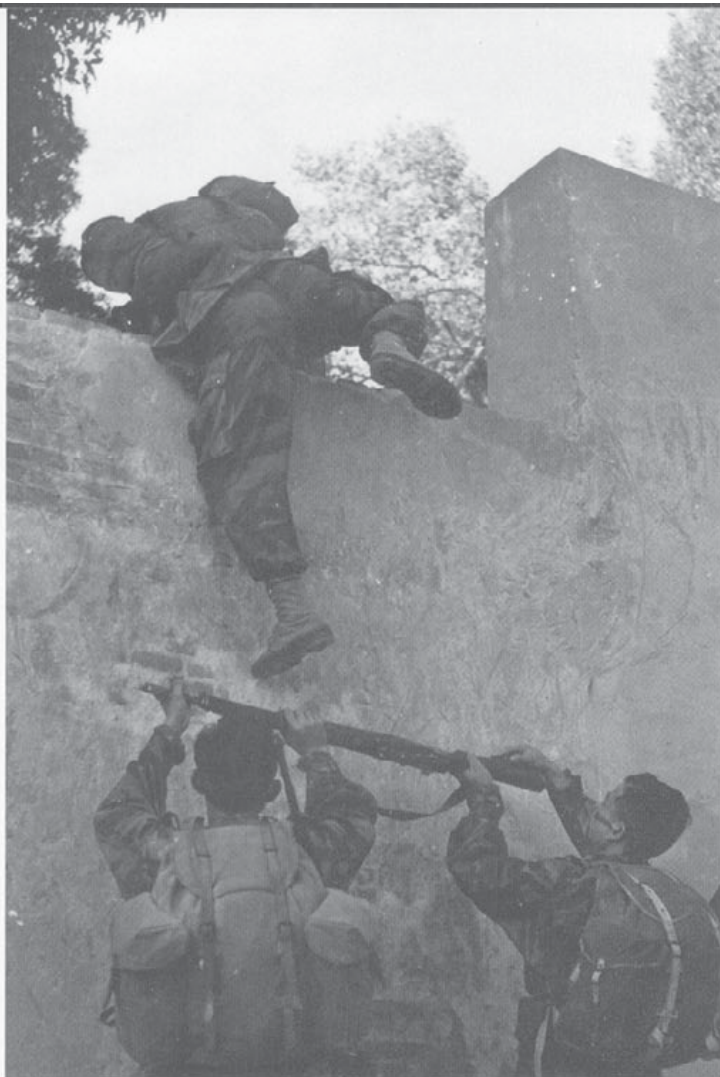
People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) forces invaded Sam Neua Province in April of 1953, sweeping away the provincial capital's Franco-Laotian garrison and turning it over to Pathet Lao forces. Youthful Laotian communist guerrillas, waving the Pathet Lao flag, parade in Sam Neua city soon after the invasion. They were armed with a variety of captured weapons, including U.S. Model 1928A1 .45 caliber Thompson submachine guns, a French MAS 38 submachine gun, a French MAT 49 submachine gun and a British Bren Mark 1 machine gun.



An F8F Bearcat fighter-bomber pulls out after a strafing run against Pathet Lao forces. A second PAVN invasion in early 1954, intended as a diversion from the battle brewing around Dien Bien Phu, temporarily cut Laos in half at the upper panhandle. Close air support of French-backed forces was provided by B-26 Invaders and F8F Bearcats of the French Air Force and F6F Hellcats of the French Navy. (ECPA via Grandolini Albert)

Vietnamese paratroopers from the French-backed Army of the Republic of Vietnam were rushed to Seno to stem the tide of the PAVN thrust across the upper Laotian panhandle during early 1954. During a pause in the fighting, a French Air Force C-119 drops supplies to the troops. The paratroopers wear a mix of steel helmets and floppy French bush hats. (ECPA via Grandolini Albert)





Laotian paratroopers, dressed in French camouflage and armed with M1 Garands, train at the Commando School established in Vientiane, on 21 October 1954. The ANL was, in practice, little more than an extension of the French Union Army until the 1954 Geneva Agreements forced France to give full independence to Laos during that year. Even through the late 1950s, however, French advisors cadred most of the ANL's technical and support branches. (ECPA via Grandolini Albert)

were allowed to retain nominal control over their Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian colonies.

By the Spring of 1945, the outcome of the Second World War was fast becoming apparent. Sensing that the French authorities in Indochina were shifting their loyalty toward the Allies, the Japanese, in March of 1945, brutally pushed aside the French and openly began to support various Indochinese nationalist movements in an effort to prevent a return of French forces. In Laos; however, the nationalists were fragmented and held little support among the peasantry. Additionally, the King of Laos was a dedicated Francophile. In spite of this, following the Japanese capitulation in August, a handful of Laotian nationalists, led by the three half-brothers: Prince Phetsarath, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and Prince Soupannavong, declared an independent Lao Issara, or Free Lao, government in Vientiane.

The French had no intention of losing their Indochinese colonies. By the time of the Japanese capitulation, French commandos, parachuted back into Indochina by the British Special Operations Executive, were leading scores of Laotian guerrillas in the hills. Building on these forces, the French began organizing *Bataillon Chasseur Laotienne* (BCL or Laotian light infantry battalions) within the French Union Army.

In the Spring of 1946, with a force of six BCLs and a handful of French units shipped fresh from Europe, the Franco-Laotian task force systematically began retaking Laos. By the early Summer, the French tricolor was flying over all the major towns in the kingdom.

Defeated, the majority of Lao Issara leaders withdrew to Bangkok, Thailand, where they bickered among themselves and conducted little resistance activity against the French.

While Laos was relatively quiet, elsewhere the war in Indochina was not going well for France. The communist-led Viet Minh resistance in northern Vietnam were growing particularly effective in controlling the countryside. By 1949, it was apparent that some form of autonomy would be needed in an attempt to appease the indigenous—especially Vietnamese—nationalists. Because Laos could be so easily controlled, the French elected to use the kingdom as an experiment in limited independence. As a result, in July of 1949, Laos suddenly was granted a long list of new freedoms. Among them was the right of the new Royal Laotian Government to raise its own armed forces.

The independent Laotian military took the name *Armee Nationale Laotienne* (ANL). The largest unit within the ANL was the *Bataillon Infanterie Laotienne* (BIL or Laotian Infantry Battalion). In reality, the

The ANL was given a fledgling aviation branch during 1954 when the French provided a number of Morane-Saulnier MS 500 Criquets, the French-built version of the German Fieseler Storch. A total of nine Criquets were delivered for use as training, liaison, medevac, and observation aircraft. This Criquet is on the PSP ramp at Wattay Airport (Vientiane) during January of 1955. (ECPA via Grandolini Albert)



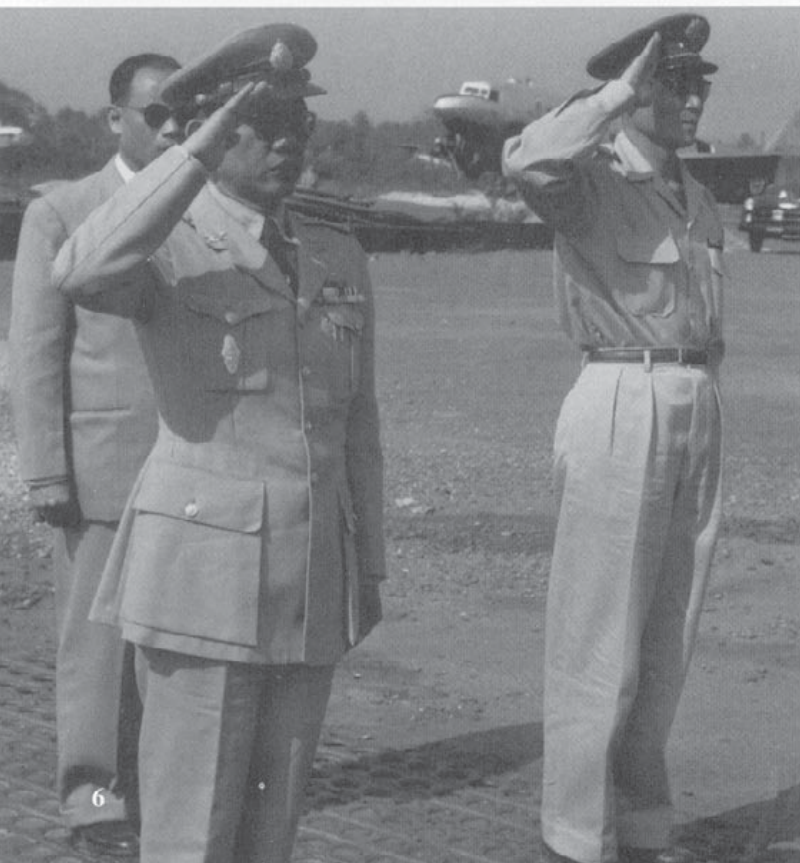


French CAPT Guido instructs the first group of ANL aviation personnel at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, during January of 1955. French advisors held key slots within the aviation branch throughout the 1950s. (EPCA via Grandolini Albert)

ANL was commanded by French officers, and the BILs differed little from the French Union Army's BCLs. In addition, a *Bataillon Parachutistes Laotienne* (BPL) was raised as a fast reaction unit.

Three months after the ANL was born, the Lao Issara officially disbanded, lured back to Vientiane by the French promises of limited independence. Significantly, Prince Soupannavong refused to rally, and instead crossed into northeastern Laos where he linked up with Laotian

A Royal Thai Armed Forces delegation visits Vientiane during 1955. During that year, the ANL sent thirty officers for weapons training at Hua Hin, Thailand. Additionally, Thai pilot volunteers and a pair of Thai Sikorsky H-19 helicopters were seconded for ANL use in northern Laos. On the right is COL Sounthone Patthammavong, the first commander of the ANL. (EPCA via Grandolini Albert)



resistance units supported by the Viet Minh. Like the Viet Minh, this Vietnamese backed Laotian resistance movement was controlled by communists and soon became known as the Pathet Lao.

For nearly three years, police actions in Laos remained minimal. By late 1952; however, the French authorities sensed trouble. Indications pointed to a Viet Minh incursion into northeastern Sam Neua province, which the French predicted the Vietnamese could capture. In the Spring of 1953, a Viet Minh incursion into Sam Neua materialized. From the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), the Viet Minh sent ten battalions from three different divisions surging across the border. The Franco-Laotian garrison at Sam Neua city quickly fled southwest toward the PDJ. A second PAVN column pushed west from Nong Het toward the PDJ, while a third column moved from Dien Bien Phu toward the royal capital at Luang Prabang.

Airlifting in battalions of Moroccans and Foreign Legionnaires to reinforce the 12,000-man ANL, the PAVN thrusts were stopped cold by late April. The Spring 1953 invasion of Laos; however, further sapped French strength. As a result, Laotian forces were rapidly expanded during the remainder of the year to better provide for their own national defense. By October of 1953, the ANL had formed seven new *Bataillon Leger Laotienne* (BLL or Light Laotian Battalions) which had Laotian commanders but lacked heavy weapons.

Along with overseeing an expansion of the ANL, France, in late 1953, granted the Royal Laotian Government further autonomy. The French promised to continue to protect Laos from future PAVN invasions. To better shield northern Laos from a second Viet Minh incursion, the French Union Army retook the valley of Dien Bien Phu in November of 1953.

In January of 1954, the PAVN launched two thrusts into Laos. One column cut across the top of the panhandle, reaching the river-side town of Thakhek. A second thrust pressured the royal capital at Luang Prabang. Both of these threats—which had been contained by February—proved to be little more than diversions for the confrontation building at Dien Bien Phu. As the French poured reinforcements into that isolated valley, the PAVN tightened its noose. When the base finally fell in early May of 1954, the fiasco sent the French to the negotiating tables at Geneva. In August, a cease-fire went into effect and French forces began an immediate departure. For the first time in a century, Indochina was free of colonial rule.

1954: Independence

In the aftermath of the Geneva Agreements, Vietnam was divided into a Communist north and a pro-Western south, while both Cambodia and Laos were declared neutral. In Laos; however, the situation was complicated. The French Union Army turned over its BCLs to the Royal Laotian Government's ANL. France continued to provide advisors for the ANL and was allowed to maintain two garrisons (one at the southern base of Seno, near Savannakhet, and a second, unspecified base in northern Laos) to help guarantee Laotian sovereignty. The Pathet Lao, meanwhile, were allowed to regroup unmolested in the provinces of Sam Neua and Phongsaly, with future elections to decide the details of their integration into the Royal Laotian Government.

During 1957, the Royal Laotian Government and the Pathet Lao formed their first coalition government. The ANL reentered both Pathet Lao provinces, and two Pathet Lao battalions were scheduled for integration into the ANL. It was not long before tensions began to build, and the much-delayed integration ceremonies on the PDJ in May of 1959 dramatically fell apart. One of the two Pathet Lao battalions fled into communist North Vietnam, which prompted the Royal Laotian Government to arrest several top Pathet Lao officials, including Prince Soupannavong.

With the collapse of the coalition government in Vientiane, the United States began to pay more attention to Laos. Since 1955, in fact,



Washington had underwritten the entire Laotian defense budget. But because an overt Military Assistance and Advisory Group was forbidden under the 1954 Geneva Agreements, Washington had established a civilian Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) in Vientiane. When the 1957 coalition began to turn sour, the PEO began to consider serious measures to improve the capabilities of the ANL.

In July of 1959, Washington dispatched U.S. Army Special Forces (USSF) Mobile Training Teams to Laos. Under civilian cover and attached to the PEO, these teams, code named HOTFOOT, were to join with French advisors in retraining the *Forces Armee Laotienne* (FAL, the new name given to the ANL that July) at five regional training centers.

As the HOTFOOT teams arrived in Laos, Pathet Lao forces, with limited support from the PAVN, attacked FAL garrisons in Sam Neua Province. FAL reinforcements were rushed to the scene and, although they far outnumbered the enemy, they turned in a lackluster performance.

Members from the first HOTFOOT detachment, drawn from the 77th Army Special Forces Group, with a *Forces Armee Laotienne* (FAL, the new name given to the ANL in mid-1959) paratrooper (left) at Luang Prabang, during 1959. Although posing as civilians under the PEO, the HOTFOOT advisors already are beginning to look like military. They were issued sun helmets reminiscent of the PAVN's pith helmet. (George Morton)

Robert "Dutch" Brongersma with his AT-11 (Beech Model 18) flew supplies to the 2 BP at Sam Neua in July of 1959 while under contract to the U.S. Embassy, Vientiane. CAPT Kong Le (second from left) and LT Deuane (fourth from left) both wear British "windproof" smocks. The AT-11 was sold in early 1961 to William Bird, becoming the first aircraft operated by Bird and Son, Inc. (Jack Mathews).

FAL parachute officers deployed to Sam Neua during the crisis of July 1959, (from left) CAPT Kong Le, Deputy Commander, 2 *Bataillon Parachutistes* (2 BP). CAPT Sisamouth Sananikone, Commander 2 BP; Eduardo Perez, Filipino Scout Ranger advisor to the 2 BP; and LT Deuane Siphaseuth. Kong Le wears a British 1942 "windproof" smock supplied to the French, and passed on to the ANL. Sisamouth has French 1948/51 camouflage trousers with front thigh pockets; the other two paratroopers have 1959-style trousers without the front pockets. (Jack Mathews)

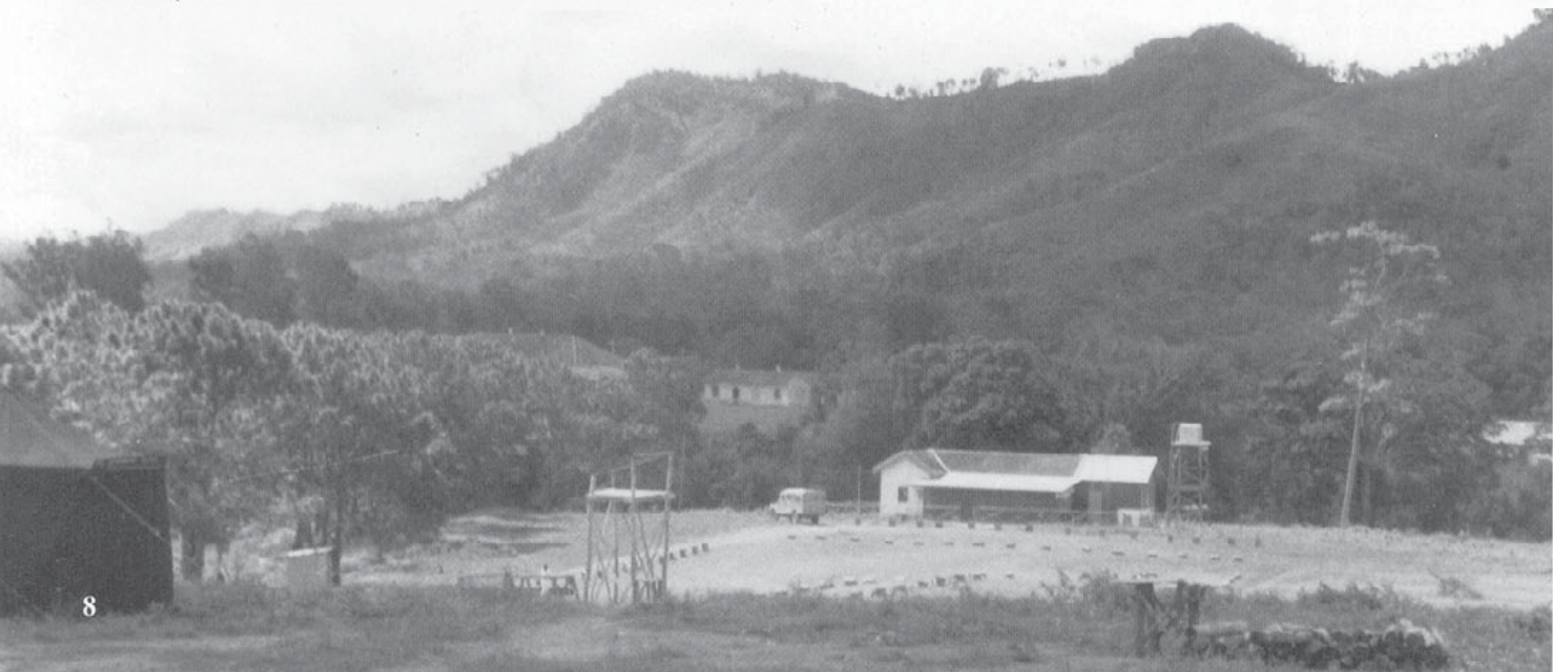




(Left) One of three Helio Couriers provided to the U.S. Air Force for evaluation arrives at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, during the Spring of 1960. The aircraft was assigned to Detachment 2, 1045 Operations, Evaluation, and Training Group—a joint CIA-USAF outfit based on Okinawa. This Helio was turned over to Air America and began flights into northern Laos by the Summer of 1960. (Harry C. Aderholt)



The FAL training center at Khang Khai during March of 1960. Instruction was provided to the FAL by a joint French and U.S. HOTFOOT mobile training team. The house in the center was occupied by COL Kim Brabson, senior PEO advisor in Military Region Two (MR 2). (Jack Mathews)





Anti-American banners on the streets of Vientiane during the days immediately after the August 1960 coup d' état. The lower banner demanded that the PEO staff go home. (Frank Tatu)



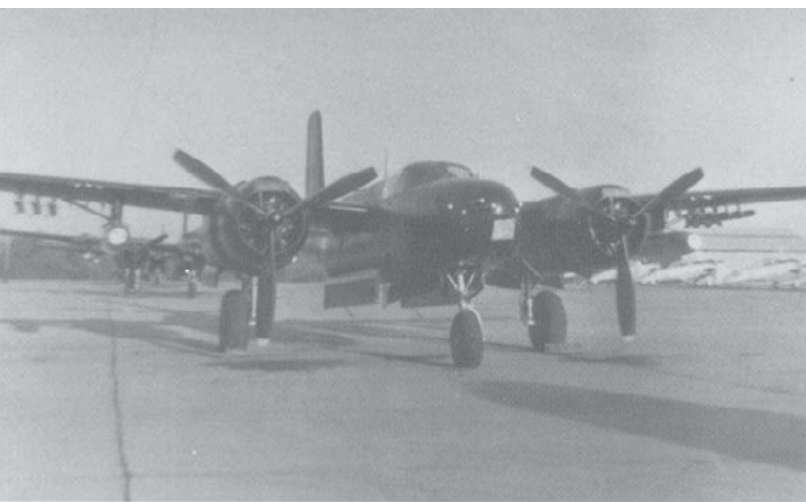
LT Deuane and CAPT Kong Le address a crowd in Vientiane on the day after their 9 August 1960 coup d' état. Both wear the French 1948/51 camouflage uniform, Deuane has a French Alsetex grenade and 9mm Luger pistol on his belt. The paratrooper in the background holds a U.S. M1 carbine. (Frank Tatu)

(Right) A new HOTFOOT contingent, still listed as civilians under the PEO, began arriving just as Kong Le was being pushed out of Vientiane. Among the new, split A-Detachments was Team MOON, consisting of (left to right) SGT Orville (Roger) Ballenger, demolitions specialist; SGT George Tollinger, mechanic; SGT Donald Stetson, radioman; SFC John Roy, light weapons specialist; Johnny, interpreter; and CAPT Walter H. Moon, team leader (MSGT Pat Patterson, team sergeant, was not present). Elements of Team MOON would later be ambushed north of Vientiane on 22 April 1961, Moon was taken prisoner and later was killed in captivity. (Robert McKnight)



Royal Laotian Air Force pilots discuss an upcoming operation in front of one of their North American T-6 Texans during 1961. The U.S.-supplied T-6 aircraft were modified for the Counter-Insurgency (COIN) role and carried twin .30 caliber machine gun pods under the wings and 5 inch HAVR rockets. The Black Panther on the fuselage side was a unit insignia. The Royal Lao Air Force received a total of four T-6s in January of 1961; however, within a short time, five of the firsts six RLAF pilots had been killed in action, victim of Pathet Lao ground fire. (Photo via Grandolini Albert)





One of the four Air America-piloted B-26B Invader bombers on the ramp at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base during March of 1961. These aircraft, flown from Taiwan in December of 1960, were overall Black with no national markings. This Invader had the original World War II-style six-gun nose, three more guns in each wing, a napalm canister and three rockets under each wing. In the background are Royal Thai Air Force T-6 trainers. (Harry C. Aderholt)



A second contingent of B-26B/Cs were ferried from Okinawa to Takhli in the Spring of 1961. These overall Natural Metal aircraft, also without national insignia, were to be flown by pilots released from the USAF under Project MILL POND. Twelve of these aircraft, with four of the Black B-26Bs as flight leaders, were to bomb the Plain of Jars in April of 1961; however, reservations following the Bay of Pigs fiasco led President John Kennedy to abort the mission. The glass-nosed B-26C in the foreground was used later during 1961 for reconnaissance missions over Laos. (Harry C. Aderholt)



COL Oudone Sananikone (center) with a Thai PARU interpreter and HOTFOOT advisor MAJ Eleazer Parmly IV at Muong Kassy during the push north along Route 13 toward Sala Phou Khuon, in January of 1961. (Robert McKnight)



CAPT Robert McKnight, HOTFOOT advisor to the Groupement Mobile moving north from Vientiane, holds a captured Soviet-made PPSH-41 submachine gun with a seventy-one round drum magazine at Sala Phou Khuon, during February of 1961. (Robert McKnight)

CAPT Bill Chance, HOTFOOT advisor to the 1st BP, has his parachute checked at Wattay Air base, Vientiane before an airborne assault on Muong Kassy conducted on 5 April 1961. (Rob McKnight)



Members of the 1 BP at Wattay Air base prior to the airborne assault on Muong Kassy on 5 April 1961. Most of the paratroops are armed with M1 Garand rifles which were strapped to their packs for the jump. (Robert McKnight)



A Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) instructor briefs a 100 man Hmong Auto Defense d'Choc (ADC) company at Phou Vieng during the Spring of 1961. The primitive airfields in Laos were dubbed Lima Sites, or LSs, Phou Vieng being known as LS 6. The design stitched on the back of the jacket was intended to ward off evil spirits. (Pat Landry Collection, Air America Archives)

A Hmong ADC company receives its final briefing before departing on a mission during the Spring of 1961. They are armed with M1 Garand rifles, M1 Carbines, a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), and a 57mm M18A1 Recoilless Rifle. (Pat Landry Collection, Air America Archives)





Hmong ADC guerrillas armed with M1 Garands and M2 Carbines receive instruction at Houei Sa An (LS 23), before starting another mission. (T. Fosmire)

1960: Kong Le Coup d'État

In December of 1959, a second USSF contingent, HOTFOOT 2, replaced the first group. FAL battalions began to pass through the regional training centers, and a slight improvement in their performance was noted. Just as the FAL's counterinsurgency campaign began to show promise, the FAL's best battalion, the *2 Bataillon Parachutistes* (2 BP) led by its deputy commander, CAPT Kong Le, staged a successful coup d'état in Vientiane in August of 1960.

Kong Le declared himself a "neutralist" and immediately called for all foreign forces, especially Americans, to leave Laos. The Pathet Lao, sensing an opportunity, declared their support for Kong Le. The vast majority of FAL officers, led by BGEN Phoumi Nosavan, opposed Kong Le and began forming counter-coup forces in Savannakhet.

Given the anti-American proclamations of Kong Le and his Neutralist Armed Forces (known by its French acronym, FAN), the United States covertly threw its weight behind Phoumi Nosavan's units which were massing in Savannakhet. In late November of 1960, a column of Phoumi's forces, composed of artillery, armored cars, landing ships and an infantry task force, began moving north toward Vientiane. At the same time, the *1st Bataillon Parachutistes* (1 BP) was parachuted from Air America C-47s over the garrison of Chinaimo, southeast of Vientiane.

After fierce city fighting, including a highly destructive artillery duel, pro-Phoumi forces consolidated control over Vientiane by mid-December 1960. But Kong Le's paratroopers, supported by the Pathet Lao and a battery of PAVN-manned 105MM howitzers (which had been

Forces Armées Royales (FAR, the new name given to the FAL in September of 1961) troops prior to departing on a patrol from Kiou Cacham, during the Summer of 1961. They are relatively well equipped with French camouflage pants, Bata Boots (made by the Bata Shoe Company and inspired by the French "patauga" combat shoe of a nearly identical design) and a mixture of steel helmets and patrol caps. (Andrew Irzyk via James Morrison)



Hmong ADC guerrillas receive training on the 57mm M18A1 Recoilless Rifle. (T. Fosmire)

Sp4 Andrew Irzyk, WHITE STAR advisor to Hmong ADC forces at Kiou Cacham (LS 4), poses with a Thai interpreter, during the Summer of 1961. As WHITE STAR was part of an overt military advisory effort, HOTFOOT's civilian clothes have been replaced by an Olive Green 107 Cotton Sateen Shirt with a full-color cloth nametape, parachute badge and U.S. Army tag. The pants, with two large below-type cargo pockets, are an early version of what later became Jungle Utility Trousers. He is armed with a French 9mm MAT 49 submachine gun and an Mk 2 pineapple grenade. The wide-brimmed "Australian" bush hat, made from Second World War Pacific Campaign-style spotted camouflage fabric and often worn with both sides pulled up, was popular headgear among WHITE STAR teams. (Andrew Irzyk via James Morrison)





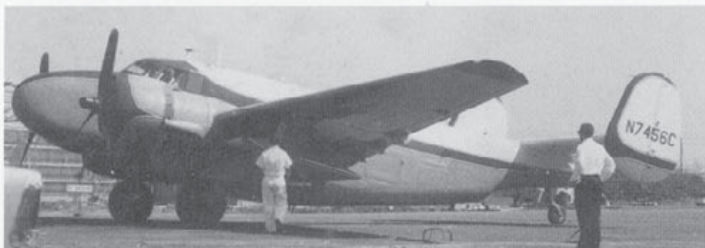
A pair Hmong ADC guerrillas in traditional black Hmong pajamas with wide legs, a colored sash and bowl hats at Kiou Cacham during the Summer of 1961. (Andrew Irzyk via James Morrison)

rushed from Hanoi during the first week of December), withdrew north along Route 13 in an orderly fashion. Then, as Phoumi's officers procrastinated in Vientiane, Kong Le raced east along Route 7 and captured the strategic PDJ on the last day of the year.

1961: Crisis For Kennedy

As President John Kennedy took office in January of 1961, the situation in Laos looked bleak. The FAL, supported by HOTFOOT advisors on the front lines, consistently turned in a pathetic performance on the battlefield. By this time, FAL battalions were organized into regimental-sized Groupement Mobiles (GMs), composed of three battalions each, with six-man HOTFOOT detachments assigned to each GM (in some instances, HOTFOOT detachments were attached to individual battalions within the GM).

Far better than the FAL were the Hmong hill tribesmen in northeastern Laos, led by LCOL Vang Pao. The Hmong, organized into 100-man Auto Defense d'Choc companies, employed effective guerrilla tactics against the Pathet Lao and Kong Le's FAN. Airlifting supplies to the ADC was Air America, a CIA-owned airline (prior to 1959, Air America was known as Civil Air Transport) and Bird & Son, Inc., a private Lockheed PV-2 Ventura (N7456C) owned by Bird & Son transits through Manila on its way to Laos on 27 January 1961. A World War II-era twin-engine aircraft, Bird & Son modified two PV-2s with cargo doors and rollers and used them for resupply drops in northern Laos. One of the PV-2s was additionally modified with a belly camera for reconnaissance work. This PV-2 crashed at Phou Fa (LS 16), a remote mountaintop ADC position northwest of the Plain of Jars, in October of 1961, killing both American crewmen. (William H. Bird)



vate airline run by William H. Bird.

Frustrated with the widening war in Laos, Kennedy, in April of 1961 "upgraded" the PEO from a civilian organization into an overt Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG). Within the MAAG, the HOTFOOT advisors were renamed WHITE STAR Field Training Teams, and were allowed to wear United States Army uniforms into the field.

Kennedy considered further steps to show United States resolve in Laos, and even came within several hours of ordering American-piloted B-26 bombers based in Thailand to strike at Kong Le's FAN on the PDJ. But following the Bay of Pigs debacle in mid-April, the White House reconsidered its Laos policy and worked to help secure a cease-fire, which went into effect during the first week of May.

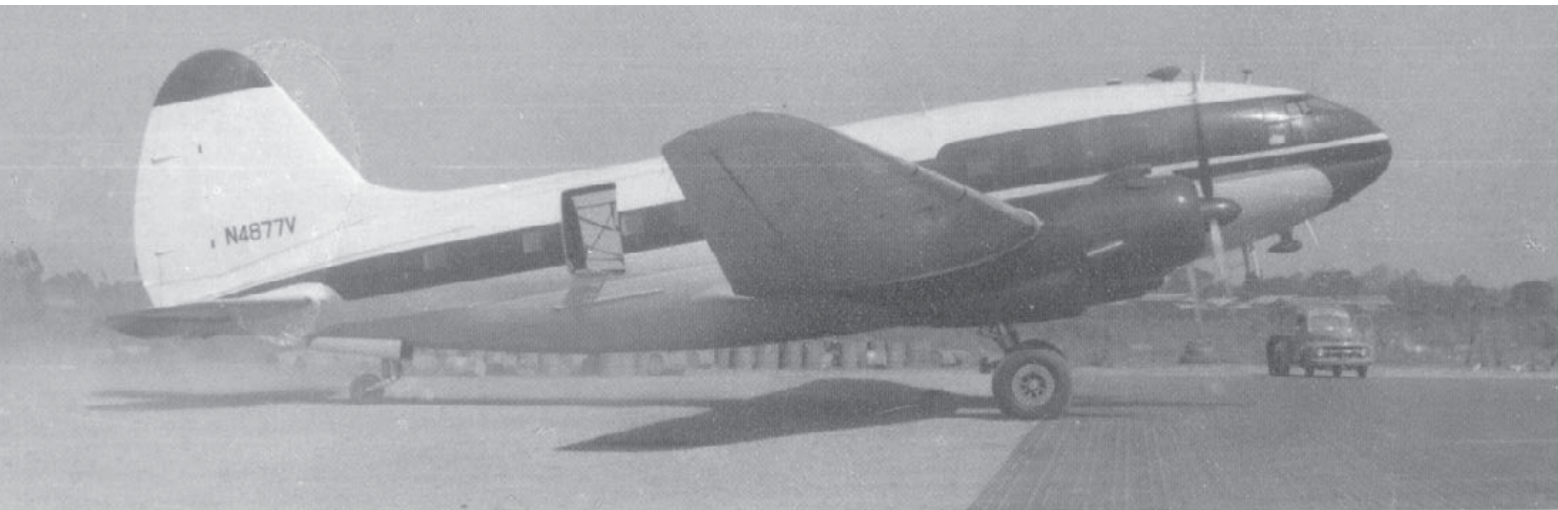
The May cease-fire soon became a farce, due to constant Communist violations. By June, the Pathet Lao, along with PAVN reinforcements, overran the Hmong ADC headquarters at Pa Doung following a heavy artillery barrage. GEN Phoumi Nosavan, the de facto head of the *Forces Armee Royales* (FAR, the new name given to the FAL in September of 1961), increasingly resented these Pathet Lao cease-fire violations and the American efforts to force him to the negotiating table to form a second coalition government.

In December of 1961, Phoumi ordered GMs 11 and 18 to reassert government control over Nam Tha, a provincial capital in the extreme northwestern corner of the country near the Chinese border. The Pathet Lao and PAVN soon began to pressure the garrison, forcing Phoumi to dispatch GM 15 (Airborne) to Nam Tha beginning in February of 1962. While holding a numerical advantage, the FAR defenses around the town crumbled in early May, following a PAVN-led assault. In a humiliating defeat, the Laotian troops fled southwest, crossing the Mekong River into Thailand.

Following the defeat at Nam Tha, the United States put severe economic pressure on Phoumi, forcing him to the negotiating table. By July of 1962, he had agreed to form a coalition government with the Pathet Lao and Kong Le's FAN, with Souvanna Phouma (a Neutralist) being named prime minister. According to the Geneva Agreements which formed the coalition, all foreign military and paramilitary forces had to depart Laos by early October. As a result, the United States MAAG was disbanded and all WHITE STAR teams removed. Incredibly, only forty Vietnamese "technicians" (out of the more than 2,000 estimated to be in-country) were officially removed from Laos, representing a major breach of the accords.

WHITE STAR Field Training Team 30 (FTT 30), advisors to GM 18, on the Bolovens Plateau during November of 1961. The team consisted of (left to right, front row) SFC William Baker, medic; SFC Jimmy Dean, team sergeant; SGT James O. Wells, light weapons specialist; (left to right, standing) SGT Lupe Rodriguez, medic/demolitions specialist; and SGT Richard Lahue, radioman (CAPT Thomas Stanford, team leader, not present). Baker wears a French camouflage uniform; the rest have Olive Green 107 fatigues with the sleeves cut short. Full-color rank, name, parachute, U.S. Army and SF insignia are worn by several of the team members. (Jimmy Dean)





A Bird & Son C-46 (N4877V) taxis in at Wattay Air base during January of 1962. The aircraft was White with a Dark Blue stripe. This aircraft crashed on 31 August 1962 at Phou Fa (LS 16), killing all five crewmen onboard. (William H. Bird)

The Second Coalition

By mid-1963, the coalition government was beginning to fray, this time because of friction between the previously-allied Pathet Lao and FAN. The United States, for its part, provided limited military support to the FAR via a liaison office established in Bangkok known as the Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand. In addition, a civilian Requirements Office was set up within the United States Embassy in Vientiane to determine the material needs of the FAR.

By the Spring of 1964, several FAR officers had grown tired of the ineffectual coalition government and constant Pathet Lao cease-fire violations. Emulating the example of the successive military coup d'états in South Vietnam, these officers, led by the Laotian Directorate of National Coordination (a paramilitary organization that combined police, intelligence, and commando units) spearheaded a takeover of the capital in April. Although Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was ultimately able to reassert his control, the Pathet Lao used the upheaval as an excuse to overrun Kong Le's FAN on the PDJ in May and gain total control over the strategic plain.

Faced with a rapidly deteriorating situation in northern Laos, President Lyndon Johnson searched for ways to demonstrate United States resolve in opposing communist forces in Laos. Already that March, a United States Air Force special warfare training unit, code named WATERPUMP, had been dispatched to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base to train Laotian pilots in the use of T-28 aircraft (the first four T-28s, in fact, had been delivered to the Royal Laotian Air Force in August of 1963). The Johnson Administration took the additional steps of deliver-

ing over two dozen more T-28s to the RLAF, providing military support to both FAR and FAN units, and arranging for a Royal Thai Army artillery battalion (code named SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS) to be dispatched to Laos to protect the new FAN headquarters at Muong Soui.

Facing a common enemy, the FAR and FAN, in the Summer of 1964 launched a combined operation to clear Route 13 linking Vientiane with Luang Prabang. Code named Operation TRIANGLE, the action proved to be the FAR's first major success after years of defeat. By the end of the year, FAR units in Savannakhet tried to copy TRIANGLE's gains by launching operation VICTORIOUS ARROW toward Muong Phine; this second operation, however, faltered short of its intended target.

As 1965 opened, political infighting among the generals in Vientiane shifted attention away from the battlefield. GEN Kouprasith Abhay, commander of Military Region 5 (MR 5), gathered his allies for a successful coup d'état that February against the Directorate of National Coordination (DNC), which had led the previous April 1964 coup. In the aftermath of the coup, the DNC was dissolved and its commander fled to Thailand. Also fleeing into exile was GEN Phoumi Nosavan, who had been a major military and political figure since 1960.

Vientiane's preoccupation with petty personal rivalries was symptomatic of the ineffectiveness of the entire FAR. Military Region commanders ran their zones like private fiefdoms, rarely dispatching their GIs outside the Mekong River valley. As a result, the only effective counterweight to the communist forces were the paramilitary units funded and trained through the United States Embassy.

A Bird & Son Dornier Do 28 (N4224G) at Moung Phun (LS 37) during the Fall of 1961. Beginning in the Summer of 1961, a six-man WHITE STAR detachment moved to Moung Phun (located southwest of the Plain of Jars) and began training Hmong ADC units in the area. They were supported by airlifts of supplies by Bird & Son along with Air America. The Do 28 was an ideal aircraft for getting into the small, unprepared airstrips that were so common in Laos. (Rolf Utegaard)



WHITE STAR team members maintain contact with Team Control in Vientiane via an AN/GRC 109 radio during the Fall of 1961. One man mans the radio, while the other cranks the hand powered electrical generator. (Rolf Utegaard)





WHITE STAR MSGT Lambert Larson rests and reads his mail while manning a foxhole at Nam Tha during February of 1962. His weapons include a .45 caliber Thompson submachine gun and a .30 caliber M1 Garand. (Pat Marr)



MGEN Bounleut Sanichanh, the FAR commander, plans the defense of Nam Tha with GM 15 (Airborne) commander, COL Khamhou Boussarath (standing, with bush hat); and GM 18 commander, LCOL Noupheut Daoheung (right, in "duck hunter" camouflage). (Robert McKnight)

(Right) Air America Helio Courier pilots Charles Dieffenbach and Ed Dearborn confer with WHITE STAR special forces advisors at Sam Thong (Lima Site 20) during the early Summer of 1962. The WHITE STAR advisors are wearing beret flashes from the 1st U.S. Army Special Forces Group. CAPT Charles Dieffenbach was killed when his Courier was shot down on 23 July 1962. (Ed Dearborn)



COL Vang Pao and a Thai Border Patrol Police officer inspect Hmong guerrillas at Hua Hin, Thailand, before a parachute training jump during early August of 1962. Hmong companies were rotated through Hua Hin for unconventional warfare and radio communications instruction until August of 1962. The C-47 Skytrain transport in the background has a Royal Thai Air Force fin flash on the tail. The Royal Thai Air Force supplied the aircraft used in the training program, although the American Embassy in Vientiane supplied the funding. (Pat Landry Collection, Air America Archives)



A U.S. paramilitary advisor, Thai PARU officer (fifth from right) and a Hmong guerrilla squad depart on a search for the wreck of an Air America Helio Courier shot down over Phou Bia mountain on 23 July 1962, in which CAPT Dieffenbach was killed. Barely visible, the PARU commando is wearing metal Thai police wings as a beret badge. (Ed Dearborn)





COL Vang Pao delivers the graduation speech to his Hmong guerrillas at Hua Hin, Thailand during August of 1962. The insignia on the podium was that of the Royal Thai Border Police. (Pat Landry Collection, Air America Archives)



The Lao Theung village at Long Tieng during October of 1962. Although far from the bustling guerrilla headquarters it would become in later years, a dirt airfield already has been cleared for Air America supply flights and supplies are being stockpiled in the background. (Ed Dearborn)

One of the first two Swiss-built Pilatus PC-6 Porter Short Take-Off and Landing (STOL) transports brought into Laos by Bird & Son during July of 1962. Powered by a Lycoming piston engine, these early eight-ten passenger Porters performed poorly in the hot and high conditions of Laos. One crashed in December of 1962, killing all on board; the second crashed a month later, severely burning the pilot. Turboprop powered versions of the Porter, known as the Turbo-Porter (UV-20A), were used by both Air America and Bird & Son (later Continental) and earned a far better reputation thanks to their increased power, better hot and high performance and increased payload capabilities. (Ed Dearborn)





The Guerrilla Army

Like the FAR, the Laotian paramilitary program was divided between the military regions. Each region had its own unique characteristics. MR 1 was divided into two zones (later three): the Northwest Zone, based in the village of Nam Yu, and the Northeast Zone, based in Luang Prabang. The Northwest Zone had perhaps the greatest ethnic diversity in all of Laos, with guerrilla forces raised among the Mien (Yao), Lao Theung, Lu and several other ethnic groups. Given this extreme diversity, and the rough terrain in the northwest, the guerrilla program in this zone mainly involved the raising of small intelligence teams. One of these units, Team FOX, was formed with Mien hill tribesmen in 1966 and used for long-range intelligence-gathering forays into southern China.

In MR 2, the paramilitary program had its roots in the Hmong ADCs which began forming in early 1961. During the following year, several Hmong companies were sent for guerrilla training at Hua Hin, Thailand. In 1963, these Thai-trained companies were incorporated into the battalion-sized Special Guerrilla Unit One (SGU 1). The headquarters of the Hmong guerrillas was at Long Tieng, located southwest of the PDJ. By 1965, four SGU battalions had been formed in MR 2; during the following year, a SGU training center was formed at Muong Cha, south of the PDJ. Then, in 1967, Vang Pao (who was promoted to BGEN in December of 1963) took three of the SGU battalions and gathered them into guerrilla *Groupeement Mobile 21* (GM 21). Using these SGU battalions to spearhead offensive operations, the government was able to push across Xieng Khouang Province and into Sam Neua Province during the rainy seasons, when they could benefit from aerial resupply from Air America and Bird & Son (which in 1965 became Continental Air Services, Inc.). During the dry seasons, the SGU guerrillas melted into the jungle, sniping at the Pathet Lao and PAVN forces as the communists retook territory lost during the monsoons.

In MR 3, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, dominated by the PAVN, ran down the eastern side of the region. To counter PAVN, the paramilitary program in MR 3 fielded three kinds of teams: action, intelligence, and

The King of Laos makes his first trip to Long Tieng to present medals to the forces of MR 2 in December of 1963. The first man in line is COL Pranet Ritoluechai, PARU commander and leader of PARU advisory teams in Laos during 1960-62. For the occasion, Pranet wears a standard FAR Red beret with Gold medal cap badge. The King presented Vang Pao with his first general's star during this visit. (Pranet Ritoluechai)

roadwatch. The MR 3 guerrilla headquarters was at Naseng, located on the southern outskirts of Savannakhet. A training center, known as Whiskey-Three, and a barracks, called SGU Camp, were located east and north of Savannakhet. In addition, beginning in 1966, Royal Thai Army Special Forces units, code named STAR teams, provided additional roadwatch coverage along the trail. As the PAVN more effective-

GEN Kong Le (second from left) in Sam Thong to meet BGEN Vang Pao (right) to coordinate FAN contingency plans for withdrawing from the PDJ during April of 1964. (Jack Mathews)

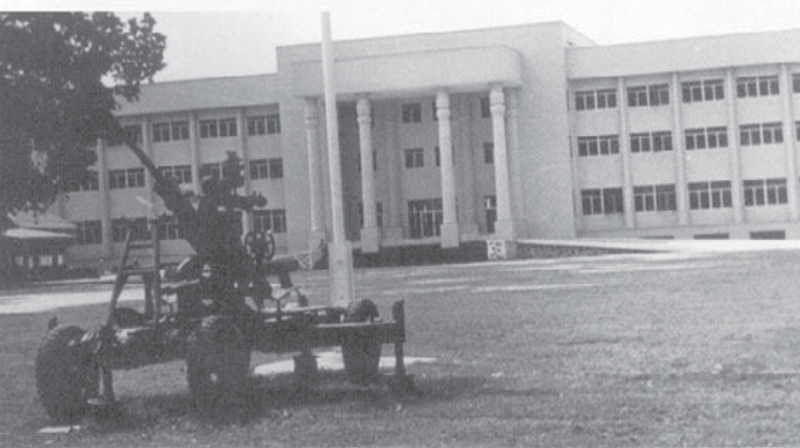




Pro-Kouprasith forces ride on an M-8 Greyhound armored car as they patrol Vientiane after the coup d'état, in February of 1965. The vehicle is armed with a 37mm cannon and a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the rear of the open turret. (Al Rich Collection, Air America Archives)



Units loyal to General Kouprasith Abhay patrol the streets of Vientiane in a M-3 White scout car following a coup d'état in February of 1965. The trooper in the foreground has a .30 caliber Browning machine gun fitted with a bipod. (Al Rich Collection, Air America Archives)



During the February 1965 coup d'état, the Directorate of National Coordination (DNC) headquarters at Phone Kheng in the northeastern outskirts of Vientiane was destroyed with tank and artillery fire. Built in its place was the FAR Headquarters and a captured Soviet 37mm anti-aircraft gun was placed on the front lawn. (Bill Keeler)

ly began to counter these Laotian guerrilla teams, they were expanded into companies, and then, in 1967, into an SGU battalion.

In MR 4, the Ho Chi Minh Trail also dominated the eastern side of the region. Like MR 3, the paramilitary forces in this region were organized into action, intelligence, and roadwatch teams. Also like MR 3, the teams were expanded into an SGU battalion in 1967. In MR 5, which faced no serious enemy threat, no paramilitary forces were raised.

To add punch to the guerrilla forces, the Royal Lao Air Force (augmented since 1964 with Thai volunteer T-28 pilots), United States Air Force, and United States Navy provided close air support. In order to coordinate these diverse air assets, a handful of United States Air Force advisors were dispatched to Laos on temporary duty beginning in mid-1965. Most of these advisors trained indigenous forces to act as ground-based forward air guides. Other advisors flew aboard light aircraft to act as airborne forward air controllers (FACs) under Projects CRICKET and BUTTERFLY. One such advisor was killed when his O-IE was shot

COL Thong Vongpangdy, commander of both *Bataillon Volontaire 26* (BV 26) and the Sam Neua subdivision, poses with a PPSH 41 submachine gun during the Spring of 1965. His arm is around **COL Douang Ta Norasing**, commander of BV 27. Thong was killed in an Air America H-34 while on a rescue mission for a USAF pilot inside North Vietnam during June of 1965. (Photo via Roger Warner)





Elements of a Hmong Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU), rest on a hill side during late 1965. Aside from a few civilian items, most of the equipment is standard U.S. Army issue, including an AN/PRC-25 radio, ammunition bandoliers, a M1951 field jacket, and scaled down copies of OG 107 fatigues. Headgear includes M1951 utility caps, a Red FAR beret and camouflage caps. Rice tubes worn over the shoulder are fashioned from Red parachute silk. Footwear are Bata Boots and Black leather boots. M1 Carbines and a pair of Thompson submachine guns are on the ground, but Mk 2 and M61 grenades appear to be the weapons of choice. (George Morton)



A USAF Combat Weatherman with a M-3 submachine gun at Nakhang (LS 36) during the Fall of 1965. Because of the high number of sorties aborted due to inclement weather, combat weathermen began rotating through northeastern Laos in June of 1965 to help establish a rudimentary weather-forecasting network. In the background are fuel drums and a USAF HH-3 Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopter. (via John Fuller)

The Air Division of Bird & Son became Continental Air Services, Incorporated (CASI) on 1 September 1965. CASI, which competed with Air America for U.S. government airlift contracts in Laos and South Vietnam, inherited Bird's diverse fleet. This Scottish Aviation Twin Pioneer, one of three turned over to CASI, overshot a runway in northeastern Laos and crashed during late 1965. (Ed Dearborn)





CASI briefly operated a single Fairchild-Hiller FH-1100 helicopter during late 1965, which crashed after a few months of service. Unable to compete with Air America in rotary airlift, CASI reverted to a strictly fixed-wing airline. (Ed Dearborn)

Project 404

In October of 1966, a formalized program was organized to keep track of the United States Air Force and United States Army advisors that worked in Laos on a temporary duty basis. Known as Project 404, the program was an administrative umbrella for all military advisors serving in Laos, aside from the officially accredited air and army attaches assigned to the United States Embassy in Vientiane. Project 404 advisors were technically not supposed to be stationed in Laos, so they were not official attaches. The majority of those in the project were from the United States Air Force and were assigned to the Air Operations Centers (AOCs) located in Luang Prabang, Long Tieng, Savannakhet, Pakse, and Vientiane. The AOCs served as communication centers to coordinate the rising number of fighter and bomber aircraft - both U.S. and Laotian - that were supporting ground forces in Laos.

In addition to Project 404, in late 1966 a program was organized to provide U.S. Air Force pilots to fly as forward air controllers in Laos. These pilots, known as the RAVENS, initially flew O-1 light aircraft; later, some RAVENs would be allowed to fly T-28s and other aircraft in U.S. Air Force advisor CAPT Ramon Horinek advises government forces on the use of a 105mm howitzer at Nakhang (Lima Site 36) during January of 1966. (Ramon Horinek)



the same role. As originally conceived, the RAVENs would fly with indigenous "backseaters" who would pinpoint targets for airstrikes by U.S. and Laotian planes.

1968: THE WAR ESCALATES

During early 1968, a turning point was reached in the war in Laos. Prior to that time, the conflict had been waged largely between the Pathet Lao and the government forces, which included both the FAR and guerrilla units. PAVN forces were present in a supporting role to the Pathet Lao. By 1968, however, Hanoi was growing concerned with the poor fighting spirit of the Pathet Lao. As a result, in conjunction with the Tet Offensive it was planning for South Vietnam, the PAVN in January of 1968 pushed aside the Pathet Lao and assumed the role of primary combatant against Laotian government forces.

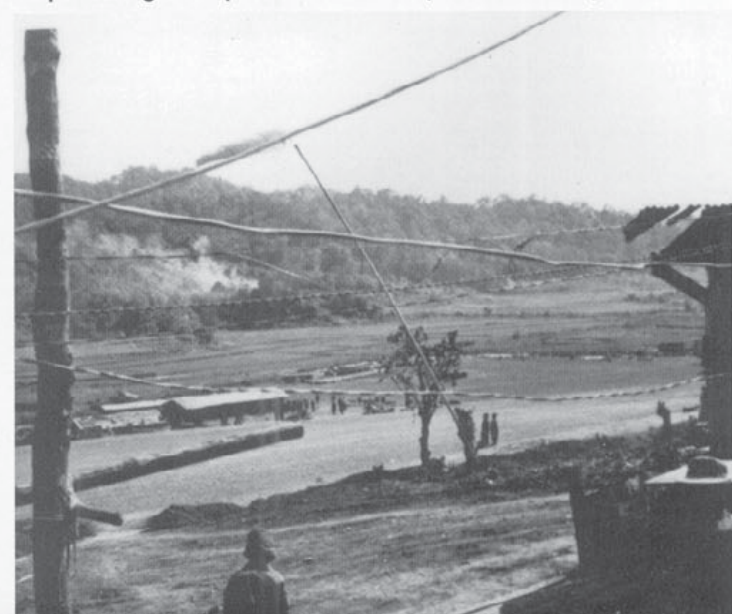
The first major battle that PAVN spearheaded was in the Nambac valley, north of Luang Prabang. This valley had been captured by the FAR in August of 1966 and since that time, the government had reinforced the base on several occasions until it included several of the FAR's best regiments, including GMs 11, 12, 15, 19 and 25.

Staging out of Dien Bien Phu, the PAVN's 316th Division surrounded the Nambac valley and pounded the FAR garrison. During the second week of January, the base fell, with staggering losses to all five *Groupement Mobiles*. It was the largest rout in the FAR's history. Following the defeat, the government disbanded all of the FAR's *Groupement Mobiles*, leaving individual battalions as the largest unit within the FAR. With the FAR demoralized, the paramilitary guerrilla units were left as the only effective fighting force in the country.

The PAVN's offensive push did not stop at Nambac. By March, the PAVN 766th Independent Regiment had pushed deep into Sam Neua Province and over-ran Phou Pha Thi, a key mountain top radar facility manned by U.S. Air Force technicians. The PAVN then steamrolled most of the other guerrilla bases in Sam Neua Province and extended southwest into Xieng Khouang Province.

Following the North Vietnamese blitz into northeastern Laos, the Hmong guerrilla forces spent much of the Summer rainy season resting and refitting. Finally, in November of 1968, they began a counteroffensive, code named Operation PIGFAT. The target of the operation was Phou Pha Thi, which was to be assaulted by elements of guerrilla GM 21. But despite heavy aerial bombardment, GM 21 could only get a toe-hold on the mountain before being pushed off.

Nakhang (LS 36) under enemy mortar attack during February of 1966. Later that month, BGEN Vang Pao was critically wounded by a sniper during an inspection of the site. (Ramon Horinek)





The FAN outpost at Muong Hiem, northeast of the PDJ during early 1966. Headquarters of the FAN's 5 Battalion Infantry, this isolated Neutralist outpost was overrun by two People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) battalions in March of 1966. (Manit Bhisitcharoentat)

(Right) Draped with belts of .50 caliber machine gun ammunition, a Thai volunteer T-28 pilot, known as B-Team, celebrates his one-hundredth sortie over northern Laos during the Summer of 1966. Thai pilots flew without identification, and their T-28s, which staged from Wattay Air Base, were devoid of national insignia. (Bill Keeler)



A USAF Assistant Air Attache serving as the Air Operations Center commander in Vientiane prepares to board a T-28 at Wattay Air base, during the Summer of 1966. During that year, selected USAF personnel assigned to the Air Attache's Office were granted permission to fly T-28s on "weather reconnaissance" missions. Although the aircraft technically belonged to the RLAF, small USAF insignia were inserted into the side panels when being flown by Americans. (Bill Keeler)





A U.S. Air Force advisor (left) instructs Lao forward air controllers (FACs) in methods for directing airstrikes by Laotian and U.S. aircraft during 1966 (Ramon Horinek)

(Right) BGEN Thao Ma in dress Blue Royal Lao Air Force uniform on the flightline at Wattay Air base during the Summer of 1966. The aircraft in the background are T-28 Trojan fighter-bombers which were flown by both B-Team (Thai) and RLAF pilots. (Bill Keeler)



The entrance to Savannakhet Air Base. The Lao pilot's wings over the gate are identical to the U.S. Air Force command pilot's wings, with the letters "RLAF" printed on the shield. In June of 1966, BGEN Thao Ma, commander of the RLAF, staged a "sit-in" at this air base after a feud with several FAR generals in Vientiane. Four months later, after being demoted, Thao Ma sent a flight of T-28 fighter-bombers to bomb Vientiane, then fled to Thailand for seven years of exile. He returned for another coup attempt in August of 1973, was captured and quickly executed. (Vic Williams via Jim Morrison)

BGEN Thao Ma's RLAF October 1966 coup attempt in progress. Smoke rises from Vientiane as a T-28 fighter-bomber divebombs the capital. (Charlie Jones)





SGU members aim a 75mm M20 Recoilless Rifle during an attack near the "Sihanouk Trail" in the southeastern corner of Laos in 1967. The initial insignia used by SGUs in MR 4, a Black Panther's head, was identical to that used by the South Vietnamese Rangers, but with an "SGU" tab added above the Panther's head. (D. Swanson)



(Right) CAPT Vernchien Saechao, commander of Team FOX, the first Mien intelligence team launched from northwestern Laos into southern China during 1966. Team FOX members wore Black fatigues and were lightly armed with pistols, M1 carbines and AK-47 assault rifles. (Vernchien Saechao)

An MR-3 action team boards a USAF 20th Helicopter Squadron Pony Express CH-3 during 1967. The team is armed with M1 carbines and use a mix of standard U.S. Army equipment, including lightweight rucksacks and plastic water canteens. Their headgear consisted of camouflage bush hats and patrol caps. (Pat Landry)





Members of an Military Region 4 action team place mines on the Sihanouk Trail during 1967. (D. Swanson)

Guerrillas On The Offensive

Following PIGFAT, the Hmong were exhausted and demoralized. Worse, the PAVN, in early 1969, dispatched elements of its 316th Division toward the PDJ, over-running the key guerrilla base at Nakhang (LS 36). Once on the plain, Hanoi made a key miscalculation. Prior to that time, the North Vietnamese sent their supplies from Sam Neua Province down Route 6 and onto the PDJ. Route 6, however, was under constant aerial interdiction by U. S. air power. As a result, an alternative road network, known as Route 72, was being constructed from Nong Het west toward the southern PDJ. Hanoi anticipated that Route 72 would be completed by mid-1969, and could be used to support its units on the PDJ all year long. Thus, unlike in previous years when PAVN units had withdrawn during the rainy season, Hanoi in the early Spring of 1969 told its forces to remain on the PDJ. In addition, Hanoi gave the order in late June for its forces to seize the FAN base at Muong Soui, off the western edge of the PDJ.

Upon seizing Muong Soui, never before did PAVN have its supply lines so stretched, especially during the rainy season. Worse for Hanoi, LCOL William Ritchie, WATERPUMP commander, congratulates LT Lee Lue, one of the first two Hmong T-28 pilots, upon completion of training at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base during 1967. Lee Lue became a legend among the Hmong for his daring close air support and bombing runs. He was shot down and killed in July of 1969. (William Ritchie)



In 1967, two Nung companies recruited in Saigon were lifted onto the Bolovens Plateau to begin the first large-scale action operations launched east toward the Ho Chi Minh Trail. One of the companies was camped at Ban Nam Tieng (LS 165), a small post on the eastern edge of the Bolovens. The camp had two dirt airfields and French-style triangular trenchwork (visible on the left). (T.L. Arkansas)

the United States Air Force was given permission to begin a major air campaign aimed at cutting the logistics corridor to the east of the PDJ. Without supplies, PAVN units on the PDJ began to literally starve to death by mid-Summer.

Taking advantage of PAVN's supply problems, MGEN Vang Pao had used two of his guerrilla battalions and an airborne battalion dispatched from MR 3 to capture the town of Xieng Khouangville, south of the PDJ, in May of 1969. Although the PAVN and Pathet Lao retook the town within days, the operation proved the ability of the guerrilla forces, when supported by air power, to act effectively as light infantry.

By August, Vang Pao was ready to test his guerrillas in a more ambitious undertaking, code named Operation KOU KIET ("Recover Honor," also known as Operation ABOUT FACE). For the operation, Vang Pao used his guerrilla GM 22, as well as SGU battalions on loan

A USAF HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant helicopter slingloads the wreck of a North Vietnamese An-2 biplane that was shot down after it made a bizarre strafing run against a mountaintop USAF radar facility at Phou Phathi in Sam Neua province during January of 1968. The biplane was shot down by an Air America flight mechanic firing from the back of a Bell 205 helicopter: The first instance of a rotary-wing aircraft downing a fixed-wing aircraft. (Ted Moore)





The French Union Army began forming the first *Bataillon Chasseur Laotienne* (BCL), or Laotian Light Infantry Battalions, during 1945. Both the 3rd BCL (left) and 4th BCL (right) were formed the following year and played a critical role in helping France reassert its control over Laos after World War II. The anchor in both badges symbolizes the "overseas" role of the BCLs within the French colonial forces.



1st BIL



3rd BIL



4th BIL



5th BIL

The ANL began forming the 1st *Bataillon Infanterie Laotian* (far left) during 1950; the 3rd BIL (right) and 4th BIL (left) completed training the following year and the 5th BIL (far right) was fielded during 1952. Although the BILs were nominally part of an independent Laotian army, they had French commanders and responded almost exclusively to orders issued by the French High Command.



In late 1953, the ANL formed the 21st *Bataillon Leger Laotienne* (left), or Laotian Light Battalion, at Luang Prabang. Unlike the BILs, the BLLs had Laotian commanders but lacked heavy weapons. The 22nd BLL (right), stationed at Vientiane, was formed during the same year.



The downed North Vietnamese An-2 Colt was air lifted to Nakhang, then to Vientiane for public display. The color scheme was overall Olive Drab and the aircraft carried no national markings. (Photo via John Fuller)

from MRs 3 and 4. In the first phase of KOU KIET, elements of these combined forces stabbed at the key chokepoints on the east side of the PDJ. Once these terrain features were captured, GM 22 walked onto the southern PDJ and fanned northward. The PAVN was caught completely by surprise, abandoning millions of dollars worth of military hardware, which to that date was the largest assembly of communist weapons captured in the Second Indochina War.

In the aftermath of KOU KIET, Vang Pao's Hmong pursued the PAVN east nearly to the North Vietnamese border. However, not only did this overextend their supply lines, but it prevented United States air power from creating a free-fire zone along the border for fear of hitting friendly forces. At the same time, both the PAVN 312th and 316th Divisions had begun to re-infiltrate into Xieng Khouang Province. Two months later, these divisions launched an armor-led assault against the PDJ, crushing the government defenses and retaking all of the territory lost during KOU KIET.

After retaking the PDJ, the PAVN continued its pursuit to the south-



When PAVN troops over ran the garrison at Nambac during January of 1968, it was the largest rout in FAR's history. More than five Groupement Mobiles, including the airborne GM 15, were smashed, and a dozen artillery pieces were lost. The Pathet Lao released several propaganda photos showing some of the hundreds of prisoners captured at the base receiving re-education lectures from communist guards. (Photo via Chuck Campbell)

west, nearly over-running the Hmong guerrilla headquarters at Long Tieng. Only the intervention of the Royal Thai Army's 13th Regiment during March saved the day for Long Tieng.

In southern Laos, the war showed a similar escalation. In October of 1969, MR 3 guerrillas launched Operation JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR, surging east on Route 9 toward the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The communists were caught off guard as the guerrillas pushed their way into Muong Phine, a long-time Pathet Lao regional headquarters. With Muong Phine secured, the guerrillas pushed east and were knocking on the gates of Tchepone, a key PAVN trans-shipment center. By the end of the month, the PAVN had regrouped and managed to push the guerrillas west toward the previous front lines at Muong Phalane.

In March of 1968, PAVN commandos assaulted the USAF radar/TACAN site at Phou Phathi, a seemingly impregnable mountaintop base in Sam Neua province. Eleven USAF technicians were either killed or missing in the attack and five more were rescued by helicopter. A PAVN combat photographer scaled the mountain after USAF airstrikes had only partially destroyed the radar equipment. The structure in the center is the radar mounting; the dish has been blown off the side. Camouflage netting, which had been draped over the buildings, is visible on the left. (Photo via Roger Warner)





A USAF Raven Forward Air Controller (left, in Black civilian clothes) lands his O-1 Birddog at Muang Phalane Southwest during 1969. Joining him is a USAF mechanic, a Thai interpreter and an American paramilitary advisor (right). The O-1 is armed with four smoke rockets under each wing. (Tom Verso via James Morrison)

(Right) A People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) commando team attacked the FAN garrison at Muong Soui in February of 1969. The U.S. advisors' quarters was hit by automatic weapons fire and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). One U.S. Army sergeant was wounded; another advisor, U.S. Army CAPT Joseph Bush, was killed, and the quarters were destroyed. (Fred Platt)



A U.S. paramilitary advisor (left) distributes cases of 75mm recoilless rifle ammunition to SGU forces in Luang Prabang province during 1968. COL Thongphanh Sukhaseum (right, with civilian hat) was commander of SGU Forces, Northeast Zone (Luang Prabang and Phongsaly provinces), Military Region 1. (D. Swanson)





Team ROY from the second HOTFOOT detachment instructs FAL troops at the rifle range at Savannakhet during 1960. The weapons are M1 Grand rifles. (Robert McKnight)

A battalion of Nationalist Chinese troops, known as *Bataillon Speciales 111*, fought in northwestern Laos on behalf of the Royal government during 1961-62. Despite their motley array of uniforms, BS 111 contained many seasoned officers and gave a good account of themselves while fighting in the Muong Houn valley during late 1961. (Pat Marr)

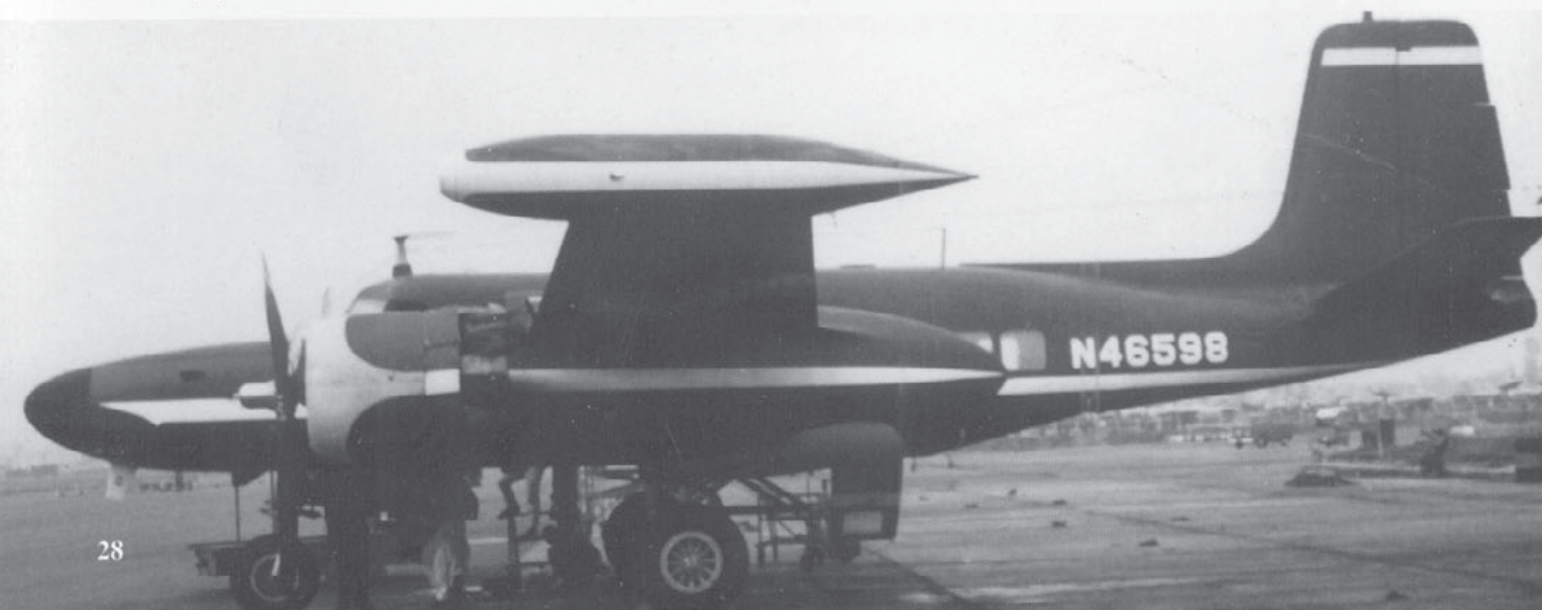


This Air America B-26 (N46598) modified by On-Mark for high-speed airdrops to teams operating along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Equipped with terrain-following radar and a rear ramp, it flew during 1967, but was found to be too fast for low-altitude resupply missions. (Frank Bonansinga)



WHITE STAR B-Detachment officers from Luang Prabang (in Ridgeway caps) confer with A-Detachment advisors at the Nam Tha airfield during December of 1961. (Pat Marr)

WATERPUMP officer CAPT Ferratta and detachment commander LCOL William Ritchie pose in front of a T-28 used for training the Royal Laotian Air Force pilots at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base during 1967. (William Ritchie)





Continental Air Services took delivery of its first Lockheed L-100-20, the civilian version of the C-130E, in early November of 1965. Although a second L-10020 was delivered in December, both were returned to the U.S. in June of 1966 when Continental Air Services decided to focus its inventory on small fixed-wing aircraft. (Ed Dearborn)

A U.S. paramilitary advisor in the trench work at PS 22, the major guerrilla staging base on the eastern edge of the Bolovens Plateau, during late 1970. An Air America H-34 helicopter is parked in the background.



A pair of Air America Bell 205A helicopters, the civilian version of the UH-1H, at Phou Pha Thi mountain, during January of 1968. A few hours later, the helicopter seen hovering pursued and shot down one of two Antonov An-2 Colt biplanes that had rocketed and bombed the moutaintop base. (Ted Moore)



A RLAF T-28C at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base during 1972. Although a few T-28Cs were delivered to the RLAF, the vast majority of the Trojans in the RLAF inventory were T-28Ds. (Photo via Grandolini Albert)





This Project 404 advisor to a Thai "Special Requirements" artillery battalion at Muong Soui was evacuated to Long Tieng after Muong Soui was overrun by PAVN forces on 27 June 1969. The helicopter in the background is one of three unarmed UH-1H helicopters assigned to the U.S. Army Attache's Office in Vientiane. (Joe Bossi)

Action teams occasionally scored sharp blows against the PAVN along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. After locating a truck park, members of one action team place a thermite charge on the engine block of a GAZ-63 truck. Over fifty vehicles were destroyed in this single attack on 31 August 1969. (Vic Williams via James Morrison)



The 2 SGU Battalion, flown in from MR 4, participates in Operation KOU KIET by capturing Phou Nok Kok, a strategic mountain overlooking the northeastern approaches to the PDJ during September of 1969. The M-16 rifle carried by the U.S. paramilitary advisor and the guerrilla on right are new to the SGU forces, the first limited shipments having arrived in June of 1969. The advisor and guerrilla second from left carry HT-2 tactical radios, the standard SGU radio used for short-range ground-to-ground transmissions. (T.L. Arkansas)





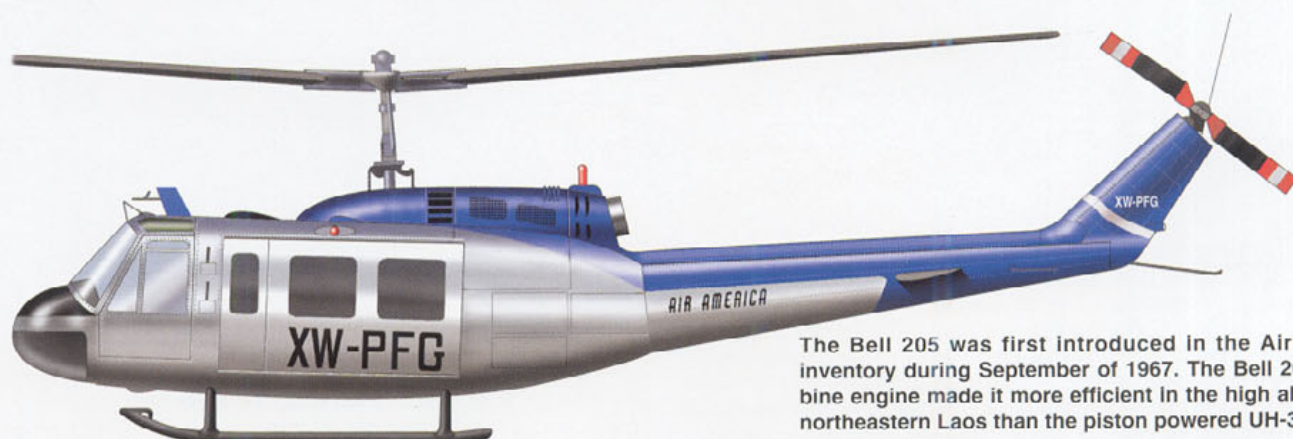
After capturing the town of Xieng Khouangville in May of 1969, government forces uncovered a cave complex north of the town that doubled as the major PAVN/Pathet Lao supply depot and command headquarters in Xieng Khouang province. U.S. paramilitary advisors assembled at Xieng Khouangville airfield an array of landmines, 40 pound block cratering charges and M3 demolition charges that were used to seal the front of the cave. (T.L. Arkansas)

(Right) Hmong guerrillas add a 250 pound bomb to the small arsenal piled in front of the entrance of the cave complex near Xieng Khouangville that housed the PAVN/Pathet Lao depot and headquarters; the subsequent explosion sealed the cave. (T.L. Arkansas)

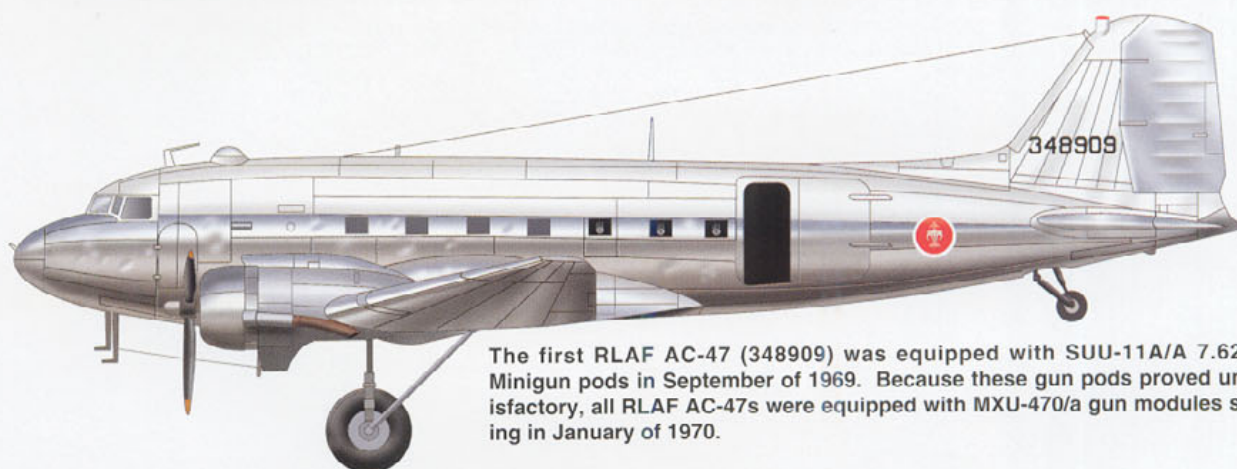




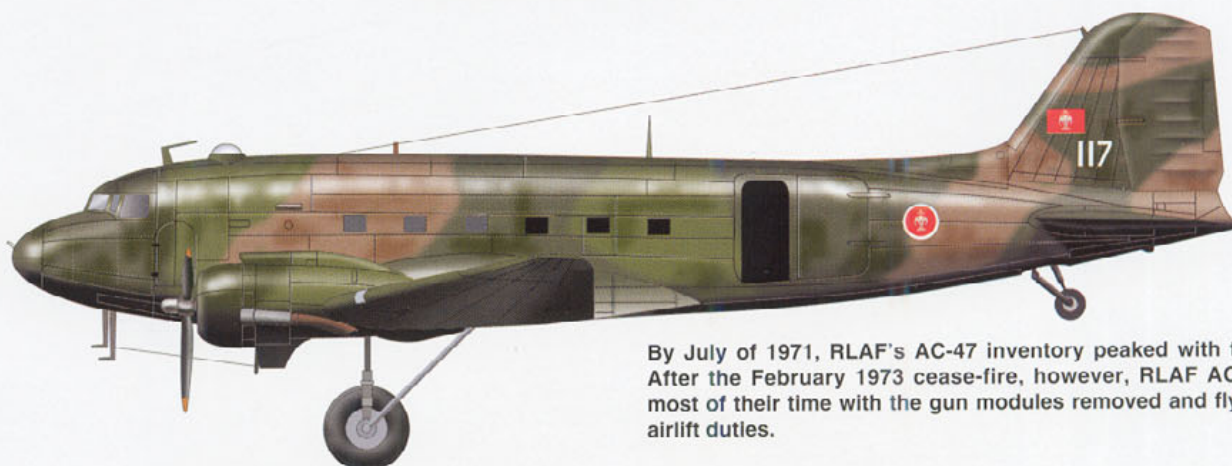
A RLAF UH-34D during 1965-1975. A U.S. Marine Mobile Training Team in Thailand provided instruction to RLAF helicopter pilots beginning in 1964; during the following year, the first ex-U.S. Navy UH-34 was turned over to RLAF.



The Bell 205 was first introduced in the Air America inventory during September of 1967. The Bell 205A's turbine engine made it more efficient in the high altitudes of northeastern Laos than the piston powered UH-34s.



The first RLAF AC-47 (348909) was equipped with SUU-11A/A 7.62mm Minigun pods in September of 1969. Because these gun pods proved unsatisfactory, all RLAF AC-47s were equipped with MXU-470/a gun modules starting in January of 1970.



By July of 1971, RLAF's AC-47 inventory peaked with ten aircraft. After the February 1973 cease-fire, however, RLAF AC-47s spent most of their time with the gun modules removed and flying regular airlift duties.



An Commando Raider Team armed with M-16s and M-79 40MM grenade launchers assembles at PS 44, during November of 1970. These commandos are equipped totally with U.S. supplied uniforms and web gear. (Hugh Tovar)



An Air America S-58T Twin Pac (XW-PHA) loads troops and supplies near Pa Doung (Lima Site 5). This helicopter was the first of five Sikorsky H-34s that were converted to turbine engines at Air America's Udorn, Thailand facilities during the Spring of 1971. During their first few months in operation, the S-58Ts were painted in the more traditional Silver and Blue Air America color scheme, but that scheme quickly gave way to overall Olive Drab. (Hugh Tovar)

(Right) Hmong guerrilla forces recaptured the PDJ in July of 1971. Thai infantry and artillery battalions were quickly lifted onto the plain to establish a series of interlocking fire support bases. This Thai forward air guide (forward air controller [FAC]) was known by the radio callsign "Small Man." He carries a CAR-15 which has been modified with an M-16 stock. (John Koren).

A 21st Special Operations Squadron CH-53, callsign Knives, lands Groupement Mobile 31 one kilometer south of the Saravane airfield during Operation SAYASILA, on 28 July 1971. The CH-53 was armed with a 7.63MM Minigun mounted in the forward crew door (starboard side) and in one of the forward windows (port side). To allow it to operate deep into Laos, the aircraft carried two external fuel tanks. (Hugh Tovar)



Guerrilla officers from Groupement Mobile (GM) 11 immediately after recapturing the King's Farm at Luang Prabang, from the People's Army of Vietnam's (PAVN) 335th Regiment during April of 1971. Guerrilla troops often wore civilian clothes, as dramatically demonstrated by the officer on the right. One officer is carrying a movie camera while another is carrying a LAW anti-tank rocket. (Houmphanh Bounysari)



An unmarked CH-54 Skycrane (known in Laos by the radio callsign Hurricane), on loan to Air America from the U.S. Army's 1st Aviation Brigade, lifts ammunition to Fire Support Base (FAB) Mustang, during August of 1971. It was not uncommon for USAF and U.S. Army aviation units to loan aircraft to Air America for specific missions. When used on such missions, all U.S. service and national markings were removed or overpainted. (Hugh Tovar)

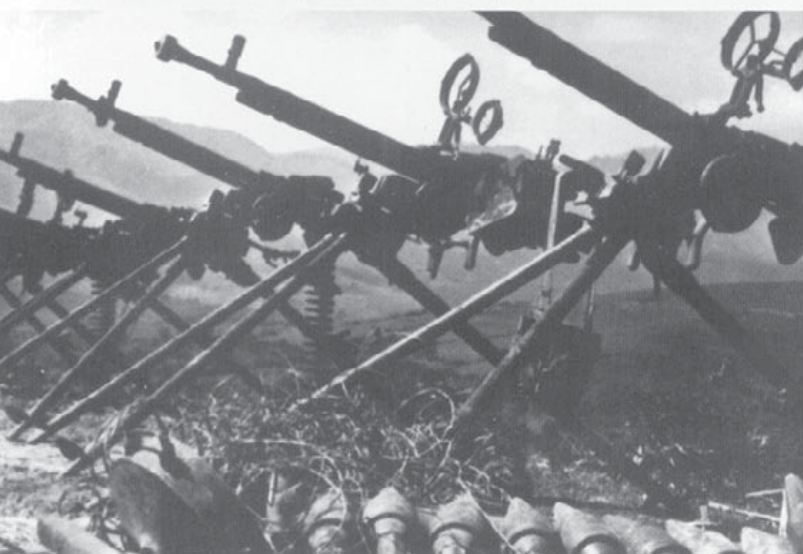




Two irregular GMs, composed of Hmong guerrillas, quickly swept across the PDJ during Operation KOU KIET, taking one of the largest hauls of communist military equipment of any operation during the Second Indochina War. COL Neng Chu Thao, commander of BV 21 and the Xieng Khouang Subdivision, and his men pile aboard an abandoned Soviet-made PT-76 amphibious tank during September of 1969. (Charles Campbell)



Operation KOU KIET: MGEN Vang Pao on the PDJ looking pleased with his haul of captured People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) 122mm field guns during September of 1969. (Charles Campbell)



(Left) A row of Soviet-made 12.7mm heavy machine guns. These guns were on anti-aircraft mounts and were used as light anti-aircraft artillery mainly against low flying aircraft and helicopters. The weapons were captured in Operation KOU KIET. In the foreground are B-40 rocket rounds and a landmine. (Charles Campbell)

One of the Soviet-made BTR-40 armored personnel carriers captured during Operation KOU KIET. The vehicle was armed with a pair of 7.62mm medium machine guns, one mounted at the rear of the vehicle and one mounted at the front of the open personnel compartment. (Charles Campbell)





More spoils from Operation KOU KIET. Visible are some Chinese-made 75mm Type 52 Recoilless Rifles, a Soviet-made B-10 82mm Recoilless Gun (commonly known as the DK-82), the rear section from a Soviet B-11 107mm Recoilless Gun and the bipod from a Soviet-made 82mm mortar. (Charles Campbell)



MGEN Phasouk S. Rasaphak (left), commander of MR 4, greets MGEN Vang Pao after he flew from Pakse to Long Tieng aboard an Air America Beech Baron in October of 1969. Stepping from the plane is COL Soutchay Vongsavanh, SGU chief-of-staff for Military Region 4. (Dhonnadit Sudhides)

(Right) Generals Vang Pao and Phasouk, on their tour of the captured *Plaine Des Jarres* (PDJ), walk across an overgrown PSP runway (Lima 22, built by the French during 1953) in the middle of the plain. Phasouk wears a U.S. Army tropical combat uniform and tropical combat boots. Their escorts carry M-16 rifles. (Dhonnadit Sudhides)



A U.S. Army Special Forces SFC assigned to Project 404 with the commander of *Bataillon Parachutistes* 103 at Savannakhet during late 1969. (Joe Bossi)



In October 1969, MR 3 guerrilla units launched Operation JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR, capturing the town of Muong Phine for the first time in eight years. During the final phases of the operation, helicopters from the 20th Special Operations Squadron attempted to infiltrate an additional guerrilla battalion into the Muong Phine airfield. Enemy fire shot down two CH-3s, both of which were still where they crashed some two months later (Vic Williams via James Morrison)





Thai forward air guides and advisors from the U.S. Air Force combat control team based at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base pose in front of a small Buddhist wat at Long Tieng, during the Summer of 1971. (John Koren)



MGEN Vang Pao (center) discusses operations to retake Skyline Ridge with MAJ Chanh Nosavan, commander of GM 30, during mid-January of 1972. Chanh wears a French 1956 camouflaged smock. The town of Long Tieng is visible in the background. (Hugh Tovar)

GEN Bounpone Maktheparak, the FAR commander-in-chief, addresses rebel troops from Groupement Mobiles 31 and 33 at Pha Khao, during March of 1972. Both GMs, recruited from the Savannakhet area in Military Region 3, were revolting for being deployed in Military Region 2 for too long during Operation STRENGTH. A Continental Air Services Twin Otter is on the airfield. (Hugh Tovar)



MAJ Vang Pao fires a 4.2-inch mortar from Pa Doung during Operation PHOU PHIANG II, which was conducted during the Fall of 1972. (Hugh Tovar)

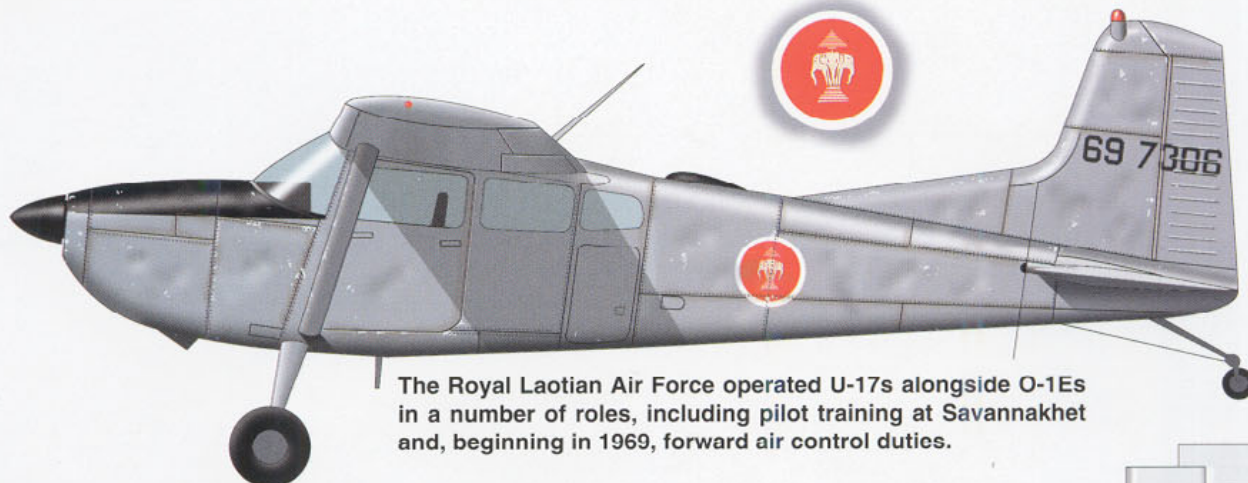


A T-28D-5 armed with underwing .50 caliber machine guns and two 250 pound Mk 81 low drag bombs taxis at Long Tieng airfield, during September of 1972. In the background looms the denuded summit of Skyline Ridge. (Hugh Tovar)

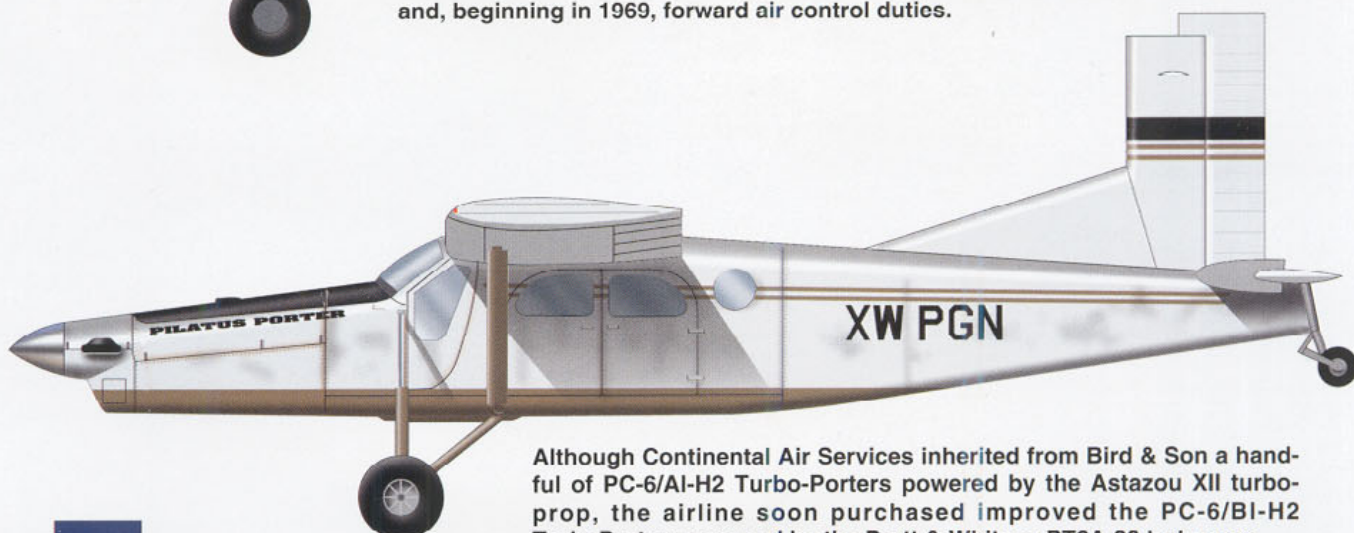


U.S. officials inspect elements of the 1st Division pushing north along Route 13 toward the junction at Sala Phou Khoun, during December of 1972. The U.S. Army Attaché's UH-1H has been temporarily armed with M60 machine-guns; normally it carried no armament. (Hugh Tovar)

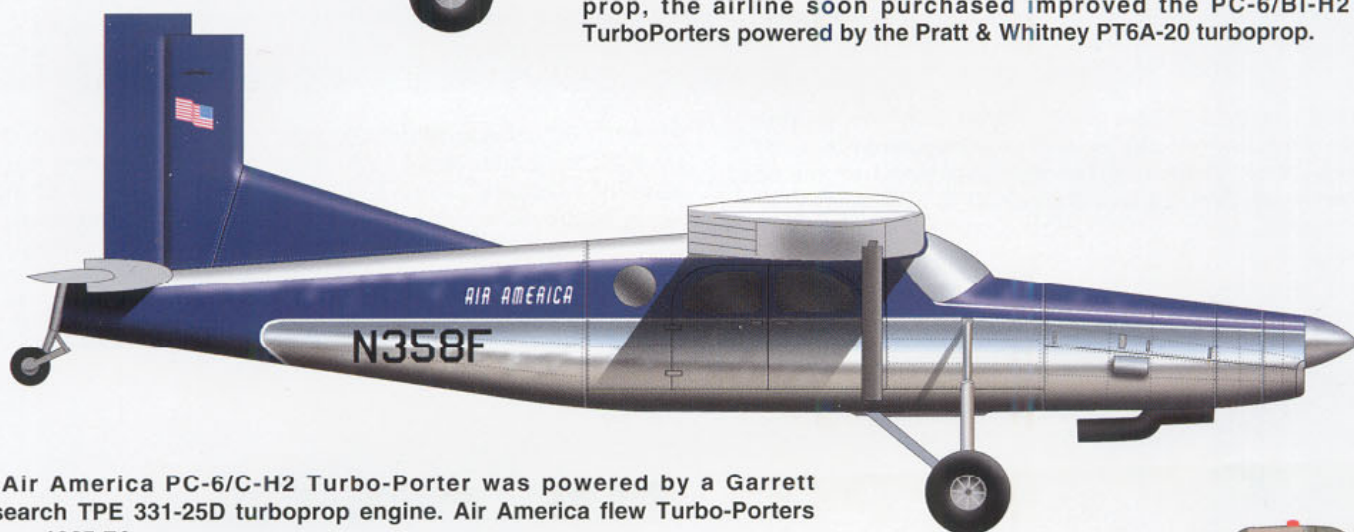




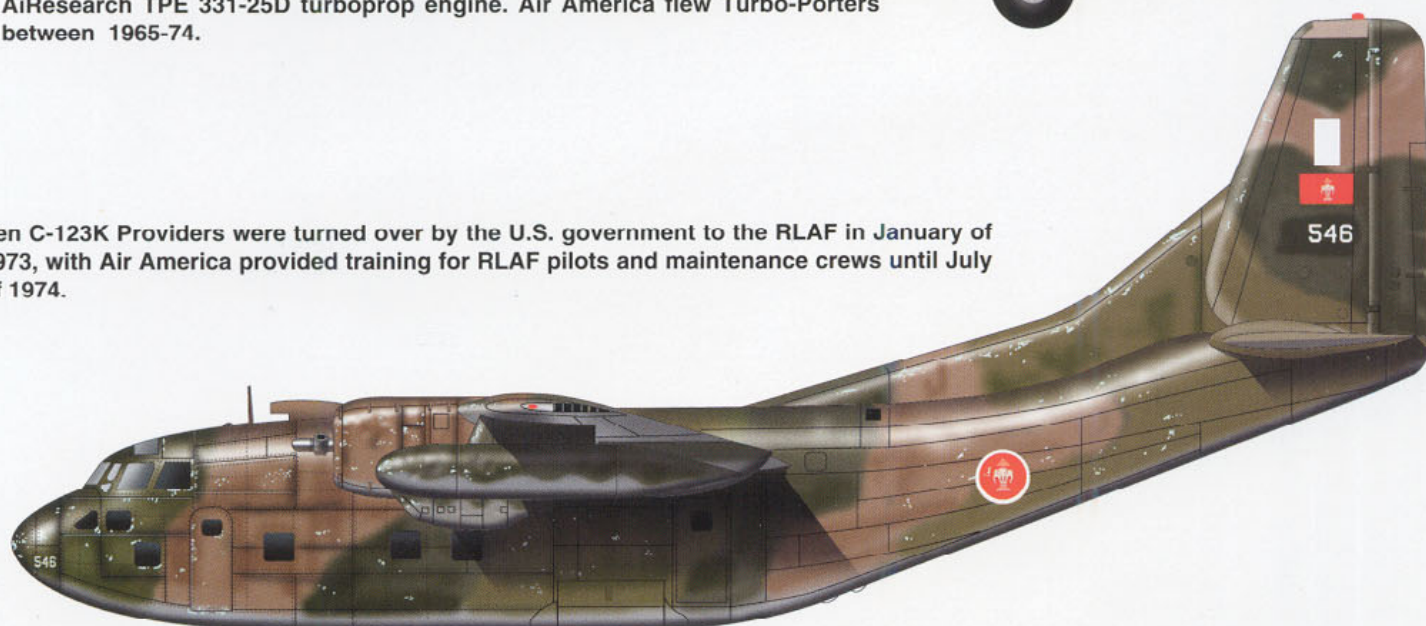
The Royal Laotian Air Force operated U-17s alongside O-1Es in a number of roles, including pilot training at Savannakhet and, beginning in 1969, forward air control duties.



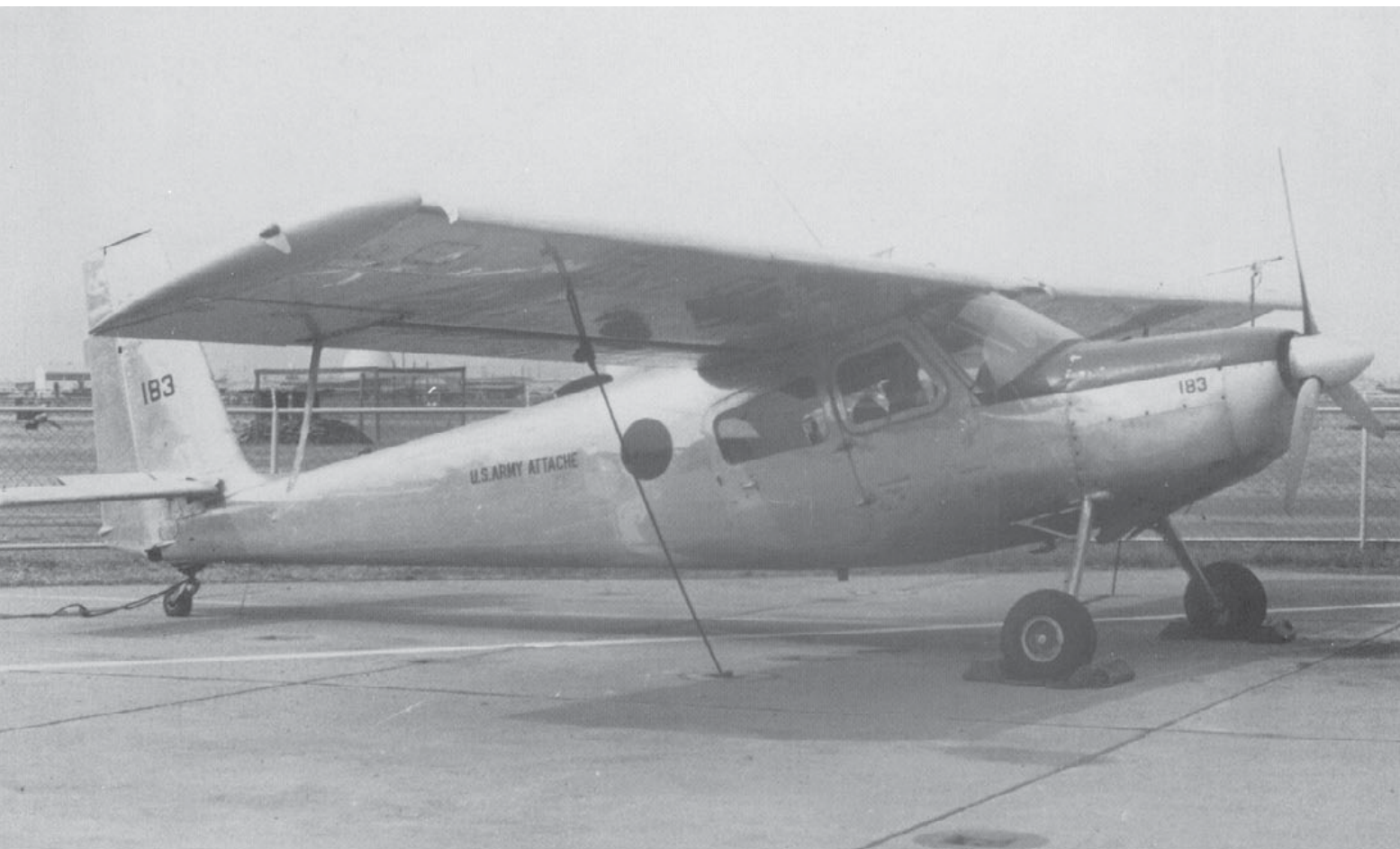
Although Continental Air Services inherited from Bird & Son a handful of PC-6/AI-H2 Turbo-Porters powered by the Astazou XII turboprop, the airline soon purchased improved the PC-6/BI-H2 TurboPorters powered by the Pratt & Whitney PT6A-20 turboprop.



This Air America PC-6/C-H2 Turbo-Porter was powered by a Garrett AiResearch TPE 331-25D turboprop engine. Air America flew Turbo-Porters between 1965-74.

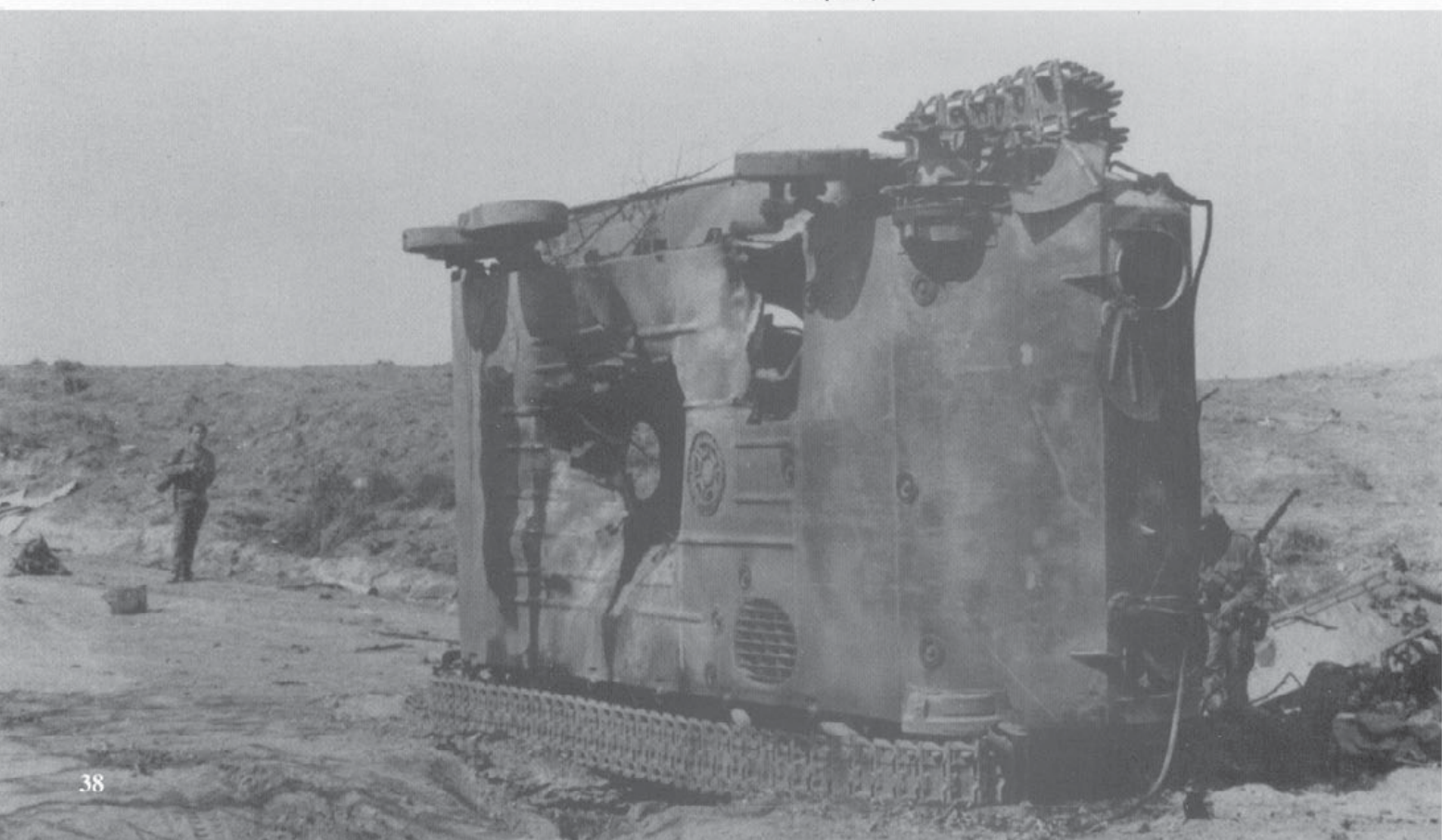


Ten C-123K Providers were turned over by the U.S. government to the RLAF in January of 1973, with Air America provided training for RLAF pilots and maintenance crews until July of 1974.



This overall Natural Metal Super-Helio (Serial 183) was originally assigned to Air America. The aircraft was later transferred to the U.S. Army Attache's Office, Vientiane. The anti-glare panel on the nose was Olive Drab and all lettering was in Black. (T.L. Arkansas)

PAVN PT-76 tanks and Dac Cong commandos launched an attack on Lima 22 (LS 22) located in the center of the PDJ, during the second week of February 1970. The attack failed, with two of the tanks being destroyed by mines. A second, larger armored thrust the following week smashed through government lines, reversing all of the gains made by the Laotians during Operation KOU KIET. (Charles Campbell)



1970: The War Widens

Following the success of JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR, the MR 3 guerrilla program expanded considerably during 1970. Two different guerrilla units were conceived. First, a series of large battalions, known as "Mobiles," were formed primarily for use as reinforcements in other military regions. Second, the smaller SGU battalions were to be used within MR 3 against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

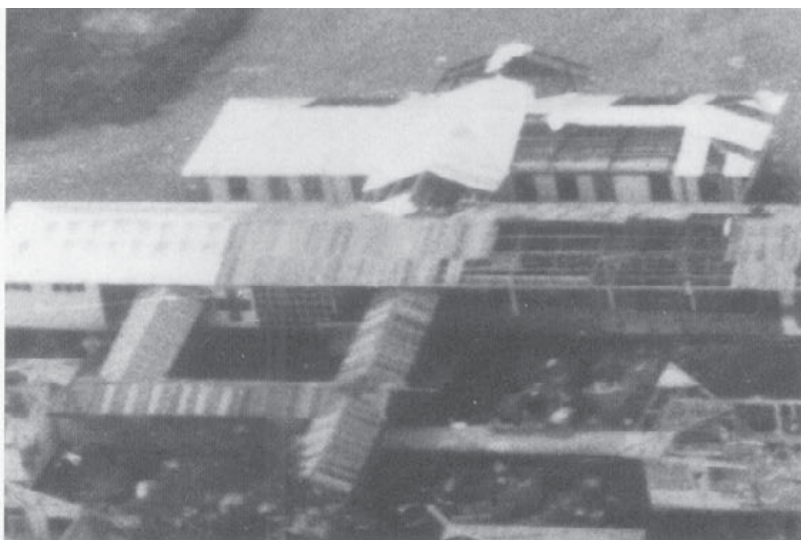
During the summer of 1970, the expanded MR 3 guerrilla forces saw action in Operation MAENG DA ("Waterbug"). Using SGU battalions and Mobile #1 (the latter receiving its baptism of fire), the operation attempted to repeat the success of JUNCTION CITY JUNIOR. This it failed to do, and the operation accomplished little other than getting the commander of Mobile #1 killed.

Following this failure, a second offensive, code named Operation TCHEPONE, was launched in November using two task forces of two SGU battalions each. The target, as the operation's name implied, was the town of Tchepone. Although the operation fell short of its intended goal, it did demonstrate the ability of four guerrilla battalions to coordinate their actions. As a result, by year's end the MR 3 guerrilla program underwent a major reorganization. First, the Mobiles were disbanded. Second, the SGU battalions were renamed *Bataillon Gujerrier* (BG) and grouped by fours into guerrilla GMs (MR 2's guerrilla GMs, by comparison, had only three battalions each).

In addition to the guerrilla GMs, a new unconventional unit known as Commando Raider Teams (CRTs) were being formed in 1969. The CRT, as originally envisioned, were highly-trained teams of Laotian para-commandos available for strategic raids, reconnaissance, prisoner snatches, and other special missions. The first CRT was raised in MR 3 during 1969 and sent for training at Phitsanulok, Thailand. They were immediately used for raids in Laos, North Vietnam and even Cambodia. Another CRT was created in MR 2 and, in its first operation, was airlifted in February of 1970 for a raid into Dien Bien Phu. Although the CRTs would go on to achieve some success, the program did not justify the great amount of time and effort that went into training each team. As a result, by 1972, the mission of the CRT had shifted primarily to acting as pathfinders for the guerrilla GMs.

(Right) PAVN forces briefly seized control of Skyline Ridge, overlooking Long Tieng, in March of 1970; however, Hmong guerrillas quickly retook the summit. Victorious Hmong, armed with M1 Garands, M1 Carbines and a 3.5 inch rocket launcher, gather around a number of dead PAVN troops. (D. Swanson)

A Xieng Khouang Air Transport C-47 at Long Tieng airfield during 1970. Created in 1967 with two C-47s piloted by Thai pilots, the airline lost one aircraft and most of its pilots in a January 1970 crash at Long Tieng. The airline hired American pilots and continued to fly until the end of the war. The color scheme carried by the Skytrain was overall White with a Gold stripe and Gold cowling ring. The helicopters in the background are Air America H-34s. (J. Glerum)



After capturing the PDJ, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) pursued the retreating Hmong southwest. Exhausted and in disarray, the Hmong guerrillas could not prevent PAVN forces from briefly occupying the town of Sam Thong during March of 1970. The town's hospital was destroyed in the North Vietnamese attack. (T.L. Arkansas)





This insignia was worn by troops assigned to Groupement Mobile 30, during 1972.



The insignia worn by troops of the Thai UNITY Bataillon Commando 610, during 1971



This was the shoulder patch of GEN Thao Ma's Laotian Revolutionary Committee, which was worn by rebel troops during the general's abortive coup of 20 August 1973.



Troops of Thai UNITY Bataillon Commando 603B wore this patch during 1973.



This PAVN K-63 Armored Personnel Carrier was destroyed on the PDJ in September of 1972.



This FAR M-706 was equipped with twin .50 caliber machineguns. It was repainted with a new camouflage scheme during the March 1973 Armed Forces Day parade in Vientiane. FAR also operated the open-top version of the M-706 equipped with either an 81mm mortar or four machine-guns.



Government paramilitary operations on the Bolovens Plateau were divided into three guerrilla zones during mid-1968. Each zone had an SGU battalion for offensive actions and two Guerrilla Battalions used mainly for local defense. The headquarters of Guerrilla Zone #1 was located at Pakse Site 22 (PS 22), which featured a 3,069 foot clay and soil airfield. Touring the site are BGEN Sourith Don Sasorith, commander of the Royal Laotian Air Force; BGEN Kane Insisiengmay, Deputy MR 4 Commander; and MGEN Oudone Sananikone, FAR chief-of-staff. (Robert Tyrrell)

Commando Raider Team assembles at PS 44 before being helilifted on a mission into North Vietnam, during the Summer of 1970. The team is outfitted with a mix of Pathet Lao and PAVN uniforms; weapons include AK-47s and a Makarov pistol tucked into the belt of the team leader. This team was ambushed soon after infiltration and only a couple of team members managed to walk back to Savannakhet weeks later. (H.M. Greensleeves)



Pakse Site 22, with a U.S. Air Force OV-10 Bronco and a pair of Turbo-Porters on the strip. (Tim Danforth via James Morrison)

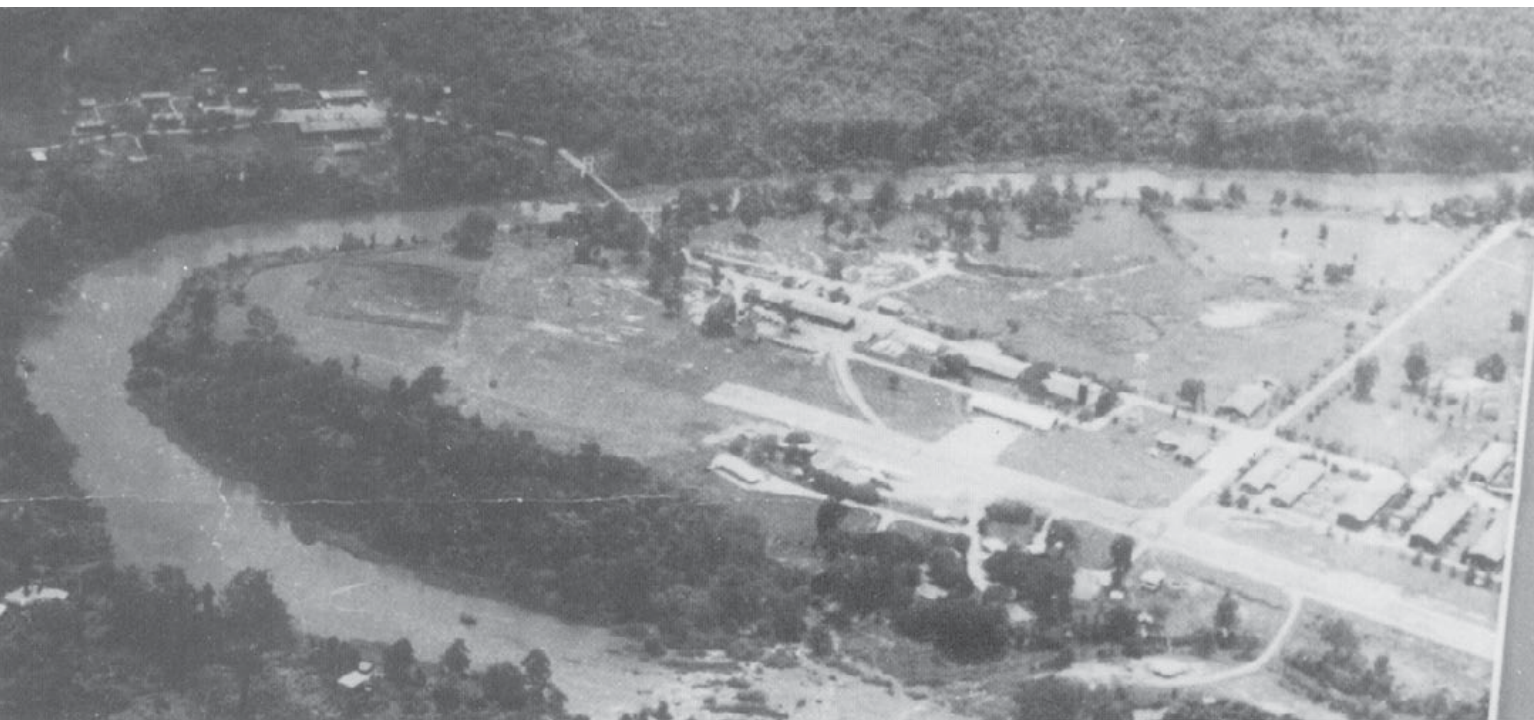
Operations On The Bolovens

In March of 1970, GEN Lon Nol assumed control in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and demanded that PAVN vacate its extensive sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia. Lon Nol also put an immediate end to Hanoi's use of the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville for trans-shipping war materials to communist forces in South Vietnam.

Its Cambodian supply lines gone, North Vietnam more than ever was dependent on the Ho Chi Minh Trail for moving supplies south. To safeguard this sole logistic corridor, the PAVN, in mid-1970, began to extend its zone of control west, deeper into MR 4. That April, North Vietnamese forces seized control of the town of Attopeu; two months later, they pushed their way into the town of Sarvane.

In the face of this escalated PAVN pressure, MR 4 expanded its operations during the second half of the year. In August, Operation HONORABLE DRAGON was launched with the purpose of retaking the moun-





Phitsanulok training camp in Thailand during 1972. The training area at the top left was the Upper Lao Camp, originally established for Hmong guerrilla training. The training area at the extreme left center was the Lower Lao Camp, dedicated primarily for SGU training from MRs 3 and 4. At the lower right corner was the Thai Special Battalion barracks and communications training camp. (David Carr via James Morrison)

tains on the southeast corner of the Bolovens. Guerrilla reinforcements were sent from around the country to participate in the operation, including MRs 1, 2, and 3. After several weeks of confused fighting, government forces pushed back the Vietnamese from that sector of the Bolovens.

As HONORABLE DRAGON was winding down, two other programs were being initiated to bolster the pro-government forces in MR 4. The first of these, known as Project COPPER, involved training Cambodian infantry battalions at a base north of Pakse. The first of these battalions completed training by December of 1970 and was deployed by CH-53 helicopters to the southeastern Bolovens on New Year's Day, 1971. A second battalion was deployed shortly after and a third battalion had severe morale problems and was repatriated to Cambodia before it could

COL Soutchay Vongsavanh, chief-of-staff of Military Region 4 guerrilla forces, delivers a graduation speech to MR 4 Commando Raiders who have just completed training at Phitsanulok, Thailand during 1970. The commandos wear "duck hunter" camouflage, including helmet covers; such uniform standardization was, in practice, rarely seen among Laotian guerrilla forces. (Dhonnadit Sudhides)



be deployed. By the early Spring of 1971, after a lackluster performance on the Bolovens, Project COPPER was canceled and the battalions were flown back to Phnom Penh.

The second program, which came to be known as Project UNITY, involved the training of Thai volunteer battalions in Thailand for deployment in Laos. These 550-man battalions included a twenty-two man cadre seconded from the Royal Thai Armed Forces. These battalions were given the French designation "Bataillon Commandos" (French nomenclature was prevalent in the FAR).

The first two Bataillon Commandos, BC 601 and 602, were deployed to the Bolovens Plateau on 15 December 1970. On the morning of 8 January 1971, the PAVN 9th Regiment struck the UNITY garrison from two directions. The Thai troops held their ground, forcing the North Vietnamese to withdraw with 131 killed. The Thais had suffered one killed and one wounded. UNITY was off to a good start.

Commando Raiders doing parachute landing drills at Phitsanulok, Thailand during 1972. (David Carr via James Morrison)



1971: Retaking The Offensive

By the Spring of 1971, the Royal Laotian Government was feeling the greatest pressure to that date. In MR 3, the South Vietnamese Armed Forces had launched Operation LAM SON 719, aimed at capturing the town of Tchepone and cutting, at least temporarily, the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As part of a diversionary effort, a regiment of MR 3 guerrillas (Groupement Mobile 30) launched Operation SILVER BUCKLE to the south LAM SON 719. In a second diversion, GM 33 was airlifted into the outskirts of Tchepone as part of Operation DESERT RAT.

To the north in MR 1, the PAVN 335th Independent Regiment began to heavily pressure the town of Luang Prabang. To bolster the local government forces, MR 3's GM 32 was airlifted into the town. Together with a battalion of Hmong guerrillas from MR 2 and a regiment of MR 1 guerrillas (GM 11), the government inflicted heavy casualties on the 335th Regiment and eased pressure on Luang Prabang.

In MR 2, Vang Pao's guerrillas had been under continuous pressure since mid-1970. Although they had managed to launch a series of small operations in the Fall designed to capture the towns of Moung Soui and Ban Na (code named Operations COUNTERPUNCH and COUNTERPUNCH II), the Hmong could not repeat the success of 1969's KOU KIET. A final effort at the end of the year, code named Operation COUNTERPUNCH III, involved the airlifting of GM 21 east of the PDJ; after a few weeks of ineffectual guerrilla sweeps, the regiment withdrew back toward Long Tieng.

By January of 1971 Vang Pao faced the upcoming dry season with forward PAVN units only a few ridge lines northeast of Long Tieng. Worse, the Royal Thai Army regiment that had been bolstering his forces since March of 1970, was due to return to Thailand that Spring. Fortunately, Project UNITY Thai volunteer battalions began arriving at Long Tieng on 14 February 1971, providing an invaluable source of manpower for the depleted Hmong.

The Spring of 1971, looked as bleak for MR 4 as it did for MR 2. That March, MR 4 guerrilla forces were driven from key bases along the eastern Bolovens Plateau. Then, in mid-May, Paksong and the other key towns in the middle of the Bolovens fell to the PAVN 9th Regiment. MR 4 was on the ropes, with little to stop a concerted PAVN push toward Pakse.

By the summer of 1971, Laos was hanging on by its fingernails, but the monsoon rains gave the government forces a short reprieve. In MR 2, Vang Pao intended to take advantage of the rains and launch a repeat of KOU KIET. Using three regiments of his Hmong - GMs 21, 22, and 23 - he began to walk north onto the PDJ during July. This time, the PAVN was not taken by surprise, and had withdrawn with their equipment ahead of time. The guerrillas fanned across the plain, capturing several food caches but little else.

Once the PDJ had been secured, Thai UNITY artillery batteries, protected by UNITY Bataillon Commandos, formed a network of interlocking fire support bases in the middle of the plain. The Hmong pushed north and east of the plain to establish a forward defensive perimeter.

In MR 4, government forces had also taken advantage of the rains to launch a major offensive. Code named Operation SAYASILA, it aimed at retaking the towns of Saravane and Paksong. In late July, Phase One of SAYASILA began with GM 31, on loan from MR 3, making a successful heliborne assault into the outskirts of Saravane. The town was retaken without a fight. Two months later, Phase Two of SAYASILA began in earnest with GM 32, also on loan from MR 3, heliborne east of Paksong, storming the town and retaking it after tough house-to-house fighting.

(Right) The Orchid Room, an officer's club at Fire Support Base (FSB) Puncher, Ban Na during December of 1970. By May of 1971, Ban Na was under such intense enemy heavy weapons fire that the Thai battery was forced to retreat south. (Hugh Tovar)



Following the heavy losses received after the PAVN recaptured the PDJ in February of 1970, Vang Pao's Hmong forces were retrained in Thailand and then put back on the offensive. In October of 1970, Hmong units recaptured the village of Ban Na (LS 15) and a Thai Army artillery battery was flown in to garrison the elaborate fire support base, codenamed Puncher, built at the site. (D. Swanson)



As the last line of defense around FSB Puncher at Ban Na, the Thais assembled wooden troughs loaded with 3.5 inch rockets rigged to ignite electronically. In the event the base was about to be over-run the rockets could be fired by remote control. (Hugh Tovar)

Although both Saravane and Paksong had been retaken, the PAVN maintained a heavy presence between the two towns. In response, the government devised a series of sweeps, known as Operation THAO LA, during the final two quarters of 1971. In this operation, GM 31 and a new guerrilla regiment from MR 4 (GM 41), maneuvered in and around the town of Thateng. The PAVN, however, maintained its foothold on the Bolovens and was well positioned to launch a dry season offensive.





(Left) A U.S. Air Force RAVEN forward air controller (FAC), armed with a CAR-15 (folding stock commando version of the M-16 rifle), confers with an Military Region 3 guerrilla officer during the fall 1970. The officer wears a FAR airborne beret badge depicting a winged trident. A number of FAR paratroopers were attracted to the guerrilla program because of its better pay scale. (Tim Danforth via James Morrison)

Bataillon Commando 601 and 602 at Ban Houei Sai on the day after the Thai forces inflicted severe casualties on the People's Army of Vietnam's (PAVN) 9th Infantry Regiment during January of 1971. Barely visible on the road at the top is a Raven Cessna 0-1E Bird Dog reconnaissance aircraft, which tried to takeoff from the site but flipped on a row of concertina wire and landed in a minefield. The pilot managed to walk away from the crash, unscathed. (David J. Erickson via James Morrison)





GEN Phomma Douangmala, the Pathet Lao commander in southern Laos, died mysteriously while in a People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) hospital in November of 1970. Rumors immediately began to surface that the North Vietnamese had refused him proper medical treatment which led to his death. In March of 1971, the Pathet Lao's 25th Special Fighters Battalion rallied to the Royal Laotian Government in MR 4 to protest the general's death. The battalion commander, CAPT Boua Liang, dressed in "duck hunter" camouflage provided by the government, poses with his men, a Soviet-made 82mm M36 mortar and a 7.62mm SGM medium machinegun (Photo via Wick Tourison)

(Right) On Saint Valentine's Day, 1971 the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) attacked the guerilla base at Long Tieng. During a close air support mission flown by a USAF F-4 Phantom, the crew accidentally dropped a Cluster Bomb Unit (CBU) on the base, setting it on fire. Some thirty persons were killed and another 170 were wounded. (Charles Campbell)





GEN Vang Pao relays orders over an AN/PRC-77 field radio from Moung Phanh airfield, on the western edge of the PDJ, during his second successful capture of the plain during September of 1971. (Hugh Tovar)



(Left) FAR troops are heliborne onto the deserted airfield at Muong Soui by CH-53 Knives of the USAF 21st Special Operations Squadron (21st SOS) during Operation GOLDEN MOUNTAIN in September of 1971. (Photo via Wick Tourison)

GM 31 and U.S. paramilitary advisors massed at Ban Koutlamphong (PS 47) on the morning of 28 July 1971. 21st SOS Knives (CH-53s) are waiting for GM 31 to board for an air assault to retake the town of Saravane. By noon, the town was in government hands. (Eli Chovis)



Sandbagged bunkers at Fire Support Base (FSB) Lion, part of the elaborate interlocking FSB grid constructed across the PDJ, in November of 1971. (Charles Campbell)





The town of Paksong, known for its fair climate and villas built by the French prior to 1954, was scene to fierce combat between government-backed forces and the North Vietnamese between 1971-73. (Hugh Tovar)

(Right) A U.S. paramilitary advisor greets some of the remnants of the civilian population after entering the town of Paksong with GM 32 on 15 September 1971. (Eli Chovis)

1972: Collapse

As expected, the PAVN launched its dry season offensive in late December of 1971. What was not expected was the intensity of the offensive, which included elements of two infantry divisions, two more independent regiments and armor. What's more, for the first time in the Second Indochina War, the PAVN was making liberal use of both 130mm artillery and was even using its MiG fighters for air cover during its offensive.

Faced with this firepower, the Hmong forward line north and east of the PDJ crumbled almost instantly. The PAVN surged forward, and overwhelmed the Thai 105mm and 155mm howitzers with their longer-range 130mm guns. Within three days, the North Vietnamese had complete control of the plain.

In the south, elements of the PAVN 968th Infantry Division pounded the government's forward lines in late December, forcing the MR 4 guerrillas, FAR, FAN and UNITY battalions in the town to flee.

In a stage re-enactment posed for its propaganda value, a Pathet Lao soldier approaches the headquarters of Fire Support Base Mustang. The resulting photos were put on display in Hanoi during January of 1972. (Photo via Charles Campbell)



North Vietnamese artillery, armor and infantry blitzkrieged through the interlocking FSBs on the PDJ during an overwhelming three-day assault in December 1971. For propaganda purposes, the attack was restaged and photographed with Pathet Lao soldiers running through abandoned trenches, in this case, those previously held by 1 Company, BC 603. (Photo via Charles Campbell)



west toward Pakse.

By the opening days of January 1972, Laos was again on the ropes. In MR 2, PAVN elements had pushed all the way to Skyline Ridge, which overlooks the MR 2 guerrilla headquarters at Long Tieng. Only the timely intervention of GM 30 from MR 3 bought Long Tieng some breathing room after the regiment muscled its way to the top of Skyline Ridge.

Just as GM 30 was pushing its way to the top of Skyline, the Hmong GMs had finished a quick retraining cycle and were sent back to Long Tieng. With these regiments, along with GMs 31 and 33 on loan from MR 3, Vang Pao launched Operation STRENGTH in February, designed to cut behind PAVN lines and further relieve pressure on Long Tieng. The operation was a success, but when Vang Pao tried to launch operation STRENGTH II in March, the two MR 3 regiments revolted

Compounding the rout taking place on the *Plaine Des Jarres*, an idling Air America Turbo-Porter rolled into a gas drum at Long Tieng airfield, on 22 December 1971. The resulting explosion and fire destroyed both the Porter and a nearby Air America Fairchild C-123 Provider. Incredibly, no one was killed in the accident. (D. Swanson)

after being kept in the field for too long.

In the south, the PAVN was pushing slowly toward the MR 4 headquarters at Pakse. Barely rested from its operation in MR 2, GM 30 was rushed to Pakse. In addition, GM 32 was sent from MR 3 to conduct Operation FA NGUM (named after the first king of Laos), aimed at cutting behind PAVN and relieving pressure on Pakse. The operation bled GM 32 white, causing the regiment to mutiny. But, as with Long Tieng, the PAVN had been kept at bay, and time had been bought until the rainy season brought some relief.





The CIA's airline, Air America, used the Swiss-built Turbo-Porter to supply the FAR and guerrilla units all over Laos. The aircraft was well liked for its ability to get into the small unprepared fields and mountain tip strips.

BGEN Thao Ly, commander of the FAR 2nd Strike Division, talks on a PRC-77 radio while inspecting GM 30's defensive line on the Romeo-Juliet Ridgeline north of Long Tieng during early January of 1972. On the right is GM 30's forward air guide. (Oroth Insiengmay)

The 14 January 1972 edition of Quan Doi Nhan Dan (the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) daily newspaper) reported the "capture" of Sam Thong and Long Tieng. This boast proved to be rather premature, since Long Tieng never fell to the PAVN. (Charles Campbell)

nhân dân QUÂN VÀ DÂN LÀO
LẠI THẮNG LỚN:
Thu hồi toàn bộ vùng XÂM-THÔNG-LONG-CHỆNG

- DIỆT VÀ BẮT GẦN 1.000 TÊN ĐỊCH
- BẮN RƠI VÀ PHÁ HỦY 10 MÁY BAY
- Thu và phá hủy hàng trăm súng (có 10 khẩu pháo lớn)

Chiến sĩ sẵn sàng diệt kẻ thù địch

NGÀY 17 tháng 1
Quân và dân Lào lại thắng lớn, thu hồi toàn bộ vùng XÂM-THÔNG-LONG-CHỆNG. Quân và dân Lào đã đánh bại cuộc tấn công của kẻ thù địch, bắt gần 1.000 tên địch, bắn rơi và phá hủy 10 máy bay, thu và phá hủy hàng trăm súng (có 10 khẩu pháo lớn).

Ý NGHĨA CỦA

NGÀY 17 tháng 1
Quân và dân Lào lại thắng lớn, thu hồi toàn bộ vùng XÂM-THÔNG-LONG-CHỆNG. Quân và dân Lào đã đánh bại cuộc tấn công của kẻ thù địch, bắt gần 1.000 tên địch, bắn rơi và phá hủy 10 máy bay, thu và phá hủy hàng trăm súng (có 10 khẩu pháo lớn).





Final Moments

As the monsoons began in the Summer of 1972, it was apparent that a general cease-fire was in the making for Indochina in general and Laos in particular. As a result, there was a desire by Vientiane to grab territory and push back the North Vietnamese as far as possible before any cease-fire went into effect.

Accordingly, Vang Pao devised Operation PHOU PHIANG II, using GMs 21, 22, 23, 24, and two more regiments fresh from training in Thailand (GMs 26 and 28). GM 27, based at Bouamlong, would conduct spoiling operations northeast of the PDJ. In addition, Thai UNITY forces, like the previous year, would move forward to support the Hmong guerrillas.

As envisioned, PHOU PHIANG II would be the most ambitious, complicated guerrilla operation to that date, with four guerrilla task forces attacking four sides of the PDJ. The operation began in dramatic fashion, with the entire MR 2 Commando Raider company parachuting at night from an Air America C-130 northwest of the PDJ. The next morning, an armada of United States Air Force CH-53s lifted GMs 21 and 26 into the landing zones secured by the Commando Raiders. Unfortunately, unlike previous years, the PAVN had developed its supply lines to the point where it could make a stand on the PDJ during the rainy season. In addition, the other three task forces did not go into simultaneous action, which allowed the PAVN to focus its attention on countering GMs 21 and 26, which were quickly annihilated.

Bad fortune continued to plague PHOU PHIANG II, with the eastern and southern task forces being wiped out in turn. After a month of heavy fighting, the operation had yielded few territorial gains.

In MR 4, PAVN preempted the government's attempts to grab territory by attacking and capturing the provincial capital of Khong Sedone. This was countered by the dispatch of GMs 32 and 33, on loan from MR 3. In an operation code named BLACK LION, the two regiments pounded the PAVN 39th Regiment to shreds, in the process leaving little intact in Khong Sedone.

Task Force VANG PAO headquarters off the southeast end of the Long Tieng runway. Heavy People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) shelling during the first four months of 1972 forced the Thais to shift their headquarters to a cave at the base of Skyline Ridg. Later the headquarters was moved again, this time to a reinforced bunker on the ridge southwest of Long Tieng. (D. Swanson)

After retaking Khong Sedone, MR 4 turned its attentions toward Saravane, which had fallen along with the rest of the Bolovens the previous December. Using two MR 4 guerrilla regiments, GMs 41 and 42, in what was dubbed Operation BLACK LION III, the government forces began a major airmobile effort into the town during October. Unlike the previous year, the enemy put up a fight around Saravane, raking the helicopter armada with anti-aircraft fire. One Air America H-34 was shot down, killing a United States paramilitary advisor. After a couple of days, the town was eventually retaken, setting the stage for the final target on the Bolovens: Paksong.

Back in the north, PHOU PHIANG II was hopelessly stalled. In mid-September, it was decided to add life to the offensive by bringing in reinforcements from outside the military region. The new phase began with GM 15, a new guerrilla regiment formed at Nam Yu in MR 1, airlifted onto the extreme southern end of the PDJ. The PAVN reacted violently, overrunning the GM at night and killing its American paramilitary advisor.

During the following month, the effort around the PDJ was renamed Operation OCTOBER, and was boosted by the introduction of GMs 30 and 32 from MR 3. Still, no gains were seen; worse, GM 32's commander, MAJ Khai, who was one of the best guerrilla GM commanders in the country, was killed when the regiment was overrun by North Vietnamese armor.

In MR 4, the Thai UNITY volunteers and GM 33, pushed their way into Paksong in mid-December. Exhausted, these units clung to their positions and waited for a PAVN counterattack.



Smoke billows up from the FAR ammunition storage depot and airfield in Long Tieng valley as People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) gunners shell the valley from Skyline Ridge during January of 1972. From their postions above the valley the North Vietnamese gunners could hit anything in the valley with ease. (D. Swanson)



An Air America Bell 204B (N1196W) on the ramp at a RLA base. The Bell 204B was the civilian version of the military UH-1B Huey which could carry seven passengers. The larger Bell 205A, which could carry eleven passengers, saw greater use in Laos flown by Air America. (T.L. Arkansas)

Cargo handlers soon grew tired of the constant heavy weapons fire dropping into Long Tieng during January of 1972. The King's house at Long Tieng, built in 1966, is visible on the ridge in the background. (D. Swanson)

This sandbagged position was in front of General Vang Pao's stone house which was the only two-story building in the Long Tieng valley.





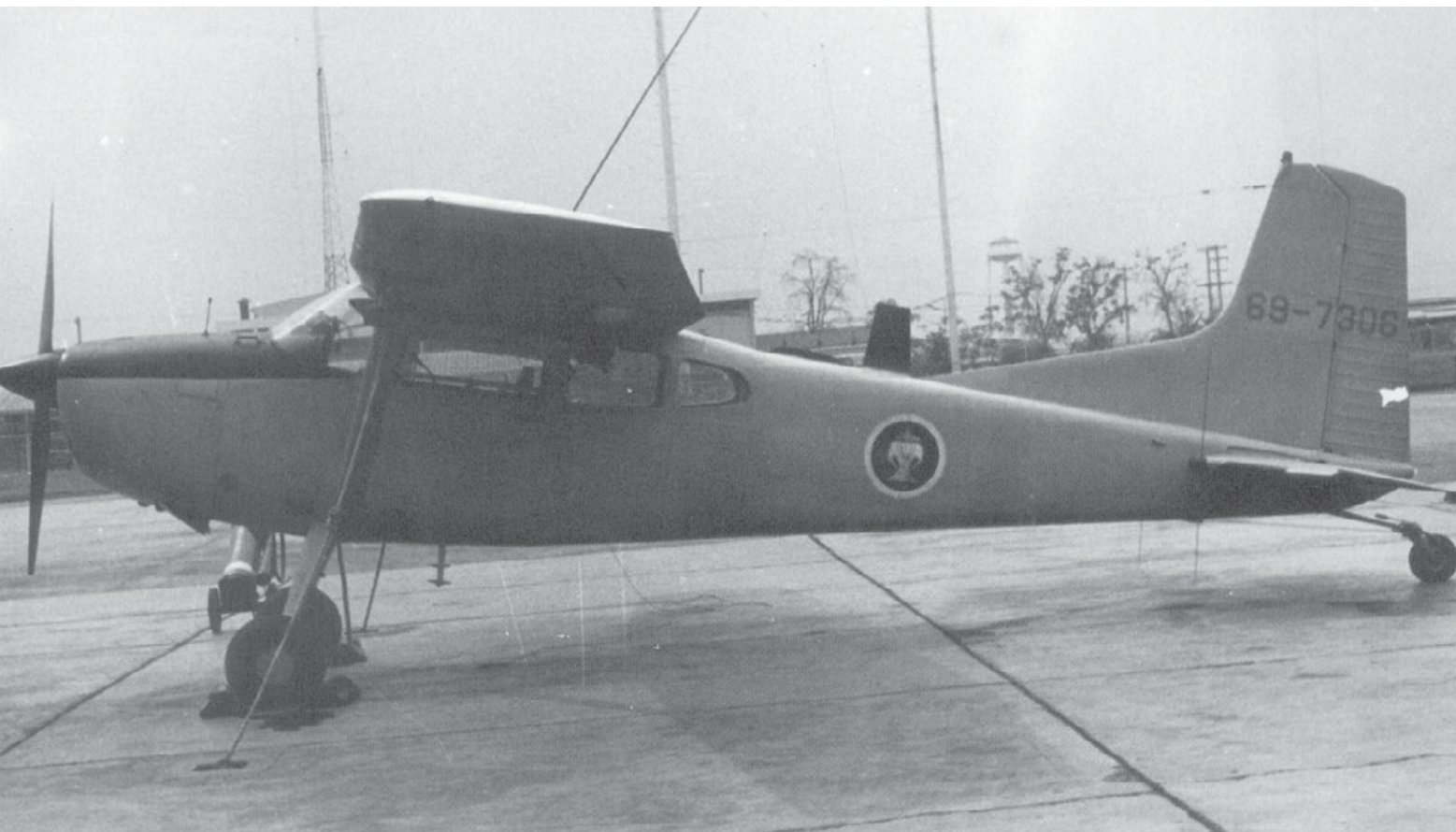
This forward air guide (forward air controller, FAC) was assigned to Groupment Mobile (GM 30) and accompanied two battalions of the GM to reinforce Pakse during March of 1972. These men directed both RLAF and U.S. airstrikes against PAVN and Pathet Lao targets. (Eli Chovis)



MGEN Vang Pao visits the training center At Phitsanulok, Thailand during the Summer of 1972. Two Hmong GMs, GM 21 and GM 22, were retrained at the camp during the summer in preparation for Operation PHOU PHIANG II. On the left, in duck hunter camouflage, is U.S. Army Special Forces CAPT David Carr, the commander of Field Training Team 2 at Phitsanulok. In the background are two Royal Thai Special Forces officers assigned to Phitsanulok's Special Battalion. (David Carr via James Morrison)

(Right) This was one of two Hughes 500D helicopters (civil version of the OH-6) operated by Air America beginning in April of 1972. They were used for an assortment of reconnaissance, search-and-rescue and light transport duties. The color scheme was very similar to that carried on U.S. Army OH-6s, overall Olive Drab. These aircraft,; however, carried no identification markings. (Bob Noble)

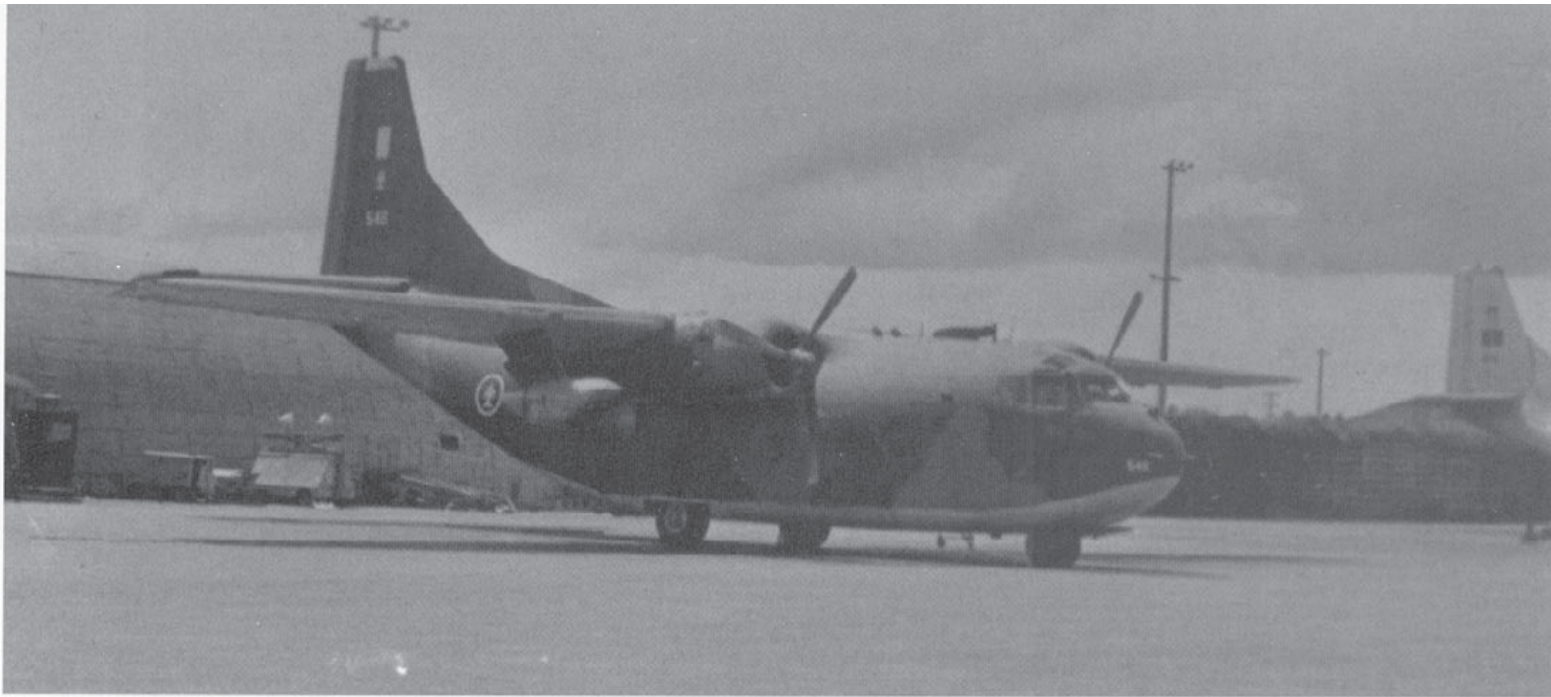




Both USAF and Lao forward air controllers flew Cessna U-17s and O-1Es in the reconnaissance, artillery spotter and FAC roles. The aircraft were overall Light Gray with Black anti-glare panels and RLAF insignia. The serial on the tail was also in Black.

The rotary wing squadron of the RLAF was equipped with Sikorsky UH-34 helicopters. These aircraft carried the same color scheme as the Air America H-34s, except that RLAF aircraft carried full national markings and had the serial on the fin in Yellow.





After consolidating their hold over Sam Thong on 12 March 1972, PAVN forces, the following week, sent three T-34 tanks toward Long Tieng. Two of the three tanks reached Skyline Ridge, but were disabled by mines. As seen by the brass casings, however, one tank continued to fire even after losing its treads. (M.I. Hardnose)

Like Air America and the USAF, the Royal Lao Air Force operated a number of C-123K Provider short take off and landing transports. The C-123 was the largest transport aircraft in the RLAF inventory.





In 1969, a handful of UH-1C Hueys were upgraded with L-13 engines (redesignated as the UH-1M) and deployed to South Vietnam as night attack ships with the U.S. Army. Two years later, several UH-1Ms were sent to Laos and flown by Thai crews in support of UNITY forces. Outfitted with the XM-21 minigun/rocket system, their call-sign was White Horse. The color scheme was overall Olive Drab with no identification markings or national insignia. (T.L. Arkansas)

In the Summer of 1972, Continental Air Services equipped some of its DC-3/C-47s as electronic warfare aircraft to intercept communist radio traffic over northern Laos. Known as Project BRUSH CARGO, the missions flown by these Skytrain crews often lasted eleven hours. (T.L. Arkansas)





An overall Natural Metal de Havilland DHC-4 Caribou (392) of Air America during 1972. Other Air America Caribous had the airline's logo painted over the rear door. (T.L. Arkansas)

On 17 May 1972, the PAVN 39th Regiment, 968th Division, captured the provincial capital of Khong Sedone. One month later, on 15-16 June 1972, GMs 32 and 33 were air assaulted into landing zones around the town. Heavy fighting lasted for one month, forcing the crippled 39th Regiment to retreat. The heavy weapons fire left little of the town or surrounding area intact. (Hugh Tovar)

During the early 1970s, the Royal Lao Air Force received a number of AC-47 Spooky gunships, believed to be at least eleven. Their aircraft differed from the USAF variant in that they were armed with different versions of the multi-barreled 7.62mm miniguns than those carried by the USAF machines. RLAF AC-47s carried the standard Southeast Asia camouflage and even used the same callsign as their USAF counterparts, Spooky.





A U.S. paramilitary advisor congratulates COL Ly Lao, commander of *Groupement Mobile* (GM) 26, upon completion of the unit's training course at Nam Pung Da, Thailand, during the Summer of 1972. GM 26 had a total of four *Bataillon Guerrier* (BGs) assigned. (T.L. Arkansas)

Hmong guerrillas from the 1st Platoon, 1st Company, *Bataillon Guerrier* (BG) 235, *Groupement Mobile* (GM) 26, at Nam Pung Dam training camp in Thailand during the Summer of 1972. The youth of the trainees is a sad testimony to the heavy combat losses suffered by the older generations of Hmong. (T.L. Arkansas)



SPECOM commandos enjoy a moment of rest during early 1973. An M60 machine gun has been mounted on a pedestal mount in the center of their M38A-1 jeep. Two of these special forces commandos wear U.S. camouflage tropical combat uniforms; the distinctive SPECOM "scorpion" insignia being sewn on the side of tiger-stripe tropical hats. The individual weapon on the dash of the jeep in front of the passenger is an XM-148 (an M-16 with a 40mm grenade launcher mounted under the barrel). The driver has a standard M-16 fitted with a thrity round clip. This clip was a rather uncommon fitting, especially in Laos. Another M-16 is carried behind the drivers seat. (Oroth Insisiengmay)



1973: Cease-fire

By January of 1973, a cease-fire appeared only weeks away. The PAVN took the opportunity to launch its own land-grab. In the north, a Vietnamese task force pushed west of the PDJ along Route 7, capturing the strategic junction town of Sala Phou Khoun. Pathet Lao forces then took over, driving south down Route 13 in PT-76 tanks toward the FAR front lines at Muong Kassy.

To counter these moves, the government dispatched GM 31 from MR 3 to launch an air assault onto the Sala Phou Khoun junction. The town was found to be largely abandoned, and security was quickly turned over to Thai UNITY battalions.

Vang Pao, meanwhile, tried to launch an eleventh-hour campaign with his depleted guerrilla ranks. Code named Operation PHOU PHIANG III, the offensive involved three task forces: one to recapture the town of Muong Soui, one to push onto the western edge of the PDJ, and a third to attack the town of Xieng Khouangville.

The first task force, aimed at Muong Soui, was composed of four UNITY battalions. Two of the battalions were airlifted into the hills north of the town, and were to link up with the two other battalions in the swampy lowlands south of Muong Soui. Before the envisioned pincer movement could take place, the PAVN shelled both columns with heavy weapons fire. The Thai battalions refused to advance further, and Muong Soui remained firmly in Vietnamese hands.

Neither of the other two task forces showed much promise, and the idea of gaining a foothold on the PDJ during the dry season quickly vanished.

Further south, the government forces were having better luck. With GMs 30, 31, and 32 recalled from reinforcement duties in other regions, MR 3 was able to launch a concerted effort toward the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Moving past the front lines at Muong Phalane, the combined guerrilla task force blasted the 29th PAVN Regiment and pushed east. Their progress was cut short by the February cease-fire announced in Vientiane.

In Military Region 4, the North Vietnamese had been building pressure since early January. Saravane, in particular, was under heavy siege, forcing the newly-constituted guerrilla GM 43 to move from Thateng to reinforce GM 41 and 42 inside Saravane. Still, by mid-January, the guerrillas had been pushed out of Saravane proper, and were staging a slow retreat west toward Khong Sedone.

South of Saravane, GM 33 and UNITY battalions were fighting a see-saw battle with the PAVN 968th Division for control of Paksong. The government-backed forces held the town right until 22 February, the day that the cease-fire was to take effect. Despite generous close air support for the government-backed troops, however, the North Vietnamese pushed their way into Paksong literally during the final hours before the cease-fire was to take effect.

With the cease-fire, the Royal Laotian Government was left in control of the Mekong River valley and little else. In the most contested military region, MR 2, the government forces held the garrisons of Long Tieng, Bouamlong and a handful of other minor sites, but had no presence on the strategic PDJ. In MR 4, the government held none of the towns on the Bolovens; the front lines had been established along the road between Paksong and Pakse.



In November of 1972, Air America took delivery of eight CH-47C Chinook heavy lift helicopters. The color scheme was overall Olive Drab with no identification markings other than the aircraft number on the rotor pylon in Black. The aircraft in the background is a USAF C-130 Graybird (636), on loan to Air America. (T.L. Arkansas)



Three Groupement Mobiles GM 30, 31 and 32 staged a coordinated attack around Muong Phalane in November of 1972, routing the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) 29th Regiment. Two members of GM 30 and their U.S. paramilitary advisor pose in front of a PAVN Soviet-built T-34 medium tank captured at the town. (Hugh Tovar)



1973-1975: The Final Collapse Of The Kingdom

Just as with the Vietnamization process that the Nixon Administration had begun to make the South Vietnamese regime more self-sufficient, the United States Embassy in Vientiane, since 1970, had helped craft plans to expand the long-neglected FAR into an armed forces capable of maintaining its own national security.

Any plans to put teeth back into the FAR faced numerous obstacles. Ever since the Nambac debacle in January of 1968, the FAR had been demoralized and effectively sidelined in the war. All major campaigns waged between 1969-1972 were fought primarily by guerrilla forces and Thai UNITY battalions, not the Royal Laotian Army. Many of the MR commanders were satisfied with letting the guerrillas fight the war, while retaining the FAR as their own private armies. In addition, Groupement Mobiles had been dissolved within the FAR during the Summer of 1968, giving Royal Laotian Army officers no experience in conducting operations larger than at the battalion level.

In late 1970, the first attempt was made to renovate the FAR. By the third quarter of that year, a National Commando Training Center was established at Phou Khao Khoui, north of Vientiane. Several FAR officers who had graduated from intensive United States training were assigned as the staff to the center, which was tasked with providing FAR (and later FAN) battalions with light infantry "commando" training.

By the Spring of 1971, a more ambitious plan was unveiled to gather most of the existing FAR infantry battalions into two divisions. The 1st Infantry Division was to be headquartered in Vientiane, with three brigades: one at Luang Prabang, one at Vientiane, and one at Paksane. Each brigade would have three battalions. All of the battalions going

In December of 1972, work began on fortifying the crest of Skyline Ridge to prevent its recapture by North Vietnamese (PAVN) forces. By the Spring of 1973, the ridge wall was a virtual Maginot Line of sandbagged bunkers, heavy weapons positions, and concertina wire. With the implementation of the ceasefire, however, the defenses were never put to the test. (Charles Campbell)

into the 1st Division would be first cycled through the National Commando Training Center.

At the same time, a 2nd Strike Division would be established in Seno with three brigades: one at Thakhek, one at Seno, and one at Pakse. In addition, the commander of the 2nd Strike Division would have a special commando company, known as the SPECOM, at his disposal.

To assist with the retraining of the battalions going into these two divisions, the United States dispatched two United States Army Special Forces teams into Laos in June of 1972. One of these teams went to Seno to work with the 2nd Strike Division. The second team was split, with one detachment working with the 1st Division at Phou Khao Khoui, and a second detachment going to MR 4 to help retrain most of that region's FAR and FAN. By December of 1972, all retraining had been accomplished and the two teams were withdrawn to Thailand.

At the same time that the FAR was being retrained into a more effective fighting force, the future of country's extensive guerrilla forces was being brought into question. As might be expected, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese insisted that all "special forces" (namely, the United States-supported guerrilla forces) had to be disbanded in any cease-fire and peace settlement. To prevent its best units from being disbanded, Vientiane, by late 1971, had merged—on paper—the guerrilla forces into the FAR's 1st and 2nd Divisions. Accordingly, when the ceasefire went into effect in February 1973, the guerrillas of MR 1 and 2 "officially" belonged to the 1st Division, while those of MR 3 and 4 belonged to the 2nd Strike Division. In reality, it would be some time



The strategic crossroads at Sala Phou Khuon was captured by communist forces on 30 December 1972. Pathet Lao units then pressed south and hit Muong Kassy with PT-76 tanks on 13 January 1973. Thai Unity battalions, stationed at Muang Kassy, destroyed two of the tanks with LAW rockets and M-79 grenade launchers. One PT-76 was brought to Vientiane for display. (Photo via Veera Star)

before the FAR officers from those two divisions had any control over the guerrilla forces.

Questions, too, were being raised about the future of the Thai UNITY battalions. The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese protested the presence of the UNITY volunteers, which had swelled to twenty-seven infantry battalions by late 1972. As a result, to comply with the cease-fire agree-

On 20 January 1973, Groupement Mobile 31 was airlifted aboard 21st SOS CH-53 Knives and Air America CH-47C Chinooks onto the strategic Sala Phou Khoun road junction. BGEN Thonglith Chokbenboun, the Military Region 5 commander, oversees GM 31's boarding of the helicopter armada at Vang Vieng airfield. (LS16). (Savay Phetluangsy)



ment, the Thai program was significantly downgraded in 1973. The last Thais were withdrawn on 22 May 1974, thirteen days ahead of the 4 June 1974 deadline stipulated by the peace accords.

Of course, while the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese did their best to force an end to the guerrilla and UNITY programs, no similar effort succeeded in forcing the PAVN to leave Laos. Indeed, the North Vietnamese retained full control over the Ho Chi Minh Trail corridor, and continued to station elements of the 316th Division on the PDJ.

The unequal terms of the peace talks displeased the generals in Vientiane. Of particular irritation was the fact that they were forced to negotiate on equal—if not inferior—terms with the Pathet Lao, which, thanks to the efforts of the PAVN, had sat out most of the war.

Also, in opposition to the peace talks was BGEN Thao Ma, who had been in exile in Thailand since a failed October of 1966 coup d'état. In August of 1973, Thao Ma tried again. Crossing the Mekong River with a band of loyal pilots, the general seized control of Wattay Air Base and hijacked several T-28 fighters, which he used to bomb and strafe the capital. The stated aim of the rebels was to overthrow the government of Souvanna Phouma and replace him with several right-wing politicians. As it turned out, Thao Ma was shot down and executed, bringing an abrupt end to this attempt at stalling the formation of Laos' third coalition government.

As was eventually agreed, Royalists, Neutralists, and Pathet Lao formed a coalition government in the Summer of 1974. By that time, UNITY had been dissolved, leaving only the FAR, FAN, and guerrilla forces to form a common front against the communists. Of these, the guerrilla forces were by far the best trained and equipped units in the country. The United States, however, was eager to get out of Indochina, and was in the final stages of cutting its links to the guerrilla program. This cut in U. S. support meant that the guerrillas would, finally, be merged with the FAR.

The merger of the guerrillas and the FAR was not easy. For the guerrillas, gone were the United States paramilitary advisors and better pay. Worse, the United States said that it would continue to fund only a small



Military Region 5 units, including the two Cadillac Gage (V-100) M-706 Commando armored cars in the background, moved north along Route 13 and linked up with GM 31 at Sala Phou Khuon on 24 January 1973. The MR 5 officer, who had received parachute training at Fort Benning, Georgia, wears U.S. Army airborne wings on his cap. (Savay Phetluangsy)

portion of the former guerrillas, forcing a mass demobilization. As a result, all guerrilla regiments were reduced down to single battalions. Four of these ex-guerrilla battalions were retained in MRs 1, 2, 3, and 4.

In the process of this demobilization, the best fighting units in Laos had been either demoralized or, literally, sent back to the rice paddies. The Pathet Lao was quick to sense this weakness. Just as Saigon and Phnom Penh were on the verge of collapse, the Laotian communists

A convoy of FAR and communist transports await the arrival of Soviet aircraft landing a battalion of Pathet Lao troops at Wattay Airfield, Vientiane during October of 1973. As part of the 1973 agreement for a coalition government, the Pathet Lao were allowed to introduce army and police units into Vientiane and Luang Prabang.



surged forward from the PDJ. By late April of 1975, Pathet Lao guerrillas, supported by PAVN artillery, attacked the government outpost at the Sala Phou Khoun crossroads. The garrison fell, allowing the Pathet Lao to continue south on Route 13 toward Muang Kassy.

By early May of 1975, the Royal Laotian government, shocked by the victory of communist forces in Cambodia and South Vietnam, was beginning to collapse from within. The Pathet Lao, which were on equal footing as coalition partners in Vientiane, encouraged anti-Royalist protests in most of the major towns throughout the country. By June, Pathet Lao forces quietly seized control of all FAR units and began sending Royalist officers to "reeducation camps" in Sam Neua Province. By December, the monarchy was abolished, replaced by the Lao People's Democratic Republic—the war had ended.

A Chinese-built Il-14 Crate airlands a Pathet Lao police battalion at Luang Prabang during October of 1973. (Bob Noble)





A Continental Air Services Curtiss C-46 Commando made the last refugee flight out of Long Tieng, at 1100, 14 May 1975. (Jack Knotts)

Unarmed Pathet Lao soldiers aboard a U.S.-built FAR truck drive through Vientiane during late 1973. (Photo via Roger Warner)



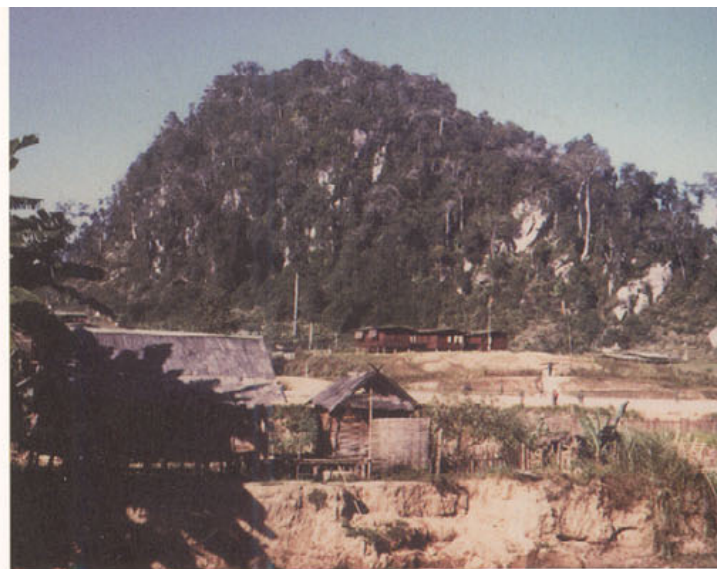


A pair of UH-1M helicopters on the ramp at Pakse Air Base during April of 1973. A White horse, the unit's radio callsign, was painted on the nose. (M.I. Hardnose)

Guerrillas man an 81mm mortar position on the perimeter of Nam Yu base, during late 1972. (Hugh Tovar)



The last Continental Air Services C-46 flight prepares to leave Long Tieng with refugees, on 14 May 1975. In the background is an RLAF O-1E and T-2D8. (Al Rich Collection, Air America Archives)



The jungle base at Nam Yu during late 1972. Nam Yu was the headquarters for guerrilla operations in northwestern MR 1, including intelligence forays into southern China. It was overrun by Pathet Lao forces in February of 1973. The communications shack used by U.S. paramilitary advisors is at the base of the karst; their living quarters is at the top of the hill. (Gary Parrott)



Two Continental Air Service C-46s were turned over to Royal Air Laos in 1974 and used for rice drops; one crashed into Phou Bia mountain that same October, killing the crew. (Jack Knotts)

The last Continental Air Services Porter in Laos (N62156) on 26 May 1975. It has been given U.S. registry and a new paint scheme. The two Laotian policemen represented both sides of the coalition: one Pathet Lao and one from the Royal Laotian Government. (Jack Knotts)



ISBN 0-89747-315-9